

Cherwell District Council

Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board

Minutes of a meeting of the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board held at Bodicote House, Bodicote, Banbury, OX15 4AA, on 16 February 2010 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Colin Clarke (Chairman)

Councillor Alyas Ahmed
Councillor Margaret Cullip
Councillor Devena Rae
Councillor Carol Steward
Councillor Patricia Tompson
Councillor Douglas Webb

Also Present: Councillor Michael Gibbard
Councillor Nigel Morris
Sandie Dancer, Chair, Residents' Voice
Harj Lota, Managing Director, Charter Community Housing
Jacky Clacken, Housing Management Team Leader, Bromford Living
Susan Dell, Bromford Living

Apologies for absence: Councillor Nicholas Mawer
Councillor Maurice Billington
Councillor Victoria Irvine
Councillor Keith Strangwood
Councillor Martin Weir

Officers: Gillian Greaves, Head of Housing Services
Martyn Swann, Strategic Housing Manager
Kate Winstanley, Strategic Housing Officer
Craig Forsyth, Communications Officer
Catherine Phythian, Senior Democratic and Scrutiny Officer
Natasha Clark, Trainee Democratic and Scrutiny Officer

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Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

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Urgent Business

There was no urgent business.

Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2010 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Registered Social Landlords' Management Group

The Chairman welcomed the Portfolio Holder Planning and Housing, the Head of Housing Services, the Strategic Housing Manager, the Strategic Housing Officer and the representatives from Charter Community Housing, the Bromford Group and Charter Residents' Voice to the meeting.

The Chairman explained that this was an opportunity for the Board to learn more about the Registered Social Landlords' Management Group, including its links to the Council's corporate priorities, the national standards that apply and to explore strategic and operational issues relating to the management of housing stock across the district. Following the discussion the Board would reflect on the evidence presented and if there were any issues that they wished to explore further, these should be added to the 2010/11 Work Programme.

The Strategic Housing Officer began by setting the overall context for Cherwell's Housing Services work with the Registered Social Landlords (RSL). As part of its strategic housing function, the Council still has a role to play in how the former "council houses" are managed, as well as other social housing in the district. Most of the day to day operation is undertaken by the Registered Social Landlords and in doing so they are accountable to and monitored by the Tenant Services Authority (a government appointed national organisation).

There are 16 Registered Social Landlords operating in the district with stock holdings ranging from just four properties to over 5000 homes. The Council works closely with these Registered Social Landlords to ensure the effective management of social housing in the district. The Council chairs and facilitates the quarterly Cherwell RSL Housing Management Group meetings, and undertakes an annual appraisal with each Registered Social Landlord. The Council recognises that this approach does not suit the smaller Registered Social Landlords and so it is looking at other ways to engage them, possibly through a "buddy" system or attendance on a rota basis.

The Strategic Housing Officer explained that the main duties of the Registered Social Landlords can be described as:

- Rents, repairs and maintenance
- Allocation of homes
- Addressing worklessness
- Promoting neighbourhoods

The Board heard that over the last twenty years the focus of attention had moved from the traditional activities of allocations and rent, repairs and maintenance. The emphasis was now on addressing worklessness amongst social housing residents and introducing measures to promote neighbourhood

and community. The involvement of residents and tenants was a key aspect of this approach.

In response to questions from the Board the Strategic Housing Officer explained that although the management of social housing is undertaken by the Registered Social Landlords, the Council maintains a housing register and nominates (i.e. decides on) applicants to move into Registered Social Landlord homes. The Council normally secures full nomination rights on the majority of properties with the Registered Social Landlords typically retaining rights on about 10% for emergency cases. Properties are advertised through the Choice Based Lettings scheme and people can bid for up to 3 properties during each fortnightly advertising cycle and modify their bids according to the popularity of the properties.

The Board also heard from representatives from Charter Community Housing (the largest Registered Social Landlord in the district with over 5000 properties) and Bromford Living (responsible for 420 homes in the district). The Managing Director of Charter Community Housing described how its merger with Banbury Homes and the Sanctuary Group had resulted in positive benefits for the residents in Cherwell. Financial stability and economies of scale had enabled Charter Community Housing to retain an in-house maintenance team and to negotiate a new contract for the procurement of kitchens and bathrooms which did not attract an inflationary uplift because of the volumes of business. A potential downside could have been the loss of any local service and identity. This was something that the organisation had worked hard to avoid and they were confident that local residents and tenants still regarded it as a local service.

The Housing Management Team Leader of Bromford Living (Bromford Living manages Bromford Group's general rented housing in the West Midlands and surrounding counties) commented on the importance of partnership working with the Council to ensure the delivery of the Housing Strategy and cited the Development & Housing Management Standards Protocol as an example of effective joint working. Local service delivery is also important to Bromford Group and the Board learnt that there was a locally based housing manager who operates from the community office at Bure Park, Bicester. The Bromford Living Housing Management Team Leader told the Board about the joint work between the Council and Bromford Group in tackling the environmental issues at Bicester Cattle Market. There had been joint visits by Cherwell District Council and Bromford Group staff to issue information packs and brief residents on recycling and their responsibilities. As a result there has been a significant decrease in environmental issues at the Cattle Market.

The Chairman of the local Charter Residents' Voice group thanked the Board for the opportunity to present the views of the tenants and residents. She explained that Residents' Voice operated at both local and national level within the Charter/Sanctuary Housing group and that it was a well established and recognised means of consultation and dialogue with tenants and residents. Charter/Sanctuary Housing are positive supporters of the Residents' Voice groups and use them to develop and consult on new policies and responses to legislation, contribute to proposals for new build housing and inspect service departments as well as a means to mediate and resolve

practical and operational problems facing particular housing estates or individual tenants.

The Chairman of the local Charter Residents' Voice group told the Board that she had always found the Charter/Sanctuary staff and managers to be approachable and responsive. There were regular formal meetings and good informal communications. She was pleased to note that this was also apparent in the relationship with Cherwell's Housing Services where there had been a marked improvement in recent years. She cited a recent "skip day in Banbury" as an example of a successful joint project between the residents, Charter and Cherwell to tackle littering and flytipping and promote recycling.

The Chairman thanked the guests for their comments which had been informative and a valuable basis for the Board's consideration of the partnership between Cherwell's Housing Services and the Registered Social Landlords.

In conclusion the Board noted that there was a strong working relationship between the Council's Housing Services and the main Registered Social Landlords which was focused on common objectives which supported the Council's corporate priorities. This was underpinned by a formal structure to manage and measure the effectiveness of the partnership. As a result, the partnership was delivering practical benefits to those residents living in social housing. On the basis of the information presented the Board confirmed that there was no need to undertake any further scrutiny of this subject.

The Board determined that a brief report summarising the information presented should be submitted to the Executive commending the Portfolio Holder, Planning and Housing and the staff of Cherwell's Housing Services for their work, in partnership with the Registered Social Landlords, on the management of social housing in the district.

Resolved

- 1) That no further scrutiny of Registered Social Landlords and the management of social housing should be undertaken at this time.
- 2) That a report be submitted to the Executive commending the Portfolio Holder, Planning and Housing and the staff of Cherwell's Housing Services for their work, in partnership with the Registered Social Landlords, on the management of social housing in the district.

The Board reflected on the outcomes of its scrutiny review of the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and discussed the draft recommendations to the Executive. The Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Street Scene and Rural was present at the meeting and participated in the discussion.

The Board confirmed that the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council was a valuable and important partnership for Cherwell District Council without which it would be difficult to deliver the Council's rural agenda.

The Board discussed the role of elected Members in the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and agreed that the current arrangement should continue but that it should be strengthened and the respective role and responsibilities of the Portfolio Holder and the elected ward member should be clarified. The Board felt that it was important to distinguish between the role of the Portfolio Holder in shaping the strategic direction of the partnership and determining funding and service level agreements and that of the elected member providing knowledge and experience of rural issues within the district. The Board agreed that the elected member should represent a rural ward.

Throughout the course of the Review the Board had raised some general issues about the role and responsibilities of elected Members who represent the Council on partnerships and outside bodies. The Board noted that in spring 2009 the Executive had requested further information setting out how the Council would effectively support member representatives on partnerships and outside bodies. The Chairman reported that a project group had been established to review representation on outside bodies. The Board agreed that that the review addressed the issues that they had raised and commented that it was important for there to be a defined role for elected Members representing the Council on outside bodies and partnerships and that the responsibilities for this role should be defined and strengthened.

Resolved

- 1) That the briefing on the review of representation on Outside Bodies be noted.
- 2) That the following recommendations to the Executive be included in the report on the Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council:
 - a) That an annual programme of aims/objectives (aligned to the Rural Strategy Action Plan and the Council's corporate priorities) be agreed with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and regularly reviewed and monitored by officers, the elected Member representative from a rural ward and reported to the Portfolio Holder.
 - b) That the role and involvement of elected Members (the representative from a rural ward and the Portfolio Holder) in the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council be clarified and strengthened.
 - c) That the elected Member representative from a rural ward should work closely with rural community development officers and safer communities and community development officers to provide overall steer and direction for the partnership.
- 3) That the draft report Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council be circulated to Officers for comment.

- 4) That the Democratic, Scrutiny and Elections Manager in consultation with the Chairman of the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board be delegated to agree any amendments to the draft report on the Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council prior to its submission to the Executive.

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Work Programme

The Board considered a report of Head of Legal and Democratic Services on the overview and scrutiny work programme for 2009/10.

The Board agreed that a report on the Contracts Review and a monitoring report on Past Year Budget Scrutiny Recommendations should be considered at the June meeting.

Partnerships: Cherwell Safer Communities Partnership

The Board was informed that the value for money review of the Cherwell Safer Communities Partnership had been delayed but that work was now starting on the scoping of the project. The Board confirmed that this was an important subject area and agreed that it should remain on their work programme for scrutiny in 2010/11.

Partnerships: Bicester Vision Partnership

The Chairman reported that he and the Vice-Chairman had yet to meet the Leader of the Council to discuss the arrangements and timing for the further scrutiny of the Bicester Vision Partnership. The topic would remain on the work programme for 2010/11.

The Board noted that this would be their last meeting until the new municipal year and expressed concern about the absence of a formal meeting date in March. They agreed to review the schedule of meetings for 2010/11 at their June meeting with a view to adding an extra meeting if necessary.

Resolved

- 1) That the Resources & Performance Scrutiny Board element of the work programme for 2009/10 as detailed above be noted and carried forward to the work programme for 2010/11.
- 2) That the update on the Bicester Vision Partnership be noted.
- 3) That the dates for the Board meetings in 2010/11 be reviewed at the Board meeting in June 2010.

The meeting ended at 9.00 pm

Chairman:

Date: