

Policy & Service Review Scrutiny Committee



Date	30 March 2006
Venue	Town Hall, Lytham St Annes
Committee members	Raymond Norsworthy (Chairman) Martin Taylor (Vice-Chairman) Stephen Carpenter, Maxine Chew, Elizabeth Clarkson, Paul Hayhurst, Elizabeth Oades, Dawn Prestwich, Fabian Wilson
Other Councillors	None
Officers	Clare Platt, Tracy Scholes, Richard Wood, Chris Kitchen, Lyndsey Lacey

To provide some context about the items on the agenda for the meeting, which were all housing related, Councillor Norsworthy invited Clare Platt to outline the current staffing position within the housing team. Clare Platt responded by outlining that out of a team of nine officers, there were currently three posts vacant or absent due to sickness. Positive action was being undertaken to address the housing technician vacancy. However in the interim a housing consultant had been retained to manage the section on a day to day basis and work on policy development.

The financial implications of the agenda items were discussed, on the basis that identified revenue costs were already accounted for within the service, although further funding would enhance the activity already occurring. Capital costs had been identified at the time the 2006/07 budget was set, with £475,000 allocated for disabled facilities grants and £428,000 allocated for housing renewal activities.

1. Declarations of interest

Members were reminded that any personal/prejudicial interests should be declared as required by the Council's Code of Conduct adopted in accordance with the Local Government Act 2000.

2. Confirmation of minutes

RESOLVED: To approve the minutes of the Policy & Service Review Community Forum meeting held on 10 March 2006 as a correct record for signature by the chairman.

3. Substitute members

Nil

4. Homelessness Strategy

Clare Platt (Consumer Wellbeing and Protection Unit Business Manager) presented a report on the Homelessness Strategy which had been developed by the Homelessness Action Group.

In brief, the strategy informed how the council and its partners would work to prevent homelessness occurring and what services it would provide to people who find themselves homeless, threatened with homelessness or in need of advice. The Strategy identified a number of priority issues, including the need for further 'move on' accommodation to encourage turnover in supported housing schemes and the importance of preventing homelessness in the first instance. It advocated the improved consultation with service users and the continued importance of effective partnership working.

Members commented on the need to work more closely with Wyre Council on the development and integration of such strategies. Clarification was also sought on the interpretation of affordable housing.

A copy of the draft strategy and the associated action plan was circulated with the agenda.

Following a full debate the Committee RESOLVED:

1. To recognise the commitment of partners in preparing and delivering the strategy.
2. To recommend that the Portfolio Holder for Community and Social Wellbeing consider the strategy for adoption.
3. To recommend that the Homelessness Strategy be reviewed alongside the next review of the Housing Strategy.
4. To recommend that the Portfolio Holder for Community and Social Wellbeing look at working with Wyre on integrating the various housing strategies.
5. To seek clarity in the strategy on the interpretation of affordable housing provided through the rented tenure.
6. To recommend to Cabinet that consideration be given to expending some of the monies collected from the commuted sums budget on affordable housing.

5. Housing Services Improvement Plan

Clare Platt (Consumer Wellbeing and Protection Unit Business Manager) presented an updated report on the Housing Services Improvement Plan.

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The Committee was reminded that the private sector housing service was re-inspected by the Audit Commission during the autumn of 2004. The report concluded that the service was a fair service with promising prospects for improvement. The housing service was due a 'light touch' Audit Commission inspection during June 2006,

The report highlighted resource issues within housing services. In addition, it included an improvement plan which detailed progress to date and areas that still required action.

An assurance was sought by members as to whether all of the milestone dates had or were proposed to be achieved. The Unit Business Manager addressed this point.

Following discussion it was RESOLVED:

1. To recommend that the Portfolio Holder for Community and Social Wellbeing consider the Improvement Plan for adoption.
2. To seek to incorporate and include reference (where appropriate) to older persons in all of the council's various strategies.
3. To suggest that the Portfolio Holder for Community and Social Wellbeing considers an amendment to the Action Plan to reflect that Action 3 (Developing an Older Peoples Strategy) which has failed in its target implementation date be held in abeyance pending the development of a Lancashire wide Older Peoples Strategy being developed by Lancashire County Council.
4. To present an exception report on the updated Improvement Plan to the next meeting of the committee.

6. Implications of the Housing Act 2004

Clare Platt (Consumer Wellbeing and Protection Unit Business Manager) and Richard Wood (Housing Consultant) presented a joint report on the implications of the Housing Act 2004.

It was reported that the legislation would come into force on 6 April 2006. The report addressed three specific areas of the legislation:

- The Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS)
- The licensing of houses in multiple occupation
- Empty dwelling management orders

Members were advised that the licensing of houses in multiple occupation required the setting of a licence fee locally, but it must only reflect the actual cost of licensing. This and a local licensing policy would be progressed through consultation prior to agreement. Meanwhile action could still be pursued using the new HHSRS, incorporating the new amenities standards once published.

Concerns were raised about the costs associated with the new arrangements and the implications to the council. Members also enquired about the number of empty dwellings/HMOs throughout the borough.

It was RESOLVED:

1. To note the development in housing legislation.
2. To recommend that the report be considered by the Portfolio Holder for Community and Social Wellbeing.
3. To request a progress report at the next meeting of the Committee. To ask the Unit Business manager and the Portfolio Holder to look at the feasibility of the new arrangements being self funding from the licence fee.
4. To work with Wyre Council on the new arrangements to ensure commonality.

7. Private Sector Housing Renewal policy

Clare Platt (Consumer Wellbeing and Protection and Protection Business Manager) and Richard Wood (Housing Consultant) presented a joint report on the revision of the private sector housing renewal policy.

The revised policy focused on promoting the Decent Homes Standard in the private sector with particular emphasis on provision for vulnerable people.

The report detailed how the strategy had been developed, the priorities that the council wished to address and the types of assistance that would be available, including where to obtain the services, eligibility, how to apply, conditions etc. It introduces equity loans as part of the package, and recognises the role of a grant agency in delivering assistance whilst also increasing revenue to the Council.

The Committee RESOLVED:

1. To recommend that the policy be consulted further with partners.
2. To recommend that any consequent amendments be considered by the Portfolio Holder for Community and Social Wellbeing prior to implementation.
3. To recommend that under Section 8.17 of the policy (types of work qualifying for assistance) reference be made to wind turbines and solar power.
4. To recommend that individuals taking out loans be given the option of paying interest or repaying the equity, the decision being taken retrospectively.
5. To present an updated report to committee at the end of the consultation period.