

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL
28th October, 2010

Present:- The Mayor (Councillor McNeely) (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Blair, Ellis, Nightingale, Walker, Jenny Andrews (Maltby Town Council), Jack Carr (Environment Protection UK), Derek Corkell (RotherFed) and Roddison (RotherFed).

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gamble, Havenhand, Hodgkiss and P. A. Russell.

34. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest made at the meeting.

35. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

Two Members of Voluntary Action Rotherham came to observe the meeting.

36. COMMUNICATIONS

The Chair announced that the Christmas lunch would take place following the next Panel meeting on 9th December, 2010.

37. BEREAVEMENT SERVICES IN ROTHERHAM

Mark Ford, Safer Neighbourhoods Manager, presented a report on the progress made with regard to the Bereavement Service in Rotherham since the inception of the partnership between Dignity Funerals Ltd. and the Council in August, 2008.

To date, the partnership with Dignity had seen the following improvements in Rotherham:-

- Improvements to the Chapel including access to the waiting room, facilities for funeral directors and a covered canopy to the Chapel exit
- A new bereavement services administration centre including reception, interview room, records and archive section, location of an electronic Book of Remembrance and visitor parking provision
- A new 120 space car park, with overspill provision for a further 40 vehicles, including improved arrangements for the disabled and other visitors to the Crematorium

- The development of the Crematorium grounds to provide an extensive landscaped memorial garden offering increased memorial choice to the bereaved
- A new depot for grounds maintenance staff built to modern standards, including shower and mess facilities and secure provision for plant and machinery
- Introduction of a 24 hour telephone line that customers could use to request bereavement services 365 days a year
- Improved security and management of Cemetery grounds to prevent crime, damage to buildings and infrastructure and to address anti-social behaviour
- Management plan for the maintenance and development of Cemetery roads, pathways and grounds to meet vehicular access needs and the needs of pedestrians visiting the site
- Under the financial agreement reached with Dignity, £400,692 would be paid to the Council in 2010/ 11
- Fees and charges were set in accordance with the projections contained with the previously agreed financial model. The level of fees reflected the costs incurred by Dignity in delivering the service

The following work was currently ongoing:-

- Upgrading of the existing cremators to meet the essential requirements of new Environmental Legislation effective from 31st December, 2012
- Development of a new IT system that would permit electronic access to archived burial and cremation records
- Work taking place on securing land to provide future burial space

It was viewed that the partnership with Dignity had delivered real improvements in Bereavement Services and this included provision of funerals for particular faith groups.

Further planned improvements were also explained.

It was confirmed that the financial model for the partnership still ensured a guaranteed income sum for the Council and there was

provision for further “super profit” element where income produced in excess of a 20% internal rate of return.

The process for Fees and Charges together with the Council's challenge and moderation elements were explained. A benchmark chart of fees and charges from other local authorities was referred to.

Mark identified continuing Council liability with regard to Cemetery Chapels and explained the current option appraisal, involving Ward Member consultation, being carried out.

The development of the risk and performance management systems was summarised. These arrangements being the result of an Officer workshop on the 17th June 2010. The Business Regulation Manager would be ensuring;

- Improved scrutiny of the financial standing of Dignity Funerals Ltd
- Development of Business Continuity Plans for both operational failures (in place) and complete failure of the partnership (low risk).
- Quarterly monitoring of the agreed Performance Management Framework
- Customer satisfaction and service testing

Mark introduced Georgina Bembridge, Dignity's Manager of Bereavement Services in Rotherham, who would help answer any questions raised.

Discussion ensued on the report with the following issues raised/ highlighted:-

- Disappointment that the performance monitoring framework had not been implemented due to management changes within Dignity. As a result there had been no Performance Indicators to track performance or customer satisfaction. It was noted that the formal quarterly meetings needed to commence as soon as possible and that the Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods had asked for 6 monthly reports

- Rotherham's cremation costs were the highest of those quoted on Appendix A, however, it was not known what other authorities included in their costings. Nationally there were huge differences in costs and service provision
- Appendix A did not include a comparison with the fees charged by Sheffield
- At the beginning of the contract, the Authority had decided to concentrate on the actual construction work and the mercury abatement requirements. By the end of the year Rotherham would be compliant with environmental legislation – two years ahead of the statutory timeframe
- Problems were being experienced regarding ownership and responsibility for cemeteries across the Borough.
- Rotherham currently did not offer a “no frills” burial or publicise how to arrange funerals without an undertaker however this would be included on the revamped website.
- There was no extra charge for Monday to Friday 24 hours a day but there was a weekend charge

Concern was expressed at the potential staffing situation faced across the Council given the current financial climate. All Cabinet Members and Directors had to be pro active in maintaining service and resilience in the difficult times being experienced.

Resolved:- (1) That the report be noted.

(2) That a visit be made to the East Herringthorpe Cemetery and Crematorium to view the improvements.

(3) That a briefing note be prepared for Members setting out the differing responsibilities and contacts for the cemeteries around the Borough

(4) That, once developed, the Business Continuity Plan be submitted to this Scrutiny Panel.

(5) That a further report be submitted in 6 months including performance monitoring.

(6) That the Performance and Strategic Overview Committee be

requested to take a strategic view on managing the future resilience of services given the current financial climate.

38. LOCAL LETTINGS POLICY FOR NEW BUILD COUNCIL HOUSING

The Director of Independent Living and Housing Choices Manager presented a report and powerpoint presentation on the proposed Local Lettings Policy for the new build Council Housing which the Authority had successfully attained funding for. There would be a total of 127 properties built - 36 at Wood Street/ School Street, Thrybergh, 29 at Albert Road, Kilnhurst, 8 at Newlands Avenue, Maltby and 4 at Stone Park Close, Maltby.

All the new homes would meet high quality design standards and Level 4 of the Code for Sustainable Housing resulting in a quality residential social housing offer. It was important to ensure that all of the schemes were looked after by the new tenants, compliance with the Tenancy Agreement and that the estate(s) did not suffer from anti-social behaviour. It was proposed that any prospective tenant must comply with the Local Letting Policy detailed in Appendix 1 of the report submitted.

The proposed local lettings would be closely monitored and reviewed in 6 months following the date of the first lettings. All of the 127 properties would be advertised in accordance with the normal advertising quotas. All properties would only be offered to existing Council tenant transfer applicants who had held a Council tenancy in Rotherham for the past 2 years and who had a clear rent account and no housing management issues. The approach would be:-

- All properties initially offered to Priority Plus applicants and then 50% to the Priority Group, 30% to the General Plus Group and 20% to the General Group
- Approximately 10% of the total (13 properties) would be let only to tenants in employment
- The following types of households would be excluded from applying:-
 - Housing Association tenants
 - Private rented tenants
 - People who were statutory homeless
 - Home owners
 - Applicants on the Housing Register living with friends or relatives

Due it being a major change to the current Housing Allocation Policy, wide consultation was taking place and would be completed by 5th

November, 2010. The outcomes would be fed back to the Cabinet Member on 29th November, 2010.

So far the consultation had revealed concern with regard to the management of the properties and the need for additional support and management as well as careful allocation of new tenants.

The Panel's comments were sought on the proposed Policy.

The following comments were made:-

- Local connection, family support, move for work purposes etc. should be added to the criteria for applicants
- Could the 10% employment condition be seen as discriminatory against those who had retired?
- Consideration be given to families with young children who had disabilities so the properties could be built with the necessary adaptations or be adapted more easily due to their newness
- Important that the new properties should not stand empty and have tenants from day 1
- Could 10% of the properties be for key workers only?
- Would the former Maltby Tarren tenants be given priority for the Maltby properties?
- How would the empty Council properties be allocated when a tenant moved into a new build property? Housing Association and private rented tenants who were in such accommodation due to there being no Council properties available, would be excluded from the new build

Resolved:- That the comments above be fed into the consultation exercise.

39. THE COMPREHENSIVE SPENDING REVIEW - UPDATE

Sioned Mair Richards circulated information from the Government website on the Comprehensive Spending Review with particular emphasis on Housing.

Discussion ensued on the paper with the following issues raised:-

- What is the Council's Forward Plan?

- What would happen to future Council tenants who would no longer have secure tenancies?
- Changes to Housing Benefits
- Review of the Housing Revenue Account

Resolved:- That the Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee as well as this Panel seek reports on the above due to the wide ranging effects on the Council.

40. PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR SCRUTINY REVIEW - UPDATE

Councillor Atkin gave a brief verbal report on the work of the above Review Group.

41. CABINET MEMBER FOR SAFE AND ATTRACTIVE NEIGHBOURHOODS

The Panel noted the decisions made under delegated powers by the Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods held on 6th and 20th September and 4th October, 2010.

42. SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL

The minutes of the meeting held on 16th September, 2010, were agreed.

43. PERFORMANCE AND SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

The minutes of the Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee held on 10th and 24th September and 8th October, 2010, were noted.

Arising from Minute No. D66 (Quarter 1 Performance), it was felt that Scrutiny should look at all the Indicators that were to be scrapped to ascertain if there were any which might be kept especially any specific to Rotherham.

It was also felt that a Scrutiny Member from the relevant Panel should be invited to attend performance clinics as part of their development/ understanding of performance.

Resolved:- That the Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee be informed of the above.