

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – SPECIAL MEETING

FRIDAY 18 OCTOBER 2002 AT 10.00 AM

PRESENT: Councillor Knapton (Chairman), Councillors Atkinson, Mrs Fisher, Morton, Mrs Parsons and Mrs Pattinson.

ALSO

PRESENT: Councillors Bloxham, Mrs Bradley, Firth and Weber.

COS.139/02 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chairman made reference to the recent death of Mr Lawrie Eilbeck, former Leader of the City Council. He paid tribute to Mr Eilbeck who had been a friend as well as an opponent over many years.

The Committee then stood for a minute's silence in memory of Mr Eilbeck.

COS.140/02 APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Boaden.

COS.141/02 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations affecting any item on the Agenda.

COS.142/02 CALL-IN – RAFFLES AREA STRATEGY

Councillors Atkinson, Boaden and G Hodgson had called in for scrutiny Minute EX.302/02 of the Executive of 30 September 2002 regarding the Raffles Area Strategy. Copies of the Executive Decision Notice and the Director of Housing's report H.63/02 had been circulated to Members.

The call-in related to the following points:

- why the properties were to be demolished so close to the proposed transfer of the housing stock;
- the cost to Council Tax payers; and
- that an examination be undertaken as to properties which may be saved.

It was noted, however, that the reasons outlined above did not confine the areas of

questioning which Members were entitled to pursue when examining the decision.

Councillor Bloxham, Portfolio Holder for Health and Well Being, was present at the meeting to answer questions, together with the Portfolio Holder for Economic Prosperity who was representing the Executive. The Acting Director of Housing and Head of Housing Provision also attended the meeting to answer questions on the content of the Director's report.

A Member noted that the report in question had been prepared by the Head of Housing Provision and sought clarification of the Officer's position bearing in mind the proposed transfer.

The Head of Housing Provision indicated that he had been interviewed for and would take up a post with Carlisle Housing Association should the transfer proceed on 9 December 2002. In the interim he remained an Officer of the City Council.

The Chairman added that the Officer was operating under a Conflict of Interest Protocol for staff affected by the Housing transfer.

Discussion then arose during which the following issues were raised:

The report indicated that a large proportion of the vacant properties within Phase 4 were beyond economical repair and demand for those types of properties on the estate had continually declined.

What cost would be involved in returning the properties to an acceptable standard, could that be funded from within the Raffles Area Strategy budget and what was the demand for such properties?

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well Being made reference to previous reports, including H.47/99 (Raffles Area Strategy – Redevelopment Proposals), H.49/99 (Best Value in Housing), together with the findings of the Sheffield Hallam and Weedon Grant Ltd studies into housing demand.

He indicated that Phase 4 included a total of 76 properties, 23 of which were tenanted and 53 empty and it would cost £160,000 to return those to a decent living standard. Bearing in mind that minimal demand existed for 1 bed properties and that such accommodation was available in other locations throughout the City, there could be no guarantee of a return for such investment. He then provided details of the detailed consultation which had been undertaken with local residents.

A report on television this week identified that increasing numbers of single people were living on their own, which trend was expected to continue; would that not lead to an increased demand for 1 bed properties?

The Head of Housing Provision indicated that such properties were initially let to elderly persons. Upstairs flats were not necessarily appropriate to their needs, as a consequence of which high numbers remained vacant. In order to address that issue attempts had been made to integrate younger persons into the flats, but differing lifestyles had proved to be problematic.

Although he accepted the Member's point, a serious lack of demand had existed for a number of years and certainly no increase in demand had been evidenced in the past 12 months.

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well Being reminded Members that those properties were not up to sustainable letting standards and, in his view, mixing the elderly and the young was a recipe for disaster.

The marketing approach to lettings on the estate could be undertaken more effectively and the social mix monitored. Was then the investment of £160,000 not more cost effective than demolition?

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well Being indicated that the cost of demolishing the 76 properties was £114,000.

The Acting Director of Housing added that there would also be home loss payments to tenants amounting to £57,500, making a total cost of £171,500.

The Local Regeneration Partnership Group had held a number of open days on the estate to ascertain the views of residents with regard to the proposals. The Portfolio Holder stressed that the most important issue was the re-development the area so that people were pleased to live there and believed that this was the only effective way of giving Raffles a chance for the future.

The Chairman added that he too had attended an open day and had been very impressed by the enthusiasm shown by all those involved and that residents' comments had been taken on board.

What was the recent cost of bringing houses in Raffles up to an acceptable standard?

The Head of Housing Provision indicated that the main concern was the long-term sustainability of the whole estate. Repairs costs on Raffles had been higher than on other estates for a number of years and, when coupled with the issue of low demand, Officers could not recommend that £160,000 of investment was justified.

Materials from demolished dwellings had in the past been reused and were not totally lost to the Council.

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well Being indicated that a report had been presented to the former Housing and Care Services Committee to the effect that that was no longer a viable option.

If the properties were refurbished but remained empty additional costs would fall upon the Council. Similarly if demolition was delayed related costs would increase.

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well Being intimated that that was correct and any delay may place the re-development in jeopardy.

Had the outstanding issues in relation to the overall strategic approach for the regeneration of the estate been resolved?

The Head of Housing Provision indicated that a report would be submitted to the Executive on 19 December 2002 which would fully address those issues. Following a request by the Chairman, he added that it should be possible for the report to be firstly considered by this Committee, and he would discuss that point with the partners.

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well Being stated that he would prefer that course of

action.

Why were the properties to be demolished so close to the proposed transfer?

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well Being drew Members' attention to the map attached to the report, indicating that the areas designated for demolition did not form part of the transfer agreement with Carlisle Housing Association and would remain with the City Council.

The Head of Housing Provision added that following 9 December issues such as the ongoing maintenance of the properties required to be addressed. The partnership had therefore been formed to ensure the successful re-development of the estate.

When would Phase 6 be implemented and how many properties were involved?

The Head of Housing Provision indicated that it would be on site within the following week and he would provide Members with further details in writing.

Would any tenants remain in those areas following the transfer?

The Acting Director of Housing indicated that 23 tenants would remain post transfer. Ownership of the properties would remain with the City Council, with Carlisle Housing Association managing the same until all tenants had moved out.

The Head of Housing Provision stressed that a speedy decision on the issue was vital in the interests of those tenants. The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well Being reiterated that point.

What costs would fall upon Council Tax payers?

The Head of Housing Provision advised that no cost whatsoever would be borne by Council Tax payers.

The Chairman then moved that the matter be not referred back to the decision making body, which course of action was agreed.

RESOLVED – That the decision concerning the Raffles Area Strategy, as detailed in Minute EX.302/02, be not referred back to the decision making body and, therefore, the decision takes effect from the date of this meeting.

N.B. In accordance with Standing Order 17.5, Councillor Atkinson wished it to be recorded that he had voted against the above decision.

COS.143/02 PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S COMMENT

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Prosperity indicated that, whilst it was right and proper that Executive decisions were scrutinised in line with the Council's Constitution, he had a problem with the call-in protocol.

On the first occasion when he had attended a call-in it had taken the Committee a lengthy period to decide how to approach the matter, which was a gross waste of Members and

Officers' time. In addition, only one of the Members who had called in for scrutiny the above decision was actually present today.

In response, Councillor Atkinson commented that Councillor Boaden had been unable to attend due to pressure of work.

[The meeting ended at 10.47 am]