

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY 14 FEBRUARY 2013 AT 10.00 AM

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Luckley (Chairman) Councillors Bowditch (as substitute for Councillor Mrs Bradley) Earp, Mrs Prest, Miss Sherriff, Mrs Stevenson and Mrs Vasey.

ALSO

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Riddle – Communities and Housing Portfolio Holder
Mr P Taylor - Head of Operations, Riverside Carlisle
Ms R Kenvyn – Development Project Manager, Riverside Carlisle
Mr D Robinson – Development Officer, Riverside Carlisle

OFFICERS: Director of Community Engagement
Communities, Housing and Health Manager
DFG Coordinator – Cumbria
Communities Housing and Health Manager
Policy and Communications Manager
Scrutiny Officer

COSP.09/13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Mrs Bradley and Scarborough.

COSP.10/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Mrs Luckley declared a registrable interest in accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct in respect of agenda item A.3 – Joint Working with Riverside Carlisle. The interest related to the fact that she was the City Council's representative on the Riverside Carlisle Board.

COSP.11/13 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meetings held on 10 January 2013 be noted.

COSP.12/13 CALL-IN OF DECISIONS

There were no items which had been the subject of call-in.

COSP.13/13 AGENDA

RESOLVED – That Agenda items A.3, Riverside Carlisle Joint Working be considered before Agenda item A2 the Overview Report to avoid any unnecessary delay to external organisations attending the Panel.

COSP.14/13 JOINT WORKING WITH RIVERSIDE CARLISLE

The Chairman welcomed Mr Paul Taylor, Ms Kenvyn and Mr Robinson, Riverside Carlisle to the meeting.

The Director of Community Engagement submitted an update on joint working between Riverside Carlisle and Carlisle City Council (Report CD.14/13).

The report updated the Panel on a number of areas of joint working including the Affordable Homes Programme, Disabled Facility Grants and Homelessness. Work being undertaken regarding the impact of the Welfare Reform on Riverside Tenants was reported in detail.

The Panel scrutinised each of the areas of joint working in turn and raised the following comments and questions:

Affordable Housing

- If the development of the former Morton Primary School site had progressed would the developments at Arnside Court, Borland Avenue and Thomlinson Avenue happened?

The Development Project Manager, Riverside Carlisle responded that the developments at the three sites would not have progressed if the Morton site had been developed. She confirmed that the site would not be developed as an agreement on the land had not been reached.

- Could some of the one bedroom properties have been renovated in preparation for the Welfare Reform changes?

The Head of Operations, Riverside Carlisle acknowledged that the Welfare Reform would have an impact on the development strategy in the future. Riverside Carlisle had to be careful of making changes to the development strategy during the period of change but recognised that a large proportion of tenants would be impacted by the changes.

- There was a serious shortage of affordable accommodation in the rural areas and there were no current rural developments, was there a programme to increase affordable accommodation in rural areas?

The Development Project Manager was aware of the demand in rural areas. There were no planned developments in rural areas, however, Riverside Carlisle always looked for new opportunities for developments. The Head of Operations added that the reduction in funding available to social housing providers impacted on the amount of developments that could be planned.

- Did Riverside Carlisle use all of the funding available to them for developments?

The Development Project Manager confirmed that Riverside carried out a full development programme and investigated all resourcing opportunities. The Head of Operations added that Riverside were putting all available resources into the development programme and Riverside Carlisle had been making links with Head Office so that their own resources could be included. He reiterated that the development programme relied heavily on funding and loans and there had been a significant reduction nationally. Due to the reductions the development programme for future years was uncertain.

The Communities Housing and Health Manager informed the Panel the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) had awarded Carlisle a £2.4m grant for new affordable homes.

The City Council was working closely with partners to bring forward a supply of affordable housing and had agreed on a mix of accommodation. Social housing providers had to borrow significant amounts of money because of the reduction in grants and in Carlisle property developments were 80% affordable rents. There was additional pressure on social housing providers as the margin between private rent and social housing rent was very narrow.

- The opportunity for funding to bring empty properties back into use had increased and this should be utilised alongside new developments.

The Communities Housing and Health Manager agreed and explained that Carlisle was the most successful authority in Cumbria for bringing empty properties back into use.

- Could Arnside Court have been redeveloped instead of being demolished?

The Development Project Manager explained that Arnside Court had been sheltered accommodation and could not be redeveloped because Riverside Carlisle could not secure funding to redevelop it due to the age, fabric and structure of the building. It would have been a challenge to create fit for purpose accommodation, the new development offered more sustainable accommodation.

- If Riverside had been aware of the Welfare Reform and the need for one bedroom accommodation would it still have taken the decision to demolish the 14 bedsits?

The Head of Operations stated that Riverside was obliged to consider redevelopment but the bedsits had not met the legal requirement for social landlords. He was aware of the impact the Welfare Reform would have on social housing and it would impact on the development strategy in the future. He added that it was often cheaper to demolish properties and rebuild them to sustainable standards than to redevelop them.

Disabled Facility Grants

- How did Riverside judge when a Disabled Facility Grant (DFG) request was unviable or impracticable?

The Head of Operations responded that there had been a real policy change in the way that Riverside worked, they considered the property and the needs of the individual and what properties were available. Riverside had to ensure that there was a balance to ensure that as many people as possible could be helped and relocating tenants instead of providing DFGs had meant that more DFGs could be provided, last year 82 major adaptations and 269 minor adaptations been carried out. He added that the register of adapted properties had been completed.

The Panel thanked Riverside for their contribution to DFGs.

Homelessness

- Had Riverside Carlisle refused to provide accommodation for any of the referrals from the City Council?

The Communities Housing and Health Manager agreed to provide Members with a written answer.

- The Panel highlighted the last paragraph in the report regarding Choice Based Letting and asked for clarification.

The Director of Community Engagement reminded the Panel that the Choice Based Letting Policy had been amended and one of the amendments had been to ensure that tenants who fell into debt as a result of the changes brought in by the Welfare Reform would not fall in priority in the Choice Based Letting Scheme.

- The report stated that 69 people had been nominated by the City Council as being owed a homelessness duty and only 49 had been housed by Riverside, what happened to the other 20 people?

The Communities Housing and Health Manager reported that all 69 people had been housed as follows:

Riverside – 49 households

Two Castles Housing Association – 5 households

Impact Housing Association – 3 households

Eden Housing Association – 2 Households

Hanover, Anchor & South Lakes – 1 Household each

Private rented accommodation through choice – 7 households

- Were the problems regarding the statutory responsibility of homeless 16-18 year olds continuing?

The Director of Community Engagement reminded the Panel of a Case which happened in 2010. The Case led to a review of the processes and joint working arrangements between the County Council and the City Council. The County Council had a statutory responsibility to 16-18 year old children in need. The County Council sought legal advice on Case Law and had recently Children's Act and the appointed a Liaison Officer to work with the Districts.

The Panel were pleased to hear that improvements had been made and suggested that the new Liaison Officer role be invited to a future Panel meeting.

Welfare Reform

- The report stated that 570 tenants who under-occupied their homes had engaged with Riverside Carlisle, how would the other tenants be kept informed of the changes?

The Head of Operations explained that the exact figures changed quickly due to tenants changes in circumstances. The approximate number of tenants who under-occupied their home was in the 1000 region. 70% of those tenants had made contact with Riverside and the remaining tenants had not responded to written communications or to officers visiting

their homes. Riverside had chosen to interpret those who had not responded as deciding to stay in the property and pay the extra rent as there was a cost implication to Riverside to continue to visit the properties.

Riverside had been collating data on those tenants who were vulnerable to enable extra support and advice to be provided. The data was collected through officer knowledge and external agencies. Riverside had support officers and funding in place to support tenants who wished to downsize and a number of tenants had already taken this offer.

The Head of Operations outlined the Big Changes Campaign which Riverside was running to inform all tenants of the Welfare Reform and to specifically target tenants who under-occupied. Part of the Campaign was to ensure that those tenants of retirement age understood that the under-occupancy changes did not affect them. He added that Carlisle was fortunate compared to many areas as smaller accommodation was available for tenants to downsize to. There were a number of questions and issues that still had not been answered and the full impact would not be known for some months.

The Head of Operations added that Riverside Carlisle had two members of staff dedicated to giving benefit advice and one member of staff focused on visiting people to give advice.

The Director of Community Engagement outlined the work the City Council had undertaken in preparation for the changes including closer working with partners. A multi agency Welfare Reform Board had been established to share and disperse information to avoid duplicity of work. The Revenues and Benefits Service had sent out a statutory letter to residents and there had been a limited response to the letter. All responses would be logged and mapped so areas of low response or high concern could be identified and targeted with information/awareness raising activity.

- Was there enough capacity to move all of the tenants who requested a down size?

The Head of Operations responded that Riverside had less empty properties then it had ever had and although there were adequate properties they were all occupied. He stated it that it would be a slow process to rehouse everyone and it would cause arrears for some tenants.

- If a tenant was unable to downsize due to the lack of accommodation would they still have to pay the extra rent?

The Head of Operations informed the Panel that tenants would have to pay the rent and Riverside had set procedures in place to recover the debt.

- Did Riverside have any discretion when considering rent arrears and were they reviewing their Rent Arrears Policy in light of the Reform?

The Head of Operations confirmed that Riverside was reviewing their national Rent Arrears Policy. Riverside had made it clear to tenants that the changes were Government policy and that tenants were responsible for paying the rent. Riverside Carlisle had no discretion regarding rent arrears as the Policy covered the whole of Riverside not just Carlisle.

- It had been suggested that tenants who under-occupied could take in lodgers, would this affect the tenancy agreements?

The Head of Operations agreed that a lodger was an option for tenants but it would be their choice although they would be required to gain written consent from Riverside. There were pros and cons to this idea and ultimately the tenant would be responsible for the behaviour of the lodger as far as their tenancy agreement was concerned. There was an option for shared tenancies but ultimately it was up to the individual and their circumstances.

RESOLVED –1) That the Riverside Carlisle representatives be thanked for their input in the meeting and welcomed the update on the partnership;

2) That Riverside Carlisle be thanked for their contribution towards Disabled Facilities Grants

3) That the Communities Housing and Health Manager provide Members with a written response to the following question:

“Had Riverside Carlisle refused to provide accommodation for any of the referrals from the City Council?”

4) That an update on the development with regard to the changes in partnership working with Children’s Services and their Liaison Officer be provided to the Panel at their July meeting.

5) That the Panels concerns regarding rent arrears be passed to Riverside to consider during their review of the Rent Arrears Policy.

COSP.15/13 OVERVIEW REPORT AND WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer presented report OS.04/13 which provided an overview of matters relating to the work of the Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel and included the latest version of the work programme and Key Decisions of the Executive which related to the Panel.

The Scrutiny Officer reported that:

- The Notice of Executive Key Decisions had been published on 11 January 2013. The following issues fell within the remit of this Panel:

KD.037/12 – Carlisle Plan to be considered at this meeting

KD.041/12 - Regulatory Reform Order had been removed from the January Notice but had been included in the February Notice to be considered by the Executive on 11 March 2013.

KD.045/12 – Parish Charter – Would be considered by the Panel on 28 March 2013.

KD.046/12 – Home Improvement Agency would be considered at this meeting.

Members did not raise any questions or comments on the items contained within the Notice of Key Decisions.

- There were no references from the Executive.

- The Scrutiny Officer provided an update on information that the Panel had requested at their meeting on 10 January 2013, details of which had been included in the Overview Report. Updates on the Homeless and Hostel Services and the Carlisle and Eden District Delivery Group had also been circulated to Members.
- All Scrutiny Members had been asked if there were any particular issues they wished to see discussed in the Scrutiny Annual report. A draft of the report would be submitted to the Panel's final meeting of the civic year on Thursday 28 March 2013.
- The Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel had organised a special meeting to take place on 5 March 2013 at 2.00pm to consider the Carlisle Leisure Limited contract. All Members of the Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel had been invited to attend.

The Panel asked for updates to be made available on the CCTV provision and the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership.

RESOLVED – 1) That, subject to the issues raised above, the Overview Report incorporating the Work Programme and Key decisions relevant to this Panel be noted;

2) That Key Decisions:

KD.041/12 - Regulatory Reform Order had been removed from the January Notice but had been included in the February Notice to be considered by the Executive on 11 March 2013.

KD.045/12 – Parish Charter – Would be considered by the Panel on 28 March 2013.

3) That the Panel receive regular updates on the CCTV provision in Carlisle in 2013/14.

4) That an update on the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership be submitted to the next meeting of the Panel.

COSP.16/13 DRAFT CARLISLE PLAN 2013/16

The Policy and Communications Manager submitted report PC.02/13 presenting the draft Carlisle Plan 2013 – 2016. He informed Members that the Plan replaced the previous Corporate Plan 2010 - 2013 and formed part of the Council's Policy Framework.

The Plan set out the Council's vision for Carlisle and the six priorities for action over the medium term (2013 - 2016), with the text under each priority providing the background and further detail on how the priority would be achieved.

The draft Action Plan for delivering the priorities was set out at Appendix 2, including medium term actions aimed to be delivered over the life of the Plan and actions to be delivered within the financial year. That aligned the Plan with the budget year. Future actions which developed could fit into the budget planning process.

The Executive had on 11 February 2013 (EX.10/13) considered the report and decided:

“That the Executive:

1. Had considered the presentation and content of the draft Carlisle Plan with a view to seeking continuous improvement in the way the Council delivered services to its local communities.
2. Referred the draft Carlisle Plan to the Overview and Scrutiny Panels for consultation.
3. Referred the Action Plan to partners, including community and voluntary groups for consultation.”

In considering the Plan Members raised the following comments and questions:

- The Plan contained a lot of work for officers and the number of priorities had increased, was there the capacity to deliver and monitor the priorities.

The Policy and Communications Manager highlighted the action plan for delivering each of the priorities which was attached to the report. Each item in the action plan was linked to a lead Director and would not have been included in the action plan if there was not the resource available to deliver it.

- A previous priority had been Health and Wellbeing and it was no longer included in the priorities.

The Communities and Housing Portfolio Holder explained that health had been integrated into each one of the priorities and each Directorate because of its importance.

The Panel accepted that health had been included in the priorities but felt that it should have been written down to enable it to be monitored.

- The comments underneath the housing needs priority should include lifetime home standards.
- Was the selection of the suitable site for the Arts Centre progressing according to the timescale set out in the report?

The Director of Community Engagement confirmed that it would be likely that a suitable site or property would be identified by April 2013 and gave a brief update on the progress to date.

- An action in the plan had been to deliver the cycle way link to complete the Carlisle Cycle Scheme; Members questioned how this could be completed.

The Policy and Communications Manager explained that the action had been discussed at the Corporate Programme Board and it was likely that it would be removed from the Plan.

RESOLVED – 1) That the Panel recommended that the Health and Wellbeing agenda objectives are identified and reported separately within the Carlisle Plan.

2) That a monitoring report on the actions set out in report PC.02/13 be submitted to the September meeting of the Panel.

COSP.17/13 PERFORMANCE UPDATE

The Policy and Communications Manager presented report PC.05/13 updating the Panel on the latest position regarding the Service Standards which helped measure the City Council's performance and customer satisfaction.

In considering the report Members raised the following comments and questions:

- Were the public's reaction to the service standards or to the display screen in the reception monitored?

The Policy and Communications Manager responded that information was being captured and he intended to carry out a survey in the customer contact centre to ask customers if they knew about the standards.

- 75% of new benefit claims were being processed in less than 28 days, Members were concerned that the other 25% were waiting too long to have a claim processed and having to deal with unnecessary stress during the processing period.

The Policy and Communications Manager replied that he had investigated the figures in detail and the 25% who were not being processed within the 28 days was due mostly to the requirement for further information. Often the additional information had to come from outside agencies and could take some time. He added that the most complex cases could have delays of over 100 days and agreed to investigate further the delay time after 28 days.

- Would the processing time for new claims increase as a result of the Welfare Reform?

The Director of Community Engagement acknowledged that there were capacity challenges, some of which sat with IT. There was a lot of pressure on the Performance Team within Revenue and Benefits in February and March due to the annual billing process and that team in particular would feel most of the pressure from the benefits changes. He added that the staff dealing with new claims would not necessarily deal with the changes in legislation. Some of the changes from Welfare Reform would take place over a number of years and would see some staff redundancies in the benefits team as the function would be provided by the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP).

He informed the Panel that the target for processing new claims would be reduced to 24 days in March.

- How did the processing time compare to other Councils within Cumbria?

The Policy and Communications Manager agreed to gather other Districts information where possible.

RESOLVED: That the Performance Update report PC.05/13 be noted.

COSP.18/13 PUBLIC AND PRESS

RESOLVED – That in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the Public and Press were excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt

information as defined in the paragraph number (as indicated in brackets against each minute) of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Local Government Act.

COSP.19/13 HOME IMPROVEMENT AGENCY

(Public and Press excluded by virtue of Paragraph 3)

The Director of Community Engagement submitted private report CD.12/13 regarding the development of a Home Improvement Agency (HIA).

The DFG Coordinator – Cumbria outlined the background and current position, emphasising that enabling people to remain living independently at home was a key part of Government Policy. He further set out the reasoning behind the recommendation that the HIA adopt a brand name whilst, at the same time, retaining its identity as a service of Carlisle City Council.

The Executive had on 11 February 2013 (EX.21/13) considered the report and decided:

“That the Executive noted the content of private Report CD.11/13 and approved the branding of Carlisle City Council’s Home Improvement Agency as ‘homelife carlisle’.”

In considering the report Members raised the following comments and questions:

- Had any of the proposed work begun?

The DFG Coordinator – Cumbria outlined a number of the schemes that had started including the Keep Warm, Keep Safe, Keep Well Scheme. He hoped that the HIA could build up a database of people who they worked successfully with to ensure they have a good track record of delivery that could lead to additional funding. The HIA had to be viable and the aim was to become cost neutral to the Council. Customers of the services would have to pay for the service and it was essential to have a good Business Plan.

- Could the Housing Case Worker be funded for more than one year?

The DFG Coordinator – Cumbria explained that it was hoped that the HIA could work towards making the post sustainable by demonstrating the savings the post had made to health care and attracting additional funding.

- Would the HIA help address issues that elderly parents had who cared for severely disabled children?

The DFG Coordinator – Cumbria agreed that families struggled as carers got older and needed additional support. A strategy was being formulated to help in those situations. He added that the changes to home care had resulted in a shortfall of home carers in Carlisle.

- Would there be any benefit to sharing the service with neighbouring districts?

The DFG Coordinator – Cumbria confirmed that Cumbria wide services were being investigated where possible. Due to the geographical size of Cumbria it was not always viable to share services.

- How long had HIAs been operating?

The DFG Coordinator – Cumbria stated that HIAs had been in operation for some time and 85% of the Country was covered by HIAs. Carlisle was accredited by Foundations, the National Body for HIAs. The Department of Health and Department for Communities and Local Government saw HIAs as a way of delivering services to vulnerable people.

The Communities and Housing Portfolio Holder reminded the Panel of a successful HIA that had been set up by Age Concern and felt that the HIA would work well.

RESOLVED – That Report CD.12/13 be welcomed.

COSP.20/13 TRANSFORMATION

(Public and Press excluded by virtue of Paragraph 3)

The Director of Community Engagement gave a verbal update on the Transformation savings within the Community Engagement Directorate.

The Director explained the process behind the Transformation and the reason for the changes to the proposals within his Directorate. He informed the Panel that staff would be given the consultation document on 1 March and the consultation period would run until April. The Panel would receive a copy of the consultation document at their meeting on 28 March 2013.

RESOLVED – That the Director of Community Engagement's update be welcomed and that the Panel looked forward to a further update in March.

(The meeting ended at 12.35pm)