

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY 30 MAY 2013 AT 10.00 AM

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Luckley (Chairman) Councillors Mrs Bradley, Ellis, Mrs Prest, Scarborough, Miss Sherriff, Mrs Vasey and Wilson (as substitute for Councillor Mrs Stevenson)

ALSO

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Riddle – Communities and Housing Portfolio Holder
Mr Tim Linford – YMCA

OFFICERS: Director of Community Engagement
Communities, Housing and Health Manager
Overview and Scrutiny Officer
Policy and Performance Officer
Private Sector Housing Technical Team Manager

COSP.33/13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Mrs Stevenson.

COSP.34/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest in respect of the business to be transacted at the meeting.

COSP.35/13 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meetings held on 14 February 2013 and 28 March 2013 be agreed as a correct record of the meetings and signed by the Chairman.

COSP.36/13 CALL-IN OF DECISIONS

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

COSP.37/13 OVERVIEW REPORT AND WORK PROGRAMME

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer presented report OS.13/13 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 1 May 2013. The following issues fell within the remit of this Panel:

KD.04/13 – Food Law Enforcement Service Plan – The Panel agreed to take this item for information only.

KD.06/13 – CDRP Partnership Plan – The Partnership Plan was scrutinised by the Panel at their meeting on 28 March 2013.

KD.08/13 – Scheme of Housing Assistance (Empty Properties and Disabled Facilities) – for consideration later in the meeting

- The following Minute Excerpts had been received from the Executive's meetings held on 8 April 2013 and 7 May 2013:
EX.33/13 – Draft Carlisle Plan 2013-2016
EX.35/13 – CSP Partnership Plan
EX.34/13 – Parish Charter.
- The Overview and Scrutiny Manager had circulated a short survey regarding the Members' views on scrutiny. She advised that the survey was similar to that undertaken on 2009 and would determine whether Members' views had altered over that time. The results of the survey would be evaluated and fed back to the Scrutiny Chairs Group.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer reminded Members that there would be a Work Programme Development Session at the end of the meeting.

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;

COSP.38/13 SHADDONGATE RESOURCE CENTRE

The Director of Community Engagement submitted report CD.35/13 that gave an operational and financial update of the first twelve months of Carlisle YMCA management of the Shaddongate Resource and Training Centre. The report detailed the progress made to date in the development of services, the involvement of agencies and service users and the financial performance of the YMCA in 2012/13 and their plans going forward.

The Director of Community Engagement reminded Members of the background to the development of the Centre which was officially opened on 22 October 2012.

A copy of the aims and objectives for the Resource Centre was attached to the report. Progress on achieving those aims was critically dependent on the Centre's financial sustainability and the development of surpluses that could be recycled back into the development of services in the centre in line with the broad objectives.

The Director of Community Engagement outlined the financial position of the YMCA and advised that their 2013/14 financial plan also projected a small surplus. The year two projections were underpinned by an increase in lettings performance.

As part of the ongoing partnership and contract monitoring arrangements, the City Council and the YMCA met quarterly. At the most recent meeting the YMCA presented their draft outturn report for 2012/13, the projected income stream for 2013/14 and reported on activity. The Director of Community Engagement circulated a copy of the YMCA's activity log which indicated that many of the activities fitted in with the objectives in the contract for prevention services, education and training and health and wellbeing.

Going forward, the City Council and the YMCA would be working on a revised performance management framework, partnership charter and implementation plan, which would be reported to the Panel at a future meeting.

The Director of Community Engagement outlined the City Council's contribution to the Carlisle Plan priorities in respect of the Resource Centre.

An addition to the report included the financial report for the YMCA for year 2012/13, the budget for YMCA for 2013/14 and the activity log to date.

The Director introduced Mr Linford from the YMCA. Mr Linford explained that the YMCA was now in the second year of occupation at the Resource Centre. Whilst it had been a challenging year there had been a financial surplus due to the sale of the premises on Fisher Street. Costs during the first year had been to equipping the Centre with high standard IT equipment in an effort to attract agencies to use the centre. The Centre had been used recently by Systems Training who had done a lot of work under the Action for Education programme with young unemployed people.

Mr Linford advised that there had been some success in obtaining grant funding that enabled the Centre to provide facilitators and volunteers to deliver activities around wellbeing. The model for year 2 would be for the Centre to deliver their own activities and they would look to the third sector and charitable trusts for funding to enable the Centre's own staff to deliver programmes.

Mr Linford stated that lettings needed to increase by 24%-30% to reach targets set, but it was also essential that there was a balance to be met between securing the regular income from secured accommodation and the use of offices as training rooms. There had been 4 parties interested in relocating to the Centre. The workshop at the rear of the building had been reinforced but a training provider would be required to utilise that space. The YMCA were working with Inspira in providing a module for 12-14 young people over 3 weeks during the summer. Mr Linford was also looking at links with strategic partners and the City Council either to obtain funding or something in kind to enable the YMCA to deliver training from the workshop area.

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

- *What was the capacity of the Resource Centre?*

Mr Linford advised that capacity was 80% daily and with a large scale training opportunity that would increase to 90% occupancy. With guaranteed usage the Centre could look at providing its own staff and volunteers.

- *Was youth homelessness still part of the remit of the Centre?*

Mr Linford explained that it was but would not be within the early part of the scheme. It would be included later if care and support packages were in place.

- *In 2011/12 the net income was the same as the expenditure. What was the explanation for that?*

Mr Linford explained that in 2011/12 there was a surplus carried forward which would show as an accrual next year. The actual figures in the budget were correct.

- *The energy figures for the coming year were half of those shown last year. How would that be achieved?*

Mr Linford advised that due to efficient systems being installed in the building and better housekeeping such as switching off equipment overnight the expenditure would be reduced. The rents and rates had also been reduced due to a reduction in the mandatory rate relief and a rebate from the empty property in Fisher Street. The contract was completed on a full cost and repair basis including equipment maintenance services.

With regard to cleaning Mr Linford advised that initially the cleaning was done by a contract company but due to the expense the YMCA had now employed a cleaner.

- *The salaries of people were £2,000 above budget. What was the explanation for that?*

Mr Linford explained that the sum had been carried through as it was grant funding and would be shown separately.

- *It would have been useful to have had some explanation included in the financial reports.*

Mr Linford agreed to provide narrative in future reports.

- *Members were encouraged by Mr Linford's enthusiasm and acknowledged that it had been a difficult period. It was agreed that the letting side of the venture needed to be increased.*

Mr Linford advised that he was aware of other providers who would be interested in leasing accommodation at the Centre. The Centre was advertised on the internet and by open days but the most effective method was word of mouth. A lot of enquiries had been generated from stakeholder meetings.

- *What partners were the YMCA working with and how could they be sure they were not duplicating work already being undertaken elsewhere within the City.*

Mr Linford explained that there was an extensive list of actions that had been agreed by the YMCA and the Council. He assured Members that work would not be duplicated but that the YMCA would signpost people to the appropriate agencies. Other organisations were keen to work with the YMCA, particularly agencies within the voluntary sector. Any grant applications by the YMCA would be for specific pieces of work and would not take potential grants from other agencies.

- *When the Resources Centre was first considered a need was identified to support young people within the City. That was a large part of the city Council's support for the Resource Centre.*
- *Had there been a rise in homelessness among young people recently and who was working on the matter?*

Mr Linford advised that John Street Hostel were providing catering courses to show young people how to live less expensively and how to cost meals appropriately. Some young people received support from Impact support workers and adult education courses in

conjunction with the Job Centre with regard to literacy, numeracy and IT. However, the YMCA had not received many referrals from the Job Centre. IT courses had been provided which had realised large numbers of attendees including young people. At the present time the YMCA facilitates the courses but to make the building sustainable the YMCA would need to find partners to carry out the courses. The YMCA were also keen to talk to the City Council regarding a strategic partnership.

- *A Member asked the Communities and Housing Portfolio Holder whether she was confident of the future of the Resource Centre.*

The Portfolio Holder stated that it had been a major task getting the Resource Centre equipped and there had been difficult times. The Portfolio Holder acknowledged that Carlisle could be a difficult place for new establishments to gain a foothold but she was confident that the Centre would be successful. The Portfolio Holder was aware of the potential competition with other agencies within the City but believed that there was strength in submitting joint partnership bids.

Mr Linford explained that the YMCA had tried to attract people from the voluntary sector and looked at supporting organisations that did not have a huge amount of income to achieve their aims. There was a need for voluntary organisations to use the Resource Centre if they did not have their own premises.

- *Were the volunteers at the Resource Centre working longer hours?*

The YMCA had up to 10 volunteers working an extended day from 8:00am until 8:00pm and until 9:30pm 2 nights of the week. There had been applications from 3 young people on a youth project who were keen to work with the YMCA so they could include that work before attending university. The YMCA worked with the University of Cumbria who were supportive of the work. The work of the Centre would not have been as successful without volunteers.

- *A Member who worked with men with disabilities stated that they were impressed with the facilities at the Centre and the wheelchair access made the building as a whole more accessible.*

Mr Linford advised that it was the role of the YMCA to make people welcome to the Centre particularly if they were shy about joining any of the groups.

- *Who would offer employment training?*

Mr Linford explained that there was currently 1 person at the Centre who was qualified to assess other people's work and by next year there would be people who could deliver courses but external funding would be required. Mr Linford's role would be to ensure that the building was fit for purpose and that there was the equipment and staff to deliver training in house but that could only be done in conjunction with other partners.

- *A Member was concerned about the provision of adult literacy and numeracy as that was a specialised area of work and different qualifications were required.*

Mr Linford explained that a verifier would assess the capability of the trainer and the YMCA would work within the law and good practice.

- *How many young homeless people would the Centre be able to support?*

Mr Linford advised that young people go to the Centre as they believe the YMCA could offer accommodation. Staff give advice to the young people and arrange meetings with the appropriate agencies. The YMCA would like to develop training and were intending to make a funding application to enable people on low incomes to deliver activities. A large number of people take part in the fitness classes and it was important that such activities were available to all.

Mr Linford explained that his role at the Centre was to seek out smaller local grants the information about which was included within the report.

- *A Member queried whether the current budget could achieve everything outlined in the report.*

Mr Linford advised that there was little slack in the budget and they would save on housekeeping where they could which would mean that they would have to look at lettings and work with large providers. Part of his work was looking at the Empty Homes Initiative and expanding the work in Carlisle. Mr Linford wished to do a lot of work with the community.

- *People in Castle Ward supported the venture. Was it proposed to hold another meeting of the Stakeholder Group?*

Mr Linford advised that he, with colleagues, were looking at the performance framework and they would try to get people who were involved in the consultation around the table and determine whether the needs of the community had been covered. If that was not the case then there was clearly the need to change direction if possible which would be done in conjunction with City Council colleagues.

- *Would the quarterly review involve only officers?*

Mr Linford explained that it had been agreed that the review would sit with the YMCA who would look at implementing the plan and pulling together specific targets and performance indicators then the issues would be reported back to the Panel.

- *A member queried whether car parking was causing problems for the Centre.*

Mr Linford confirmed that it was a problem and he had contacted adjacent organisations with a view to leasing land from them. He had also contacted the City Council to request having a number of permits for parking spaces on the Paddy's market car park to be made available. However the cost of the permits made it difficult to prove the business case but he thanked the City Council for their offer. All literature stated that there was no parking available on site and on occasions the Centre's 9 parking spaces were reserved as disabled parking. He acknowledged that it was a struggle when there were large community events at the Centre.

RESOLVED – The Chairman thanked Mr Linford for the information and congratulated him and his staff for the success of the Centre.

COSP.39/13 SCHEME OF HOUSING ASSISTANCE (EMPTY PROPERTIES DISABLED FACILITIES GRANTS)

The Director of Community Engagement submitted report CD.34/13 that provided an updated housing scheme of assistance that reflected services that the Council undertook in relation to dealing with empty property and Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) in the private rented sector.

The report had previously been considered by the Executive on 7 May 2013 who had decided:

1. That the Executive approved the new Policy for Housing Assistance and the use of funds as described in Appendix 2 to Report CD.31/13.
2. That the use of funds, as outlined in Appendix 2 and granting of grants and loans, would be the responsibility of Officers and as such delegated to the Director of Community Engagement and Director of Resources.
3. That a decision to proceed with future Empty Property Schemes be delegated to the Portfolio Holder.

The Director of Community Engagement that the report would enable the Council to make loans to private landlords to bring empty properties back into use. There would potentially be an impact on homelessness and improve the environmental quality of Carlisle. The work could be undertaken following a successful application to the Government and would work in parallel with the Government to support grants to DFGs. The Communities, Housing and Health Manager and the Housing and health Services Manager had worked on the report and the Director acknowledged the amount of work they had undertaken in preparation of the report.

By way of background, the Communities, Housing and Health Manager reminded Members that the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 (RRO) placed a duty on local authorities to publish a Housing Assistance Policy for the private sector. The RRO had been adopted by the City Council on 9 September 2003 and subsequently amended to allow actions to be taken by Officers in relation to the private housing sector.

Se added that Disabled Facilities Grants, which were mandatory and funded via a separate funding stream, would continue to be available under the proposed Housing Assistance Policy. Any other grants and loans which the Council proposed to offer would be discretionary and dependant upon the availability of resources.

Since April 2012 no housing assistance had been available in Carlisle for anything other than Disabled Facilities Grants. However, in recent months, successful bids for external funding had secured the finance necessary to enable assistance to be offered to the owners of empty homes to bring them back into use.

The funding had to be used in accordance with the prescribed criteria, but could be used to provide grants and loans. Most of the schemes currently being progressed had a finite lifespan with a cut off date of March 2014. The conditions attached to the funding streams were included in the proposed Housing Assistance Policy document (Appendix 1).

The report emphasised that approval of the amended Housing Assistance Policy would enable the Council to offer financial incentives to empty property owners to bring those

properties back into use, and in so doing increase the availability of much needed housing accommodation in the area. A summary of the sources of funding obtained and the match funding requirements was provided at Appendix 2 to report CD.31/13 that had been considered by the Executive at their meeting on 7 May 2013. .

Opportunities to bid for empty property funding often arose at short notice and delivery of such schemes was expected within a short timescale. It was therefore advantageous to build flexibility into the Housing Assistance Policy.

The report also outlined the circumstances in which the Council could reclaim the grant and who would make that decision ie the Director and the Portfolio Holder.

Any work would have to be to a minimum standard and where there was a larger amount of work Officers would want to ensure a higher than basic decent homes standard.

The proposal would enable the Council to hold a recyclable loan fund which would enable the Council to do more work as there would be more funds available and that would be in line with Government policy to provide a recyclable loan policy. The Communities, Housing and Health Manager confirmed that the loan rate had not yet been set.

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

- *How many empty properties were there in Carlisle?*

The Communities, Housing and Health Manager advised that there were up to 45 houses at present and there had been a number of applications from the owners of properties with a cluster of bids operating in various areas of the City.

- *Would the Council require a list of work to be undertaken before approval of a loan?*

The responsibility for the work would be on the owner of the property. The Council could prescribe the standard of the work but not the actual work to be undertaken. The property would be checked before work commenced by the Empty Properties Officer and advice on consents given. The property would again be inspected on completion of the work by the Empty Properties Officer who would be qualified to inspect the property. The reputation of contractors would be the responsibility of the owners of the properties and if the work was not completed to standard the loan would not be paid.

- *The loan would be needed for the work to be undertaken and therefore the loan would be spent before substandard work was identified. Therefore there needed to be sanctions if the work was not to standard.*

The Communities, Housing and Health Manager confirmed that the loan would be backed up by a charge on the property so the Council's position would be protected.

- *There may be some private landlords who may try to take advantage of the loan.*

The Communities, Housing and Health Manager was confident that procedures would be in place to safeguard the Council. Officers would work with landlords and the interest rate would be attractive to the Council.

- *Officers would not be able to determine whether the work was to standard until the work was completed and the Council could not realise any charge to the property until the property was sold.*

The Communities, Housing and Health Manager explained that Officers would need to look at the timing of loans. The Director advised that there would be a phased payment of the loan to reduce that risk which he believed to be modest and would not have a significant impact on the Council. In most cases Officers had a good relationship with the landlords or contractors and payment would be made in stages.

- *The Council would need to ensure that good quality work was provided as the loan was public money. Would it be possible to provide a list of approved contractors?*

The Communities, Housing and Health Manager advised that if the Council produced an approved list of contractors it would take on the liability that the work would be completed to an acceptable standard. Officers could signpost people to contracts used by the Council but could not produce an approved list.

- *How would the empty properties be identified?*

The Communities, Housing and Health Manager explained that Officers were working with colleagues in Revenues and benefits to identify empty properties from the annual return of the Council Tax list. Officers would go out and inspect properties that had been empty for 6 months or more.

The Private Sector Housing Technical Team Manager advised that the funding was only available in certain wards and did not relate to all properties. For example only part of Brampton town was included. The funding would be provided to areas where 10% of the properties were empty. Individual properties in rural areas would be excluded but there was scope to find other funding streams.

- *After a property had been empty for 6 months rates became payable. How often were the records updated?*

The Communities, Housing and Health Manager advised that some of the properties identified were not actually empty and Officers were working with other agencies and had identified 40 properties from the list only 2 of which were actually empty. Officers would continue to check the properties. When the scheme was promoted a lot of people made enquiries and if more funding was available the Council would have targeted other areas. However the scheme had been useful to a lot of people within Carlisle.

- *It was imperative that contractors were vetted in some way. A contract had recently been awarded for work at the Botcherby Community Centre and whilst the contract was not the cheapest the Member believed the work would be to a good standard.*

The Communities, Housing and Health Manager thanked Members for their feedback which had been useful. She confirmed that she would look at monitoring the quality of contractors and build that into the process.

The Council had dedicated Officers who worked with landlords and inspected the properties. They would specify the standard of work and the message would be clear about what standard the Council would accept.

- *Some small business do not complete relevant forms because of the bureaucracy attached to them and therefore would not be included in any list of contractors. It would be a shame for such businesses to be excluded.*
- *A recommended list could include smaller businesses. By keeping checks on the work and being clear how the process would work, including staged payments, would be a common sense approach.*

The Communities, Housing and Health Manager advised that at present the DFG payments were staged and the empty homes payments would be implemented in a similar manner.

- *Would the project refer to the Community Grant Project?*

The YMCA had successfully applied for funding from the Homes and Communities Agency for empty homes. The Council would provide the technical information and there were currently 12 referrals to the YMCA.

The Private Sector Housing Technical Team Manager confirmed that properties would need to be re-let within 4 months of completion of any work undertaken. The Communities, Housing and Health Manager advised that anyone undertaking work would need to provide a scope of works and that would be agreed with the builder. Once work was completed the owner would have 4 months to re-let the property. If the work did not meet the required standard on completion sanctions could be taken. There would be a charge on the property that would enable the Council to recover the loan.

The Portfolio Holder confirmed that any decision on repayment would be made by the Director of Community Engagement and the Portfolio Holder which was the current policy.

- *Funding pockets were available regarding fuel poverty. Would such funding assist the empty properties scheme?*

The Communities, Housing and Health Manager confirmed that other products could be brought in where relevant but a lot would depend upon the circumstances of the owner of the property.

RESOLVED – 1) That Members were concerned about the quality of potential work to be undertaken on empty properties

2) That the Communities, Housing and Health Manager would monitor the work and follow up the issues raised

COSP.40/13 END OF YEAR PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Policy and Performance Officer submitted private report PC.11/13 which outlined the Council's end of year performance against the 2012/13 Service Standards that helped to measure performance and customer satisfaction. Details of each service standard were included in the table appended to the report, which illustrated the cumulative end of year figure, a month-by-month breakdown of performance and, where possible, an actual service standard baseline that had been established either locally or nationally.

By way of background the Policy and Performance Officer advised that the Service Standards were based on timeliness, accuracy and appropriateness of the service provided by the Council in key areas. The table indicated that the majority of standards demonstrated consistently good performance throughout the year and, in the case of "Processing New Benefit Claims", significant improvements had been made month on month. That was due to a continuous programme of reviewing processes and resources in order to maximise efficiency.

During the last Overview and Scrutiny cycle Members request information concerning claims that had not been processed in time. The Policy and Performance Officer advised that the majority were delayed because the benefits Team were awaiting further information from the claimants. The Officer outlined other issues that had caused a delay in the processing of claims.

One standard that had seen a deterioration in performance was that of "Percentage of Waste Sent for Recycling". That was due mainly to the lack of garden waste in the winter months when compared with the 2011 figures.

The Policy and Performance Officer advised that the Service standards would continue to be developed and amended to accommodate the needs of the Council's customers and changes in legislation. The Standards would continue to be monitored by the Senior Management Team and regular progress would be reported to the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny throughout 2013/14.

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

- *Only the indicator on Revenues and Benefits was within the remit of the Panel but all indicators were included in the report.*

The Policy and Performance Officer advised that Benefits had performed well throughout the year with a steady upward trend. The Chief Executive had taken ownership of the indicators and regular reports were submitted to the Chief Executive.

The Policy and Performance Officer explained the reasons why the figure was not 100%.

- *Members were concerned about the changes to the Benefits system due to take place shortly.*

The Policy and Performance Officer advised that he had spoken with the Benefits Manager who was looking at measures for the future. However the current service standards would be retained.

- *How would the 6 priorities within the Carlisle Plan be indicated in future reports?*

The Policy and Performance Officer explained that it was intended that there would be quarterly updates which would be split into service standards against measures within the Carlisle Plan. At the present stage the Policy and Performance Officer was unsure whether the information would be narrative or quantitative.

- *The new format would be easier to understand if there was more narrative about why indicators were above or below standard.*

The Policy and Performance Officer agreed that narrative could be included in future reports.

RESOLVED – That Report PC.11/13 be noted.

(The meeting ended at 1.00pm)