

# STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

## 22 MARCH 2011

*Present :-* Councillor Christopher Arnold (Chairman)  
Councillors Nigel Chapman, Mark Cory, Bill Frame,  
Theresa Higgins, Nigel Offen, Gerard Oxford,  
Dennis Willetts and Julie Young

*Substitute Member :-* Councillor Margaret Kimberley  
for Councillor Andrew Ellis

*Also in Attendance :-* Councillor Tina Dopson  
Councillor Beverley Oxford

### 41. Minutes

The minutes of the meetings held on the 8 February 2011 and 15 February 2011 were both confirmed as a correct record.

### 42. Review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety

The Portfolio Holder was unable to attend due to a commitment to a peer review at another authority. Councillor Tim Young sent his apologies in advance of the meeting.

*RESOLVED* that the Panel agreed that the review of the work by the Portfolio Holder would be scheduled for an early meeting in 2011/12.

**Councillor Bill Frame (in respect of being a Board Member of the Colne Housing Group) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)**

**Councillor Nigel Chapman, Councillor Margaret Kimberley and Councillor Nigel Offen (in respect of being a member of the Board of Colchester Borough Homes) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)**

**Councillor Gerard Oxford (in respect of being a tenant of a Housing Association's adapted property) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)**

**Councillor Theresa Higgins (in respect of being the Chairman of Colchester's YMCA) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)**

### 43. Transforming Colchester's Housing Services – the Fundamental Service

## **Review of Housing - one year on**

Councillor Tina Dopson, Portfolio Holder for Communities, Ms. Lindsay Barker, Head of Strategic Policy and Regeneration and Mr. Gareth Mitchell, Head of Life Opportunities attended the meeting.

Councillor Dopson introduced the item, explaining that the review had ensured the housing service was fit for purpose with evidence to show the impact of the review on individual services. The service now provided was quicker, more effective and at a reduced overall cost.

One year on from the previous review, Housing Services continued to operate in a challenging environment that is experiencing continual change. But the service continues to respond well to new challenges, and meeting the needs of customers.

Councillor Dopson said officers would give a high-level briefing of where we are at this moment in time.

## **Presentation**

Mr. Mitchell and Ms. Barker gave a presentation on Transforming Colchester's Housing Services.

It was explained that the objective was "To ensure that Colchester has the best possible arrangements for meeting the housing needs of residents".

Housing was central to the Council's strategic priorities, 'Homes for All' (working towards providing safe, secure, decent and affordable homes for all), 'Healthy Living', 'Older People's needs', 'Younger People's needs' and 'Community Safety'.

The report provided progress on the three year implementation plan for the Fundamental Service Review (FSR), and demonstrated the service performance to date against the full Business Case.

It was explained that the Business Case for the future service would require the following, a redesigned "front-end" process for customers, the alignment of housing solutions for customers with other key drivers of improved life chances, a stronger focus on the Council's "strategic enabling" role in housing, greater collaboration between CBC and CBH across the whole housing function and a new organisational structure and more flexible ways of working.

The Business Case Opportunities were outlined as;

- Effective self serve
- Effective triage
- Multi-skilled housing customer team
- Co-ordinated support to sustain tenancies and information sharing between agencies
- Collaborative approach between housing and benefits teams
- Education and cultural change
- Effective enforcement of standards in the private sector

- Short term housing solutions
- Colchester Association of Social Landlords
- A strong CBC/CBH partnership
- Delivery of new affordable homes
- Returning more private sector empty homes to use
- Supporting landlords to deliver more quality private rented accommodation
- Professional support unit
- Cross-cutting themes
- Consistent implementation of policy
- Flexibility
- Effective management
- Motivated workforce
- Learning and development
- Outsourcing, commissioning, shared services opportunities

For customers, the opportunities would;

- resolve many of their enquiries themselves
- have their enquiries dealt with in one place
- only have to give information once
- reach a solution quicker
- indicate that their experience has improved
- know
  - who their lead officer is
  - what is happening on their case
  - who else has been informed
- be supported to help them maintain their home

In regards to efficiencies, it was anticipated that;

- people resource could be reduced by around 25% (including the resources that could be moved)
- reduction in staff costs phased over 3 years.
- reduction in management overhead of nearly 50%
- investment will be covered from in service efficiencies.
- reduction in 'cost to serve' while improving quality and speed of service.

The Performance Highlights were outlined as;

- Faster resolution and more effective signposting of customer enquiries at the first point of contact through the Customer Service Centre
- A reduction in the number of homelessness applications and acceptances made
- Achievement of the target for delivery of new affordable homes
- Significant progress with the review of temporary accommodation
- Successful achievement of the target to reduce by 50% the number of households in temporary accommodation.
  - 25% reduction in staff costs, including a 50% reduction in management costs, have been delivered one year earlier than planned (£150K of savings in 2010/11 and a further £300K of savings in 2011/12 bringing the total recurring saving to £450k).
- The allocations function has been transferred to Colchester Borough Homes (CBH)
- The adaptations service has also been successfully transferred to CBH.

- The improved partnership between the Council and CBH in managing property services
- Has led to significant improvements in Void turnaround times.
- The enforcement and inspection element of private sector housing has been transferred to Environmental and Protective Services and now has clear targets around work priorities
- A positive effect on staff motivation has been noted during implementation, a flexible workforce created and levels of sickness absence have dropped significantly from consistently high levels across the service.
- A new, reduced management structure is in place and a number of opportunities for individuals to develop their skills, knowledge and experience through multi-skilling have been taken.
- In spite of the significant changes experienced from the impact of the recession on demand for services and more recently the range of changes proposed by Government to the policy framework, the strategic ambitions of the business case are on track for delivery within the 3 year business case timeframe.

### **Questions and answers**

Councillor Dopson and officers responded to questions from members of the panel.

In regards to the review of Sheltered Housing, it was explained to Councillor G. Oxford that they were confident that the Benefits system will help to minimise the impact on those residents. Ms. Barker later confirmed that any cuts in the Sheltered Housing service is very much about reviewing the arrangements in respect of the Warden's Scheme.

Ms. Barker explained to Councillor Offen that the future for the Colchester Association of Registered Landlords has been slightly skewed by the wholesale changes to funding from the Homes and Communities Agency. This has resulted in a Four Year Development Plan needed from Registered Providers. However a date has now been agreed for the first meeting. In regards to Social Housing Landlords (SHL), Ms. Barker said the Council was already in discussions with this sector. SHL continue to invest locally and the intention is to get as many as possible to participate

Councillor Dopson responded to Councillor Frame, saying the 'Homes for All' was a broad title. The Administration had taken the view that a house is a home whatever the aspiration or size of the family, and encompasses the desire not only to build new homes, but to see homes fit for purpose and fit in with all social housing needs, including the elderly, young people and the needs of the community. An aspiration was to see more homes built, by identifying land fit for redevelopment and working with social housing associations and landlords in providing more suitable housing.

Ms. Barker also confirmed that the average time to re-let Council Houses was 22 days (as of December 2010), a significant improvement on 36 days for the same period the previous year. In respect of under occupancy, Ms. Barker said she would circulate to Members of the Panel the number of transfers for Colchester Borough Homes properties.

Councillor J. Young said 'Homes for All' was a laudable aspiration that needed to be embedded into the organization, likewise, getting developers to build 'lifetime homes' needed embedding. Ms. Barker said the Council has achieved significant success in delivering adapted properties, greater than any other authority in the region.

Mr. Mitchell responded to Councillor Higgins in respect of Housing Benefit paid directly to tenants, saying the Housing Service was now better able to deal with the pressures associated with this change in legislation. Significant modeling had been undertaken with the Benefits and Housing Services and Social Housing Landlords to ensure we anticipate tenant's needs. Ms. Barker said the number of homelessness applications and acceptances made, as illustrated within the report, emphasized the concern that the solutions needed to meet the needs will continue to be a challenge, with a recognition for the need to be 'smart' both internally and with our partners. The joint referral panel provided an effective way of managing homelessness, housing people or families into appropriate accommodation. There has been an increase in the number of homeless people in Bed and Breakfast, and whilst the recession will put greater demand on this scheme, the new housing service is now better prepared to deal with this.

Ms. Barker said 'single room rent payments' was not a straightforward change to the benefits system and would pose a real challenge for officers. Mr. Mitchell said direct payments are also a concern, especially for vulnerable clients, and that could cause a barrier to private sector housing.

Councillor Higgins said given the cost of refurbishing rental properties can often be prohibitive, resulting in a decline in the standard of rental accommodation, what can the Council do to help the landlord(s)? Ms. Barker said Enforcement around the issue of poorly maintained accommodation was very important, but there was a balance to be made in trying not to let the numbers of rental properties dry-up and encouraging landlords to take-on tenants who are on welfare benefits. The Council was committed to developing the 'supply side', but where a landlord does not comply in respect of the condition of a property, there was a clear message that the Enforcement Team will take action where appropriate. Mr. Mitchell said in terms of the review, the new joined-up enforcement policy enabled the enforcement function to be done by those best placed to within the structure.

In response to Councillor Arnold, Mr. Mitchell said the new service arrangements placed the private sector enforcement function within a wider enforcement team and enabled officers to take a more joined-up approach to the whole range of enforcement issues, resulting in better, smarter solutions for residents. The service now benefited from clear targets and proactive management to ensure performance continues to improve. Councillor Dopson said from the outset the new policy and structure seemed very radical, but now it was running smoothly it seemed like the obvious change.

One of the Business Case opportunities was to return more private sector empty homes to use, and Ms. Barker responded to Councillor Kimberley saying many properties are empty due to probate / transition, but officers are looking to pilot a variety of options to find out what can get housing back into the market quicker.

Ms. Barker responded to Councillor Offen in regards to a lack of supply of extra care homes preventing more people from moving out of their houses. Ms Barker said the Council now had a dedicated project officer working on private housing supply. Focusing on how we increase this supply was critical, this resource within the new service structure was paying off, with far more being achieved than would have been the case under the original housing model.

Mr. Mitchell concurred with Councillor Arnold that the significant progress made with the review of the council's temporary accommodation was a major step forward for the service as part of the FSR and that through the imminent transfer of Ascott House to a specialist registered social landlord, it was gratifying to see a better temporary housing solution coming forward for clients who are in acute need of support. Mr. Mitchell said as a direct result of increased investment in homelessness prevention from the review, officers are now also doing more proactive work in targeting high risk young adults. In response to Councillor Chapman in regards to the prevention of young people becoming homeless, Mr. Mitchell said that the council has a strong track record of focusing on individual cases, proactively mediating with the family, trying to find a way for the person to return home. As a result of the review, officers now engage more with young people, dispelling the prevailing culture around social housing and the view that the Council will provide them with a home. He acknowledged that temporary accommodation is not an environment in which homeless young people will thrive and officers are working with partners from the Integrated Youth Service at Essex County Council and the Colchester Youth Enquiry Service to deliver educational visits to places like Ascott House by local fourteen / fifteen year olds to help shift perceptions and expectations at a very early stage. This initiative was marginal in terms of investment, but there was evidence to show it was already making a difference. Councillor Cory said the Colchester Youth Council fully supported this initiative and are happy to help or contribute to this work. Councilor Dopson said this was very much a joined-up approach and an eye opener to the young people. Mr. Mitchell said the level of need for this target group continued to be a challenge

Ms. Barker responded to Councillor Chapman, saying that officers are progressing with the work on the development of garage sites. The development of these sites was not straightforward, but two are at development stage and ten more potential sites have been earmarked for development, and officers are working on the delivery with Colchester Borough Homes and other Housing Partners.

Mr. Mitchell responded to Councillor Willetts in regards to self-service, saying the triage approach, filtering calls from those in greatest need to more qualified and experienced staff was having a positive impact on the service. Mr. Mitchell said the next phase of the challenge for the review was to reach the targets of 15% and 30% of enquiries dealt with through self-serve by the end of 2011 and 2012 respectively. Mr. Mitchell said three years on from the re-registering of housing register applicants, whilst the number of people on the housing register has increased, it was important to remember that the housing register is a choice-based system where anyone can place themselves on the register. It was significant to point out that around 50% of the people on the register were people in lower priority need, with the number of cases in greater need reduced by approximately 12%. The overall increase was in the main due to the challenges of the economic downturn. That said, the review does demonstrate

the positive impact on those individuals in greater need, with evidence showing solutions are found and individuals are dealt with quicker than was the case in the original service.

In response to Councillor Oxford, Ms. Barker said legislation (the law) was very clear in respect of succession, with one succession allowed on joint-tenancy, whether or not it is an adapted property and that 'succession' was managed by Colchester Borough Homes.

*RESOLVED* that the panel;

- i) Noted the progress made on the implementation of the Business Case for the Fundamental Service review of Housing Services – Transforming Colchester's Housing Services.
- ii) Congratulated all the staff associated with the Housing Services Review on the successful progress of the new working arrangements, expressing appreciation for their hard work and what had been achieved.

#### **44. Review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Customers.**

Councillor Beverley Oxford, Portfolio Holder for Customers gave an overview of the work she had been involved in during the last year.

Councillor Oxford said she had approached this new portfolio in her own way, but always keeping customers at the forefront of everything she was involved in.

Councillor Oxford explained she had spent seven months job shadowing many staff doing a variety of roles within all Council services. Councillor Oxford had spent time with officers in the Customer Services Centre, Revenues and Benefits, Housing Services, Street Services (Refuse Collection and the Graffiti Team)

Councillor Oxford spoke about InfoPoint and I-Connect, both customer based applications, the first based at the Customer Service Centre, and enabling easy access to information and advice on Council and local services, the second, the provision of a complete service, so when the customer contacts the Council, the enquiry will be dealt with more effectively by storing basic information on the customer within the Council's Customer's Index. Stored information such as name, address, telephone number, date of birth and e-mail address enabling a link to Council services received by the individual.

Councillor Oxford responded to Councillor Willetts concerning the new opening times of the Customer Services Centre, saying the new opening times had produced cost savings, but with very little impact on customers. It was pointed out that whilst the Customer Services Centre was now open 9-5 Monday to Friday (originally 8.30 – 5.30), customers will still be able to contact the centre by telephone between 8.30 – 9 and 5 – 5.30, as an interim measure.

In response to Councillor Chapman, Councillor Oxford said it was very important that the Council is proactive in improving communications and access to Council services by urban and rural communities. Sharing facilities with other partner organizations will become very important in the future. At the present, local libraries are currently offering the use of their premises as a means for customers to contact local services.

In response to Councillor Higgins, Councillor Oxford said the Typetalk service was provided as a means of access to services for deaf people or people that are hard-of-hearing or have speech-impairment. Typetalk is a national telephone relay service for these people who are unable to use standard telephones. It was acknowledged that whilst the service provided access, it was very slow.

Responding to Councillor Frame, Councillor Oxford said how people contacted the Council was changing. Contacting the Council via the internet was year on year increasing, showing a twenty five percent increase during 2010-11, whilst those requiring face to face assistance was decreasing. Councillor Oxford said the performance of the Customer services Centre is being constantly monitored, and she receives regularly briefings on performance / issues by the Customer Services Manager.

Councillor Oxford concurred with Councillor Arnold that it was vital that all forms of communication and community engagement are considered and where appropriate developed and Councillors are an integral part of this development. Mosaic (a modelling tool produced by Experian Business Strategies) assists in the identification of a population's key characteristics, helping the Council in a variety of applications, with and overall knowledge of their customer base. This information can be used to focus appropriate 'Member Engagement' training for Councillors.

Councillor Arnold thanked Councillor Oxford for attending the meeting and responding to questions from the Panel.