

WEST LINDSEY DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the Meeting of the Challenge and Improvement Committee held in the Council Chamber - The Guildhall, Marshall's Yard, Gainsborough, DN21 2NA on 20 February 2018 commencing at 6.30 pm.

Present: Councillor Paul Howitt-Cowan (Chairman)
Councillor Lewis Strange (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Mrs Angela White (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor David Bond
Councillor Mrs Jessie Milne
Councillor Roger Patterson
Councillor Mrs Diana Rodgers
Councillor Mrs Lesley Rollings
Councillor Thomas Smith
Councillor Mrs Anne Welburn

Councillor Michael Devine

In Attendance:

Ele Durrant	Democratic and Civic Officer
Andy Gray	Housing and Enforcement Manager
Michelle Howard	Wellbeing and Health Manager
Mark Sturgess	Executive Director of Operations and Head of Paid Service

Apologies: Councillor Bruce Allison
Councillor Malcolm Parish

65 CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME

The Chairman commenced the meeting by welcoming all in the room including Officers and visiting Members. He also welcomed Mr Paul Woollam, Director for Customer Excellence, and Ms Hina Patel, Head of Customer Operations, of Acis Group Ltd who were invited to talk about working in partnership with West Lindsey District Council to meet housing needs across the District.

66 MEETING OF THE CHALLENGE AND IMPROVEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 9 JANUARY 2018

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 9 January 2018 be approved and signed as a correct record.

67 MEMBERS' DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor J. Milne declared that she sat as a representative for West Lindsey District Council with Acis Group Ltd although as she had not been called upon to attend any meetings in a number of months, she explained she was unsure whether this role continued to be active.

68 MATTERS ARISING SCHEDULE

The Committee gave consideration to the Matters Arising Schedule, setting out the current position of previously agreed actions, as at 12 February 2018.

The Democratic and Civic Officer advised Members that there were no amber items to consider and all outstanding items were within agreed time scales.

RESOLVED that the Matters Arising Schedule as at 12 February 2018 be received and noted.

69 PRESENTATION ITEM - ACIS GROUP LTD & WLDC PARTNERSHIP WORKING

The Committee welcomed Mr Paul Woollam, Director for Customer Excellence, and Ms Hina Patel, Head of Customer Operations, of Acis Group Ltd. Mr Woollam explained to Members that as he had been provided with their questions in advance of the meeting, he would answer these and any other queries Members wished to raise.

Mr Woollam explained that Acis Group Ltd were keen to continue developing the working partnership with West Lindsey District Council and that the approval of housing schemes in Japan Road and Wilson Street would significantly further this working relationship. He stated that Acis Group Ltd had been a respondent in the recent housing consultation and that the focus was to work together on a localised basis.

Members enquired about the housing options at either end of the age spectrum in relation to accessible housing for young professionals and also for older people. It was explained that for young professionals the rents charged by Acis Group Ltd were competitive and set within the Government guidance but it was acknowledged that there could be ways for WLDC and Acis Group Ltd to look at the allocation of housing to make it easier for them to access. With regards to housing for older people, Mr Woollam explained there were several new developments in progress including the recently approved Wilson Street and Japan Road plans as well as a provision for over 55's accommodation in Saxilby. He added that there were sites around the District where Acis had bungalows for older people but that demand for site-based management schemes, such as warden supervised accommodation, was limited within West Lindsey. It was highlighted that there were other initiatives in place, working with community groups and with be-friending services.

Ms Hina Patel addressed the Committee to explain that the focus for Acis Group Ltd was not just bricks and mortar but that they tried to focus on the individuals accessing their housing. She advised that where necessary, Acis would refer individuals to third party support agencies but that each tenant had a tenancy support service available to them in the first 10

weeks of their tenancy. This would be used to identify any additional needs of the tenant and to resolve any initial issues with the tenancy before matters escalated. She explained that Acis had linked with Gainsborough College to provide opportunities for students to work on the houses, gain skills and lead to employment and there were also neighbourhood support schemes in place.

In response to a question about eviction rates, Ms Patel explained that the Group worked very closely with individuals at risk of eviction and that it was only ever the last option. She stated that evictions were usually as a result of rent arrears with an average debt of £2500 per tenancy.

A Member of Committee enquired about the upkeep of Acis Group Ltd properties and emphasised how important it was for properties to be kept in a good state of repair. Mr Woollam explained there was a rolling programme of maintenance and repair with priority work being allocated according to need rather than location. Ms Patel also explained that the repairs service was again being provided by Acis Group Ltd after a period of using external providers and that although there had been challenges previously these had been resolved. She stated there was an average turnaround of 20 to 25 days for a property to be re-let once it had been vacated but for those properties that may require more extensive work, this was aimed to be completed within five to 12 weeks. Members of Committee agreed on the importance of asset management and there was discussion about alternative options to maximise opportunities for successful lettings.

Members had raised concerns about the move to universal credits for residents across the District and both Mr Woollam and Ms Patel assured Members that there were provisions in place to account for difficulties their tenants might face. There had been structured communication to all tenants and training provided to staff. It was explained that the business plan had been re-worked in anticipation of possible rent arrears and the company had moved to any time direct debits to allow tenants to pay on flexible dates. A Member of Committee provided all present with a reference to the difficulties faced by other areas where the move to universal credits had left recipients struggling for weeks with limited or no support. It was requested that the Acis Group Ltd learn from the experiences elsewhere and supported their tenants to avoid the same difficulties arising in West Lindsey. The concerns around universal credits were acknowledged and further assurance was given about preparations to minimise the impact on residents and also to ensure inter-agency working to support all those affected by the changes.

There was further discussion around ways of involving tenants to help create a sense of community and also opportunities for development for the Acis Group Ltd. Members were keen for Acis to be involved in helping to regenerate areas of the District by providing high quality rental opportunities and well maintained properties. As discussions drew to a close, Mr Woollam reminded Members of the invitation for them to meet Mr Greg Bacon, CEO of Acis Group Ltd, at an afternoon event on 28 February 2018. He reiterated that all Councillors were welcome and there would be further opportunity to discuss any comments or suggestions at that event.

The Chairman thanked both Mr Woollam and Ms Patel for their time and detailed answers. He wished them and Acis Group Ltd well for future projects.

70 PROGRESS AND DELIVERY - PERIOD 3 MONITORING REPORT

The Head of Paid Service introduced the Progress and Delivery report for period three and explained it had already been seen by the two policy committees – Corporate Policy and Resources and Prosperous Communities. The minutes from the Prosperous Communities Committee had been shared with Members previously and the minute of the item from Corporate Policy and Resources was tabled for Members at Committee. He informed Members that they were asked to consider the comments from both policy committees and to ensure there had been appropriate challenge to the report.

There was significant discussion as to whether both the Prosperous Communities Committee and the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee had raised appropriate challenge. It was noted that there seemed to be a trend through the Progress and Delivery reports that the areas of enforcement and complaint handling remained weak and Members felt that, based on the minutes provided, neither committee appeared to have questioned this.

It was noted that Andy Gray, Housing and Enforcement Manager, was at the meeting to present a report for pre-scrutiny on the Planning Enforcement Policy however Members commented that they had not received any details regarding the issues with complaint handling. It was requested that the recently appointed Customer Experience Officer be asked to attend a meeting of the Challenge and Improvement Committee to provide Members with a picture of the current situation for complaints handling. It was requested that the matter be revisited after a period of six months to demonstrate any progress made. It was agreed this would be added to the work plan for the Committee.

There was further discussion around the difficulties faced by the enforcement team and, whilst it was recognised that some questions may be answered by the Housing and Enforcement Manager's report later in the meeting, Members requested that they be given a benchmark for enforcement in a similar way to the issues with complaints handling. It was suggested that further Progress and Delivery reports could be built around such requests for benchmark figures to offer further clarity to Members.

There was significant discussion around the introduction of charges for green waste collections across the District, specifically in relation to complaints raised with Councillors by their constituents. A Member of Committee suggested that the Challenge and Improvement Committee scrutinise the impact of the scheme within the first year of implementation to assess whether there had been any noticeable increase in activities such as fly-tipping or contaminated recycling bins. It was agreed this could be added to the work plan for the Committee.

A Member of Committee noted the repeat of positive comments about the Trinity Arts Centre and also the success of CCTV cameras in helping to reduce anti-social behaviour. The Housing and Enforcement Manager confirmed that this appeared to be the case and that although evidence was anecdotal at this point, there had been instances where the CCTV footage had assisted in managing anti-social behaviour.

Discussion continued regarding the content of the Progress and Delivery report and the actions to be agreed for Committee. After further consideration it was:

RESOLVED that the areas specified within the Progress and Delivery report as being 'areas of risk', such as enforcement and customer satisfaction (complaints handling), be open to further scrutiny by the Challenge and Improvement Committee and specific reports be brought to future meetings of the Committee on progress towards delivery improvements in these areas.

71 PRE-SCRUTINY ITEM: PLANNING ENFORCEMENT POLICY

Members gave consideration to a report regarding the Local Enforcement Plan (previously known as Planning Enforcement Policy). This was an item selected by Committee for pre-scrutiny and as such, had not yet been passed by the Prosperous Communities Committee. The Chairman commented to Members that this allowed the opportunity for the policy to be refined according to their scrutiny prior to submission to the subsequent committee.

The Housing and Enforcement Manager provided Members with an overview to the Local Enforcement Plan and explained it was designed to set out the approach to be taken when dealing with planning enforcement matters. The report also provided information in response to the development management audit report completed in September 2017, within which the planning enforcement service received limited assurance.

The Chairman enquired of the Housing and Enforcement Manager how he intended to ensure that planning conditions were realistic and enforceable in order to avoid instances of dissatisfaction if conditions were breached but nothing done to enforce them. The Housing and Enforcement Manager explained that he would be working closely with the Planning and Development Manager and that they realised there were problems with enforcing some of the older conditions. He explained that they would look at possibly standardising the wording of conditions whilst keeping them specific to the planning application but it was also necessary to use common sense, for example if a condition stated no work after 5pm it was reasonable to expect loud site work to be completed by this time but quieter work such as inside decorating would not be considered a nuisance. He also clarified that in the case of older conditions, the enforcement team would liaise with the original consultee (for example Highways Agency) to assess relevance under current circumstances.

The Chairman also asked what would be put in place for the team to measure their success or otherwise. The Housing and Enforcement Manager stated that he was aware that the team needed to be clear in their feedback to enforcement enquiries and also communicate their enforcement successes in order to highlight with the public that their concerns were listened to. He stated that the timescales for acknowledging and responding to concerns needed to be tightened up and this was easily recorded to demonstrate improvements. He also explained that he was working with the Customer Experience Officer in relation to enforcement complaints and relevant timescales for resolution.

A Member of the Committee who had been concerned about the performance of the enforcement team during the discussions about the Progress and Delivery report noted that there was more reassurance from the points being raised with the Housing and Enforcement Manager but highlighted that it was essential to improve communication with all who raised an issue, even if it was to advise of how long it would take to look at their concerns.

It was noted that it was important to be consistent and ensure that all planning conditions

served a purpose. The Housing and Enforcement Manager agreed this was the case and also confirmed that they look at the impact of a concern on the community as much as the alleged breach. For example, a low impact issue could be a larger consideration if it affected an increased number of residents.

The Chairman summarised that following discussions, the Committee would like to see the Local Enforcement Plan provide more clarity on what measures of success would be put in place and how conditions would be better managed between the Planning Department and the Enforcement Team.

With this agreed it was

RESOLVED that:

- a) the responses given in regards to the planning enforcement audit be noted; and
- b) pre-scrutiny comments regarding measuring the enforcement successes and planning conditions be included in the Local Enforcement Plan for consideration by the Prosperous Communities Committee.

72 FORWARD PLAN

The Democratic and Civic Officer presented a report setting out the items of business due to be considered through the committee system. It was noted that it had already been requested that an item regarding the new customer feedback process was brought to Committee to provide a benchmark against which the anticipated improvements in complaint handling could be measured. It was agreed this would be added to the committee workplan. There was considerable discussion regarding the events plan for the Gainsborough Market however it was agreed that as this issue had been through Challenge and Improvement Committee already, it was not prudent to request further scrutiny. It was confirmed that the Challenge and Improvement Committee would be kept updated on decisions made by the Prosperous Communities Committee.

Members identified areas that they would like to be considered by the Challenge and Improvement Committee, such as sports development within the District, and it was agreed that such items could be considered for inclusion in the workplan for the coming Civic Year.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted.

73 COMMITTEE WORKPLAN

The Work Plan for the business of the Challenge and Improvement Committee was presented. It was noted that there had been significant discussion within the meeting about requests for further items on the work plan.

RESOLVED that the Work Plan be noted.

The meeting concluded at 9.00 pm.

Chairman