

Minutes of: POLICY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 21 September 2010

**Present: Councillor H Steen, (Chair)
Councillors Kenyon, Morris, Milling and Robertson
(substituting for A Barnes)
K Pilkington, Co-opted Member**

**In Attendance: Rebecca Lawlor, Health and Housing Manager
Liz Sandiford, Head of People and Policy
Councillor Essex, Portfolio Holder, Finance and Resources
Pat Couch, Scrutiny Support Officer**

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor C Pilling and A Barnes.

2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the last meeting held on 27 July 2010 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair, subject to the following amendment:

Item 8 - Review of Licence Conditions Relating to Animal Boarding Establishments and resolution 3 to include the maximum number of dogs to be 4 including resident dogs.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

No urgent items were raised.

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present.

6. CHAIR'S UPDATE

The Chair informed Members that the Scrutiny Support Officer had circulated the following information:

- Update on Memorials on a Grave Policy which had first been presented to the Committee in June 2010
- Update on the Green Travel Plan which was presented to the Committee in

July 2010

- Information on the proposed draft Statement of Licensing Policy which was going out to public consultation from 13 September – 27 October 2010

7. HR POLICIES

The Head of People and Policy presented the Grievance Policy and Redundancy Policy indicating that following consultation and negotiations with the Trade Unions a package of measures had been agreed.

The Head of People and Policy under delegated authority had renegotiated a revised Disciplinary and Absence Management Procedure.

a) Grievance Procedure

The Head of People and Policy indicated that in relation to the Grievance Procedure the revised Policy explicitly explains those areas where the Policy can be applied, is more comprehensive and has reduced the number of levels of appeal. The final level of appeal now being at Director level.

b) Redundancy Procedure

The Head of People and Policy explained that the revised Redundancy Procedure replaces all other compulsory, voluntary, redeployment and redundancy procedures and provided a clear and consistent Policy for dealing with reductions in the workforce.

The Policy also confirmed the Council's position in relation to discretionary payment of an additional 4 weeks pay which would be paid to all employees who were in a compulsory redundancy situation and would not be paid to anyone who voluntarily requests redundancy.

In relation to the Local Government Pension Scheme, the Trade Unions agreed that there would no longer be added years.

There would also be a reduction in the level of protection from 4 years to 1 year automatic with possibly 2 years providing there was a business need.

Members agreed that these were excellent documents.

Resolved:

1. Members note the consultation which had been taking place in relation to the modernisation of the Human Resources Policies and Procedures
2. Members recommend to Full Council the adoption of the Grievance and Redundancy Policies.

8. HASLINGDEN HOME RENEW INITIATIVE (Pilot Scheme)

The Health and Housing Manager provided Members with information on the success of the Haslingden Home Renew Pilot project and actions proposed to be taken forward.

The project was first presented and approved to the Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2009, with the intention of bringing empty homes within the Haslingden area back into active use.

Letters were sent out to owners of long term empty properties in the area, outlining the Council's commitment to bringing empty homes back into use and explaining that a pilot scheme was currently running in the area and as part of the scheme, Great Places – a Registered Social Landlord was looking to purchase empty properties in the area. If owners were interested in selling their empty properties to Great Places, they could get in touch with them and if the property was suitable, they would purchase from the home owner.

From the 109 letters which had been sent out to owners of empty properties in the Haslingden area, 16 owners expressed an interest in selling their properties. Great Places had identified a need to find five suitable properties for them to purchase in order for the scheme to be viable for them. Great Places required properties to be run down in order for them to be able to secure funding through the temporary social housing grant to renovate the properties and bring them back into use. Only four properties from the 16 which expressed an interest fell into the criteria set by Great Places.

Further re-worded letters were sent to encourage owners to bring their property back into use of their own accord and a further 31 owners agreed to this.

The pilot project will be further developed and then rolled out across the Borough as part of the emerging Vacant Property Strategy, which offers a range of options and advice to home owners.

Resolved:

1. That the Committee note the successful outcome of the Haslingden Home Renew Scheme.
2. That the Scheme continue as part of a range of options in accordance with the Vacant Property Strategy.

9. VACANT PROPERTY STRATEGY

The Health and Housing Manager informed Members that following the establishment of the Vacant Property Task Group in 2008, Officers from the Council had been working on a unified approach to deal with problematic vacant properties – both commercial and residential. A Community Impact Assessment was also attached to the Strategy.

There were 605 long-term empty residential properties and 123 empty commercial properties across the borough. The five year target for the Vacant Property Task Group was to reduce the number of long term empty residential properties by 50% and empty commercial properties by 30% . This would be achieved by

- working with owners to support them in bringing their properties back into use
- delivery of a Vacant Property Strategy Action Plan, which would implement a number of new initiatives and approaches to dealing with these properties and owners
- targeted enforcement action where owners are unwilling to work with Officers

As of 1 June 2010, from information received from Capita (homes not paying council tax), there were 1609 empty residential properties, including second homes, across the Borough. Members received information which highlighted the empty homes within their wards up to June 2010, but raised concerns that information was inaccurate, as Members knew of properties on the list that were not empty, some having been occupied for a number of years. It was agreed to make the VPS clearly state that this was as per the information supplied by Capita as part of the Council Tax Records and members would notify the Health and Housing Manager of those properties that they knew of which are now occupied and those which are not listed as empty.

Members indicated that it would be beneficial if the Council produced a leaflet which could be included with their Council Tax bill, asking the public to contact the Council if they knew of empty homes within their area. It was also suggested that a press release be produced asking people within the Borough to report empty properties in their street to the Council and to make the public aware of the powers that the Council could enforce on people who own long term empty properties.

The Health and Housing Manager explained the scoring mechanism used to decide whether an empty home falls under low, medium or high priority. She provided information on the legal powers the Council had to enable them to deal with vacant properties in the Borough and gave examples of work the Council had undertaken.

Resolved:

1. The Committee recommend to Cabinet approval of the Rossendale Vacant Property Strategy.
2. That the Committee recommend to Cabinet that any further amendments be delegated to the Director of Business and the Head of Health, Housing and Regeneration in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration.
3. That consideration be given to producing a leaflet to be included in the letter with Council Tax bills asking the public to report empty properties to the Council and that a press release be produced asking the public to contact

the Council if they know of any empty homes in their area.

10. FORWARD PLAN (1ST September to 31st December 2010)

The Scrutiny Support Officer informed Members that the following reports would be presented to the next meeting on 9 November 2010.

- a) Governance Model Consultation
- b) Communications Strategy
- c) Private Sector Housing Strategy
- d) Illegal Eviction and Harassment Policy

Members also requested that they have sight of the Memorials on a Grave Policy which had been amended following presentation to the Committee in June 2010

Signed.....

Date