

**HOUSING SUB COMMITTEE
2 MARCH 1999**

Present: Councillors Worrall (Chairman), Barnard, Flood, Miss Haydon,
Mrs Hirst, Jones, Mrs Pile, Ryan and Mrs Shillcock

49. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Sub Committee held on 8 December 1998 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

50. Best Value In Housing Framework – Consultation Paper (Item 1)

The Sub-Committee considered a report on a consultation paper issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions outlining what local authorities should be doing in applying the statutory Best Value requirements within a non-statutory Best Value in Housing framework. It was noted that the paper took into account the relationship between Best Value and the existing Housing Investment Programme process and the role of tenants and residents. It did not define what Best Value in Housing was, as this would be a matter for the authority to determine in consultation with local people.

In answering a number of questions, the Director of Social Services & Housing explained that the proposals, to some extent, merely reinforced the work which the Council was already doing, but he recognised that it should not be complacent as there was always scope for improvement without necessarily increasing resources.

Whilst there was no objection to the aims of the proposals, there was some concern about the lack of clarity or guidance so far issued which made it difficult to reach any conclusions on the precise implications in terms of resources and services. It was, therefore, agreed to authorise the Director, in consultation with the Chairman to finalise the Council's response to the consultation paper.

A copy of the response was to be circulated to Members of the Sub-Committee.

RESOLVED that

- (i) a response to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' consultation document "Best Value in Housing Framework" be prepared on the lines indicated in the report, to be finalised by the Director of Social Services and Housing in consultation with the Chairman.
- (ii) the preparations for Housing Management Compulsory Competitive Tendering continue in accordance with the prescribed timetable, but subject to decisions flowing from the passage of the Best Value Bill through Parliament and its eventual enactment.

51. Tenant Participation Compacts – Consultation Paper (Item 2)

The Sub-Committee considered a report on a consultation paper setting out the Government's proposals for empowering tenants and ensuring that local people were involved in shaping the decisions that affected their homes and community. The plans involved the creation of Tenant Participation Compacts which were to involve tenants in both strategic and local decision-making on housing issues, but for this to work, the Government believed that there would be a need to obtain the support of Officers, tenants and Members.

In response to questions, the Sub-Committee was advised that the initial response from tenants panels had been mixed, with some apprehension about what was involved. There was concern that the proposals could result in more unnecessary bureaucracy and lead to an unrepresentative group coming forward to represent the tenants who, in Bracknell Forest for the most part, seemed content with the service currently being delivered. It was therefore considered essential to find ways of engaging the tenants effectively. It was accepted that Members of the Council would have a key role to play in this.

The full implications of the proposals in terms of resources were not yet evident, but there was concern that that it could add to the pressures already being placed on the Department.

A copy of the response was to be circulated to Members of the Sub-Committee.

RESOLVED that

- (i) the proposed development of Tenant Participation and Tenant Participation Compacts within the Best Value framework be noted.
- (ii) a response to the Consultation document on Tenant Participation Compacts be prepared by the Director of Social Services & Housing in consultation with the Chairman, along the lines indicated in the report and by the Sub-Committee, and forwarded to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

52. Supporting People (Item 3)

The Sub-Committee considered a report detailing the issues raised by a consultation paper issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, on the Government's proposals for "Supporting People". The proposals were intended to enable coherent decisions to be made at local level to meet local priorities within a framework of centrally determined objectives. These proposals had arisen as a result of demographic and social policy changes which had led to an increasing number of people requiring housing with support in the community, at a time when pressure on social services budgets had resulted in resources being targeted at only the most vulnerable.

In response to questions, the Sub-Committee was informed that there was insufficient detail currently provided to determine for certain whether or not the proposals would simplify the process or add an additional burden on the Authority. Whilst the Sub-Committee endorsed the response already made by the Director of Social Services & Housing, it believed that the four questions posed in paragraph 4.4.4. of the report relating to costs needed to be emphasised too.

RESOLVED that

- (i) the implications of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' consultation paper "Supporting People" for Bracknell Forest Borough Council be noted
- (ii) the response of the Director of Social Services and Housing as set out in Annexe A of the report be endorsed, subject to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions being asked to respond to the following four questions:
 - Will existing sheltered schemes and community alarmed housing provision be at risk?
 - Will the new fund prioritise these low support costs?
 - What are the administrative implications of levying separate charges?
 - What are the implications for the General Fund?

53. A New Financial Framework for Local Authority Housing: Resource Accounting In The Housing Revenue Account (Item 4)

The Sub-Committee considered a report on a consultation paper issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions seeking views on the broad principles of proposals to reform the financial framework for local authority housing in England. The proposals centred around moving the Housing Revenue Account and the calculation of the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy to a Resource Accounting or "capital charging" basis.

A key issue for the Borough Council was not addressed in the consultation paper, in that it failed to explain the impact on those authorities in receipt of negative Housing Revenue Account Subsidy which currently transferred to the General Fund. The Borough Finance Officer indicated that, whilst this was not an issue for the Sub-Committee, in the worst case scenario, it could cost the Council's General Fund £6.6m. Replacing such a loss in income would be equivalent to an increase of £157 on the annual Council Tax bill of a Band D property or a reduction in current Council expenditure.

Another concern was that the proposals failed to recognise the true opportunity costs of the Council's property. The Borough Finance Officer suggested that the stock transfer value of the property, reflecting the sale price and repair costs, would be a more realistic method of valuation than the open market value. The full implications would be considered by the Strategy & Policy Committee once more detailed proposals were available. He indicated that the Council was already in touch with thirty other authorities which would be similarly affected with a view to submitting a joint response to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Whilst having reservations for the Council's General Fund, the Sub-Committee indicated that it welcomed any proposal which simplified the Council's Housing Revenue Account.

RESOLVED that

- (i) the Director of Housing and Social Services in consultation with the Borough Finance Officer and the Chairman of Social Services and Housing, prepares an appropriate written response to the questions asked within the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' consultation paper "A New Financial Framework for Local Authority Housing: Resource Accounting In The Housing Revenue Account".
- (ii) the issue be referred to Strategy & Policy Committee when detailed proposals are available for consideration of the impact of the proposals on the Council's General Fund.

54. Information Items

The Sub Committee noted the following items submitted for information only:

- Social Housing Programme – Position Statement (Item 5)
- Housing Major Repairs & Improvement Programme (Item 6)
- Housing Services Management Information 1998/99 (Item 7)

55. Exclusion of the Public and Press

RESOLVED that pursuant to Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, members of the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the consideration of the following Items which involved the likely disclosure of exempt information under the following category of Schedule 12A of that Act:

- (3) Information Relating to Occupiers or Former Occupiers of Council Property (Items 8 & 9)

56. Tenants Debts – Requests to be Written-Off (Item 8)

The Sub-Committee considered a report inviting it to agree to the write-off of a number of tenants' debts which had arisen between 1995 and 1998 which were no longer considered to be recoverable.

In response to a question, the Sub-Committee was assured that action was taken as soon as a tenant missed one week's rent. The build-up of debt was usually the result of the Courts granting the tenant one or more extensions of time to pay.

RESOLVED that the debts set out in the summary of the report be written-off.

57. Information Item

The Sub Committee noted the following item submitted for information only:

- Possession Proceedings (Item 9)

The meeting commenced at 7.30pm and concluded at 9.00pm

CHAIRMAN