

## **BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET COUNCIL**

### **HOUSING AND MAJOR PROJECTS POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

Tuesday 18th September, 2012

**Present:-** Councillors Eleanor Jackson (Chair), Steve Hedges (Vice-Chair), Brian Simmons, Will Sandry, June Player and Ben Stevens (In place of Paul Fox)

**Also in attendance:** Derek Quilter (Divisional Director for Major Projects), Graham Sabourn (Associate Director for Housing), Jeremy Smalley (Divisional Director for Regeneration, Skills and Employment) and Chris Mordaunt (Housing Services Manager)

**Cabinet Member for Homes & Planning:** Councillor Tim Ball

**Cabinet Member for Sustainable Development:** Councillor Cherry Beath

#### **28 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

#### **29 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

The Chair drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

#### **30 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS**

Councillor Ben Stevens was in attendance for the duration of the meeting as a substitute for Councillor Paul Fox who had sent his apologies to the Panel.

#### **31 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

The Chair, Councillor Eleanor Jackson declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 11 (Housing & Major Projects Update) as she is a member of the Radstock Action Group.

#### **32 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIR**

The Chair announced that she wished to invite the Cabinet Member for Homes & Planning, Councillor Tim Ball to give an update on Curo.

Councillor Ball stated that as part of their reorganisation the new board at Curo would exist of twelve members and that a Council nominee would be retained. He informed the Panel that the Corporate Audit Committee were due to receive a report relating to Curo at their meeting on Thursday 27th September, 2012 5.30 pm and depending on the outcome of that meeting he may need to address Curo further on this matter.

The Associate Director for Housing commented to remind the Panel that the Councillor position on the board was not a representative of the Council but a board

place prioritised for Bath & North East Somerset Councillors and subject to some form of selection process.

Councillor Steve Hedges asked if the nominee could take issues from the Council to the Board.

The Associate Director for Housing replied that they could.

The Chair invited Barbara Garrett to make a statement to the Panel.

“Up until recently we have had a good rapport with Somer, with an excellent Resident Committee and Area Panels right from the time they took over the housing stock from the Council, involvement had a purpose. Our opinions were sought and given on any subject that involved tenants.”

“We had 26 members and met every 6 weeks. The new format that has been decided will be for 12 / 13 members to meet every 13 weeks. We now have 2000+ extra properties since Redland joined the Trust and less representatives on the Residents Committee, and no Area Panels – this does not make sense.”

“They have changed all our resident involvement since Redland joined the Trust. This seems to have given them the opportunity to down grade our involvement. Redland appears to have had less involvement. We feel that they should have kept to our higher standards instead of lowering them.”

“We have voiced our feelings about the Area Panel being closed and are being allowed by Curo to run until Christmas, after which we are a voiceless group with no funding and no Curo staff to help us.”

“The Resident Committee was a voice for residents to hold Somer / Curo to account, we set our own agenda and invited members of staff or outside speakers to address the Committee on subjects we were interested in or needed clarification on. No longer is this the case as Curo sets the agenda. We have to sit and listen to what they have to announce, no vote, no consultation. If we object to something we are told they may look at our objections only to return 6 weeks later to state they are not going to alter their plans. This is now their version of resident involvement.”

Councillor Brian Simmons commented whether the residents could take any course of action under the Equalities Act.

The Chair replied that she felt sure that Curo would have acted in accordance with the Act.

Councillor Tim Ball commented that he had requested to see Curo’s Equalities Impact Assessment and had been told that one had been completed, but he had yet to receive it.

The Associate Director for Housing commented that it was unfortunate that the members of the public felt this way. He added that it was a statutory obligation for Curo to now introduce a Resident Scrutiny Panel and that the national intention was

for this approach to give the residents a greater influence. He said that Curo should also support the meetings, including financially.

He stated that he was happy to offer his help on the matter and mentioned that residents could also contact Curo's Regulator, the Homes & Communities Agency if they had any queries.

Councillor Brian Simmons commented that complaints from residents had increased fivefold since changing from Somer to Curo with some complaints not receiving any response for over 5 weeks.

Councillor June Player commented that she found it disconcerting that the residents have a very different impression of the new process.

Councillor Tim Ball acknowledged that information delivery could be better and would report that back to Curo. He added that Curo had also offered to be scrutinised by the Housing & Major Projects Panel.

The Chair invited Gerti Sturm to make a statement to the Panel.

"I'm coming to you to ask for your help. Many of our tenants are in Fuel Poverty. An increase of 9% has been announced, which will get more into Fuel Poverty. The help I need (as I'm IT illiterate) is, could you with your expertise and equipment go on line and provide me with the names of Social Housing Providers across Britain who BULK BUY ENERGY for their tenants."

"After reading of this in the Independent Newspaper, I thought I was on a winner. I cut out the article and together with a letter handed them to Mr Victor Da Cunha. I did not receive a reply, neither did I receive an answer to my second letter which I sent by mail. I then approached him directly during a break at a meeting. The bottom line is, Curo is NOT BULK BUYING ENERGY for its tenants for the foreseeable time."

"I then asked to have it put on the agenda at the Residents Committee Meeting (RCM). It was put as an item under Any Other Business. When AOB was announced Mr Victor Da Cunha left the meeting. My report got the full support of the members bar one. It was decided that at the next RCM on the 25th October for me to bring the names of all the Housing Authorities who Bulk Buy Energy for their tenants. It was hoped this would give weight to persuade Curo to do the same for our tenants."

"The Resident Committee Meeting is on 25th October 2012 at 10am at the Maltings. This is an open meeting which you can attend as an observer. Questions can be asked with the consent of the Chair, but with no voting rights."

Councillor Rob Appleyard, the Council's nominee on the Curo Board replied that this matter was taken seriously within Curo and that he would report this request back to them.

He added that when the Board was reduced to twelve members a selection process took place to find a balance of skills. He also felt that better communication on any

proposed changes would be a key factor in the relationship between the Board and the residents.

He wished to encourage the residents to familiarise themselves with the work of the Scrutiny Panel that had been set up by Curo as this should look to challenge the decisions made by the Board.

He stated that he was surprised that not one Councillor had approached him regarding the governance of Curo and that he felt that Curo were handling the matter carefully.

Councillor Will Sandry commented that he did not feel that Curo appeared to be focussed on the concerns of their residents. He informed the residents present that the Council's Corporate Audit Committee was due to meet on Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> September at 5.30pm and that they would also be discussing the matter and that they would be welcome to attend that meeting also.

Councillor June Player commented that she would attempt to be present at the Residents Committee Meeting on October 25<sup>th</sup> and that she understood the concerns they were raising.

Councillor Steve Hedges suggested that Curo could send a representative to ward PACT meetings as a way of engaging more with residents.

Councillor Brian Simmons commented that he hoped the concerns raised by residents over fuel poverty would be heard by Curo.

Councillor Will Sandry commented that some of the activities carried out by Somer / Curo such as only hedge / grass cutting to a certain point and then stopping have been unhelpful. He added that he didn't believe they were acting in the best interest of the residents.

The Chair commented that she felt that Curo's offer to be scrutinised by the Panel should be taken up and that the Panel should be informed of the resolution from the meeting of the Corporate Audit Committee.

### **33 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE DEPUTATIONS, STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING**

The Chair invited Mr George Bailey to address the Panel.

Mr Bailey stated that he had four questions that he wished to ask.

#### **Question 1:**

NRR claims to be a Private Company, Limited by Guarantee, and as such is exempted from publishing all of its Accounts for public view at Companies House. Some areas are redacted, for example, see Notes Year 2009/2010. Yet £906,395 was supplied by SWRDA for Land Purchase, that is Public money: would the Panel

please explain how such potential Public expenditure can be hidden in private accounts?

**Question 2:**

I suspect that this Panel would agree that the transfer of ownership of the GW Railway Land from SWRDA to NRR (if indeed completed) is highly complex. Would this panel be willing to explain that transfer in Plain English for the benefit of Radstock residents?

**Question 3:**

B&NES have stated that they have no interest in NRR as it is a private company, but it does hold a mortgage on the Railway land. How much interest is being received for that mortgage?

**Question 4:**

Does B&NES hold similar mortgages for other Private companies and would this panel please state the number, the average amount and interest rate.

The Chair replied to say that the Panel were unable to answer the questions and that Mr Bailey would receive a written answer to them within five working days.

**34 MINUTES - 24TH JULY 2012**

The Chair proposed a number of amendments to the minutes.

She suggested that on page eight that the end of the first comment by Councillor Sandry be amended to read 'He also asked whether the group was going to be privatised.'

She commented that she did not recall asking for representatives from Curo to attend the September meeting of the Panel and asked for that to be deleted from page nine of the minutes.

She noticed that the word 'made' was missing from the third paragraph under Minute 23 and therefore should read 'The Chair commented that she hoped a decision on the Policy would be made by the Cabinet as soon as possible.'

The Panel accepted these amendments and confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record, they were duly signed by the Chair.

**35 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE**

Councillor Cherry Beath, Cabinet Member for Sustainable Development addressed the Panel. She informed them of the forthcoming change in directorates that would see Regeneration, Skills and Employability transfer to the Place directorate.

She stated that phase one of the Public Realm & Movement Strategy was due to be completed in March 2013.

She made the Panel aware that Linden Homes were due to submit a Joint Planning Application in relation to Norton Radstock Regeneration.

The Chair commented that she hoped Linden Homes would consult with local residents prior to the submission of the application.

Councillor Will Sandry asked if any problems had been encountered with local traders with regard to the Public Realm. He also asked if any paving surrounding the Abbey would be affected.

Councillor Cherry Beath replied that the Abbey would not lose any of its historic paving, but some from outside the Guildhall would move closer to the Abbey. She added that lengthy consultation had taken place regarding the Public Realm and that she had received no complaints from local traders.

Councillor Will Sandry asked for an update on the Creative Hub within the Guildhall.

Councillor Cherry Beath replied that all was currently going to plan and that no listed building consent was required for the project. She added that it was due to open in early January 2013.

Councillor Tim Ball, Cabinet Member for Homes & Planning addressed the Panel. He announced that the on-going work at Julian House was due to be completed by November 9<sup>th</sup> and would result in 20 self-contained units becoming available. He added that the Council had aided the project partly by contributing £155,000. He also informed them that outreach workers were now available to help homeless people.

The Chair offered her congratulations to the team at Julian House and asked that the needs of the rural areas to not be forgotten.

Councillor Tim Ball replied that the service could be used by homeless people from across Bath & North East Somerset.

The Chair on behalf of the Panel thanked them for their updates.

## **36 HOUSING ADAPTATIONS UPDATE (HOME ADAPTATIONS TO ASSIST INDEPENDENT LIVING)**

The Housing Services Manager introduced this item to the Panel. He explained that B&NES Housing Services and Sirona jointly deliver the mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) service. The DFG service provides financial assistance for home adaptations to assist independent living for eligible applicants. In 2011, a project was undertaken to cut the waiting times for a DFG adaptation to be completed. The aim was to reduce waiting times by improving the processes, staff capacity and resources associated with the delivery of this service.

He informed them that an action plan had been agreed following a process review and was currently being implemented. The Adaptation protocol has been agreed with Curo which includes joint working to improve process times and cost sharing on DFG adaptation costs.

He stated that the time taken for the fastest 80% of the cases completed during the year had improved from 52 weeks during 2010/11 to 43 weeks for the year to July during 2012/13, with the average time also improving from 36 weeks to 30 weeks over the same time period.

The Chair commented that she knew of residents that had really benefitted from the Council's work on this matter and congratulated the team.

Councillor Brian Simmons asked if Curo kept a record of the adaptations that had been carried out.

The Housing Services Manager replied that Curo now kept a list of adaptations.

Councillor Brian Simmons asked what the main delay was between identifying someone's needs and implementation.

The Housing Services Manager replied that it was either gaining consent from the landlord or identifying precisely what was required following the Occupational Therapy assessment.

The Panel **RESOLVED** to note the report.

### **37 BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET HOUSE CONDITION SURVEY 2011**

The Housing Services Manager introduced this item to the Panel. He informed them that a Private Sector House Condition Survey had been carried out during the autumn of 2011 in order to meet the legislative requirement for all Local Authorities to regularly assess the condition of housing within their areas. Four surveys were commissioned jointly across the West of England Local Authorities by Bath and North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council and South Gloucestershire Council to reduce the cost of the survey by achieving economies of scale.

He explained that the number and percentage of private rented properties had doubled since the last survey in 2004. Overall the total number of private sector homes had increased by around 9,000.

He added that a third of vulnerable residents are living in homes which do not meet the decent home standard. Vulnerable households in this context represent those on income related benefits. Residents with a disability, those receiving any benefits and owner occupier lone parents with dependent children are also more likely to live in homes which fail the decent home standard. This is significant because these residents are less likely to be able to take action themselves to improve their housing conditions.

There is high potential for improving energy efficiency of the stock with the associated health, wellbeing and social benefits. This is reflected in the fact that 25% of private sector homes fail the Decent Home Standard with the majority of failures related to cold hazards or poor thermal comfort.

Councillor Will Sandry asked if Ward level information would be available in the full report.

The Housing Services Manager replied that there would be some available.

The Panel **RESOLVED** to note the report.

## **38 HOUSING & MAJOR PROJECTS UPDATE**

The Divisional Director for Regeneration, Skills and Employment introduced this item to the Panel. He wished to highlight the following points from within the report.

Bath Western Riverside: 8 apprentices were now working on site and the site as a whole represents further training opportunities.

MoD Sites: The Concept Statements have undergone a period of public consultation and have now been approved by the Cabinet at their September meeting. The Council will now continue to work proactively with the MOD and partners through the Steering Group to implement the Project Delivery Plan.

Bath City of Ideas - Enterprise Area: The LEP's Revolving Infrastructure Fund is being finalised. A Council decision was made earlier this month to agree the process for principles for the Revolving Infrastructure Fund together with seeking permission to add the flood alleviation scheme to the Capital programme. The bids will allow infrastructure projects to be brought forward to release key development sites within the Enterprise Area.

Councillor Will Sandry commented that he appreciated the way in which employability was being incorporated within our Major Projects. He asked what opportunities existed for the Council with the proposed electrification of the main railway line.

The Divisional Director for Regeneration, Skills and Employment replied that the Council's Divisional Director for Project Management was liaising with Network Rail to understand the programme. Work would be done by Economic Development to ensure local businesses were ready to bid for the work and if the contractors can source materials from local companies.

The Chair asked what could be done with regard to the number of houses that were not being built despite them having gained planning permission.

The Divisional Director for Regeneration, Skills and Employment replied that the Government had recently announced that they would look at the legislation on this matter as it was clear that stalled schemes should be pursued.

The Chair asked for an update on the future of the gasometers in the context of the Bath Western Riverside project.

The Divisional Director for Regeneration, Skills and Employment replied that the issue of gas supply could be resolved by discussions between Transco and Crest



Nicholson. He added that their removal would have a benefit to the overall regeneration of the site.

Councillor Will Sandry asked why the performance indicator in relation to accredited privately rented homes was below its target level.

The Associate Director for Housing replied that it was because their original baseline figure had almost doubled, following the evidence from the recent House Condition Survey.

The Panel **RESOLVED** to note the report.

### **39 PANEL WORKPLAN**

The Chair introduced this item and invited Councillor Douglas Nicol to address the Panel.

Councillor Nicol asked if the Panel would be reviewing the decision to decommission John Slessor Court.

The Chair replied that she thought it might be more worthwhile to have a report on Sheltered Accommodation generally in January.

The Associate Director for Housing replied that he would be happy to provide the Panel with such a report. He added that the decommissioning of John Slessor Court was in line with the Council's policy as articulated in The Key to Independence Report.

Councillor Will Sandry asked who signed off this Council policy.

The Associate Director for Housing replied that it was a Single Member Decision made by Councillor Vic Pritchard. He added that the Council had engaged with representatives of Housing 21 at a senior level prior to the decision being made.

Councillor Douglas Nicol commented that Housing 21 had not used Home Search prior to decommissioning but had actively used it afterwards. He added that some tenants were pursuing the matter with the Housing Ombudsman.

The Chair concluded the discussion by stating that the Panel would receive a report on Sheltered Accommodation at its January meeting.

The meeting ended at 8.10 pm

Chair(person) .....

Date Confirmed and Signed .....

**Prepared by Democratic Services**