

At a meeting of the
**CPA HOUSING IMPROVEMENT
PLAN WORKING GROUP** held at
the Council House, Walsall on
Thursday 24 March, 2005 at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor C. Ault (Lead member)
Councillor Barton
Councillor Walker
Councillor D Pitt
Councillor I Shires
Councillor Yasim
Kathy McAteer
Andrea Little

IN ATTENDANCE

Julie Jones
Ian Saville
Stuart Bentley

21. Apologies

Apologies were received from Jason MacGilp and Sue Byard.

22. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

Councillor Pitt declared a personal non prejudicial interest as the brother of the portfolio holder for Housing and Community Safety.

Councillor Walker declared a personal non prejudicial interest as the partner of the portfolio holder for Regeneration.

23. Notes of the Meeting held on 24 February 2005

The notes of the previous meeting were confirmed as a correct record.

24. Presentation on Choose & Move

Cllr Ault introduced Ian Saville, Chief Executive of Willenhall Housing Trust.

Ian Saville began by saying that Choose and Move had been piloted in 2003, was government directed with clear, wholesale support and the involvement of 25% of landlords by 2005 and 100% of landlords by 2010. ODPM have taken the view that they will ask councils why they haven't adopted the policy, rather than when they will adopt it.

The scheme involves a wide range of outlets including private and shared ownership.

Walsall Housing Group (WHG) are introducing a small number of kiosks with internet access, linked to the Choose and Move website, where service users can view and bid on properties.

There is also a move to develop a common housing application form in association with other housing providers and also the use of choose and move marketing resources to advertise other properties, with the current emphasis on homes for the disabled.

Ian Saville then gave a brief overview of how the scheme works. In order to balance housing need, properties are split into 3 bands (50% of properties in band 1 (bronze), 30% in band 2 (silver), 20% in band 3 (Gold)). This scheme requires the tenants to be more pro-active in their approach to the bidding process.

Since 2003 there have been 9,500 applications with 55% of these making, on average, 3 bids. This represents 21,000 bids at an average of 45 bids per property. This is highlighting high housing demand.

Cllr Shires asked if there was any information as to why some people don't make bids. Ian Saville replied that some people may not be capable, for what ever reason and that in selective cases WHG could bid on their behalf.

Ian Saville then outlined the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme.

Strengths included increased standards and better marketing. However, not everyone receives the free press and changes in customer relations are needed.

Weaknesses include the increase of expectation, the requirement for greater customer interaction and costs, most notably around marketing.

Cllr Barton asked what the average waiting list time was. Ian Saville replied that it was up to 6 months, but shorter for more persistent tenants.

Cllr Barton then asked about housing for the disabled and the feasibility of communication with other agencies. Ian Saville replied that it is feasible with the rapid improvements and the pulling together of a database on adapted housing borough wide.

Cllr Shires asked about the number of new applications from the over 60's and voiced his concerns over the ability of the elderly to react in a pro-active system. Ian Saville replied that WHG can help manage the bid process for the vulnerable and this would include the elderly.

Cllr Shires raised the issue of the availability of the free press. Ian Saville agreed that not all people receive the free press and WHG need to look for other outlets to cover all areas.

Cllr Shires then asked if the central housing database would be accessible by the public. Ian Saville said that this was not yet the case but that it was moving in that direction.

Cllr Pitt asked if the redevelopment of certain areas was causing a backlog. Ian Saville replied that this was only a real issue in Bloxwich which, as a result, had effectively dropped out of Choose and Move having only limited housing available. Cllr Pitt asked how long this would be an issue. Ian Saville replied that there would be a gradual improvement over the next 2 years.

Cllr Ault asked if all associations would be joining Choose and Move and if so, when. Ian Saville replied that a review of the waiting list would be required first, but it may be the case that other associations may wish to remain independent. However, a central database and a common application form will move housing provision in that direction in any case.

Cllr Ault thanked Ian Saville for his input.

25. Update of Housing Services CPA Improvement Plan

Cllr Ault stated that Version 3 was still current but a new version was being produced and would be circulated when available.

26. Feedback from Members

Cllr Walker stated that she had had discussions with Andrea Little concerning the range of information available to service users. With the nearing of the next inspection, the immediate focus would be around the homeless and vulnerable in order to move forward and add value before July. This may be extended in the next Municipal year.

Andrea Little tabled a diagram outlining the information currently available to the homeless in Walsall and the methods by which people can access this information. She then focused on the leaflets available, specifically around homelessness and the rights of the homeless.

Cllr Ault asked where the leaflets were available. Andrea Little replied that they were in the civic centre, libraries, leisure centres, internet and CAB but would value the Members input as to where else they should be. The suite of leaflets was currently under review but had been available since February 2004, although Members may not have been aware. She stated that she would provide Members with a leaflet pack to show the range of information on offer.

Andrea Little then made reference to the information accessible via the Council Website. This includes standard information from the ODPM and is very detailed. It may be possible to include a reference list of available leaflets on this site.

Cllr Shires asked how easy network access was. Andrea Little replied that the new website, currently in development, would include easy to follow links. Cllr Shires asked about links to outside information sources, such as ODPM, shelter, etc.. Andrea Little replied that these links were not yet established but it was intended that such links would be available on the new website.

Andrea Little stated that the service needed to be smarter in the way it delivers information if it is to be more effective at preventing homelessness. She introduced Julie Jones who is the recently appointed as Service improvement co-ordinator. Julie Jones will be focusing on a range of new prevention

initiatives eg mediation as well as improving information available to service users on the internet, and the development of a homelessness service directory for agencies, with a summary version for service users. A dedicated e-mail facility has recently been set up to allow service users to e-mail their housing enquires directly to officers.

Cllr Shires then asked if the Bloxwich and Darlastan outreach service was to be rolled out to other areas. Andrea Little replied that no decision had been made as to where outreach would go and it was possible that Members could help to develop a plan. Cllr Shires stated that CAB also provides an outreach service and would it be possible to link with them in some form of partnership. Andrea Little stated that the aim was to target specific groups of vulnerable people in order to prevent homelessness.

Cllr Barton asked about service provision for private tenants asked to quit. Andrea Little stated that the aim would be to offer early advice.

Cllr Shires asked about the impact of increasing financial debt in the community. Andrea Little suggested that information could be targeted around life events with signposting to specialist services such as shelter.

Resolved:

1. Andrea Little to produce a pack of leaflets for Members
2. Members to think about where information can best be placed

27. Update on Actions from previous meeting

Member involvement in Mystery Shopping

Cllr Ault reported that Jason MacGilp would circulate a note for the next meeting

28. Dates of future meetings

These have been arranged for 28th April, 2005 and 26th May, 2005