

**MINUTES OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND HOUSING SCRUTINY PANEL
TUESDAY, 4 DECEMBER 2012**

Councillors Bloch, McNamara (Chair) and Strang (substitute for Cllr Alexander)

In Cllr Weber
attendance

LC11. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Alexander.

LC12. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received.

LC13. URGENT BUSINESS

None received.

LC14. DEPUTATIONS

None received.

LC15. DRAFT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

Environment - Savings Proposals

The Cabinet Member for Environment introduced the budget proposals for their portfolio area. It was noted that the Place and Sustainability Directorate was required to contribute to a £25 million budget gap over the MTFP period. Whilst this figure has been offset by some increase in fees and charges, budget proposals had involved some difficult decisions to ensure that front line services were protected.

The panel discussed budget proposals for environment services. The following provides a summary of these discussions and any conclusions reached. The reference number refers to appropriate budget line in Appendix 2 of the MTFP (savings proposals).

P3 – Additional income from planning fees. The panel noted that central government has authorised local planning authorities to increase planning application fees by up to 15%. This, together with an expected increase in the number of applications received, will generate additional income (£25k) for planning and regeneration.

P4-5 – The panel noted the deletion of middle management posts from planning and carbon management services.

P6 – The panel discussed proposals to increase allotment fees to develop income by £60k. It was noted that this increase would result in a 100% increase for the land element of allotment holder's rental. Thus as the average rent is currently £45.50 per annum, made up of £31.75 for land rental and the remainder for water charges, and

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the former would rise to approximately £63.50 per annum. The proposal also included £30k for capital investment in allotments.

The panel noted that there were approximately 1,600 tenants across 27 allotment sites. 80% of tenants were resident in Haringey. The panel were keen to assess what impact such an increase would have for low income tenants, or those on benefits.

The panel heard from a representative from Haringey Allotment Forum, who noted that:

- Allotment holders had already had a 50% increase in rent two years ago
- The £30k capital investment will not go far among 27 sites
- Previous match funding for capital projects had not been identified. T
- The increase would not be well received by allotment holders.

Action: Leisure Services to provide data on allotment holders in respect of geographical distribution and demographics, and if available, those on low income.

P8 – Amend policy to increase the number of events in Finsbury Park. Current arrangements allow for 5 events per year, none of which can occur in the summer holidays. A policy change is proposed to provide more flexibility and to allow more events to take place (up to 12 per annum). It was anticipated that this would increase income from £65k to £150k per annum.

Panel members noted that Finsbury Park was well connected for transport which made it very desirable for event hire. In this context, the panel questioned whether the Council charges adequately reflected this and how prices compared with similar venues. It was not clear if the £150k income was a net figure, once all associated costs had been deducted.

The panel recommended that: instead of more events in Finsbury Park, which may be disruptive to the local community, that the council raise charges for those 5 events which are currently agreed and ensure that charges are broken down by stages (e.g. setting up, taking down). The panel also requested a breakdown of those consulted on the proposed changes (e.g. London Borough of Islington, Hackney and FinFuture).

P11 - Restructure of enforcement (out of hours noise reporting). The panel noted that Single Front Line had undertaken an analysis of calls to out of hour's service and proposed a cut to those times when fewest calls were received. Although this would result in a 10% reduction of out of hours service, total remaining coverage (121 hours) would still be well beyond that of neighbouring boroughs. Complaints received during these times would still be investigated when these were picked up.

Action: It was noted that the panel would be looking at strategic enforcement services across the borough in 2013 and that this may be an opportunity to look at this issue in further detail.

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P13 – Increase in pest control charges to Homes for Haringey. This increase (£19k) would be realised in the Housing Revenue Account.

P14 – Parking Plan Income (increase in Penalty Charge Notice). The Council would be applying to London Councils so that Penalty Charge Notice is in higher Band A for the whole borough (as opposed to just Wood Green). This would see a rise in FPN fees (depending on the seriousness of the offence) from £110 to £130 and £60 to £80.

This would bring the Council in line with other Inner London boroughs and parts of Waltham Forest. The panel noted that this application would have been put forward regardless of the need to achieve cost savings.

P15 – Reorganisation efficiency savings. The panel noted that this relates to senior management changes and would need further member approval.

P16 – Increased income from co-mingled recycling. The panel noted that additional income would be generated through increased local tonnage of waste sent for recycling.

P17 - Street cleansing service review. The panel noted it was proposed to develop a new street sweeping regimen based on need as opposed to scheduled twice weekly sweeps. The panel noted that the £200k saving is additional to the £450k already identified for this service. The panel noted that this review would be considered by the Waste management Advisory Group.

The panel noted that there may be quality assurance issues with the current street sweeping regimen on estates which may need further investigation.

Environment – Investment Proposals

The panel discussed the investment proposals outlined in the draft MTFP. A summary of the main points discussed is provided below. The reference number refers to appropriate budget line in Appendix 3 of the MTFP (investment proposals).

P1 – Neighbourhood Planning. The panel noted that £100k investment related to the need to support 'Community Right to Bid' applications (under the Localism Act). This would involve developing a list of community buildings which the community may be interested in purchasing and to support bidding or application processes when these are received. There is currently one application pending in Crouch End.

Environment - Capital Programme

The Panel discussed the 19 items detailed within the capital investment programme for service area covered by the EHSP. At the outset, the panel noted that there was a significant reliance on capital receipts (sale of council assets) to fund the capital programme to 2016 and questioned whether this would affect future capital programme plans.

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A summary of the panel discussions on individual planned capital investments is described below. The reference number refers to budget lines in Appendix 6 (Capital Programme).

- **18** – Hornsey Town Hall (HTH) £5.3m. The panel noted that Mountview School were bidding for lottery funding to continue the development of HTH. This is matched funding bid, but there was an opportunity to develop land around the Town Hall to help secure funding for this.

The panel noted the sale of the C.A.B. office on Hattersley gardens in 2006/7.

- **12** – Accommodation Strategy £4.775m. This related to overall strategy of developing the Wood Green Hub for the Council and reflected the need for capital investment in council building to allow for release and sale. It was noted that the accommodation strategy would generate receipts in excess of this investment.

Action: The panel noted that a Corporate Building Review was intended to be submitted to Cabinet in February and it was recommended that this should be referred to Overview & Scrutiny Committee before any decisions are made.

- **13** – Street Lighting £1.2m. The panel noted that there are 17,000 street lamps in the borough: 7,000 have been replaced, 5,000 are EE compliant and a further 5,000 are part of a replacement programme. As each column costs £2k the total cost of the programme would be £10m, thus the proposed capital investment reflects the prioritisation of those columns which need to be replaced in relation to an assessed risk.

The panel noted that capital receipts will become clearer throughout the duration of the MTFP which would clarify the level of funding for capital investments.

Housing - Savings Proposals

The Cabinet member for Housing introduced the budget savings proposals within his portfolio. The Cabinet member indicated that there continued to be significant pressures on the housing budget, particularly in the current economic downturn, this had made the current savings proposals difficult. The Cabinet Member welcomed scrutiny in-put in to these decisions.

The panel noted that there was a total budget of approximately £15.5m for Community Housing Services and that there was significant pressure to manage and contain demands within this service, particularly in relation to preventing homelessness. The reference number refers to budget lines in Appendix 2 of the MTFP (savings proposals).

A18-A23 Remodelling of Community Housing services teams. The panel noted proposals to restructure a number of teams within the housing service that would aim to improve service performance whilst achieving savings. These included the merging

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of two lettings teams, remodelling Housing Benefit Assessment Teams, remodelling Technical/ Service Support and the deletion of vacant posts (Overcrowding Officer).

The panel suggested that proposed staffing reductions in the Housing Benefit service may be a strategic loss for the council. As such expertise could be used in other departments, namely fraud identification / prevention, where there was a need for such knowledgeable and experienced staff. It was suggested that redeployment in this manner could represent an 'invest to save' approach.

Action: The panel indicated that it will refer to this issue again at its January meeting where a report on the strategic enforcement functions of the council will be discussed.

In response to panel questioning around the use of agency staff whilst the service was cutting personnel, it was noted that there were few instances (1-2 occasions) where service reductions had gone too far and there was a need to re-recruit.

The panel noted that the service had a number of performance measures which it would continue to monitor closely to assess the impact of the planned changes to ensure that performance did not dip.

A number of service developments, such as on-line registration for social housing had helped to ease the administrative burden in the service, and supported savings proposals (particularly as this was now an annual registration process within the new lettings policy).

The panel discussed the use of private sector landlords by the council to support housing objectives (preventing homelessness). It was noted that a team of officers support work with private sector landlords by ensuring that accommodation is compliant with health and safety as well as housing standards. The panel noted that private landlords who do not comply are removed from the councils list of accredited landlords; in a recent case, a landlord with 12 properties was removed from the council list.

The panel noted that the proposed savings in this arm of Community Housing represented a significant sum of approximately £560k over three years. The panel heard that whilst there were always associated risks with such savings proposals, they had a good chance of working.

The panel discussed some alternative ways in which savings may be achieved within the Community Housing service. It was noted that a merger or bringing in house the Arms Length Management Organisation may yield similar savings.

Action: It was agreed that the panel would like to meet representatives of the Homes for Haringey Board. It was noted that representatives from Homes for Haringey would be attending the January meeting to discuss Tenant Scrutiny Panels and other scrutiny work being undertaken in the ALMO to determine areas of demarcation and possible joint working.

Housing – Investment Proposals

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The reference number refers to budget lines in Appendix 3 of the MTFP (investment proposals).

A3 – The Panel discussed the investment proposal for the Community Housing service of £800k which would be used to support housing options in the local private rented sector for local families on the housing register. Investment proposals would use a variety of financial incentives to landlords to increase supply of local to let properties. The council's duty to provide social housing to families or individuals is discharged if this option is chosen.

This may include a rent deposit scheme where £1,250 may be provided in year 1 and £750 provided in year 2.

This investment can help to increase opportunities within the local private rented sector and contribute to efforts to reduce those numbers in temporary accommodation. Additional savings to the Council could also be achieved through not having to process and support those in temporary accommodation which is generally more expensive option to support homeless people.

The panel noted that this scheme offered significant onward savings for the Council.

Housing - Capital Programme

The panel discussed items in the capital investment programme relating to the Community Housing services. The reference number refers to budget lines in Appendix 6 of the MTFP (capital programme).

40 – Major adaptations (non-council properties) £4.6m (to 2016). The panel noted that these are adaptations made to local accommodation to enable people to live independently at home (such as the disabled or older people). The panel noted that the full budget is allocated each year, highlighting demand for this service.

41 – Compulsory purchase order £1.5m (to 2016). This is a budget to buy housing that fall into long term disrepair to the extent that it affects the character and amenity of the local area. Such decisions are taken by Cabinet and whilst 20 properties may go to Cabinet for decision, this final process generally precipitates owner action (i.e. only 5-6 may be eventually compulsory purchased). This budget is self financing. It was noted that 13 properties were up for compulsory purchase at Cabinet on 18th December 2012.

The panel noted that compulsory purchase could be an important tool in efforts to support local regeneration.

42-59 – Capital items within the Housing Revenue Account and managed by Home for Haringey, though require approval by the Community Housing Service.

42-48 – Capital items categorised within a regular programme of update and renewal as dictated by the stock condition survey (e.g. boiler replacement, lift improvement or structural works).

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49 - £82m is outlined for improvements within the Decent Homes Programme. The panel noted that full details of proposed spend in this budget are due to be considered at Cabinet on 18th December.

56 – Loft conversions (£250k). Panel members noted that this capital investment would create additional room in council owned properties which could help to relieve pressures on overcrowding (and increase overall housing options). Given the significant potential, panel members felt that there could be a case for additional investment.

Action: Panel members requested further information on the stock numbers which may potentially benefit from loft conversions.

57 – Supported living (£1.5m) Panel members noted that this related to the conversion of large properties within the Councils property portfolio for the purpose of supported independent living. In a recent example, a conversion helped to support four people with a learning disability in the community.

LC16. NEW ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None received.

LC17. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

There was insufficient time and this item was deferred to the next panel meeting (8th January).

LC18. WORK PROGRAMME

There was insufficient time and this item was deferred to the next panel meeting (8th January).

LC19. DATE OF FUTURE MEETINGS

These were confirmed as:

- 8th January 2013
- 21st March 2013

Clr Stuart McNamara

Chair