

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY POLICY DEVELOPMENT
GROUP HELD AT FOLLATON HOUSE, TOTNES ON
TUESDAY 29 SEPTEMBER 2009**

MEMBERS

* Cllr R C Steer – Chairman

* Cllr B F Cane – Vice-Chairman

* Cllr N A Barnes

* Cllr S E Cooper

* Cllr C W Jones

* Cllr L P Jones

∅ Cllr I Longrigg

* Cllr D M O'Callaghan

* Denotes attendance

∅ Denotes apology for absence

Also in attendance and participating:

Cllrs H D Bastone, P W Hitchins, M J Howarth and M F Saltern

Officers in attendance:

All Agenda Items: Strategic Director (Community), Strategic Director (Resources),
Member Support Officer and Communications Manager.

For item 5: (Minute CPDG.16/09 below refers) Housing Advice Manager;

For item 6: (Minute CPDG.17/09 below refers) Head of Customer Service; and

For item 7: (Minute CPDG.18/09 below refers) Head of Community Regeneration.

CPDG.14/09 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Community Policy Development Group held on 15 July 2009 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

CPDG.15/09 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members and officers were invited to declare any interests in the items of business to be considered during the course of the meeting, but none were made.

CPDG.16/09 REVISED POLICY FOR DEPOSIT GUARANTEE, CASH DEPOSIT AND RENT IN ADVANCE SCHEMES

A report was considered that sought approval for an increase in the budget for the Deposit Guarantee Scheme from £40,000 to £100,000. This had been deemed necessary as the service was increasingly looking to the private sector to assist in meeting accommodation requirements. Following the adoption of the revised Deposit Guarantee Policy by the Executive in 2008 (Minute E.14/08 refers), the number of landlords willing to accept this Guarantee instead of a financial deposit had increased above expectations. To reassure Members, it was noted that since the origination of the scheme in 1999, 188 guarantees had been issued, but only 17 claims had been made totalling £5,809.

The scheme was one of the Council's main tools in homelessness prevention by assisting people with access to the private rented sector and had significantly reduced the number of people being housed in temporary accommodation which itself incurred a huge cost to the Council. As an example, it would have cost the Council £23,000 to house 67 individuals/families for one week in temporary accommodation had they not benefited from the implementation of the Guarantee Scheme.

During the discussion, the following points were made:-

- a) Concern was raised at the scale of risk that the Council might be exposed to with the proposed increase to £100,000 and it was asked how this figure had been arrived at. In reply, the Group was informed that it was based on the success of the scheme. In 2008, the liability funding had been increased from £20,000 to £40,000 but this sum was now insufficient to meet future demands and a review of the scheme had highlighted that there were a number of points that required further clarification, specifically what employment connection qualified an individual to benefit from the scheme;
- b) A Member expressed that he was very comfortable with the proposed increase bearing in mind the comparatively small sums that had been claimed in the last ten years. However, he expressed some disquiet at the proposed amendments for the employment connection to be set at a minimum of sixteen hours a week worked on permanent paid contracts. In response, the Strategic Director (Community) informed that it had been proposed to make the criteria more stringent to prevent inappropriate applications. The Member highlighted that there was currently high unemployment and many people now found themselves on shorter working weeks, short term contracts and that there was therefore a danger that the amended criteria would exclude some of the very people the scheme was designed to help. He went further to say the proposed new criteria would also exclude temporary agency workers and the self employed.

In response, the Officer asserted that it was helpful to have clear policies and referred to paragraph 14 of the presented report. Furthermore, the Council could not have a blanket policy as there was still a need to respond to each case on its merits, which could enable specific employment issues to be taken into account where appropriate. The Member was not reassured and reemphasised that the employment market was changing. He agreed that it was reasonable to restrict the scheme to those who were in some form of employment, but was very concerned about the exclusion of certain groups, such as the self employed. On the subject of seasonal work being included in the criteria, the Housing Advice Manager expressed strong reservations about this, as he felt this exposed the Council to significantly more risk e.g. in terms of people applying to the scheme but with a limited employment connection to the local area.

Another Member agreed with the Officer that the criteria should be restricted to permanent work but agreed with the Member that the scheme should be amended to include self employed workers. Therefore, it was **PROPOSED** and **SECONDED** and on being put to the vote was declared **CARRIED**:-

‘That the Deposit Guarantee Scheme be amended to include the provision for self employed workers to have access to the scheme’

- c) Officers confirmed that people who lived in the South Hams but worked in a neighbouring area e.g. Torbay or Plymouth, and people who conversely worked in South Hams but lived outside of the district would both qualify for the scheme;
- d) The Lead Executive Member for Housing stated that of the 188 guarantees that had been issued since 1999, 63 had been in the last twelve months, which highlighted the upsurge in demand.

It was then:-

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED** that:-

1. The revised policy for the issuing of Deposit Guarantee, Cash Deposits and Rent be adopted, subject to the amendment of the inclusion whereby self-employed workers also have access to the scheme; and
2. The increase in liability funding to £100,000 be approved.

CPDG.17/09 CUSTOMER SERVICES REVIEW BUDGET

The Head of Customer Services presented a report that provided Members with a budget analysis of Council Tax and Business Rates collection, Housing and Council Tax Benefit, Housing Advice, Corporate Customer Services and Postal Services. She advised that the majority of the Customer Services Budget, over 50%, was attributed to staffing costs. The target for savings for 2010/11 was £88,000. The shared Revenues and Benefits project would produce an approximate saving of £130,000 through the reduction of management posts. A further £10,000 could be saved from the postal budget by using an alternative to Royal Mail for collections from Follaton House.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- (a) A Member congratulated the Officer for the fact that the department had exceeded their target savings and expressed the comment that this service should be used as a benchmark to illustrate to other services what could be achieved;
- (b) A Member acknowledged that making such savings were a reality which both officers and Members must come to terms with. Since staff costs were the greatest cost, it was vitally important that factors such as reorganisation e.g. through the shared services agenda were fully investigated. However, the Member did wish to record his concerns about the impact that this would have on delivering services. The Officer informed that she was confident the service could deliver in the medium to long term but they relied heavily on technology to reduce the need for staff resources (e.g. the technology that allowed staff to visit people in their homes to assess benefit claims);
- (c) A Member expressed that it was difficult for the Group to assess whether the stated number of staff was sufficient and if they had the right skills. The Group was therefore reliant on the Officer to make that judgement. In reply, the Group was advised that they had benchmarking data to inform them that whilst staff numbers were reduced the performance output was being maintained, and on that basis it was felt the balance was about right;
- (d) A Member felt that there was potential for more mail to be folded to reduce envelope sizes, which could be a simple way to save postage costs;
- (e) The Lead Executive Member for Housing expressed some misgivings about using an alternative provider to Royal Mail citing issues of data security and poorer collections times, both of which would be very detrimental with regard to the issuing of benefit claims;
- (f) The reduction in performance in terms of the number of telephone calls answered and those answered within twenty seconds was noted. The Officer agreed that this was an area of concern but added that on certain days e.g. when a significant number of summonses had to be distributed then telephone performance was impaired.

It was then

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED** that the Group notes the report and has commented upon it (as recorded above).

CPDG.18/09 **COMMUNITY REGENERATION SERVICE REVIEW**

The Head of Community Regeneration presented a report that provided an overview of the Community Regeneration Service in terms of its intended principal outcomes and how it was aiming to develop. The Officer informed that the current budgetary constraints were making it increasingly difficult to find savings. The current year's savings were dependent on deleting the currently vacant External Funding Officers Post from the establishment. However, in the future, there could be opportunities for savings arising from shared services and natural wastage.

During the discussion, the following points were made:-

- (a) A Member commented on the outsourced work funded by the Planning Local Development Framework (LDF) Reserve and asked if it was always necessary to do this work, as the Council was looking to stop doing things that were not essential and focus upon only work that was absolutely necessary. In reply, the Group was informed that much of the planning work the service undertook was statutory but some areas were discretionary e.g. the administration of the locality grant fund, and some of the housing and economic development work. However, the delivery of the LDF was a statutory role, but the service went beyond baseline requirements such as consultation associated with the new plan and new initiatives in affordable housing. He emphasised that he would have to look towards shared services to make future savings.

The Strategic Director (Community) advised that currently the service was performing at a high level in relation to progressing planning documents under the new planning system, but one option to save money could be to reduce the aspirations in relation to timescales. For example, in relation to the LDF, the Council could consider producing the documents over a longer time frame, rather than as concurrent documents in a short time scale, which increased the staff resource necessary to maintain the programme.

In respect of economic development and affordable housing, the recent Place Survey had shown that these areas were still high on the list of residents' priorities;

- (b) A Member expressed that they felt the officer was not ambitious enough in terms of looking for ways to make savings and they felt a reduction in performance was a viable option, stating that it was not necessary for the Council to aim to be the best at everything. In reply, the Officer informed that his service was responding to the priorities set by the Council and that it was for Members to determine the priorities of the Council;

- (c) With regard to the External Funding Officer post, the Strategic Director (Community) informed that the opportunities for external and European funding had reduced and the likelihood was that access to funding would become more difficult in future. As a consequence, it had been felt this was a post that could remain vacant and it was suggested that it would require individual officers, Members and local communities to be alert to any funding opportunities;
- (d) On the matter of merging posts, a Member stated that this was likely to be a reality in the future due to the financial pressures the Council would experience. A Member proceeded to state that a lot of extra demands would most likely be put on staff and their welfare must not be overlooked. The Council had above average sickness levels and a number had left after being on long-term sickness absence for some length of time. It was therefore felt important to note that extra pressure on staff had potential consequences and the Council needed to be realistic about how much it could expect a postholder to deliver. The Strategic Director (Community) agreed that the Council did have a duty of care to staff and that the use of ICT could help to maximise efficiencies although this would require upfront expenditure. A reduction in staff numbers might mean that much less work could be undertaken and thus managing member and community expectations year on year would be necessary. The Council had continually strived to achieve the highest levels in service delivery and performance but it was now important to have the discussion about where savings could emerge and to accept that performance may be affected;
- (e) The Lead Executive Member for Value for Money highlighted the pressure on the Major Developments Team as a result of the Sherford Project which had been an immense challenge not least in compiling the Area Action Plan. The demands of the Sherford Project had necessitated the focus of two full-time officers almost exclusively on this project to ensure that it did not get derailed in terms of delivery and in avoiding appeals processes with subsequent significant cost. In the future, the Langage Project, Urban Fringe and more significant developments in the district's own market towns would require project co-ordination and this would most likely be funded entirely from Council reserves. The Strategic Director (Community) stated that four years ago, the project had a strong vision but no one could have predicted the scale of the financial meltdown that had recently been experienced. Extensive time, effort and money had been invested in the Sherford Area Action Plan and although there was some disappointment with the recently revised proposal, which perhaps meant it could no longer be regarded as an exemplar scheme, but it was still judged to be a good quality scheme.

It was then:

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED** that the Group notes the report and has commented upon it (as recorded above).

(Meeting started at 2.00 pm and concluded at 3.45 pm)

Chairman