

**SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**2 June 2003**

(19.00 - 20.25)

**Present:** Councillor Regan (in the Chair), Councillors Barnes, Buckland (substitute for Councillor Smith), Coleman, Mrs Driver, Forbes, Mrs Hale, Jones, Mrs Ledoux, MacDonald, Morris, Seacome, Stennett and Wheeler. Messrs Bullingham, Howard, Moore-Scott and Sygerycz.

**Apologies:** Councillors Smith and Mrs Holliday

**1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillors Mrs Driver, Morris, Mrs. Hale and Mr C Bullingham declared their interest in Item 7 as directors of Cheltenham Borough Homes, or (in Mrs. Hale's case) as the wife of a director of Cheltenham Borough Homes.

Councillor Mrs Hale declared an interest in Item 9 as she works in the National Health Service.

**2. MINUTES**

Councillor Morris pointed out that although his declaration of interest had been noted, his attendance at the meeting had not been recorded.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 3<sup>rd</sup> April be approved as a correct record, subject to the inclusion of Councillor Morris's attendance.

**3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

No public questions or petitions had been received.

**4. MATTERS REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE**

- (a) By Council - None
- (b) By Cabinet - None
- (c) By Area Committee - None

**5. SPORT AND LEISURE MANAGEMENT CONTRACT - PROGRESS REPORT**

The Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) presented her report which provided an overview of the performance and financial position of the Sport and Leisure Management contract following the handover of the contract from Leisure Connection to the council on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2003. She explained that with the council having been responsible for the direct management and operation of the service for only six weeks, at this stage it was too early to provide members with a robust assessment of performance in terms of both

service delivery and financial outturn. However, she highlighted the following key issues which had become evident since the handover:-

- During the redevelopment project, despite the partial closure of the car park, the temporary closure of the reception and relocation of the Health and Fitness Suite, customer comments and satisfaction levels had been good and the morale amongst staff positive.
- Comments had been received with regard to improvements made in the areas of cleanliness, maintenance and repairs. This compared to eighteen complaints regarding service failure received for the same period last year.
- Financial Performance - the Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) drew particular attention to the four significant issues set out in the report which would ultimately impact on financial outturn, namely Salaries and Wages, Human Resources, ICT and Income.

The Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) anticipated that a revised budget forecast would be presented to Social and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee in July 2003. She confirmed that the building works were currently on target for completion by September 2004 and encouraged members to participate in the Members' Tour of the Recreation Centre to be held on Monday 30<sup>th</sup> June. The Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) was accompanied by Mr Peter Williams General Manager of the Recreation Centre, who wished to introduce himself to elected members and provide feedback on the recent meeting of the Cheltenham Recreation Centre Customer Forum. Peter Williams reported that the Customer Forum consisting of 10 existing members of the centre had completed a tour of the redevelopment site and met informally with key members of staff. The feedback had been very positive regarding the standard of cleanliness, repairs and maintenance and staff presentation in their new uniforms.

In response to a question from Councillor MacDonald, the Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) advised that despite early indications that customers had responded positively to the handover, the contingency sum allowed for within the budget would still be required due to the downturn of income forecast. She confirmed that as the redevelopment programme moved on, income was increasing week by week but that it was still too early to predict the likely outturn position for this year.

Councillor Mrs Driver raised concerns regarding increased asthma related problems potentially caused by chemical additives to the swimming pool and asked whether measures were in place to avoid this happening. The Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) confirmed that these types of questions were being asked and the water levels would all be maintained at the standard recognised in industry. There would also be ongoing monitoring in accordance with legislation and good practice.

In response to a question from Councillor Stennet, the Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) confirmed that the wetside refurbishment contract was on schedule and within the proposed capital programme approved by Council. The anticipated completion date was also expected to be achieved enabling the reopening of the wetside in January 2004.

Councillor Barnes expressed his congratulations to the new management team and staff on generating 'a new lease of life' and 'a new sense of ownership' since the commencement of the new contract. He also asked whether any progress had been made on the matters which had yet to be resolved with Leisure Connection. In response, the Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) confirmed that negotiations were still ongoing and that any financial implications would be reported to Members through the appropriate channels.

Councillor Coleman commented that as a regular user of the facilities he had been very impressed with the new entrance and the smart new uniforms, he encouraged other members of the Committee to take up the opportunity of the Member tour or to just go along for a look and spread the good word to others.

Mr Moore-Scott referred to the possibility of additional expenditure on ICT and asked what the full cost was likely to be under those circumstances. The Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) confirmed that the intention was not to exceed the original budget prediction of £20K.

Councillor Morris asked whether it was possible to gauge whether the shortfall on attendances in April compared to the previous year was likely to even out over the next few months. The Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) advised at this stage it was difficult to assess, however the report to the Committee in July 2003 would provide an update on the situation. She anticipated that the downturn would start to improve once the message was out that the car park was completed.

In response to questions from Mr Sygerycz regarding accessibility to disabled users the Committee was informed that to obtain lottery funding, the centre had to comply with certain accessibility standards.

Councillor MacDonald asked whether the improvements to the Recreation Centre would attract regional/national events. The Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) confirmed that the sports hall met with the standards required and the division would be working with Tourism in the future to actively promote this, but that the swimming pool could not accommodate the required 8 lanes for national competitions.

The Chairman thanked the Assistant Director (Health and Wellbeing) for a comprehensive report.

**RESOLVED** that the Committee notes the report.

## **1. HOUSING MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

In introducing this report the Chair of Cheltenham Borough Homes Mr Claude Bullingham reminded the Committee that from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2003 the management of the Council's housing stock had been transferred to Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH). He explained that following consideration of the Housing Inspectors' report at the last Social and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Board of CBH had also considered the report and an outline improvement Plan.

The Chair of CBH informed the Committee that a small working party had been established and were working well together to develop the improvement plan which was attached to the report and to monitor its delivery. He explained that the improvement plan was a critical document for both the Council, as it would provide the platform from which additional government funding of £26m could be accessed, and for CBH as it set out priorities and directed resources into the identified work areas. Progress will be considered at every CBH Board meeting in 2003/04 as well as at each meeting of the Social and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Chair of CBH stressed the importance of the Council and CBH Homes working in partnership with tenants to improve their quality of life.

The General Manager of CBH Mr Paul Davies added that the improvement plan from the Best Value Review of housing management undertaken during 2001/02 had been dissected and used by the working party to produce a new improvement plan based on the findings of the 75 page Inspectors' report. He briefly explained the structure of the document and informed the Committee that a file with evidence for each target outlined in the plan would be kept and monitored by the CBH Board. The final plan would be approved by the CBH Board at its meeting in June 2003.

The Chair of the Social and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee referred to the section on improving services by involving tenants and asked Members to encourage tenants as far as possible to make their views known to Cheltenham Borough Homes.

In response to a question from Councillor Stennett it was confirmed by the General Manager of CBH that the improvement plan was required to be completed by November 2003.

Councillor MacDonald congratulated CBH for their work on the improvement plan and for progressing it so quickly. He sought clarification as to the financial and other benefits of attaining a two star rating. The General Manager of CBH confirmed that it would enable the Council to access the additional £26m from the Government to improve the housing stock to the decent homes standard.

The Group Director (Social and Community) underlined the importance of the Council, the Committee and the Company Board working together to achieve two star status. This partnership needed to ensure that the plan continued to develop as outlined to be able to demonstrate to the inspectors that there was a robust relationship between the Council and its agents Cheltenham Borough Homes. The inspectors would be talking to Members and Officers as part of the inspection.

Councillor Morris speaking especially as a member of the Board of CBC added that as the Council would continue to have direct responsibility for environmental maintenance it was important how the Council and CBC linked up the use of the funding in order to improve housing standards. The Board were keen to avoid any unnecessary duplication of work by Members and it was therefore recommended that the role of this Committee be to scrutinise the on-going improvement plan.

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee thanked the Chair and General Manager of CBH for presenting their report.

**RESOLVED** that the Committee notes the improvement plan and continues to monitor its delivery through regular reports to future meetings of the committee.

## **7. LIFELINE COMMUNITY ALARM SERVICE**

The Assistant Director (Community Services) presented this report which had been brought to the Committee at the request of Councillor Stennett and in the context of an increase of £0.52 in the weekly charge to users of the Lifeline Service. The management of the Lifeline Service was retained by the council following the restructure of housing services within the council and the formation of Cheltenham Borough Homes.

The Assistant Director (Community Services) drew particular attention to the following issues from the report:-

- Up to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2003 it was council policy not to raise a separate charge to CBC tenants for the use of the Lifeline Service as it was regarded as a 'pooled expense' financed by rents.
- The introduction of both rent restructuring and the Supporting People funding regime had required the council to now treat this as a chargeable support service in addition to rent. Tenants with insufficient means, as determined by an income test, do not have to pay the new charge. Their costs are met by the supporting people fund administered by the County Council.
- Private users had always been charged for the service. Before 2002 the charge had not been reviewed for approximately 10 years.

- A standardisation of the rate prevented discrimination against different classes of user whilst promoting the required principle of achieving a break even position in the service provision. It was envisaged that future increases would be kept in line with general inflation.

The Chair was concerned that the change in method of funding impacted on the most vulnerable people.

Councillor Stennett informed the Committee that the matter had been raised following concern from constituents. He expressed the view that the increase was very harsh on a service which enabled the elderly and disabled to stay in their homes and felt that the Council should do anything in its power to keep the costs down. He raised several questions relating to the cost/charge equation and suggested that the restructure of the housing service should improve and not hinder the service. He proposed that the Committee should ask the Cabinet to reverse the decision to increase the charge.

The Assistant Director (Community Services) explained that current regulations prevented the Council from providing financial support to users of the Lifeline Service. Additional resources were required for marketing, monitoring and managing the service which in the longer term would increase the viability of the service and ensure it was sustainable, the more the users, the lower the cost would be. The Group Accountant (Social and Community) clarified that the costs set out in 4.1 were purely based on the private sector users and confirmed the cost and income attributable to CBH tenants fell within the Housing Revenue Account.

Councillor Mrs Driver fully supported Councillor Stennett's proposals and felt that the Lifeline users should not be penalised because of changes to the 'pot' of resources brought about by Supporting People.

Mr Sygerycz was particularly concerned as he felt this increase could potentially force some of the most vulnerable people back into care homes. He asked why the County's Social Services were not dealing with the problem. The Assistant Director (Community Services) suggested that it was possible that users on Disability Living Allowance would not have to pay the charge and the County were not prepared to subsidise the service.

Councillor Mrs Hale praised the Lifeline Service as it was good value and gave peace of mind to users and their relatives. She suggested that information leaflets should be enclosed with every Lifeline bill providing benefits advice.

Mr Howard commented that as a district nurse his mother greatly valued the services of Lifeline. He was of the view that in the scheme of things the cost was not that much for the provision of such a vital service.

In response to a question from Councillor MacDonald regarding spreading the increase over 2-3 years, the Assistant Director (Community Services) confirmed that it was not a practical solution for the Council to incur the additional reclaim costs from the government and the decision had been made in accordance with Audit Commission best practice.

Councillor Morris pointed out that for 10 years there had been no increase in the charge and only the change in the legislation had forced the Council to put it up. If inflation had been built in over the 10 year period it would reflect the new charge by now. He also pointed out that tenants with insufficient means did not have to pay the new charge.

The Group Director Social and Community reminded the Committee that this charge had been part of the budget agreed by Council in February 2003 which had been subject of extensive consultation.

In closing the debate the Chair thanked the Assistant Director (Community Services) for his report and reminded the Committee that Councillor Stennett had made a proposal to ask Cabinet to reconsider the decision regarding Lifeline. Upon a vote being taken the proposal was lost.

**RESOLVED** that the Committee notes the report.

## **8. NHS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

The Group Director Social and Community reminded the Committee that at its request, Council on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2003 had given delegated authority to this Committee to appoint a representative and substitute to represent the council on the County's NHS Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Forbes was nominated and seconded as the Council's representative. A substitute representative was not appointed at this time.

**RESOLVED** that Councillor Forbes be appointed as the Council's representative on the County's NHS Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

## **9. COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT HOUSING DIAGNOSTIC**

In introducing this report the Group Director (Social and Community) explained that the latest guidance on the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) for District Councils had now been issued by the Audit Commission, As part of the CPA, diagnostic assessments will be undertaken in two areas of housing.

The Cabinet had previously considered how best to involve members in the CPA process , and its recommendations would be considered at the next ordinary council meeting. One of the Cabinet's proposals was that the three Overview and Scrutiny Committees should each be involved in reviewing and scrutinising the relevant diagnostic assessments.

The Group Director (Social and Community) advised that this was the first update to the Committee and drew particular attention to the following issues:-

- Housing Diagnostics
- Assessing progress towards the Decent Homes Standard
- Balancing housing markets
- Formal inspection in June 2004, although this date had been challenged as it coincided with local and European elections
- An officer CPA team had been established and a cross-party working group of members would oversee the process. Training and seminars would be available for members and officers.

The Group Director (Social and Community) indicated that as a result of the substantial volume of work which had been undertaken to analyse stock options and establish Cheltenham Borough Homes the council would not be starting from scratch on the Decent Homes Standard diagnostic. However, the council would need to be able to demonstrate

that it could act in an integrated way and that as far as was possible, the process and self-assessment were owned by everyone involved. A successful CPA could lead to new freedoms for the council and a positive boost to the public perception of the authority.

Councillor Morris raised concern regarding the likely cost to the council of the CPA process. He was also concerned about the amount of paperwork members were already receiving and the additional workload on top of their existing commitments. He asked whether the key documents would be available through the internet/intranet. The Group Director (Social and Community) advised that the Audit Commission had a very good website containing all the background papers and he would arrange for a series of links to be put on the intranet. He stressed the importance of the CPA process and involvement at all levels as it was a vehicle to open up financial benefits and freedoms for the council.

**RESOLVED** that the committee notes the report.

**COUNCILLOR MRS A REGAN**  
Chairman