

## **REPORT OF HOUSING COMMITTEE**

**(Meeting held 19 January 1999)**

### **1. CARE TO TENANTS OF COUNCIL OWNED SHELTERED HOUSING SCHEMES FOR OLDER PEOPLE (REPORT A) (MINUTE NO. 45).**

With deep regret, the Committee has decided to terminate the provision of a free domiciliary care service to tenants in Council owned sheltered housing schemes. The service was particularly targeted at tenants who are unable to look after themselves for short periods through illness. This Council has been acting as the agents for the County Council who has withdrawn its subsidy for this scheme, as a result of pressures on its Social Services budgets.

The tenants had been balloted to see if they would be prepared to pay for this service. Only 473 tenants had returned the ballot forms (about half of those eligible) and of these, only 183 were prepared to pay for this service. This made the service uneconomic to run. The service faced the danger that, as more people ceased to pay, it would become increasingly expensive to those remaining, and there would be an inexorable decline in its financial viability. It was noted that Social Services would become involved if a vulnerable person was unable to cope for more than a week. It was, however, regretted that this service, which kept people in their homes when they could not otherwise cope, was to be lost. This seemed contrary to the ethos of Care in the Community.

The Committee noted that there would be staffing implications as a result of this service being lost, and in addition there would inevitably be greater pressure on the Wardens who may feel pressured to undertake duties which were not part of their normal role, in order to help people within their sheltered blocks. The Committee expressed its appreciation for the high quality and professional service which the Wardens provided to their clients. Three staff would have to be considered for redeployment or redundancy. The fourth member of staff had indicated they would wish to take early retirement. The cost of redundancies had been included in the estimates for the Housing Revenue Account.

As a result of considering this issue the Committee has agreed to write to the Government urging them to understand that by cutting Social Services' budgets, it is the less fortunate members of society who suffer, as in the current case.

### **2. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT ESTIMATES 1999/2000 (REPORT B) (MINUTE NO. 47)**

The Committee has agreed the Housing Revenue Account estimates for 1999/2000. This included an increase in rents for Council dwellings of 4%. The Committee regretted the need to increase rents by more than inflation, but were mindful of the need for prudent financial management to ensure that essential repairs and refurbishment could be carried out. A lower rent increase at this time would inevitably result in a significant increase, in the order of 25%, in three years' time.

In addition to the 4% increase in Council rents there would be a 1% increase in service charges for sheltered housing schemes, a 5% increase in service charges for hostels for homeless households, a 10p per week increase in garage rents (plus VAT for garages rented to non-Council tenants) and rents charged on leased properties would be increased in accordance with current policies and service charges levied.

The Committee noted other key variations in the budgets. These arose from:

- The number of houses projected that would be sold had increased from 60 to 90, resulting in an additional loss of revenue income of £49,000 in 1998/99 and £640,000 in 1999/2000.
- A number of shops would be disposed of in 1998/99, a year earlier than projected. This resulted in a loss of revenue income of £39,000.

While the DETR was progressively reducing the subsidy for repair and maintenance, by making no allowance for inflation, the Council had approved an additional £200,000 revenue contribution to capitalised repairs in 1998/99. Half of this now needed to be transferred to the revenue programmed maintenance budget. In addition there was a £40,000 increase in the revised 1998/99 disabled facilities budget to reflect additional expenditure already approved by the Committee.

### **3. NORTH POULNER MOBILE HOME PARK HOLDING ACCOUNT (REPORT C) (MINUTE NO. 48).**

The Committee was advised that the capital value of the North Poulner Mobile Home Park had been revised down from £680,000 to £500,000 as part of the overall review of the Council's assets. The lower capital valuation reduced the annual notional asset rental charge which was levied against the park's holding account from £40,800 to £30,940. In effect, this released money for modest improvements to the site. A schedule of maintenance works has been approved. It was agreed that the Policy and Resources Committee should be recommended that there should be no increase in rents or service charges for tenants of this Park in 1999/2000

### **4. MEALS ON WHEELS (SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT) (MINUTE NO. 53).**

The Committee has decided to increase the charge to be levied for Meals on Wheels, in the light of the County Council's decision to increase the charge they levied by 5p on their 1998/99 price. The price will be increased to £1.85 with effect from 1 April 1999. The Committee recalled that on 24 March 1998 they had decided not to pass on an increase of 35p per meal in 1998/99 but to increase subsidy levels in order to reduce the charge to local residents to £1.80.

Historically, the split in funding the net cost of this service had been 50/50 with the County Council, but this had changed to 44/56 when this Council had decided not to pass the increased cost on to the recipients. The cost to the Council of the subsidy, if the cost to the recipients was increased by 5 pence, would reduce by £3,300. If the Council was to charge the price set by the County Council of £3.05 per meal the subsidy would be reduced by £15,000.

**5. HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT ADMINISTRATION -  
UPDATE REPORT (REPORT F) (MINUTE NO. 55).**

The Committee was advised of progress in implementing the verification framework for Housing and Council Tax Benefits, and of other developments in the administration of this service. The Council was acting as a pilot for the verification framework.

Members expressed concern that the verification framework should remain responsive to the needs of claimants. In particular, any important supporting documents, such as benefit books, must be returned very promptly to ensure vulnerable people were not cut off from essential funding sources. In addition, the Committee considered it was essential that the new procedures were monitored to establish whether genuine claimants were being discouraged from applying. Members welcomed the proposals both to advertise the availability of benefits, and to brief Citizens' Advice Bureaux to ensure that they could give up-to-date information.

**Councillor Mrs M J Robinson  
CHAIRMAN**