

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,**

**on Tuesday, 12th December, 2017 at 6.30 pm**

**Present:** Councillor Cathy Mason in the Chair

Councillors David Griffiths (Substitute for Helen Hollis), Christine Quinn-Wilcox, Paul Roberts, Mike Smith (Substitute for Lauren Mitchell), John Wilmott and Jason Zadrozny (Substitute for Rachel Madden).

**Tenant**

**Representatives:** Minister Myrrha Hibbert

**Apologies for Absence:** Councillors Lee Anderson, Helen Hollis, Lauren Mitchell, John Knight and Rachel Madden. Mrs Pat Simms (Tenant Representative)

**Officers Present:** Ian Bailey, Chris Clipstone, Mike Joy and Alan Maher.

**OS.19 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non-Disclosable Pecuniary / Other Interests**

Cllr Cathy Mason and Cllr David Griffiths declared Non-Pecuniary / Other interests as members of the 'Ashfield Homes' Board of Directors, which had been responsible for managing the Council's housing stock. Cllr Cathy Mason declared a further Non-Pecuniary / Other interest as an employee of the Wilko retail company, which provides products to those receiving Decoration Assistance Vouchers.

**OS.20 Introduction to Scrutiny Consideration of Decoration Assistance Vouchers**

Members were reminded that following the Council's decision to directly manage its housing stock, the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been extended to include Housing Related Performance matters. Two Tenant representatives had also been appointed to serve on the Committee. They would be invited to attend the Committee's meetings, when it scrutinised housing related issues. In this context, Members welcomed one of the appointed tenant representatives to the meeting, Minister Myrrha Hibbert.

The Committee was then asked to consider the performance of the Council's 'Decoration Assistance Voucher' Scheme. Members were assisted in this by

Chris Clipstone, Responsive and Voids Maintenance Manager and Ian Bailey, Partnership and Procurement Manager, from the Council's Housing Service.

The Housing Service officers began by explaining that the report to Committee set out the current process for allocating Decoration Assistance Vouchers, who can receive them and how much the scheme costs. It also explored a range of alternative options in which assistance could be provided and, in particular, whether there was scope for achieving efficiencies.

The Committee was told that Decoration Assistance Vouchers are issued to tenants when large scale work has taken place at their homes, such as the replacement of central heating systems or when electrical systems are rewired. Vouchers are also given to those moving into previously empty homes, so that they can re-decorate them.

Tenants can receive a maximum of £105 towards the cost of decorating a living room and £60 each for all other rooms. The Committee learned that either full or half value vouchers are issued, depending on how much the improvement works have damaged the décor or how much re-decoration an empty property requires. Tenants can use the money to buy decorating products at a wide range of suppliers from across the District or towards the cost of employing someone to carry out the decorating work for them.

The Committee was reminded by the Housing Service Officers that Cabinet had agreed to increase annually the value of Decoration Assistance Vouchers in line with the Retail Price Index (RPI). The cost of the scheme had risen in line with the index since 2004 and now stood at £156k per annum.

Members discussed possible alternatives to Decoration Assistance Vouchers, some of which were currently being used by other local authorities. This included bespoke 'Paint' or 'Decorating' Packs. These are provided by named stores and contain those products required to decorate. Another approach could be to use store cards, so that tenants could only purchase decorating products from specific retailers.

The Housing Service Officers made clear that such alternatives could have advantages and disadvantages. They explained that the Council might be able to bulk-buy at a discount decorating materials from large DIY chains. However, this would mean that tenants would no longer be able choose what they required from local suppliers. In some instances this could make it more difficult for them to collect the goods, especially for those who do not have cars or access to a car.

Such a change could also have a negative impact on small retailers, who have previously supplied goods to local people using Decoration Assistance Vouchers. This in turn could impact on the wider economy in local areas.

Members thanked the Housing Service officers for their contribution and discussed the report with them. The Committee felt that the Scheme ought to be retained. It had worked well and was supported strongly by those who benefited from the Vouchers.

Members also recognised that it was far more cost effective for the Council to enable residents to decorate themselves rather than have to employ or contract additional staff to decorate for them.

The Committee discussed whether Decoration Assistance Vouchers should continue to be provided to those tenants who are in arrears. Members felt that it would be counter-productive to change this. Providing vouchers to them helps to ensure that the properties remain in good condition. This means that the Council will not have to meet large costs to re-decorate them at a later date.

Members noted that the cost of the scheme had risen significantly. There was general agreement that it should be reviewed to make sure that it continues to offer good value for money. In this context, Members felt that the Cabinet's previous decision to link future increases in the value of the Decoration Assistance Vouchers to the Retail Price Index (RPI) should be revisited.

The Committee discussed various ways of securing value for money and for ensuring that scheme is not abused. One option that the Committee thought should be considered was the possible introduction of a 'contract'. Under this contract, those receiving Vouchers would be required to formally agree to use the voucher solely for decoration work. Another possibility would be to provide greater controls on what the Vouchers could be used to purchase.

At the conclusion of the discussion it was agreed that a small working group be established to consider these issues and to hear of best practice in other local authorities. The working group would then report its findings to the Committee.

## RESOLVED

a) That with the agreement of the Chair of the Committee, a small working group be established to consider further possible improvements to the scheme, and in particular:

(i) The use of a contract that would require tenants who receive Vouchers to carry out specific decoration work;

(ii) Consideration of whether the indexing of Vouchers to the Retail Price Index (RPI) should be reviewed;

(iii) Whether there is scope for the Council to make savings by reaching an agreement with named suppliers to bulk purchase at a discounted rate decorating supplies;

(iv) Whether greater controls can be put in place on the use of Vouchers and what they can be used for to prevent the abuse of the scheme.

(b) That the working group's findings be reported back to the Committee for consideration in due course.

Reasons

To provide the Committee with sufficient information to reach conclusions and make recommendations about the Decoration Assistance Vouchers scheme.

The meeting closed at 7.45 pm

Chairman.