

PROPERTY SCRUTINY TASK GROUP

21 January 2014

Present: Councillor Bell (Chair)
Councillors Johnson, Khan and Meerabux

Officers: Head of Regeneration and Development
Programme Manager
Committee and Scrutiny Officer
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (RW)

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR / COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Apologies were received, after the meeting, from Councillor Hastrick.

Councillor Rackett had sent apologies. He had advised that as he had many commitments during the following two months he felt that he would be unable to give the Task Group due attention. He consequently suggested that he gave up his membership of this group. Councillor Bell had agreed to join the task group in Councillor Rackett's place.

The Task Group was asked to elect a Chair for the Task Group.

AGREED

that Councillor Bell be elected Chair of the Property Scrutiny Task Group.

2. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

3. PRESENTATION BY THE PROGRAMME MANAGER

The Programme Manager gave an overview of property owned by Watford Borough Council. He also gave information on asset valuations and explained various aspects of the review to be conducted by officers and consultant.

In reply to a question from the Chair on Debt Management and the Forecast Summary, the Programme Manager advised that there was currently £100,000 owed to the Council on property in the borough; this was considered to be a low level of debt in comparison with the overall property income.

With regard to asset valuations and risk, the Programme Manager advised that Charter Place could be considered a diminishing risk as planning permission had recently been granted for redevelopment.

The Programme Manager then informed on the forthcoming 'Property Review 2014' which was to be conducted by officers and external assessors. He explained that the review would ensure that the Council's benchmarking, targets

and Key Performance Indicators were set at the correct level. The review would also look at areas where additional revenue could be gained.

The meeting then addressed the subject of garages owned and rented out by the Council.

The Programme Manager explained that the Council owned approximately 140 garages at various sites across the borough and that many were in a critical condition. He agreed with Members that, rather than using the garages as parking to keep cars off the road, many were rented by private individuals and then used for car 'storage' or as a place to keep other items.

Councillor Bell suggested that the garages could be sold and houses built on the sites.

The Head of Regeneration and Development referred to a survey conducted in 2011 and agreed that investment could bring the garages up to a suitable standard or that the sites could be redeveloped.

Speaking of the key regeneration projects, the Programme Manager confirmed that the Council had been approached by companies hoping to extend leases on space on the Watford Business Park. He concluded by advising on staffing levels in the existing property team.

4. **SCOPE OF REVIEW**

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer pointed out that the scope was very large and suggested that Members concentrate on one area. She asked the Task Group whether they wished to be involved in the Property Review 2014.

The Chair referred to previous problems connected with the voluntary sector and said that it was important that there should be fairness in this field.

The Programme Manager confirmed that the 2014 review would look at all property owned by the Council; the Head of Regeneration and Development said that the consultant for this review would be appointed in the near future.

Members agreed that it would be pointless to work on a review which would duplicate the one commissioned by the Property team.

The Head of Regeneration and Development asked whether the Task Group would be willing to act as a 'sounding board' once the review had been completed.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that it had been hoped that the Task Group's review would have been completed before the start of the Purdah period; she asked whether, were the group to work with officers, they would prefer to continue for as long as required.

Members agreed that it would be wise to continue for as long as necessary.

The Programme Manager advised that the review would consider the risk profile of properties within the Council's portfolio. It would also look at properties beyond Watford's boundaries in order to explore the possibility of gaining better returns on further investments outside the Borough.

Members also expressed a wish to look at revenue from the lease of the Council's properties. Councillor Johnson added that it would be wise to ensure that lease agreements existed for all buildings in the Borough.

The Chair asked whether the properties used by the voluntary sector had been reviewed.

The Head of Regeneration and Development said that discussion had been held with the Head of Corporate Strategy & Client Services and that all information on leases had been included as part of the review.

Councillor Khan asked whether all 173 properties owned by the Council were needed.

The Programme Manager said that this was an area which would be investigated.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer suggested that the Task Group worked on the review with the Programme Manager and officers. Once the review was completed, other topics could be looked at.

AGREED:

1. That the Task Group work with the Property Team on the review.
2. That the Task Group continue with other items on the Scope once the review has been completed.

The Chair asked the Programme Manager to provide Members with details of property leased by the voluntary sector.

ACTION: The Programme Manager to email details of the voluntary sector to the Democratic Services officers for relay to Members

5. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

It was **AGREED** that Democratic Services officers liaise with the Head of Regeneration and Development and the Programme Manager to determine the date of the next meeting.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer asked Members to advise officers if they needed further documents.

Chair
Property Scrutiny Task Group

The meeting started at 6.05 p.m.
and finished at 7.00 p.m.