

# HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 14<sup>TH</sup> February 2008

## 91. HOUSING ADVICE – PROPOSAL FOR FUTURE DELIVERY

The Head of Community Housing and Community Development submitted a report (previously circulated now appended) which sought the Committees views on options for the future delivery of Housing Advice in Oxford.

Councillor Clark Brundin declared a personal interest, as he was an Oxford City Council nominated representative to the Citizens Advice Bureau Management Board.

John McNulty from Turpin and Miller Solicitors attended the meeting and said that they had provided the Housing Advice Service for the past 3 years. Turpin and Miller offered an independent legal and housing advice service, which provided an holistic approach to housing, debt, immigration and community care advice. He said that they were aware that there were issues concerning the renewal of the contract. Turpin and Miller were keen to continue the contract and do what is required to make this continue including opening city centre premises. It was Turpin and Millers view that if the service was not continued it would be the people of Oxford that would suffer.

Marlon Higgins from LAD Solicitors said that he wrote the original bid for the contract and that he proposed that the new contract should not be provided in-house, but instead should be undertaken by the many not-for-profit organisations in the City who were able to give housing advice. He said that to award another contract could lead to double funding, as there was also funding available from the Legal Services Commission for legal work relating to housing. He said that there was scope for the great use of technology such as video links etc.

Dave Scholes introduced the report and said that Officers wanted to have a more thorough review of the contract, which would come to an end on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008. However as part of the current budget process, savings had been put forward against the housing advice budget and so it was not possible to carry out a more detailed review as a decision on the future of the service was needed quickly.

Councillor Sareva said that she was appalled that the issue of the contract was only now being looked at. She said that housing advice should not be provided in-house and that the other Advice Centres in the City gave advice and could link in with other Solicitors and that she felt that this was the best option.

Councillor Brundin said that the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) would like to see the current contract continued and that this was also the view of the other Advice Centres in the City.

Councillor Gray wondered what the logic was behind the proposed cuts and that the independence of the service was important, as was the provision in a central location.

Councillor Kent said that the feedback that she had received with regard to the service currently offered by Turpin and Miller was rather negative, and that she was disappointed that this issue had not been looked at sooner. She believed it was

important that the service was not in-house and remained independent, with the funding going to not-for-profit organisations.

In response to questions Dave Scholes said that each organisation had a different view on how they felt that the service should be provided and this came out during the consultation process. The Oxford Advice Centres Forum wished for the current provision to remain, especially as 2<sup>nd</sup> tier advice was provided to Advice Centres by Turpin and Miller. He said that it would be difficult to separate out the contract and identify costs for providing housing advice to clients and 2<sup>nd</sup> tier advice to agencies, but this could be established during a tender process.

Councillor Scanlan said that the £30k to maintain the Turpin and Miller contract for an interim period, would effectively pay for an extra Housing Advice Officer, thus providing the level of support which was well beyond the Councils statutory obligations, which for an interim period he felt could not be justified.

Jeremy King said that the tender process would be open so that any not-for-profit organisation could bid for a contract if they wished. He added that the City Council was also under no duty to fund 2<sup>nd</sup> tier legal advice.

Councillor Sareva wondered what the other Advices Centres thought. She felt that there could be conflict of interest issues and that she would like to see more use of technology such as video links etc. She felt that the use of solicitors to provide housing advice, was not the best way forward.

John McNulty said that in many cases people seeking housing advice also had other problems, which Turpin and Miller could assist with.

Graham Stratford said that budgets were now dealt with at a Directorate level and the Council faced difficult financial challenges. By providing the independent housing advice service, the Council was offering a service beyond its statutory obligations.

The Committee agreed;

(a) To recommend the Executive Board:

- (1) That Housing Advisors are employed, but being mindful of the concerns around independence, Oxford City Council commissions another organisation to provide housing advisors, to work preferably from a central location in Oxford providing a supplementary housing advice service;
- (2) The City Council should extend the current contract with Turpin Miller after the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008 whilst a new contract for independent housing advice is put in place. Council Officers should negotiate on the price of this contract extension with Turpin Miller;
- (3) That the Housing Scrutiny Committee is concerned that when a new contract is put in place, 2 housing advice workers (as suggested in the Officers report) may not be enough to provide a comprehensive service. The Executive Board and Council should be mindful of this when budget decision are taken;

- (4) The City Council should investigate the possibilities and benefits of using video link technology to assist in the provision of housing advice;
  - (5) The City Council should investigate the costs of providing additional legal advice or a Court Desk for housing matters for those people who do not qualify to receive legal aid;
  - (6) The City Council should investigate the availability of 2<sup>nd</sup> tier housing advice locally to Advice Centres in Oxford, considering other sources where this advice is currently available.
- (b) To thank Dave Scholes, John McNulty and Marlon Higgins for attending the meeting.