

HOUSING CABINET MEMBER MEETING

Agenda Item 9

Brighton & Hove City Council

Subject: *Deputations*
Date of Meeting: 4 June 2008
Report of: *Director of Strategy & Governance*
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Key Decision: No
Wards Affected: All

9(i) To receive the following Deputation presented at Council on the 13 March 2008 by Mr Karl Lester.

Deputation concerning No's. 40 & 50 Brunswick Place, Hove.

Mr Tim Pope (Spokesperson)

"No's. 40 & 50 Brunswick Place, Hove, were established in August 2006 to accommodate 20 vulnerable people. Over £300,000 of public money was spent to equip these Grade 2 listed buildings to the highest possible specifications, even fitting the roofs with solar panels to ensure an eco-friendly future. No expense was spared to equip the rooms with washing machines, microwave ovens, beds, furniture, every mod con and facility possible.

Less than 18 months later...

A Nazi swastika on the walls; blood on the stairs; blood on the walls; foul-language graffiti; broken windows; broken glass everywhere; smashed front door locks, broken and kicked in, allowing access to anyone passing; people sleeping rough in the corridors; trash with rotting food piled high; human urine and worse; rooms completely trashed and exterior windows kicked through, glass covering the street outside.

The troubles began shortly after the buildings opened, when the temporary housing department of Brighton & Hove Council curiously opted that the residents in the buildings did not need supervision at night. These residents en masse were ex-offenders, people with mental issues, etc. The council opted to run instead an admin. office within the building from 9-5. This, despite the fact that Brunswick Place already has its fair share of temporary housing accommodation, with nearby St Patrick's and other facilities at 68 Brunswick Place, which accommodates more people.

This means that the ratio of unsupervised people with possible antisocial behavioural problems in what is primarily a geographically small residential area is grossly unfairly balanced.

The call on police time was disproportionate, too, with, for example, during one week alone in late 2006, the police being called out to the properties over 14 times during a three-day period of nights. Police serials of the period will back up this information, as will many supportive officers. So, after nearly a year of hell for local residents in 2006/2007, when Brunswick Place and an overspill into the wider local area at night suffered immensely from extreme antisocial behaviour coming from the two properties, the temporary housing department finally listened to the unified voice of residents, the police and Councillor Paul Elgood. Overnight management was installed in tandem with the day staff and the troubles stopped. Then in November 2007 the accommodations closed down, due to insufficient funds. Residents from Brunswick Place contacted Jugal Sharma, interim head of temporary accommodation, who replied to an email in October 2007, saying: "We are currently discussing plans for the future use of the properties, but as yet no decision has been made, however I can assure you that we aim to manage it equally as well."

By January 2008, it was clear again to residents that these words were as thin as the cyber space they inhabited. The same old patterns began again with no overnight staff - aggressive and threatening behaviour from certain residents, particularly at night; shouting; drunken and drug fuelled swearing; loud music; urinating on cars; threatening behaviour to passing people; gathering on the steps and being raucous and drunk.

Finally, one of the residents and his guests in an alcohol and drugs fuelled frenzy in March 2008 kicked out his windows and howled at the moon, claiming to be a wolf, threatening to slit all residents' throats. He threatened to kill residents. Despite further email and telephone assurances from council employees that this was a "one-off scenario", another resident's family guest was arrested the following night at the same property, after a party in a room. These same officers, incidentally, who will not, even by day, attend the residencies without police support. Nor would the so-called security staff who were paid for and required to enter the property twice a night go in for fear of physical violence, as was admitted in a phone call by the boss of the company, who was told by the council not to speak to local residents. "I don't let my people go in there, in case they get hurt."

In effect, the council through their gross mismanagement and chronic misunderstanding and negligence has created a ghetto in a community's midst. This incidentally in a Brighton of the year 2008, not something of the turn of the century, as the image might suggest or conjure. What does this image of Brighton suggest to the wider UK public?

Does it indeed confirm how most people perceive us, as a soft-touch option for people with antisocial tendencies to come and play the system by the seaside?

Do the council not realise that there are children, elderly people and others who have to go to work, after sleepless nights? That children and the elderly have to try and sleep in their beds at night, shaking with fear at the noise and aggression coming from these places?

During the Easter holidays of 2008, with the welcomed direct intervention of Alan McCarthy, CEO of Brighton & Hove Council, overnight security emergency staff has again been installed in the properties. Though Brighton & Hove Council's temporary accommodation department needs to understand that this problem will not go away until a more long-term and circumspect view is taken. A meeting was also convened by local residents with Jugal Sharma, interim head of temporary housing, and Sylvia Peckham, head of temporary housing, and was attended by the police, again concerned at the amount of people dialling 999 (including vulnerable people within the buildings). This meeting also was convened with the appreciated support of Councillors Paul Elgood and David Watkins. People in our street are fed up, as recent Residents Association meetings minutes will confirm. They are fed up with the sleepless nights and the swearing and the antisocial behaviour. This situation has to stop and the people responsible within the council held accountable.

Do the temporary housing people not understand that they have totally lost control of the situation? Will it take blood spilt, either of local residents, or people within the properties, to understand that we need supervision and proper management at the properties of 40 & 50 Brunswick Place, if they are to continue with their current use?

Everybody understands that care in the community is an important and difficult thing to manage effectively. But care in the community is a two-way matter, whereby the community needs to be cared for in equal measure. We as a community – our elderly, our children, working people – feel equally as vulnerable right now as the vulnerable people being housed.

We await to hear from Jugal Sharma, Sylvia Peckham, and Joy Hollister, Alan McCarthy's own new appointee as head of temporary housing, and we as residents of Brunswick Place urge all Councillors and Alan McCarthy to press urgently those responsible with us for these answers and solutions."

RESPONSE FROM COUNCILLOR MEARS

“I have looked at the situation apropos these properties and the area of Brunswick.

Prior to the elections in May it was agreed that 24 hour cover be provided to the people who lived there to address the antisocial behaviour that was occurring at 40 & 50 Brunswick Place. That project then had to be closed as there was not the funding available to continue. That did not address the antisocial behaviour in the area generally and was a short term solution.

I intend to deal with the problem in a rational and joined-up way, that is essential. I will therefore be setting up a group comprising cross-party representation and officers not only from Housing but also from Adult Social Care and the Antisocial Behaviour Team and probably the Private Sector Team. The group will consider all of the issues in the Brunswick area which contribute to antisocial behaviour, rather than focus on the publicity of these. The aim is to provide a joined-up solution for the area that is sustainable in the long term.”

9 (ii) *To receive the following Deputation presented at Council on the 24 April 2008 by Mr John Melson*

Deputation concerning Consultants & Targets 'Value for Money'

Mr John Melson (Spokesperson)

"HRAG says No

The High Rise Action Group requests that the use of costly and unnecessary consultants should cease and be replaced by an in-house 'Value for Money' solution; better contract negotiation, wider training opportunities for council staff and pro-active sharing of expertise between the council, Members, partners and residents.

The emphasis on achieving paper Targets should be shifted to achieving better overall results on the ground at end-user level.

The use of Consultants should cease and we should not be Target-driven.

Consultants

1. The Housing Green Paper of July 2007 allows Authorities to explore new options. These options are new to everyone so we must wonder how and where Consultants have gained their offered expertise and if it can offer us anything better than the wide range of experience and knowledge already possessed by Councillors and Housing staff.
2. Brighton & Hove City Council appoints consultants to manage key aspects and work for Housing (and other) departments. The High Rise Action Group recognises the need for specialists if an unusual problem is encountered; however most projects for which consultants are used are routine and could be managed better in-house.
3. The High Rise Action Group is aware of the financial pressure to minimise headcount but views the appointment of consultants as an expensive and ineffective solution.
4. It is difficult to establish and maintain the impartiality of consultants. Conflicts of interest are inevitable. Consultants are not accountable to tenants. Accountability of managers becomes diluted and the council can quickly lose control of key decisions and budgets.

5. Employing consultants requires using our administrators to service them. Preservation of clear accountability is crucial in the interests of 'Value for Money'. Far better to share expertise between council departments, better Partnering Contracts and shared services provide a sounder mechanism.
6. The Administration has identified a £20m saving by reducing the use of consultants. That's £666+k annually. Using our Managers and Directors would incur costs. Support staff would be needed to service the in-house paperwork. The saving of £666+k would provide a dozen new full-time jobs at Clerical Officer level and still leave half the identified saving.
7. The argument that consultants are necessary because Procurement has become a highly specialised and complicated process would only be valid if we had incompetent managers. They are not. They manage very complicated projects and are quite able to acquire the new skills required. What the argument highlights is the short-sightedness of a policy which neglects offering Management opportunities to enhance their skills.
8. Residents accept that good management is expensive but well worth the cost as it achieves efficient service provision and financial savings across the board.

Targets

1. Targets levels of 98% or less should be unacceptable. That level pre-supposes only an aspiration to mediocrity. We recognise that 100% achievement is rarely possible but it should be the goal.
2. Targets create time-wasting extra paperwork and distract council staff from the real service provision that residents expect and though results may look good on paper they do not reflect the realities on the ground.
3. In the last quarter's figures Brighton & Hove City Council achieved the target for the turn-around of Voids. Formerly all required works were completed before a Void was re-let. To achieve Voids turn-around targets properties are re-let now before all works are completed.
4. So, we met the Voids turn-around target – but increased the number of occupied properties needing repairs. Repairs are subject to more delay and disruption in occupied properties.
5. Surely, as has happened more often than before, letting properties with condemned components (particularly gas-related components), highlights that the pursuit of Targets can have dangerous and unintended outcomes

and this cannot be acceptable. Achieving one turn-around target to the detriment of other targets is ludicrous.”

RESPONSE FROM COUNCILLOR MEARS

“Mr Melson raises a number of important points that I am happy to respond to.

The High Rise Action Group and all the tenant groups throughout the city have worked with this Administration and with officers in a spirit of harmony that has not been seen in this authority for some time.

The Tenant Conference and its unanimous passing of two motions will bring into being a City Wide Assembly and gives the support to the tenant movement to work with me and the Government Office of the South East to realise tenant ambitions.

On the use of consultants: we will not use consultants that we do not need when we do not need them. We need to maximise the use of our officers and officers’ expertise and experience. With this in mind I am committed to reducing the costs of consultancy fees in housing revenue and accounts budgets by £20M over the life of our thirty year business plan.

On the Housing Green Paper officers from across the council in Housing Strategy, Finance and Legal Departments have looked closely at the potential options available to us in this paper. We are now seeking specific and targeted external legal and financial advice in order to support our detailed examination and appraisal of which option may meet our strategic objectives. The specialist advice we are seeking is the detail on tax, risk, partnership and investment.

On performance I am committed to ensuring Housing Management services improve and measure this improvement in a transparent way. By necessity this does include continuing to use targets. However, I agree that we must not overuse or become too reliant on targets as they only measure tenant satisfaction. This is why going forward into the new Constitution I have proposed retention of the Housing Management Committee with tenant involvement to ensure that performance and tenant satisfaction issues can be discussed transparently.

Finally, I will also ensure Mr Melson receives a comprehensive response on the more detailed points raised in his Deputation.”

