

SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 8 November 2011 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. R J Davison (Chairman)
Cllr. C Brown (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr. L Abraham, Cllr. Mrs B Ayres, Cllr. L Ball, Cllr. J Edwards-Winser,
Cllr. Mrs A Firth, Cllr. Mrs A George, Cllr. R Hogarth, Cllr. M Horwood,
Cllr. Mrs F Parkin, Cllr. A Pett, Cllr. R Piper, Cllr. S Raikes,
Cllr. J Scholey, Cllr. P Towell and Cllr. R Walshe

Apologies for absence: Cllr M Butler

Cllr. L Ayres, Cllr. Mrs C Clark, Cllr Mrs J Davison, Cllr. Mrs A Hunter
and Cllr. B Ramsey were also present

20. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 20 September 2011 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

21. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

Cllr. Mrs. Parkin declared a personal interest in matters relating to housing and benefits as she had relatives in both social housing and on benefits.

22. FORMAL RESPONSE FROM THE CABINET FOLLOWING MATTERS REFERRED BY THE COMMITTEE

- (a) Performance Management Performance Report - LPI HB 001, 002, 005 & 006 referred for further consideration (Performance and Governance Committee 27.09.11)

This matter was considered under Minute Item 26.

- (b) Proposed Changes to Staff Terms and Conditions (Cabinet 13.10.11)

A Member of the Committee reported that he had recently met a former Council employee. The former employee was concerned that morale had fallen among Council staff since the budget savings. The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources accepted that the savings had an impact but believed the Council had dealt with the matter better than other local authorities. The process had been transparent and had involved the Staff Consultative Group in finding savings.

The Committee noted the comments of Cabinet.

23. ACTIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chairman read an update from the Head of Environmental and Operational Services outlining the last visit to the Material Recycling Facility in Swanley. A further visit was arranged for the Committee in December. Members of the Committee who took part in the visit confirmed they enjoyed it and were impressed. One Member had been told on the visit that, being a smaller facility than some he had encountered before, it was more cost effective.

The second action was considered under Minute Item 25.

As a matter arising, the Vice Chairman had discussed Affordable Housing provision and equivalent financial contributions with the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources. He wanted to clarify what and where the provision was and a Question and Answer document had been uploaded to the Members' Portal. He was particularly interested in what income the Council had received for Affordable Housing. He reminded Members that all such funding received would be ring-fenced for Affordable Housing.

24. FUTURE BUSINESS, THE WORK PLAN 2011/12 (ATTACHED) AND THE FORWARD PLAN

The Chairman of the IT Working Group provided an update on the IT Strategy. On 3 November the Group had met to consider an initial draft of the document. A number of comments were made on it but the Group had been pleased with the Officers' work. The Group was to meet again on 30 November 2011 to make final comments but he did not expect that it would have to make many. It was expected the Strategy would be ready soon after the meeting on 30 November and could be presented to the Committee meeting on 31 January 2012. The Chairman of the Committee hoped the Strategy could be circulated to Committee Members for consideration before Christmas.

Action 1: Officers to circulate the IT Strategy, if complete, to Members of the Committee before Christmas.

The Committee agreed to move the "Under-occupation of Social Housing – final strategy and action plan" forward to the meeting in June 2012.

25. UNDER-OCCUPATION OF SOCIAL HOUSING – VERBAL UPDATE FROM WORKING GROUP

The Chairman of the Members' Under-Occupation of Social Housing Working Group confirmed that the Group had met on 17 October 2011. The Head of Housing, Housing Policy Manager and Cllr. Ayres were also present at that meeting.

The Working Group looked at a range of statistics provided by Officers, including where under-occupation occurred most, as an introduction and

considered 2 case studies. They were acutely aware of the sensitivity which surrounded the topic and the distress which can be caused when they move house, particularly to older people. They were very interested in the financial help which may be available to remedy under-occupation.

At the next meeting of the Working Group they were to talk to a representative from West Kent Housing Association, to answer questions about the scale of the problem within their stock and where funding would come from to remedy it. They envisaged considering more case studies and inviting a representative from Moat.

The Head of Housing felt the last meeting had been very constructive. She clarified that further housing associations would be invited to the main panel meeting to be interviewed by the whole Committee at a later stage. She had also provided a series of dates on which the Working Group should take place with Officers. The Chairman of the Committee advised at least 1 meeting per month.

A Member, on the Working Group, hoped to find out whether Affordable Housing commuted sums could be used to help people move house. The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Environment confirmed the sums were not ring-fenced for building but could be used to help people move house. However, she believed that it was the provision of sheltered accommodation, such as White Oak and Hollybush Court previously, which encouraged residents to move.

The Chairman of the Working Group added that the Group was considering how under-occupation could be aided by redevelopment.

The Vice Chairman of the Committee thought it would be useful for the Working Group to have a total for the Affordable Housing Contributions the Council had received.

Action 2: The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources to provide a total for Affordable Housing financial contributions made.

The Chairman of the Committee thanked the Group and Officers for their good work raising many issues.

26. REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP UPDATE

The Head of Finance and Human Resources believed that the average days to process claims was the greatest concern for the Partnership and confirmed the workload had increased by 24% over the past year. Across a range of indicators activities had remained high into October. The introduction of Automated Transfers to Local Authority Systems (ATLAS) had helped to notify of changes to claimants' tax credits. However, this meant that claimants' circumstances had likely changed and needed to be investigated by staff; consequently this had significantly increased the workload. Due to the economic conditions customers were generally reporting more changes to their circumstances than usual. The time taken to process reported changes

had begun to fall, though.

The Benefits Team faced difficulties from staff shortages but recruitment was a key focus. The pool of assessors was decreasing because of uncertainty caused by the proposals for Universal Credit.

They had therefore introduced new processes to increase efficiency for new claims. A triage system had been established and information was put onto the computer database more flexibly. Tasks had been re-evaluated so that the more experienced Officers could focus on the more complex cases. They had also reconsidered what activities were undertaken so that any resources, which could be, were moved to assessing claims.

The Head of Finance and Human Resources gave an overview of the changes expected from the Welfare Reform Bill. From October 2013 Housing Benefit would be incorporated into the Universal Credit, except for those at pension age. Council Tax Benefit would be abolished from April 2013, with the introduction of a new localised Council Tax Support. This meant two separate benefit assessment systems would need to be in place. She added that there would be little time to organise IT infrastructure because of the delay in publishing the secondary legislation.

Members asked whether the reforms could even mean more work than at present. The Head of Finance and Human Resources confirmed this was possible while the Team had to manage 2 separate assessment systems. Beyond that point, if half of the workload had transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Officers would have to consider how the Team would be structured.

Another Member commented that when the localised Council Tax Support scheme was introduced the Council would be expected to deliver a reduction in spending of 10%. He also believed that taking responsibility for the Social Fund could have significant financial implications. Officers clarified that the savings would be difficult to make because of all the groups Government had said were to be protected. The 10% savings would have to be made from 9% of the total paid out if pensioners and those receiving 100% Council Tax Benefit were protected. It was also not yet clear whether the Social Fund would be passed to the County or District Council.

There was concern at the presumption that claims for Universal Credit would be made online when customers may have neither the resources or ability to use this method. It was noted few currently made their applications this way. The Committee was informed that Officers had raised this matter with the DWP.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Value for Money explained that the uncertainty over transitional arrangements exacerbated the difficulties in planning ahead. Members also had to consider whether, in the future, the Council would need increased income either to cover greater staffing or to compensate for the 10% reduction in funding for the localised Council Tax Support.

Resolved: That the progress made in addressing the challenges

facing the Benefits Service be noted and the action being taken to reduce processing times be endorsed.

27. 2012/13 BUDGET AND REVIEW OF SERVICE PLANS

The Head of Finance and Human Resources explained that the report formed part of the budget process. There were only 2 growth items totalling £46,500. This reflected the work undertaken in 2010 to agree the 10 year budget and 4 year savings and that Officers were taking these pressures into account.

The Chairman noted the report was modest when compared to previous years. One item was the result of a reduction in the Housing Benefits Admin Support Grant from Government and the Members' IT Allowance had been agreed by the Council on 18 October 2011. He had been informed by Officers that they were still investigating ways to fund the items and these would be passed to Cabinet for approval in due course.

A Member of the Committee asked whether the Members' IT Allowance had been a reduction in cost from previously, when laptops were provided. The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources explained that the laptops had been provided by a one-off grant from Government but they were now at the end of their functional life. No further grant was expected and this was not a programmed item in the budget.

Several Members queried what replacement services were available since the IT Team no longer provided on-going technical support for Members' IT difficulties. The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources stated that in addition to the Ivysoft Training there were plans to organise hour-long workshops for Members before Full Council meetings. He was happy to bring a note to the Committee, for discussion, about what facilities were available to Councillors and how they could be accessed.

Action 3: Officers to provide the Committee with information about what IT support was available to them.

In response to a question Officers explained that they were in consultation with Dartford Borough Council about how they would manage the reduction in the Admin Support Grant. Dartford Borough Council were also still considering the matter.

A Member asked what Officers meant by the phrase "drive behaviour to shift customers from expensive to more cost effective" customer services. The Head of Finance and Human Resources accepted that the phrase should be reconsidered and explained that the Customer Services Team was taking on an increased role with more complicated public enquiries, so that the professional staff would be freed up.

Resolved: That the Committee's views on the 2012/13 Budget and Review of Service plans be communicated to the Cabinet to inform draft budget decisions to be made at its meeting on 8 December.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 8.34 pm

Chairman