

## SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 19 June 2012 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Davison (Chairman)

Cllr. Brown (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs. Abraham, Mrs. Ayres, Ayres, Ball, Mrs. Dibsdall, Edwards-Winser, Fittock, Mrs. George, Hogarth, Horwood, Mrs. Parkin, Pett, Piper, Raikes and Scholey.

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Neal and Towell.

Cllrs. Clark, Mrs. Clark, Mrs. Davison, Dickins, Firth, Fleming, Mrs. Morris, Mrs. Purves, Ramsay and Mrs. Sargeant were also present.

### 1. Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 3 April 2012 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

### 2. 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.

### 3. Formal Response from the Cabinet following matters referred by the Committee and/or requests from the Performance and Governance Committee (please refer to the minutes as indicated):

- (a) Performance Monitoring (Referral from Performance and Governance Committee – 13 March 2012)

Members noted that this was dealt with under Agenda Item 10 (Minute 10) 'Sickness Absence.'

### 4. Actions from the Previous Meeting

There were none.

### 5. Future Business, the Work Plan 2012/13 and the Forward Plan.

Members noted the Work Plan. The Chairman advised that the Affordable Housing Position information report would be reported to the September meeting.

6. Reconstitution of Informal groups

a) Members' IT Working Group

The Chairman of the Members' I.T. Working Group had been speaking to his colleagues and proposed the membership to be himself, Cllrs. Abraham, Ayres, Mrs. Dibsdall and Scholey, and that Cllr. Hogarth had expressed a desire to be associated with looking at the Disaster Recovery Plan.

Resolved: That the Members' I.T. Working Group continue to meet and the membership be Cllrs. Abraham, Ayres, Mrs. Dibsdall, Pett (Chairman) and Scholey, with Cllr. Hogarth joining the Group for consideration of the Disaster Recovery Plan, for the municipal year 2012/13.

b) Members' Under Occupation of Social Housing Working Group

Resolved: That the Members' Under Occupation of Social Housing Working Group continue to meet and the membership remain Cllrs. Mrs. Ayres, Mrs. George, Horwood, Mrs. Parkin (Chairman) and Piper, for the municipal year 2012/13.

c) Members' Universal Credits Working Group

The Chairman advised that he had spoken with the previous Chairman of the Working Group and she was happy to remain in that role despite no longer being a member of the Committee.

Resolved: That the Members' Universal Credits Working Group continue to meet and the membership remain Cllrs. Ball, Firth (visiting Chairman), Hogarth, Horwood (Vice Chairman) and Raikes, for the municipal year 2012/13.

Change to Agenda Order

The Chairman, with the Committee's agreement, amended the agenda item order so that report items 8 and 9 were considered prior to item 7.

7. Universal Credit Indepth Scrutiny - Update (Report Item 8)

The Group Manager – Financial Services presented the report explaining that there were two reports on the agenda concerning Universal Credit and Localisation of Support for Council Tax. The Benefits Team currently issue Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit, which were two separate benefits although many claimants received both. Council Tax Benefit was changing to Council Tax Support which would be administered and funded by the Council from 1 April 2013. Housing Benefit would become part of Universal Credit which would be administered and funded by central Government and phased in from October 2013 over 4 years. Since the last Services Select Committee meeting, the

Working Group had held two meetings to deliberate and consider options as part of the scrutiny process.

The Chairman of the Universal Credit Working Group advised that Housing Benefit was a joint service with Dartford Borough Council and distributed around £54M to 11,122 households within the District and Borough, administered by the Benefits Team which includes 27 full time equivalent (FTE) staff employed by this Council. The changes were going to bring a number of challenges for staff and those in receipt of housing benefit. Challenges that would be added to by the introduction of the Localisation of Support for Council Tax and new rules on under occupation of social housing and local housing allowance. In the meantime this was not helped by the receipt of lots of different information on how it was all going to work. However there was some certainty on when it would start to have an impact on the Council. In October Universal Credits would initially replace the Job Seekers Allowance rolling out to the Council by April 2014. The Working Group had considered whether it would be worth volunteering as a pilot, but had taken the view that as no funding would be given for doing so it would create too much work and strain on the benefits department. Especially as there were already 70% more calls and post. Another reason for this decision was the Council already had a kind of pilot in place with the HERO (Housing Energy Retraining Options) Project, which already delivered free face to face contact and could possibly be adapted to a pilot study. The Group were looking at all the financial implications, how claims would start to be redirected to the DWP, the time periods for all the changes, numbers of claims and implications for the Council. Two main areas of concern were how to build in resilience to the service and protect more vulnerable residents with diminishing funds. The Working Group hoped to come back with final recommendations to the Committee meeting in September.

The Vice Chairman of the Universal Credit Working Group advised that the impact on the Council would come from its responsibility to the homeless, as the changes could see a marked increase in homelessness or risk of homelessness from people not understanding or being able to manage the new system, and were therefore looking at ways to soften the impact. Another Member of the Group pointed out that there would also be a reduction in the administration fee received for running the benefits service which would have a resource impact as well.

The Director of Corporate Resources (Deputy Chief Executive) advised that there were a number of on going changes at Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) adjusting for the reforms, and the 70% increase in work was due to some of the requirements placed on the Council in advance of the changes. The customer was losing the face to face contact and it would be a difficult and challenging time for them. A Member compared the situation to when Student Loan administration was centralised.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

8. Localisation of Support for Council Tax (Report Item 9)

The Group Manager – Financial Services, reported that the Local Government Finance Bill had introduced one of the biggest fundamental changes requiring all council tax billing authorities to devise a local Council Tax Support Scheme to replace the current national Council Tax Benefit Scheme, commencing 1 April 2013. The report provided more information on the thinking behind the change in legislation and the likely effect on the

Council. It also set out options for a local scheme and proposed a scheme that had been recommended by the Kent Forum.

The Leader of the Council was invited to address the Committee by the Chairman, he explained the difficulties faced with the various options that had been available, against the benefits of the scheme proposed. He advised that only the elderly were protected, and there was no definition of what a vulnerable group was. The Government would not define what a vulnerable group was so as not to be open to judicial review, and therefore defining the group was being left as a local decision. There was only a requirement to have them in mind. It was also felt that once Council Tax benefit was stopped and the discount applied, the elderly who currently chose not to apply for benefits would apply for the discount.

The Director of Corporate Resources (Deputy Chief Executive) advised that where there were areas of higher deprivation these areas could be heavily hit by the reduction, but Officers had not been able to carry out sufficient modelling due to limited information. He believed that it had not been the Government's intention that Parish Councils would be hit so hard which was why there was now talk of compensation. He explained that he was happy to share the information with Parish Councils but did not want to worry them until more facts were known. The Leader suggested that once the baseline information was known they would be able to share this on the annual tour of the three town councils.

*Action 1: An update to be provided at the next meeting.*

Resolved: That the Proposed Localisation of Support for Council Tax Scheme as set out at Appendix A of the report, be recommended to Cabinet, for its consideration and recommendation to Full Council.

#### 9. Under-occupation of Social Housing - Final Strategy and Action Plan (Report Item 7)

The Head of Housing and Communications presented the report and draft Under Occupation Strategy 2012-2015. She highlighted five unique and innovative objectives to note were:

- that it was a first for local housing associations not only to jointly work together but with the Council to explore joint funding for a specialist officer to act as an advisor for people downsizing
- that it was a first to use planning gains funding to deliver objectives
- working with developers to build bungalows to encourage downsizing
- the proactive approach taken to minimise the effect of the welfare reform
- a dedicated Under Occupation Officer.

The Chairman commented that those five main points were part of a longer more comprehensive list which had been agreed with the Working Group and all parties identified within the Plan. The Head of Housing and Communications advised that the targets were not enforceable and could only happen through the good working relationship.

In response to questions it was agreed that the following be included in the draft Strategy:

- the definition of social housing
- that the consensual nature of the agreed targets be highlighted
- that an emphasis be made in the expected outcome of an increase of up to 20 cases per annum for the Small is Beautiful Scheme, that this would be reviewed in a year.

A Member asked whether letters would be written to under occupied households rather than just distributing leaflets, as a personalised letter may be more effective. The Head of Housing and Communications advised that the Council did not hold the information and would need to liaise with West Kent Housing to identify the properties.

*Action 2: The Head of Housing and Communications to speak to the Well Being Manager at West Kent Housing, and investigate the feasibility of sending personalised letters to under occupied properties.*

Members commended the Housing Policy Manager for all his work on the draft Action Plan.

Resolved: That the adoption of the attached strategy be supported and it be recommended to Cabinet for approval as a District Council Policy.

*Action 3: If agreed by Cabinet, monitoring of the Action plan to be placed on the Work Plan.*

#### 10. Sickness Absence

The Human Resources Manager, Syreeta Gill, introduced herself to the Committee and gave a brief description of her career background.

She reported that at the meeting of the Performance and Governance Committee on 13 March 2012, a Performance Monitoring report was considered which highlighted areas across the council where performance was not meeting target. Due to Members concerns surrounding the levels of sickness absence it was resolved that the matter be referred to the Services Select Committee to review. The report updated Members on the levels of sickness absence across the council and set out an analysis of sickness absence levels across the council, incorporating trends from previous years and available benchmarking. The strategy and actions to reduce sickness absence levels was also included for Members consideration.

Members discussed the differences between the statistics on manual and non manual staff. In response to questions the Human Resources Manager advised that it was difficult to find comparable data with the private sector. The Director of Corporate Resources (Deputy Chief Executive) advised that he would need to confirm but that the private sector was around 7.1 days lost to sickness absence per year compared to 9.6 days in local government.

*Action 4: The Director of Corporate Resources (Deputy Chief Executive) to obtain confirmation of the figures.*

Members agreed that it was a clear report with helpful statistics., and were very pleased with the progress made on reducing sickness absence. A Member stressed the

importance of monitoring the quality of return to work interviews. Another Member queried whether flu jabs were provided, advised that positive working from home could help reduce sickness absence, and queried whether the time between the first day of long term sickness and a possible termination period could be reduced by swifter action by managers. It was confirmed that free flu jabs were not provided. The Vice Chairman whilst agreeing with the general point made about speed of action added a note of caution that very often a certain period of time was required in order to prove due process.

The Director of Corporate Resources (Deputy Chief Executive) reported that a number of factors had helped reduce the figures which included a change to the Occupational Health service provider and improved practices for managers including the return to work procedures.

*Action 5: That the report be appended to the referral back to Performance and Governance Committee.*

Resolved: That the levels of sickness absence be noted and the planned action to reduce the levels of sickness absence, endorsed.

11. Waste And Recycling - DCLG Weekly Collection Support Scheme And Health And Safety Executive Audit of Waste And Recycling Services

The Committee considered a report and Cabinet response on the DCLG Weekly Collection Support Scheme bidding process and the result of the recent Health and Safety Executive (HSE) audit of waste and recycling services, which had been considered by Cabinet on 10 May 2012. Members noted that due to the timescales and deadlines it had not been possible to bring this report to the Committee prior to the meeting of Cabinet. The Head of Environmental and Operational Services updated Members that he had still received no response from the HSE on the further inspection of the drop fronted bins, funded by the Kent Waste Partnership, so was now seeking independent advice.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.00 PM

CHAIRMAN