

SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 4 April 2013 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, Horwood, Mrs. Parkin, Pett, Scholey and Miss. Stack

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Neal, Piper, Raikes and Towell

Cllrs. Brookbank, Hogarth and Ramsay were also present.

37. Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 14 January 2013 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

38. Declarations of interest

No new declarations of interest were made. However Councillors Ball, Fittock and Mrs George advised that as members of Swanley Town Council they would stay and listen to the debate at Agenda Item 10 'Renewal of Swanley Local Office contract with Swanley Town Council' but would abstain from voting.

39. Formal Response from the Cabinet following matters referred by the Committee and/or requests from the Performance and Governance Committee

There were none.

40. Actions from the Previous Meeting

The actions were noted.

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

Member's agreed to review the need for an early autumn meeting at the next meeting. It was agreed that the new Chief Planning Officer should be invited to a future meeting.

42. SDHR amended Allocation Policy and Sevenoaks District Tenancy Strategy - Update

The Housing Manager tabled a report and provided an update on the Sevenoaks District Housing Register (SDHR) amended Allocation Policy and Sevenoaks District Tenancy Strategy.

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A Member expressed concern as to whether monitoring would be carried out to check that the emphasis on working in the area mean residents suffered. The Housing Manager advised that three and six month reviews would be carried out.

In response to questions concerning the new rules on under occupation of social housing, she advised that some of the changes the Government were now making had been anticipated, such as a spare room for foster children. With regards to comparisons with other local authorities, this was possible where the criterion was set by the Housing Act. People who had been taken off the register were not prevented from reapplying if their circumstances had changed.

As a point of clarification a Member pointed out that the term/media sound bite 'bedroom tax' was not correct and should not be used.

The Head of Housing and Communications, in response to a question, stated that she was very confident the Housing Associations would stick to the criteria. She had had a meeting that day with Deborah White from West Kent Housing, and their policy was in line with the Council's so there should be no issues.

43. Under Occupation of Social Housing Action Plan review

The Housing Policy Manager reported that of the two main housing associations: West Kent Housing had 509 tenants affected by the new under occupations rules (397 by 1 bed, 112 by 2 bed); and MOAT, 57, the majority of which were by one bed. The current stock profile did not help as there was a higher proportion of family-sized units and therefore limited availability for downsizing. There were also not many private sector options with limited lower-quartiles private rented housing in the area. There was some in Swanley but most wished to keep their security of tenure, so chose to stay in social housing.

Over the past year, Housing Benefits, Housing Officers and Housing Associations had done as much as possible to pre-warn those to be affected by the new rules, and help them look at their housing options. MOAT had a dedicated 'back to work' team working alongside the HERO project, and West Kent Housing was doing similar things. In November 2012, Housing Benefits had written to all under occupying tenants that had been identified. The feedback so far was that the majority of those living in the district were going to try and manage the shortfall for the time being, though the cuts would likely over time spur some on to seek smaller housing

There had been a lot of press coverage of the potential impacts on the disabled, those with overnight carers, adult children in the armed forces, foster carers etc. Housing Benefits had been carrying out visits to such households and were looking at using Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) to bridge any gaps. West Kent Housing and MOAT were going to hold a 'speed dating' type event in the district, matching under occupiers with over-crowded households. These had proved successful elsewhere. MOAT were looking into lodger options by offering tenants advice on advertising, for instance. This raised slight concerns, but they were going to be making the potential risks clear. The HERO (Housing Energy Retraining Options) Project was also involved and was currently working with four

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different households. The Council had given £20,000 from affordable housing financial contributions (collected under Policy SP3 of the Core Strategy) towards the 'Small is beautiful scheme and has also agreed to part-fund an under occupation worker to assist those households seeking to down-size. Phase I of their work would deal with those who needed to move, and Phase II would be providing help to older people who would benefit from down sizing and needed some help and advice.

With reference to DHPs, a Member asked whether it was possible to estimate how much of that money was being used and whether there was a danger on over relying on those funds especially if they were to reduce. The Chief Finance Officer assured him that officers would monitor demand to ensure that the best possible use was made of the funds and noted that the level of funds in future years was currently uncertain.

A Member asked how whether families would be expected to take the reduction for under occupation if there was no housing stock for them to be able to downsize to. The Head of Housing and Communications advised that it was a balancing act and they were looking at building more bungalows where possible to encourage older people to downsize.

The Head of Housing and Communications reported that Deborah White, of West Kent Housing, had requested the opportunity to report back to the Committee in six months, on how the Under Occupation Officer was doing. This was welcomed.

A request was made that in future this information be submitted as a written report on the agenda.

44. Scope and terms of reference of the in-depth scrutiny review of Rural Broadband

The Head of Housing and Communications presented the report in the absence of the Head of Community Development, which set out progress made so far and suggested possible areas of scrutiny.

The Chair proposed that the current IT Working Group undertake the scrutiny as set out within the report. He also proposed that Cllr. Scholey became the new Chairman in Cllr Pett absence when he hopefully took on the role as Chairman of the Council, and that Cllr Piper be nominated as a replacement member.

A request was made that the Group find an independent source for measures of broadband speed.

Resolved: That

- a) an in depth scrutiny review be carried out, to include –
 - the work that has been undertaken in order to improve broadband in the District to date
 - the additional work that might be usefully undertaken
 - whether the Council has a role in promoting private broadband provision through small providers;

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- b) the I.T. Working Group reconstituted as Cllrs Abraham, Ayres, Mrs Dibsdall, Piper and Scholey (Chairman), carry out the scrutiny review; and
- c) Mr. Andrew Campling be invited to attend the Working Group and next meeting of the Committee.

45. Localising Support for Council Tax - Update

The Chief Finance Officer presented the latest update report. He reminded Members that the Council was required to set up a Local Council Tax Support Scheme to replace the national Council Tax Benefit Scheme from 1 April 2013. The scheme, approved by Council in November included working age claimants receiving a standard reduction to their discount of 8.5% in 2013/14 (e.g. previously received 100% Council Tax Benefit, would now receive 91.5% CTS). Once the scheme was set up the next stage had been to communicate with the affected residents especially those that would be paying Council Tax for the first time. All of those residents had been contacted and part of the funds provided by the County, Fire and Police were being used to employ temporary staff who would be attempting to contact those residents who had not yet paid, so that they could be worked with to encourage payment before their debts became large. Two members of staff had been employed initially for a period of six months.

During the first week of the year there had been a noticeable increase in the volume of small Council Tax payments made at both Argyle Road and Swanley Local Office. He would report to the Committee again when the actual impact of the change to Council Tax Support is known.

In response to a question as to whether the Council would continue with the Kent scheme, he replied that negotiations were due to commence shortly on how this would be progressed.

Resolved: That the contents of the report be noted.

The Committee congratulated Mr. Rowbotham on his recent appointment as the Council's Chief Finance Officer.

46. Renewal of Swanley Local Office contract with Swanley Town Council

The Customer Services Manager presented the report which requested that the Council approve the renewal of the Local Office Contract for a further 3 years with Swanley Town Council and set out the benefits in continuing to provide this service and highlighting the risks of not doing so.

In response to questions the Contact Centre Manager explained that bringing the report to the Committee had been delayed due to staff changes at Swanley Town Council.

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Members supported the proposals for negotiations to commence and commended the report.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Members noted that there were no adverse equality impacts arising from the report.

Resolved: That it be RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that the Council renew the provision of a Local Office Contract for a further 3 years with Swanley Town Council based on the current contract terms and value.

(Cllr. Fittock abstained from voting)

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 8.07 PM

CHAIRMAN