

SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 31 January 2012 commencing at 7 p.m.

Present: Cllr. Brown (Vice-Chairman) (In the Chair)

Cllrs. Abraham, Mrs. Ayres, Ball, Butler, Firth, Mrs. George, Hogarth, Horwood, Mrs. Parkin, Pett, Piper, Raikes and Walshe.

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Davison, Edwards-Winser, Piper, Scholey and Towell.

Cllrs. Ayres, Mrs Clark, Ramsay and Miss. Stack and were also present.

28. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 8 November 2011 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

29. 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.

30. FORMAL RESPONSE OR CONSULTATION REQUESTS FROM THE CABINET FOLLOWING MATTERS REFERRED BY THE COMMITTEE (Item No. 3)

- (a) 2012/13 Budget and Review of Service Plans (*Response from Cabinet – 8 December 2011*)

The response from Cabinet was noted.

31. ACTIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item No. 4)

The Actions from the previous meeting were noted. The Head of Housing and Communications provided an update in relation to Action 2 which referred to financial contributions in lieu of on-site affordable housing provision. She reported that there was a realised sum of £174,000 and a potential further £300,000 which would not be realised until and when works commenced on site. Planning and Housing Policy Officers were currently looking into how the guidance and which areas relating to affordable housing would be relevant to the allocation of the funds. In reference to Item 7 (see Minute 34 below) on the agenda, this was an area the Planning Policy Manager could be questioned on when he sat on the Panel in April 2012. In response to a question Members were advised that affordable housing was a term for housing provided with some form of subsidy such as affordable or intermediate rent and shared ownership.

Services Select Committee – 31 January 2012

ACTION 1: A further update on the financial contributions received and potential use of the money, to be given at the next meeting.

Members queried why there was not a colour printer in the Members' Room and whether it was possible to have a wireless free printer.

ACTION 2: The Head of IT and Facilities Management to investigate supply of colour and/or wireless free printer in the Members room.

32. FUTURE BUSINESS, THE WORK PLAN 2011/12 AND THE FORWARD PLAN (Report No. 5)

Members noted the Work Plan. As April's meeting was to be taken up with the Under-Occupation of Social Housing Panel, and Universal Credits, it was agreed that SDHR Amended Allocation Policy be moved to September 2012 as Government guidance was still awaited.

33. UNIVERSAL CREDIT INDEPTH SCRUTINY – BRIEFING NOTE (Report No. 6)

The Chairman advised Members that this scrutiny would be of great significance to the Council. Officers had many concerns and the review would be of great assistance to them. The Head of Finance and Human Resources introduced the Benefits Manager to the Committee, who reported that Universal Credits were a key element of the Welfare Reform Bill affecting 19 million individual claims and an estimated eight million households. A significant change would be that it was based on households rather than individuals and money would be paid to claimants directly, in arrears, to mirror how most wages were paid. There would be significant impacts on social and private landlords; homelessness; increased pressures on housing stock; a likelihood of increased debt and increased numbers seeking assistance from the Council especially as not everyone has access to online facilities. There was also the impact on staff generally, recruitment and retention issues and potential cost of agency staff. The Head of Finance and Human Resources advised that some areas where the scrutiny role would assist were communication with other organisations such as landlords, Citizen's Advice Bureau etc; looking at how to retain staff; preparation work for transferring services and phasing implementation; how to retain customer service and where it was considered not cost effective to retrain new staff the cost implications of agency staff. It would also be useful to look at whether there was any scope to lobby Government further, and the possibility of feeding views back to the Department of Work and Pensions whilst it was still in its implementation phase.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Value for Money, reported that he had written to Lord Freud, Minister for Welfare Reform asking for an audience but had not heard back. However Lord Freud had visited the Council Offices and met with the Leader, Chief Executive and the Benefits and Revenues Managers and had asked to be taken through a typical case. He believed that the Minister was visiting a number of councils. In response to Members' questions, the Benefits Manager replied that they had been told that the necessary I.T. infrastructure would be ready in time and that at the moment no decision had been made as to whether social funds would be administered here or by Kent County Council (KCC).

Services Select Committee – 31 January 2012

The Chairman referred to the workload involved for any Member of the Working Group advising that they would need to be able to meet at least once a month. A draft timetable had been drawn up with Officer's availability in mind which would be circulated to members of the Working Group to discuss. Councillors Ball, Firth, Hogarth, Horwood and Raikes expressed interest in being on the Working Group.

ACTION 3: The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources agree a draft meeting timetable with Working Group Members.

A Member advised that she had a meeting with the Benefits Manager to talk through a typical case which other Members, especially those on the new Working Group, were welcome to attend.

Resolved: That:

- (a) the contents of the report and proposals for possible lines of enquiry for the in-depth scrutiny, be noted; and
- (b) a Members' Universal Credit Working Group be formed for the remainder of the municipal year, consisting of Cllrs. Ball, Firth, Hogarth, Horwood and Raikes.

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee expressed his thanks to Tricia Marshall, Head of Finance and Human Resources, for all her hard work over the years.

34. UNDER-OCCUPATION OF SOCIAL HOUSING – VERBAL UPDATE FROM WORKING GROUP (Item No. 7)

Cllr. Miss. Stack, with permission of the Chairman, spoke on behalf of the Chairman of the Members' Under-Occupation of Social Housing Working Group as the Chairman was feeling unwell. She reported that the Working Group had been looking at many issues including numbers on the Sevenoaks District Housing Register and statistics received from Moat, the potential impact of the new benefit system and the current gaps in rent and what housing benefit would pay. She reported that there was a downsizing scheme called 'small is beautiful' which was a West Kent Housing Association Scheme; that 1400 people still had the 'right to buy'; and that there was a need for more 1-2 bed properties to free up larger properties. More specialist housing for older people was also needed. She reported that there had been some debate with regards to 1 bed properties. It was felt that many people had a 1 bed property need, but preferred a 2 bed property so that they could have, for example, their grandchildren or carers to stay and this impacted on their choice to move.

The Head of Housing and Communications explained that the current Allocations Policy was based on a points system but the new one may move to a banding system in line with other Kent authorities. The Allocation Policy would be reviewed and revised after consultation in the summer 2012. It was explained that there was a possibility of utilising a few privately rented 3-4 bed properties for single people to share. Particularity as those under 35 would be restricted to a single room allowance. These properties would need to be managed by a housing association and negotiation was under way. It had also become apparent to the Working Group that there needed to be more synergy between planning and housing and a need for

Services Select Committee – 31 January 2012

lateral thinking such as extensions and using financial contributions in lieu of affordable housing to update or improve properties. Cllr. Miss. Stack advised that at the last Social Affairs Select Committee two Kent County Council representatives had talked of the need for more forward thinking specialist accommodation and had highlighted examples such as Emily Court in Wilmington.

The Head of Housing and Communications reported that the Working Group had discussed and made a list of potential representatives for the Panel and had produced possible questions. Currently on the list were the Planning Policy Manager, West Kent Housing Association, Moat Housing, Places for people, the Housing Policy Officer and the Empty Homes/Under-Occupation Officer. In addition, Members asked for a representative from Kent County Council's (KCC) Older Person's Team. She would email this to all Members for further suggestions to reach her by Friday 2 March 2012. This would allow time to forward the questions to the Panel Members. The Housing Policy Manager would collate all the information from the April meeting and produce a draft strategy and action plan for the meeting in June.

ACTION 4: The Head of Housing and Communications to send an email with suggested panel members and questions to all Committee members along with the statistics from West Kent and Moat Housing and a case study.

35. COMPLETION OF WORKS AT HEVER ROAD GYPSY AND TRAVELLER SITE – VERBAL UPDATE. (Item No.8)

The Head of Housing and Communications reported that a successful bid of £1.308m had been received to upgrade, modernise and extend the Hever Road site. An additional 4 pitches had been provided bringing the number of pitches up to sixteen. The extensive works had included provision of an entirely new electrical supply to the site which involved extensive cable laying within Hever Road site itself and construction of a new electrical sub station. Within the site a completely new electrical distribution system was put in to provide every Pitch with an independent supply. Each resident was now a customer of an energy company, resulting in the Council only paying for communal electricity. In the past the Council had funded this and sold electricity cards but there had always been a deficit to be met. A new water supply had been installed to each Pitch making all residents responsible for water charges, and new foul and surface water drainage systems had been constructed.

It was during excavations for the new drains that significant amounts of ordnance had been discovered, believed to have been buried after the war around 1944 when they were disbanded. Once uncovered it became the Council's responsibility to undertake all remedial action and a company called BACTEC International were engaged. As a result of their investigations a total 383 ordnance related items was recovered with 40 being destroyed in controlled explosions. The related cost for this was £198,000, which was met by some external funding and existing budgets. The Head of Housing and Communications was however going to explore other avenues to ascertain whether or not external funding could help with the costs.

The Head of Housing and Communications reported that each of the pitches had been provided with a new amenity block, which gave each resident a kitchen and bathroom. If this had not happened the cost of the amenity blocks would have been the Council's responsibility. A new community unit had been provided to act as a meeting point for the residents and base for the site warden. A significant number of

Services Select Committee – 31 January 2012

pitches had been resurfaced to eliminate trip hazards and improve surface water removal. The access road had been resurfaced, traffic calming measures installed with new street lighting, new fencing and other measures to improve the appearance of the site. Residents were generally happy with the changes and the works would reduce future maintenance costs. The rent charged was within the housing benefit levels. Two of the new pitches were already let and one was still vacant. Members asked that this be communicated effectively to planning. Members were concerned that the MOD had not taken responsibility for clearing the ordnance related items. The Head of Housing and Communications that she would obtain full information from the Property Services Manager and come back to Members with this information.

ACTION 5: The Head of Housing and Communications to speak to Property Services manager for background information on why the MOD were not used to clear the ordnance related items from the site.

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee congratulated the Head of Housing and Communications for securing the impressive funding sum.

36. HOUSING STRATEGY ACTION PLAN. (Report No. 9)

The Head of Housing and Communications reported that because the Council had been rated as excellent it was no longer required to produce a housing strategy, though it was still considered good practice to do so. The documents provided strategic direction and included a range of tactics to achieve strategic goals. It was a living document which if approved would be overseen by the Local Strategic Partnership's (LSP) Strategic Housing Sub Group. The Local Strategic Partnership was a multi agency group consisting of 24 members including Kent County Council, the Home Improvement Agency and West Kent Housing. Progress reports would be taken to the LSP and this Committee. The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) had very little available funding and Housing Associations required help with putting together business cases to look for funding elsewhere. There needed to be a lot of imagination and creativity as there were limited opportunities. The Plan would be revised again in 2013 along with the Council's Community Plan.

Resolved: That the Housing Strategy Action Plan BE RECOMMENDED to Cabinet for approval.

37. I.T. STRATEGY ACTION PLAN FOR 2012/15

The Chairman of the I.T. Working Group thanked Members for their positive input into the Strategy, and requested a volunteer for the current vacancy on the Group. He advised that the next piece of work for the Group would be looking at the Disaster Recovery Process which was due for renewal towards the end of the year. The Head of Development Services reported the Members I.T. Working Group comments had already been incorporated into the document and other service areas consulted. He highlighted the key objectives and issues as set in the report. Members thought that their new email system was very good, and congratulated all Officers and the Working Group for the swift production of such a good report.

Resolved: That:

(a) Cllr. Walshe fill the current vacancy in the Members I.T. Working

Services Select Committee – 31 January 2012

Group for the remainder of the municipal year; and

- (b) it BE RECOMMENDED to Cabinet to recommend to Council that the IT Strategy and Plan 2012-2015 be approved and adopted.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 8.44 P.M.

Chairman