

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 11 February 2014 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Ms. Lowe (Chairman)

Cllr. Mrs. Clark (Vice Chairman)

Cllrs. Ayres, Mrs. Ayres, Eyre, Firth, Mrs. George, Raikes and Towell

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Mrs. Bracken

Cllrs. Fittock, Mrs. Parkin, Piper, Mrs. Sargeant and Miss. Stack were also present.

20. Minutes

Cllr. Towell clarified that he had given his prior apologies for the meeting on 15 October 2013. It was agreed these would be added to the minutes.

Resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 15 October 2013, as amended, be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

21. Declarations of Interest

No additional declarations of interest were made.

22. Actions from Previous Meeting

There were none.

23. Update from Portfolio Holder

The Portfolio Holder's update was noted.

24. Referrals from Cabinet or the Audit Committee

There were none.

Change in order of agenda items

The Chairman brought consideration of Agenda Item 9 forward.

25. Strategic Assessment - Update

The Chairman welcomed Chief Inspector Tim Cook, Kent Police Sevenoaks District Commander to the meeting.

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The Chief Officer Communities & Business explained that the Strategic Assessment was the result of considerable data received from partner organisations and resident surveys and panels, running from October to September each year. The data would be made available to Members through the Members' Portal. Officers sought to find patterns from the data and would put together a Community Safety Action Plan, to be brought to the next meeting of the Committee.

Over the previous 10 years the District had consistently been among the 3 lowest districts in Kent for crime. The largest form of crime was criminal damage at 19.3% of reported incidents. Vehicle crime had risen 8% on the previous year. Burglary had risen 29.6% and was at the second highest levels across the county. If included then, Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) was the largest recorded issue but it was still the lowest level in the county. In the District there had been a reduction in ASB of 8.2%, compared to a fall of 14.9% across Kent. Together the Community Safety Partnership had set 8 priorities for the District, namely substance misuse, domestic abuse, vehicle crime, burglary, ASB, young people, road safety and theft (including shoplifting).

The Chief Inspector highlighted that the increase in reports of domestic abuse (up by 1.8%) could be seen as demonstrating increased confidence for victims to come forward. The reporting age had recently reduced to 16. Reports were also received sooner. Officers confirmed that most local services catered for male victims as well as female but there was a low level of reporting and there was no male refuge in the County. The Partnership was working in schools and with bodies like Mankind to promote awareness of abuse of men. Kent Police had recently held a conference about abuse within the Gypsy and Traveller communities and the Police had a Gypsy liaison team. The Council provided a private room on its site in Hever Road, Edenbridge and there were monthly visits from a trained HERO Officer.

Theft of vehicles was down; theft from vehicles was up, with a particular concern in Swanley from criminals often travelling in from London. Kent Police were keen for residents to mark their property to give a more realistic prospect of prosecution for burglary.

The Chief Inspector advised that predictive policing, by targeting Officers to likely hotspots, had reduced crime by 2%. However the District was very affluent and so certain crimes such as burglary of dwelling and vehicle crime were always higher than the average in the County. Levels of robbery and criminal damage were the lowest in the County. The crime rate was only 39 per 1000 residents.

A Members asked whether the 8 priorities should be ranked. Officers felt that each priority was discrete and different actions would be set against each. Some resources, such as Speed Watch groups, were not transferrable between priorities.

Although Kent County Council intended to turn off further street lights, Kent Police had been consulted and crime rates in those areas would be reviewed.

26. Small is Beautiful Update

Deborah White, the West Kent Housing Association Housing and Communities Director and Andy Airey, the Under-occupation Officer provided an overview of the Small is Beautiful (SIB) service.

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The Under-occupation Officer had been in post since October 2013 and had conducted a full review of the service. Between April and December 2013 16 downsizes had been completed with 8 downsizing by 1 bedroom, 5 by 2 bedrooms. 4 Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) claimants downsized out of this need. £25,000 had been paid out in SIB payments. Residents over 50 were most likely in need of downsizing but those under 50 could be considered under the scheme, depending on their circumstances. Payment would consist of £500 per bedroom freed and £1,000 either as lump sum or to cover moving costs. Any such payments would now be made after the move. For those not eligible, such as younger residents, they may instead be eligible for the Under-occupation Move Assistance Grant of £500 to fund the move which also allowed them to assign their arrears to the new tenancy.

He confirmed that since January 2014 13 new downsizing cases had been identified, with 37 still open from 2013. The Under-occupation Officer regularly checked all cases against available properties in each bidding cycle, making bids if they have low IT literacy, and he correlated mutual exchanges. 61% of current cases were from Swanley and the north of the District, 6% from Edenbridge and the south and 33% from Sevenoaks and the centre. If all current cases were completed then 69 bedrooms would be freed in total. However, not all residents downsized to 1 bedroom and there was a lack of available 2 bedroom properties. Members suggested there should be more correlation with the Planning Service to address this lack.

The Under-occupation Officer advised that there were many more cases than the funding to deal with them. The Chief Housing Officer confirmed any money for the present year had been committed but the intention had been to review the service in April 2014. The Housing and Communities Director confirmed that Officers at the Council and West Kent Housing were keen to extend the service but the funding mechanism needed to be found. Members suggested that money from Section 106 Affordable Housing Contribution Planning Obligations be used again for this purpose. The Chief Housing Officer agreed to take this forward.

A Member asked what plans West Kent Housing had to provide more small properties. The Housing and Communities Director said that they would continue to work with the Council for potential development sites. Existing stock tended to be older and so the 1 and 2 bed properties were quite small and not popular. West Kent Housing would seek to reuse or demolish and rebuild properties where appropriate but it could take ten to twenty years to complete that process. Such projects needed to be supported by rental income streams.

27. West Kent Housing Association Housing Allocation Policy and Life Time Tenancies

Lifetime Tenancies

The West Kent Housing Association Housing and Communities Director explained that the decision not to adopt a general policy of fixed-term tenancies had been difficult. However, lifetime tenancies would be more likely to allow residents to put down roots and provide stability. Fixed term tenancies of 5 years had been adopted for properties of 4 bedrooms and above and any tenancies for adapted properties would only be for so long as they were required. West Kent Housing did not currently intend to introduce more

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fixed term tenancies but would monitor these and monitor what impact the policy had elsewhere.

Concerns were raised by Members that lifetime tenancies would make it more difficult to evict residents who committed anti-social behaviour. Lifetime tenancies also meant that residents may have properties for longer than required while other families fell into need. The Director advised that Officers did visit residents every 5 years to discuss whether the property was still appropriate to their need and 30 families had moved out of social housing in the last year. If introduced, fixed term tenancies would only apply to new tenants.

In response to a question the Director confirmed that West Kent Housing would take action against persistent non-payers of rent, however Courts would usually grant only suspended orders initially.

A Member, not on the Committee, proposed that tenancy agreements include a clause stating that the tenancy would end once the property exceeded their need. The Director agreed to consider this. Such clauses already existed for properties with adaptations.

The Committee agreed that they were not in favour of lifetime tenancies and asked West Kent Housing to consider this position. The Chairman requested that the Director return in a year to update the Committee on the matter and the Director agreed to take their comments back to West Kent Housing Association's Board.

Allocation Policy

The Homes and Communities Agency required registered providers of social housing to have clear policies on allocations. The Council's Allocation Policy established who would be eligible to join the housing register, while the West Kent Housing Allocations Policy sought to determine who was appropriate for their properties. The Chief Housing Officer advised that the two policies had been designed to work together and were constantly reviewed for effectiveness.

The Director advised that under the Council's former Policy the housing register had over 2,000 applicants. The Council had since introduced a requirement to show a local connection and it was no longer an open register so this number had reduced to approximately 560. There were about 470 vacancies per year and 300 would be for Sevenoaks. Therefore some properties were not in great enough demand and it could be slow for them to be let. This was a new problem since the amendment to the Council's Allocation Policy and would be considered when it was reviewed again.

Concern was raised about low paid workers and whether they would be eligible. The Director confirmed that the Council's Policy would consider them eligible so long as they qualified on the income criterion, the local connection and that they had a housing need that could not be met elsewhere.

28. Policy Discussion: Proposed Housing ladder

The Housing Policy Manager explained that the high value of properties and low supply created an increasing problem for intermediate housing in the District.

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Two schemes were already established to assist this group. A Home of Your Own scheme assisted those who purchased on the open market with the purchase price and so converted the properties to shared ownership. The Council had just completed its seventh such unit. Applicants currently in socially rented property had been prioritised so that their socially rented property would be freed up. The Homesteading scheme provided grants of £15,000 for first-time buyers to improve long-term empty properties. Three such grants were to be delivered shortly.

Officers were also considering a Tenants' Incentive Scheme. This would provide assistance to those households who could afford mortgage payments but did not have the savings to provide the deposit or the outlays of purchase. This would again be aimed at social housing tenants in order to free up housing association properties. The Officer intended to further develop the proposals and bring back to the Committee for full consideration.

The Committee agreed that the proposals were promising and complimented Housing Policy team.

29. Air Quality Monitoring and Management

The Environmental Health Manager explained that Air Quality Monitoring and Management was a statutory service, however the Council was in no real position to influence improvements in air quality as the problems were predominantly caused by traffic. The Assistant Environmental Health Manager explained that the service was provided to meet statutory obligations at a budget of £65,919 with no dedicated Officer. The most significant costs were for the monitoring stations at Greatness and Bat & Ball. Contributions to the service were made from Defra and Section 106 Planning Obligations.

Members expressed significant concern that representations on poor air quality had not influenced planning decisions in the past. The service had been ineffectual but self-perpetuating. The monies may be put to other and better uses. Grants and Section 106 monies did not cover all the costs of the service.

Officers stated that they would need to consider the legal implications of withdrawing from current projects, such as Air Alert, and monitoring schemes. Officers had recently accepted when responding to a Government consultation that air quality would be better served without the local management duty, however this had been a minority opinion among local authorities.

It was suggested that Defra ought to provide the full funding for projects it wanted pursued. Monies should be focused on improving air quality rather than on monitoring. It was agreed that Officers should prepare a further report on the minimisation of the service for the Committee to consider at its meeting on 29 April 2014 or July 2014.

Action: It was suggested that the Chief Officer Environmental & Operational Services inform the Sevenoaks Joint Transportation Board of the Committee's proposals.

Resolved: That the Chief Officer Environmental & Operational Services provide a report to the Committee stating how the air quality management service could be pared down,

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clarifying the legal position of what the Council was required to do, what air quality management projects the Council was developing and whether existing projects could be ended.

30. Work Plan

The Chairman informed the Committee that the Police and Crime Commissioner would no longer be attending the Committee as she had been invited, together with her Youth Commissioner, to full Council. The District Area Commander would be invited as a guest speaker to the meeting in July 2014. The Road Safety Working Group would now report back to the Committee in July 2014. The Chief Officer Environmental and Operational Services was also due to submit a detailed report on the options for the CCTV Service in July 2014.

Resolved: That subject to approval by the Local Planning and Environment Advisory Committee

- a) a Working Group be set up to consider Squaring the Housing Circle in using the planning system to provide more properties of the type needed within the District;
- b) the Working Group consist of four Members, two from each Advisory Committee; and
- c) Cllrs. Mrs. Clark and Mrs. Ayres be the Members from the Housing and Community Safety Advisory Committee.

It was expected that the Working Group report back to the Committee in October 2014.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.35 PM

CHAIRMAN