

SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2012 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Davison (Chairman)

Cllr. Brown (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs. Mrs. Ayres, Ayres, Ball, Mrs. Dibsdall, Edwards-Winser, Mrs. George, Horwood, Mrs. Parkin, Pett, Piper, Raikes, Scholey, Miss. Stack and Towell.

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Abraham, Fittock and Neal.

Cllrs. Mrs. Clark, Mrs Davison, Firth, Fleming and Hogarth were also present.

12. Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 19 June 2012 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

13. Declarations of interest

No new declarations of interest were made.

14. 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 Management End of Year Results (Referral from Performance and Governance Committee – 12 June 2012)

Members noted that the Performance Indicators for the Housing Benefits Service would be considered at Agenda Item 8 (Minute 19). The Committee also noted the additional information tabled referring to the Green Waste Service Performance Indicators and the update from the Head of Environmental and Operational Services.

15. Actions from the Previous Meeting

The Head of Housing and Communications reported that she had attended the Core Strategy Development Group and pending approval, some funding had been identified to support people during the transition to Universal Credits throughout Kent.

It was noted that Cabinet had agreed the Under Occupation of Social Housing Action Plan at the meeting held on 13 September 2012, and therefore a review/update would be placed on the Work Plan.

Members attention was drawn to the updated information received from the Human Resources Manager. It was noted that the previous equivalent year had been more heavily impacted by long term sickness absence.

The actions were noted.

16. Future Business, the Work Plan 2012/13 (attached) and the Forward Plan.

Members noted the Work Plan. The Chairman advised that the Under Occupation of Social Housing Action Plan review would be placed on the Work Plan for April 2013, and any review of the Universal Credits Action Plan, if approved by Cabinet, in June 2013.

The Chairman of the Members I.T. Working Group advised that the next project was the Disaster Recovery Plan. He had held a meeting with the Head of I.T. and Facilities and the Group would be meeting in October. He expected to bring a report to Committee in April 2013.

17. Universal Credit In-Depth Scrutiny Board - Final Report

The Group Manager – Financial Services, introduced the report. He advised that both he and the Director of Corporate Resources, Deputy Chief Executive, were extremely grateful for the work that the Members' Working Group had carried out, the clarity it had provided and the action plan that it was putting forward. It placed the Council in a strong position going forward in what could only be described as an uncertain period.

The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Universal Credit in Depth Scrutiny Board gave a comprehensive presentation outlining the background to Universal Credits, the uncertainties, possible consequences and future role of local councils.

The Chairman thanked them for a comprehensive and excellent report. He recommended that the Committee place a review of the Action Plan, if adopted by Cabinet, on the Work Plan for June 2014.

The Leader of the Council was invited to speak by the Chairman, he congratulated the Board on their excellent work and responded to some issues raised. With regards to making work pay he commented that this was the principle of the Universal Credits, however Council Tax Benefit could negate the desired effect. He advised that the issue of whether TUPE should apply was likely to be pursued in the courts. If Cabinet agreed to adoption of the Strategy, he requested that the Board help him present the Strategy to Dartford Borough Council's Cabinet. In response to questioning from the Chairman he stated that, if adopted, Cabinet would lead on the issue but welcomed support from the Board.

In preparing for the changes Members discussed and it was suggested that the recommendation to partial involvement be made clearer.

A Member pointed out that more would need to be done to improve rural broadband.

The Director of Corporate Resources, Deputy Chief Executive, was grateful to the Universal Credit Scrutiny Board for all the work they had done. It provided the Council with the ability to potentially manage and plan for uncertainties. It appeared it had also

gone some way to reassuring staff who were more confident to stay at the Council for the time being.

Members conveyed their thanks to all staff involved especially the Benefits Team for their continued commitment to the Council.

Resolved: That the adoption of the Strategy, subject to the additions discussed, be RECOMMENDED to Cabinet.

18. Affordable Housing Position Report

The Head of Housing and Communications presented the report which provided an overview of the affordable housing work programme.

In response to questions, the Housing Policy Manager explained that it was possible for developers to renegotiate social housing provision on already agreed s.106 agreements. However it would have to be agreed to by the Planning Inspectorate and would have to be justified. Housing was placed wherever there was opportunity but in reality this was mainly urban areas.

The Head of Housing and Communications advised that the Housing Allocation Policy was currently being reviewed and would come to this Committee in January 2013.

Some Members mooted the idea of using unviable shops and returning them to residential use. It was noted that this was something that would need to be pursued as part of the Local Development Framework.

Resolved: That the related housing strategy be endorsed to deliver affordable housing in the area.

19. Benefits Performance - Verbal Update

The Group Manager – Financial Resources gave a verbal update on the red status of the benefits performance indicators in response to the referral from the Performance and Governance Committee (Minute 14 (a)), and referred Members to the updated results which had been tabled.

He reported that, as detailed in the Universal Credits report, activity levels had increased by 70% since April 2011. The number of claimants had not significantly changed but there were many more changes of circumstances. These were due to: the economy; people moving and work changes (e.g. reduced hours, short contracts; redundancy; and increased workload from the DWP via the ATLAS system (automatic transfer to local authorities for changes of circumstances) - started in July 2011. Other core reasons for the performance levels were the loss of a number of staff. It was difficult to recruit assessors in an environment where people were changing careers due to the uncertainty caused by Universal Credits for Benefits professionals. The uncertainties and complexities in benefits elsewhere was also causing the need to spend more time with people who were contacting the Council. In future there would also be additional work required for welfare reform changes.

Actions that had been taken so far included: recruiting additional temporary staff in a competitive market; development of the apprentices who started two years ago; the use of an external agency to process some new claims on a unit cost basis; redirection of some calls to the Dartford Borough Council Contact Centre; and the re-engineering of some processes.

Referring to the tabled information, the Group Manager – Financial Services reported that the average number of days to process new benefits claims had improved in the past two months and with dedicated staff in place he expected a steady and sustainable improvement over the coming months.

20. Business Rates Retention

The Group Manager – Financial Services presented the report which set out the proposed new Business Rates Retention Scheme and its possible affect on initial and future funding levels. The impact of the new scheme on the Council's 10-year budget was hard to predict.

In response to a question he advised that there was not a good take up on the pooling option and it was not significant enough to get involved with a discussion at this point in time.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.08 PM

CHAIRMAN