

Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee
16 November 2016

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the SOCIAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on Wednesday, 16th November, 2016 at 7.00 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, The Campus, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE

PRESENT: Councillors N Pace (Chairman)
D Bennett (Vice-Chairman)

T Bailey, L Brandon, A Chesterman (substituting for L Chesterman), J Cragg, B Fitzsimon, F Thomson and K Thorpe

ALSO PRESENT: T Kingsbury – Cabinet Member Policy and Culture
M Perkins – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member
Planning, Housing and Community

D Goodson – Tenants' Panel
B Rhodes – Tenants' Panel

N Palmer – Finesse
A Bedford – Finesse
D Sinclair – Finesse

J Hughes – BeNCH
P Redhead – Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue
A Wilmott – Hertfordshire Police

OFFICIALS PRESENT: S Russell – Executive Director
K Ng – Executive Director
S Chambers – Head of Housing and Community
P Underwood – Head of Policy and Culture
M Rayner – Community Partnerships Manager
K Clare – Head of Community Development
C Karvella – Community Safety Partnership Co-ordinator
S Hulks – Governance Services Officer

30. SUBSTITUTION OF MEMBERS

The following substitution of a Committee Member had been made in accordance with Council Procedure Rules 19-22:

Councillor A Chesterman for Councillor L Chesterman.

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31. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors L Chesterman and H Morgan.

32. MINUTES

The minutes from the meeting held on 7 September 2016 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

33. ACTIONS UPDATE

Members received the following updates:

- Regular inspections of the KGV Pavilion were being undertaken and any issues addressed.
- The details of the number of HMOs meeting the required standard were included in a report to be presented at this meeting.
- Details of the number of homeless families and other associated information was tabled for Members.

34. FINESSE MONITORING REPORT

Members received a report from Finesse which provided information on the performance of Finesse in accordance with the agreed monitoring framework.

The report provided information on visitor numbers, financial performance and the latest news, improvements and initiatives.

Members asked the following questions:

Q Were the boats at Stanborough run by a third party?

A *Yes. This was on a profit share arrangement. Consideration had been given to running this service in-house and retaining all of the profits, but this would be a higher risk arrangement with additional costs for employing staff. It was felt that sharing the income with a third party also meant that the risks would be shared.*

Q Could the figures which show the usage of the Swim Centre be broken down to show Reflex members separately?

A *Yes, this could be done and it was agreed that it would provide useful additional information.*

Members then received a presentation on Hatfield Leisure Centre which showed the work that had been done and the plans for the future. Of particular interest

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was the commitment to refurbish the centre to make it more appealing so that previous members would be encouraged to return and new members to join.

RESOLVED

To note the report which detailed the work done by Finesse and the outcomes within the agreed monitoring framework.

35. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Members received a report from the Executive Director which provided details on the performance indicators within its remit.

Members asked how many of the housing stock were vacant. They were informed that there were approximately 50 empty properties.

RESOLVED

To note the report which detailed the performance indicator data.

36. COMMUNITY SAFETY UPDATE

The Council has a statutory duty to scrutinise the work of the Community Safety Partnership. (Police and Justice Act 2006) and this is included in the remit of the Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Officers provided details of the various projects that had been completed by the Partnership, such as:

- Safer Together – events which provided information to residents on things such as bike marking, neighbourhood watch, drug and alcohol services and many others.
- Community Information Days. One of the outcomes of these was the formation of a task and finish group for Hatfield Town Centre which produced an action plan to focus on issues such as fly-tipping, street drinking and anti-social behaviour.
- MAGPYE – (Multi Agency Group for the Prevention of Youth Exclusion) is a group that works to prevent youth exclusion through partnership work. The group includes representation from all secondary schools across the borough. The aim of the group is support and intervention rather than punishment for young people. The group shares information and ideas to prevent, where possible, young people getting involved in Anti-Social Behaviour.
- Youth Champions – these were Year 12 students who had attended and learnt about road safety issues such as drink driving or texting whilst

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driving. They had then returned to their schools, prepared their own presentation and cascaded the information to the other students.

Also in attendance for this item were representatives of Hertfordshire Police, Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service and BeNCH (Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire Probation).

The Police representative said that there had been some good work done in Woodhall where there had been an anti-social behaviour problem. Due to the partnership working, there had been 19 arrests, drugs and cash had been seized and curfews imposed.

Members were advised that the Council is working towards becoming a third party Hate Crime reporting Centre. It is hoped that both the council building at Campus East in Welwyn Garden City and the new Housing Office in Hatfield Town Centre would be the preferred locations. A further report would be presented to the relevant committee with regards to this proposal.

The report provided details of the crime statistics. It was noted that Harassment, including via social media would be reported separately in the reports next year.

The Fire Officer provided some information regarding the incidence of fires and how Welwyn Hatfield compared with the county figures. There had been a decrease in the number of primary fires. Fire injuries had been mainly smoke inhalation and a burned hand.

The representative from BeNCH reported that there had been a number of projects undertaken which had provided some excellent results.

There had been a significant reduction in the number of children on protection plans and a 6% reduction in children in care.

Tribute was paid to the Police for being pro-active in domestic violence cases. There were issues with domestic violence cases being heard in courts not specially designated and this resulted in victims receiving less support.

Members were advised that the Police and Crime Commissioner had changed Community Safety Funding from 1 April 2017. District and Borough councils, Herts County Council, Herts Community Safety Unit and other organisations with a statutory function around community safety would have the opportunity to apply for funding between now and the end of November. The total fund available is £800k. Grants of up to £5k could be applied for, but the project to be funded needs to show innovation, be focussed on one of the PCC's aims, show evidence of need and involve partnership working.

Members asked whether the young people involved in the Woodhall issues were local. Officers said that they were. Parents had engaged well with the CSP and some of the parents were shocked to hear of the behaviour of their child.

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Members were advised that there were two pilot projects being funded, one on the issue of mental health with a specific school in the borough and the other funding of a PCSO as a single point of contact for secondary schools.

It was noted that a review of CCTV provision in Woodhall would be undertaken once the project to look at the council owned flats in the area had been completed. This is currently being delivered by the Council's Housing Trust.

The report provided information on the proposed Public Spaces Protection Order for Hatfield Town Centre. It was recognised that there was a problem with street drinking in the area and this order would provide a broader range of enforcement powers. A more detailed report will be presented to Council at a later date with details about the proposed new order. The report will highlight its aims and objectives as well as how it will be enforced both in the short and long term.

Members thanked the partnership for the hard work which had resulted in some very positive outcomes.

RESOLVED

- To note the report which detailed the work of the Community Safety Partnership and the outcomes of many of the projects. The Committee noted that the risk of crime locally remains low, but the partnership still continues to work to reduce crime and the effect crime has on residents of the borough.
- To note that the ongoing financial support received from the Police and Crime Commissioner's Office which enables a lot of the work of the Partnership, would change from 1 April 2017 and there were no guarantees of funding for the partnership from this date.
- To support the Community Safety Partnership in its review of the current DPPO in Hatfield Town Centre.

37. WELFARE BENEFIT REFORM

Members received a report from the Executive Director which provided details of the government's welfare reforms and the Council's response to them.

The report highlighted that working age benefits such as Jobseekers Allowance, Housing Benefit and Tax Credits had been frozen for the four years 2016 to 2020. Also that the child element of tax credit would be limited to two children from April 2017.

Other issues highlighted in the report were a reduction in backdating of Council Tax Reduction from six months to one month; the roll out of Universal Credit; changes to the Benefit Cap and the freezing of Local Housing Allowance..

The report also detailed the plans put in place to mitigate the reforms.

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A Member commented that he thought the changes were unfair and would impact on many elements of people's lives and of the borough as more pressure was put on the Council with regard to homelessness and debt.

It was noted that the Discretionary Housing Payment had been targeted at those most in need and it was intended that the fund would hold enough to deal with issues arising out of the new legislation.

RESOLVED

To note the report which identified the changes to legislation and the mitigation plans.

38. STRATEGIC HOUSING UPDATE

Members received a report from the Executive Director which provided an update on the work of the strategic housing service and an overview of the current key issues.

Members were advised that the Housing and Homelessness Strategy, which was published in 2013, had an action plan which was monitored on a quarterly basis.

The report identified the key priorities of the Housing and Homelessness Strategy and an update on each area.

Within the report were details of the number of Houses of Multiple Occupation which were compliant. It was thought that the total of HMOs was approximately 2400 and of these 1000 had been risk rated and were compliant at the time of the inspection.

It was noted that legislation was likely to change whereby two-storey houses with 5+ occupiers would be included in the mandatory licensing scheme. It was thought that if this was introduced most houses of multiple occupation locally would need to be licensed.

Members noted that Welwyn Hatfield had almost the lowest number of homeless families in the county in temporary accommodation and were working towards the Gold Standard in this area of work.

Members asked how many homes were classed as long term empty. They were advised that the survey had found approximately 190 empty homes but that there were only perhaps 20 that could be considered long-term.

Members asked if rough sleeping was a problem locally. Officers advised that the numbers of rough sleepers were increasing across the borough. There was a protocol in place to deal with this issue. Once identified, a rough sleeper would be visited within 24 hours so that they could be given support and advice.

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A lot of work was being undertaken with partners in order to tackle the problem and a funding bid will be submitted in partnership with other councils for money to support rough sleepers where required, although it was acknowledged that the decision to sleep rough was entrenched in some people.

Members commented that this report and the earlier report on welfare reform, plus a lack of flats for young people and cuts in support for mental health and changes to housing benefit painted a bleak picture. It was hoped that there would be budget made available for the additional duties required of the team.

The report detailed some of the work that was being done on buy back/rehousing. It was noted that properties could be purchased at a discount with an agreement to rehouse the owner/occupier. A survey into this option had received a favourable response. Members were advised though that this area of work had not been started yet and further research was required in order to determine the level of discount, other options available, the needs of the community and details of the properties that might be included in the scheme.

Members asked whether properties that might be bought by the Council could become eligible as Right To Buy. Officers agreed that they could. However, the Council would be protected from making a loss on the property in the first 15 years due to the "cost floor". This was a system of making sure that RTB discount could not be claimed which would mean that the authority would lose money.

Members asked whether, when tenants were offered a home, financial checks were made as the report seemed to suggest that this was not the case. However, it was noted that checks were undertaken, but that the results of these could become out of date very quickly as circumstances changed, hence the need to obtain information from tenants and benefits recipients in respect of Pay to Stay.

39. OLDER PERSONS HOUSING STRATEGY 2017-2022

Members received a report from the Executive Director and a copy of the draft version of the Older Persons Housing Strategy which they were asked to consider, revise if required and then to give permission to initiate consultation with key stakeholders.

The Strategy detailed the vision, aims and objectives for housing for Older Persons from 2017 to 2022.

Members commented that they felt that some older owner-occupiers might welcome the opportunity to downsize providing quality housing was available to move into.

Members were pleased to see that Dementia had been considered as a key component of the strategy.

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A discussion took place as to whether 50 was too young for the strategy or whether the age should be raised. Some thought that getting the views of people in the younger age group (50+) would mean that they would look at the strategy and how it might affect them in the future. It was also felt that, should housing complexes restrict residency to older age groups only, the benefits of mixed age living would be lost and the area could turn into an “old persons ghetto”.

It was agreed that the strategy should be based on needs not age.

Officers advised that homes could be produced which were flexible for people’s needs such as making conversion of a one bedroom property to two property easier with the use of a “slot in” divider. Properties should be designed for life.

RESOLVED

To agree that officers should initiate consultation on the Older Persons Housing Strategy with key stakeholders.

39.1. RE-INTEGRATION OF THE HOUSING SERVICE

The Chairman agreed to receive a presentation from the Executive Director on the Re-integration of the Housing Service.

The presentation provided information on the key principles of the proposals to bring the service in-house, timescales for the work to be done, the work streams and issues to be considered.

Members were informed that there had been 9,960 questionnaires sent out for the consultation and 139 responses had been received. Of these, a significant number were in favour of bringing the service back in house.

Members commented that they felt it was very important that Tenants Panel members should have voting rights and a voice and that the governance arrangements should reflect this.

The Cabinet Member for Housing commented that the Tenants Panel seemed more positive since the proposal to reintegrate. There had been some confusion about its role during the time of the Trust’s existence but this had now disappeared. This was evidenced by the robust scrutiny that they had recently undertaken which had been reported to the Cabinet Housing and Planning Panel.

Members were advised that work was being done to help staff feel reassured during this period of uncertainty.

RESOLVED

To note the report and the status of the proposal to reintegrate the Housing Service back into the Council.

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40. COMMITTEE OVERVIEW WORK PROGRAMME 2015-2016

Members received a copy of the work programme which provided information on reports and presentations for future meetings.

It was noted that, at the January meeting an additional item needed to be added regarding the Dementia Alliance.

The Safeguarding Annual report would be added as an item for the March meeting.

RESOLVED

To note the work programme and the additions to be made as listed above.

Meeting ended at 9.50 pm