

Cabinet Housing Panel  
16 January 2019

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

\* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL CABINET HOUSING PANEL held on Wednesday 16 January 2019 at 7.30pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, The Campus, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors J.Boulton (Chairman)  
N.Pace (Vice-Chairman)  
  
M.Birleson, M.Cook, M.Holloway, T.Jackson-Mynott,  
T.Kingsbury, R.Lass, H.Quenet, F.Thomson, R.Trigg  
(substituting for S.Glick)

CO-OPTED MEMBERS: Co-opted Members:-  
  
Tenants' Panel Representatives  
  
R.Read and B.Rhodes  
  
Independent Representative  
  
R.Paris

OFFICIALS PRESENT: Corporate Director (Housing and Communities) (S.Russell)  
Head of Community and Housing Strategy (S.Chambers)  
Head of Property Services (P.Gray)  
Head of Housing Operations (S.Pearson)  
Independent Living Services Manager (J.Woods)  
Income and Home Ownership Manager (S.Kiff)  
Governance Services Officer (M.Lowe)

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57. SUBSTITUTION OF MEMBER

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

Councillor R.Trigg for Councillor S.Glick.

58. APOLOGY

An apology for absence was received from Councillor S.Glick.

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59. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 10 December 2018 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

60. ACTIONS UPDATE

The status of actions agreed at the Panel meeting on 10 December 2018 in the report of the Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) was noted.

Members received the information requested at the previous meeting in relation to Minute 51 - Performance Report for Housing Period Quarter Two 2018-19 on the number of decent homes inspections and the percentage of inspected properties non-decent on first inspection.

61. HOUSING OPERATIONS TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME UPDATE

Report of the Corporate Director (Housing and Communities) provided an update on the progress of the Housing Operations Transformation Programme and set out some of the key changes and achievements delivered since the rollout of the programme in June 2018.

Members noted that the aim of the programme was to modernise the housing service so that customers were able to benefit from a more flexible, community-facing service, making better use of the Council's resources.

New team structures across all teams had been implemented and were nearing full compliment. An enhanced suite of performance metrics had been developed across all teams. The staffing aspect of the programme was virtually complete, the next steps would be to continue to progress the operational and cultural changes and improvements to allow the vision of the programme to be delivered successfully in the long term.

Teams were continuing to develop full scale service reviews, with some already demonstrating successes in progressing and delivering outcomes as a direct result of actions identified following transformation. These successes will contribute to the overall success of the programme both for the Council, but more importantly for the residents.

In response questions Officers confirmed that, in line with the housing sector generally, the Council was focusing on modernising services by the use of information technology. The aim is to encourage more self-service for the benefit of customers. Mystery Shopping has been used to provide feedback including for telephone calls and emails.

Members welcomed the new 'Neighbourhood Improvement Bid' scheme which involved Champions, which has now been implemented. The scheme

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encourages residents and the Council's Neighbourhood Officers to work together to make changes to the local neighbourhood to improve the area.

Members noted that one of the opportunities currently being piloted was the use of the Noise App, an application that enabled complainants to make recordings of alleged noise nuisance, at the point it happened.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the contents of the report be noted.
- (2) That regular updates continue to be brought to the Panel.
- (3) That, when received, the names of the Neighbourhood Champions be circulated to Ward Councillors (GDPR compliant).

62. PRESENTATION ON THE INDEPENDENT LIVING SERVICE

The Panel received a presentation which gave an overview of the Independent Living Service provided by the Council and included information on the following areas:

- Sheltered Housing
- Lifeline Community Alarm
- Mobile Warden Response
- Control Centre
- Community Bus Service
- Shopmobility

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the contents of the presentation be noted.
- (2) That Members wishing to explore the service further contact the Independent Living Services Manager and further information leaflets on the services be circulated after the meeting.
- (3) That a further update on the service be brought to the first meeting of the Panel in the new municipal year.

63. CHANGES TO HOUSING RENT STATEMENT PRODUCTION

Report of the Corporate Director (Housing and Communities) provides an overview of the current process regarding the standard issue of rent statements and sought the Panel's views on a new approach, which aimed to reduce the frequency of standard issue rent statements and to deliver a more efficient process whilst ensuring that tenants who pay by direct debit also receive a rent statement which currently they do not.

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For comparison the report set out the two different options, the status quo and a proposed preferred alternative option for consideration. Members noted that a cost benefit analysis review of the current production process of Council tenant rent statements had been carried out.

Members welcomed the modernisation of the current process to make rent statement production and distribution more efficient and make better use of the resources available.

During the discussion which ensued, consideration was given to the best way in which to roll out the changes to gradually reduce the number of paper copies of statements sent and Members proposed that the following points be taken into consideration.

- New tenants would automatically receive the rent statements electronically and be given the opportunity to opt-in rather than to opt-out of paper copies.
- Traditional access methods for requesting a rent account balances or a rent statement must still be available to all tenants to protect the interests of tenants who do not go on-line.
- A robust back up strategy be in place in the event that there be a system failure resulting in tenants being unable to access their accounts.

RESOLVED:

That the proposal to change the frequency of tenant rent statements from quarterly to once per year, issued at the end of the financial year be agreed subject to being amended to reflect the views of the Panel as follows:

- a) New tenants would automatically receive the rent statements electronically and be given the opportunity to opt in rather than to opt out.
- b) Traditional access methods for requesting a rent account balances or a rent statement will still be available to all tenants.
- c) A robust back up strategy be in place in the event that there be a system failure resulting in tenants being unable to access their accounts.

#### 64. TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION PROVISION UPDATE

Report of the Corporate Director (Housing and Communities) outlines the position in relation to the use of temporary accommodation for homeless families; the use of bed and breakfast accommodation in the Borough and the measures the Council were taking to address the current and future demand.

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The measures being taken included how the Council planned to make provision during the period that Howlands House (currently the Authority's main temporary accommodation site) was being redeveloped.

Members noted that there was an opportunity to make use of a decanted sheltered housing block (Minster House) for temporary accommodation – during a time when the block would otherwise be empty awaiting re-development. The occupation charges would be sufficient to cover the costs associated with making the block suitable for use as temporary accommodation and in addition – plus this should help alleviate the need for bed and breakfast accommodation elsewhere.

However, the occasional use of bed and breakfast or supported housing will continue for individuals who present challenges that could not be managed within these settings (such as sexual or violent offences).

Members noted that over the last eighteen months the Borough had experienced an increase in the demand for temporary accommodation and had seen a reduction in move-on options, which meant that both the occupancy levels and average level of stay (for all occupiers) in temporary accommodation had risen. The average stay was previously 14.5 weeks, but by March 2018 was 16.5 weeks.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the plans underway to ensure adequate provision of temporary accommodation, including the acquisition of Inspira House, Welwyn Garden City and the development of private sector leasing be noted.
- (2) That a recommendation should be made to Cabinet that Minster House, Hatfield, once fully vacated, be used for temporary accommodation in the interim.

65. QUEENSWAY HOUSE UPDATE

Members received a tabled report which provided a briefing to Members on various items relating to Queensway House and was an update on the verbal update 10 December 2018. It also advised Members on recent significant events at the block.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

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66. WORK PROGRAMME 2018/19

The pro-forma setting out the Panel's work programme had been updated since the last meeting to enable forward planning of items to be considered to take place.

Members welcomed the announcement that the Council's Housing Team had been nominated for a national award. They were finalists in the category of *Excellence in Tenant Communication* at the 2019 TPAS (Tenant Participation Advisory Service) Awards. The project which had propelled the Team into contenders was their animated video, called 'Everything and all that', which showed the impact of engagement work for tenants and residents.

Members agreed that the video should be viewed at the next meeting of the Panel.

RESOLVED:

That the updated and amended work programme be noted.

Meeting ended 9.05pm  
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