

# COMMUNITY POLICY AND REVIEW PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 15th September, 2016 at Council Offices, Farnborough at 7.00 pm.

## **Voting Members**

Cr. M.D. Smith (Chairman)  
Cr. M.S. Choudhary (Vice-Chairman)

Cr. R. Cooper  
Cr. Jennifer Evans  
Cr. A. Jackman

Cr. S.J. Masterson

Cr. J.J. Preece  
Cr. P.F. Rust  
Cr. J.E. Woolley

## **8. MINUTES –**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 9th June, 2016 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

## **9. FIRST WESSEX AND SENTINEL HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS – POTENTIAL MERGER –**

The Panel welcomed Mr. Peter Walters, Chief Executive of First Wessex, to the meeting, who had been invited to attend to explain the reasons behind the planned merger between First Wessex and Sentinel Housing Association.

Mr. Walters wanted to assure Members that, essentially, the merged association aimed to use their combined strength to improve services and build more homes. It was the intention for the two housing associations to be one association by April, 2017. It was noted that Government policy had had an impact on housing associations due to the introduction of the 1% rent reduction scheme over a four year period. The merger was aiming to make significant cost reductions and also enable the new association to borrow funding for new developments.

Other reasons for the proposal included the geographical location of the housing stock held by the associations; First Wessex had stock in northern and southern Hampshire, including Portsmouth and Southampton, and Sentinel's stock covered most of the middle of Hampshire. The Panel was shown a map of the First Wessex and Sentinel stock, which covered their main areas of operation. This showed Members that the combined stock left no gaps and totalled 30,000 homes in and just outside the County. Both housing associations had been known for providing 'top performing' services and the larger footprint would result in the association being closer to their customers, therefore minimising travel. It was noted that the intention was to remain as local to Hampshire as possible and not exceed 30,000 homes.

The issue around other mergers was raised, as some had not been successful. Mr. Walters expressed the opinion that the merger between First Wessex and Sentinel was one of equal partners. Both had successfully increased their own stock over the years and were of the view that it was important to continue to build low-cost housing.

The Panel noted what the new association would aim to achieve:

- Financial strength to build more homes and provide better services
- Maintain a high level of expertise
- Keep to 20 local authority areas
- Be an influential partner of choice
- Deliver at least 1,250 new homes per year of mixed tenure
- Create efficiencies
- Social purpose and customer focus as the core ethos
- First class repairs service
- Value for money
- Fast forward to digital shift

Questions were raised concerning the locality of the new association and whether this would impact customers. However, it was confirmed that the new association aimed to maintain a local presence and would expect staff to spend more time out in the community.

To conclude, it was noted that the due diligence process was scheduled to be completed by the end of October, 2016, provided no issues were found, consent would be sought from funders to vary the covenants attached to borrowing arrangements with a view for the organisation to take effect from April, 2017.

Mr. Walters answered Member questions and the Panel **NOTED** the presentation.

## 10. **HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY –**

The Panel welcomed Ms. Zoe Paine and Ms. Sally Ravenhill, Strategy and Enabling Managers, who had been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on the progress made on the development of the Housing and Homelessness Strategy. It was noted that the strategy was required to fulfil the statutory obligation to have a Homelessness and Tenancy Strategy in place. The 2017-2021 strategy would be a continuation of the work from the previous strategy.

It was noted that homelessness had risen in the Borough by 58% since 2010/11, which had had an impact on the local community, residents service providers and the Council's housing staff. The reduction in housing support services had led to loss of accommodation for a number of people, which was one of the reasons for the increase in homelessness. Other reasons included parental eviction and loss of private sector accommodation. Key housing issues in the Borough included welfare reform, the high housing demand and

affordability issues, housing conditions and the pressure on social rented housing stock.

Members heard that before drafting the strategy, a number of consultations had been carried out:

- Partner consultation – April 2016
- Online consultation – June 2016
- Cabinet Member for Health and Housing and the Housing Strategy Standing Group – July 2016
- Homelessness Review – Summer 2016

The Panel discussed the outcomes of the online consultation, which had received 222 responses. It was noted that the Housing Strategy Standing Group had met and discussed the proposed structure, raised some of the challenges and agreed the proposed objectives and actions.

It was noted that the strategy aimed to tackle the key issues through four strategic themes:

- The right homes in the right place
- Making best use of the housing stock
- Helping people to solve their housing problems and provide a suitable home when needed
- Enabling people to live in good quality accommodation appropriate for their needs

These themes were discussed in more detail with the Panel, including what they aimed to achieve and the challenges that they were likely to face. It was noted the draft was due to be completed by 14th October, 2016. The next stage would then be to present the draft to the Housing Strategy Standing Group. In addition, Members requested that a draft should also be taken to a full Panel meeting before seeking Cabinet approval in December.

The Panel **NOTED** the Report and **AGREED** that an update on the draft of the strategy be brought to the Panel before Cabinet approval is sought.

## 11. **WORK PROGRAMME –**

The Panel noted the work programme for the 2016/17 Municipal Year.

The Meeting closed at 9.13 p.m.

M.D. Smith  
CHAIRMAN

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