

COMMUNITY POLICY AND REVIEW PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 4th February, 2016 at the Council Offices, Farnborough at 7.00 pm.

Voting Members

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

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| Cr. Sophia Choudhary | Cr. Jennifer Evans | Cr. S.J. Masterson |
| Cr. R. Cooper | | Cr. M.J. Roberts |
| a Cr. Liz Corps | | Cr. P.F. Rust |

An apology for absence was received on behalf of Cr. Liz Corps.

16. MINUTES –

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 19th November, 2015 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

17. FIRST WESSEX – UPDATE –

The Panel welcomed Ms. Carol Williams Operations Director, to the Meeting and was introduced to Mr. Mark Batchelor, Property Services Director.

The Panel was reminded that during First Wessex's previous update, it had discussed welfare benefit changes, the impact that would have had on residents and predictions for the following year. It was acknowledged that First Wessex had not foreseen the introduction of 1% rent reductions and the implications of that over four years. Members heard that this would result in a £16million reduction in income over the four-year period and First Wessex would need to make £10million in savings to manage the loss. Ms. Williams advised the Panel that First Wessex aimed to continue to strengthen the association as a whole although it had been likely that some services provided to residents would be affected.

Ms. Williams discussed a number of ways in which the association aimed to reduce its costs and the Panel heard that it was necessary to close and sell its office building in Eastleigh. Future staffing reductions had also been considered and Ms. Williams explained that the association would try to do this through voluntary arrangements and natural turnover, where possible.

Another way First Wessex aimed to make savings was by extending the life span of their kitchens, bathrooms and boilers by up to three years.

However, they had planned to work alongside their tradesmen to ensure that the kitchens, bathrooms and boilers lasted those extra years and residents continued to receive a good service.

It was noted that the First Wessex offices based in Rushmoor had now closed their reception to the public, excluding those who had arranged prior appointments. It was heard that during the transition period, reception staff had been available to assist the public in using their digital services as they had not wanted their customers to be turned away. Ms. Williams explained how this change would help save money; a visit to the association had previously cost the association £12 per transaction, whereas a digital transaction only cost 5p each.

The Panel was advised that First Wessex had discussed its development programme and believed that the number of properties developed per year would have dropped from 6/700 to 400 units per annum. However, Members were reassured that the association had not wanted to end the development programme and had been considering ways to continue the programme on a smaller scale.

Ms. Williams updated the Panel on its Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) 'governance' rating, which had improved and was now G1. It was noted that the HCA had been pleased with progress and considered First Wessex as being more fit for purpose.

Ms. Williams and Mr. Batchelor answered questions from Members and the Chairman thanked them for their update.

The Panel **NOTED** the update.

18. **NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL STRATEGY – UPDATE –**

The Panel welcomed Ms. Debbie Whitcombe, Neighbourhood Development Officer, who had been invited to the meeting to provide Members with an update on the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. Members had been provided with a brief background of the strategy which had recognised three areas, Cherrywood, North Town and Aldershot Park as needing significant improvements to address deprivation and reduce inequalities. It was heard that a priority had been set for the Borough, which aimed to ensure that none of the Rushmoor wards were placed in the bottom 20% of the national Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).

It was noted that Cherrywood had been a priority area and that the closure of the Mayfield Job Club had caused concern, the partnership had responded to this and raised £4,000 to establish an Internet and Skills Café. Work carried out within the Café had helped some residents find employment. The PEBL (Prospect Estate Big Local) Partnership helped fund the Skills Café and had also arranged a family fun day which was attended by over 200 people.

The Panel noted that, since 2014, 73 people had completed the Skilled Up programme, of which 24 had found employment, 34 had moved onto further education, 28 had passed the Construction Skills Certification Scheme tests and 30 had gained a Level One Health and Safety in a Construction Environment Certificate. Members were advised that this programme helped break cycles of inactivity and motivate those participating. Skilled Up projects had also been held in Aldershot.

A reduction in anti-social behaviour had been a key target for Cherrywood and it was noted that incidents had reduced by 32%. This had been achieved through an increased police presence in the area. Students from Grange Infant School had taken part in four Junior Warden sessions, where the children had had the opportunity to report issues and find out if those issues had been resolved.

Ms. Whitcombe informed the Panel that some work had been linked to the Health and Wellbeing Partnership work programme. Local sessions had been arranged, including drug and alcohol awareness sessions. Also, 'swim for £1' and street games basketball had encouraged a large number of children to partake in sporting activities. Other community facilities included the Friday Night Youth Club and Creating Futures, increased use of the Prospect Centre, a free bus pass scheme, Cove Brook cycle way and a completed consultation for Moor Road.

The Panel heard that while Cherrywood had been a priority area, similar projects had been carried out in Aldershot Park. Staff had been visiting the area one day per week and had arranged regular meetings in the community. An Active Families programme had also been set up that had provided a range of free sporting activities for local residents.

In September, 2015, the Index of Multiple Deprivation data was released and Members noted that it had been difficult to compare with 2010 as some indicators had changed. The data indicated that Rushmoor had only two Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) in the bottom 20% of areas of deprivation in England, whereas previously, three LSOAs had been in the bottom 20%.

It was advised that while some issues had been specific to a small number of wards within the Borough, Borough-wide issues had also been identified, for example, income deprivation affecting children and older people.

To conclude, Ms. Whitcombe informed the Panel that a detailed review of the IMD data and IMD workshops had been planned. There had also been plans to respond to issues in priority neighbourhoods and continue delivery of the live actions in the rolling plan.

The Panel **NOTED** the update.

19. HOUSING OPTIONS – UPDATE –

Ms. Suzannah Hellicar, Housing Options Manager, was welcomed to the meeting. Members had received Report No. EHH 1603 'Housing Options Update 2015/16' which provided an update on the work and the performance of the Housing Options Team for the period of April – December 2015 and focused on the challenges faced by the team as a result of the economic climate, there had been specific concern around rough sleepers, complex clients and advice and prevention work.

It was noted that the team comprised of 8.5 officers:

- Housing Options Manager
- Senior Housing Officer
- x5 Permanent Housing Officer & x1 Temporary Housing Officer
- 0.5 Housing Allocation Officer

The Panel was then reminded of the purpose of the Housing Options Team: 'to help people to solve their housing problem and to provide a suitable home to those in housing need'. The aim of the team was to prevent homelessness by working with customers to keep them in their existing homes. When this had not been possible, the team was able to explore a number of options:

- Renting privately
- Temporary accommodation
- Shared ownership schemes
- Social rented housing

It was heard that many residents had continued to seek advice in person as 2,338 different households had visited the reception desk to contact the team this year, in comparison to 2,437 last year.

Some challenges faced by the team had been thought to continue over the following years. These had included a limited supply of suitable accommodation for permanent housing, including those who require adapted properties, the complexity of vulnerable individuals' needs and those individuals that had fallen between services and cuts to Hampshire County Council's Supporting People budgets and the rationalisation of services. It was also noted that there had been an increase in the number of rough sleepers, particularly in Aldershot Town Centre.

The reduction in suitable accommodation had resulted in housing officers spending more time carrying out robust assessments and finding private rented accommodation. This meant that there had been less time spent on preventing homelessness in the area and households had spent longer in temporary accommodation or had become homeless.

Members noted that cuts to local services, including Hampshire County Council's Supporting People budgets, had left some vulnerable individuals without support. Those that had complex needs, such as, addictions, poor social skills or an offending history had been more difficult to find suitable

accommodation, resulting in some being placed in unsuitable accommodation, which had often led to tenancies failing. The Panel was informed that the team had spent a lot of time supporting vulnerable people with complex needs. However, this had been challenging as the team had not always had the right resources to meet those needs.

At a previous Panel meeting, Members had been updated on the homelessness in Aldershot Town Centre's High Street car park. Members heard that, in conjunction with the Council's Legal Team, the Community Safety Team and The Police, a proactive and legal centred approach had been taken to stop the anti-social behaviour associated with rough sleeping. For example, not drinking, not urinating in public, not entering certain areas of Aldershot and causing trouble. It was noted that other authorities, such as Surrey Heath and Basingstoke, had seen a significant increase in the number of rough sleepers.

A multi-agency pop up 'hub' had taken place last August in the Princes Hall, Aldershot, to address rough sleeping issues. It was noted that the purpose of this project had been to bring agencies together and look at different approaches used to deal with people for whom traditional models of service delivery had not worked. The 'hub' was supported by twelve services and delivered front facing services to the street homeless people from one location. The Panel heard that 24 rough sleepers / sofa surfers had accessed the 'hub' and eight had been accommodated as a result of the 'hub' in bed and breakfast accommodation (B&B). Members heard that of the eight placements, all but two had been lost.

While the 'hub' had been successful, it was noted that it had not resolved street homelessness in the Borough. The Panel was informed that there had been between twelve and fifteen entrenched rough sleepers and it had been difficult to resolve the needs of that client group. It was thought that a multi-agency approach would be needed to succeed.

The Panel noted that the number of people in the housing allocation pool had been consistent with the previous year and heard that the highest demand had been for one-bedroom accommodation.

Ms. Hellicar informed the Panel that the Housing Options Team had worked in partnership with local agencies and other advice givers, e.g. the Citizens Advice Bureau, to prevent people from losing their homes. This had been done by providing comprehensive advice and financial / debt assistance and by working closely with people to ensure that they had understood their obligations and the consequences of their actions to avoid losing their accommodation. It was noted that the main reasons for seeking advice and assistance had remained similar to previous years, e.g. eviction by family and friends and unsuitable properties due to medical circumstances.

Members noted that the number of rent bonds were likely to reduce by 20/30 due to the difficulty of securing private sector accommodation and the length of time spent in temporary accommodation increasing. Also, the Panel heard that the number of homelessness applications had increased and it had

been likely that the next year would exceed the previous year by approximately 40 applications.

The Panel were advised that the Housing Options Team had worked hard to keep households out of B&Bs and the time spent in this temporary accommodation had reduced from five weeks to 3 1/2 weeks. It was heard that Clayton Court had helped reduce figures as it offered 45 units at no cost to the Council. It was noted that work was being carried out with Hyde Housing Association with the aim of beginning to use eight empty flats as temporary accommodation.

It was concluded that while the Team had faced a number of challenges, it had continued to meet statutory obligations to homeless people through partnership working and the exploration of new and innovative ways to support customers.

The Panel **NOTED** the update.

20. **WORK PROGRAMME –**

The Panel **NOTED** the work programme and work schedule.

The Meeting closed at 8.56 p.m.

M.D. SMITH
CHAIRMAN
