

HOUSING AND CUSTOMER SERVICES WORKING GROUP

Minutes of a meeting held on 11th October 2012 at 6pm (to be agreed at the next meeting of the Working Group)

Present: Councillors; Clayden (Chairman), Mrs Bower, Chapman, Mrs Harrison, Haymes, Mrs Oakley

Also

Present: Councillor Elkins (Cabinet Member Housing), Councillor Dingemans (Cabinet Member Customer Services) from minute 30, Councillor Mrs Madeley (Deputy Cabinet Member Customer Services)

Officers: Housing Project Manager, Democratic Services Officer, Head of Human Resources and Customer Services (Leader Officer), Housing Strategy and Enabling Manager

RECOMMENDATIONS

Review of Terms of Reference and Work Programme

The Housing & Customer Services Working Group recommends to Full Council that;

the revised Terms of Reference, as set out in Appendix 1 of the report, be approved.

It is also recommended to Full Council that the Head of Legal Administration be given delegated authority to make the required changes to Part 3 – Responsibility for Functions in the Constitution as well as any further consequential amendments required.

The Housing and Customer Services Working Group recommends that the work programme, revised to include the addition of Customer Services Review project plan, be agreed for the remainder of the municipal year 2012/13.

Council Housing Stock and Expansion Opportunities

The Housing & Customer Services Working Group recommends to Cabinet that;

a) the options generally outlined in the report for purchasing newly built homes, Council shared ownership properties, former Council and other privately owned homes to increase the Council's housing stock and acquiring land to build new Council homes be adopted.

b) The criteria outlined in paragraphs 3.2 to 3.7, in the report, for repurchasing former Council homes covered by the Housing (Right of First Refusal) (England) Regulations 2005 be adopted and applied to all purchases of Council shared ownership properties, former Council and other privately owned homes.

26 APOLOGIES

26.1 Apologies had been received from Councillors; Brown, Edwards, Mrs Goad, Oliver-Redgate, Squires. Apologies had also been received from the Head of Housing, Lead Officer to this working group.

26.2 In the absence of Councillor Edwards Councillor Mrs Bower carried out the role of vice-chair for the duration of the meeting.

27 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

27.1 There were no Declarations of Interest.

28 MINUTES OF THE HOUSING AND PLANNING MEETING ON 15TH AUGUST 2012

28.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 15th August were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

28.2 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES OF THE HOUSING AND PLANNING WORKING GROUP ON 15TH AUGUST 2012

28.3 With respect to the recent Joint Scrutiny Review of Health Inequalities and Homelessness and the issue of healthcare provision for the homeless, the Housing Project Manager confirmed that Members of this Working Group had received a copy of the letter response from the Coastal West Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group. It was noted that acknowledgement had also been received from the MP Nick Gibb and the MP Peter Bottomley who will be raising the matter with the Secretary of State for Health. It was recognised that no response had, so far, been received from the professional bodies representing General Practitioners.

28.4 Councillor Chapman confirmed that he had updated the Overview Select Committee on healthcare provision for the homeless and will also report to the next meeting in February 2013. He pointed out that the West Sussex Joint Scrutiny Committee will convene during November 2012 and it will also be possible to raise this issue at this meeting.

29 COASTAL WEST SUSSEX LOCAL INVESTMENT PLAN

29.1 The Housing Strategy and Enabling Manager presented his report for Cabinet on the Coastal West Sussex Local (Homes & Communities Agency) Investment Plan.

29.2 It was explained that the Coastal West Sussex Local Investment Plan was developed jointly by Adur District Council, Arun District Council, Brighton & Hove City Council, Chichester District Council, Worthing Borough Council and West Sussex County Council. The partnership had to consider revised local authority investment priorities and this is now being done without the involvement of Brighton & Hove City Council who have decided to produce their own Local Investment Plan.

29.3 The Housing Strategy and Enabling Manager drew members' attention to Appendix 1 which he described as an investment wish list. Although there are no guaranteed funds from the Homes and Communities Agency the Council is working on the adage that if we don't ask we don't get. He also drew attention to the Equality Impact Assessment to show that various investments have been investigated and that we are considering all groups.

29.4 Following question it was confirmed that the Council can be reasonably confident of the target of 1000 affordable homes by the end of 2015.

29.5 Disappointment was expressed with respect to the Foyer Project and Members agreed that it will be good to encourage the achievement of this scheme as a beneficial asset for the community. The Housing Strategy and Enabling Manager

explained that this type of project is subject to the use of capital funding and the provision from state budgets will diminish over the next few years. He stated that the Council will maintain the prominence of this issue going forward.

- 29.6 Members discussed housing delivery. Central Government's impetus on house building was considered with the recent statement that Housing Associations will be tasked with propelling this forward. It was noted that Housing Associations may not be in a position to deliver the number of required houses and so there may be monies available for local authorities that can commit.
- 29.7 The differences between Social Housing rents and Affordable rents were discussed. It was confirmed that Affordable rent is set at 80% of market value and Social Rent is set at 60% of market value. The Chairman asked for clarification with respect to the setting of Affordable rents and it was emphasised that Affordable Rent does not have to be fixed at 80% but can be set at "up to" 80%. Members agreed that there needs to be a balance between affordability and the cost of delivering housing provision and the Council does have the flexibility to make judgements depending on how Council Housing stock is financed.
- 29.8 Members thanked the housing strategy and enabling manager for his report.

30 CUSTOMER SERVICES

- 30.1 As the Working Group had amended its jurisdiction to become the Housing and Customer Services Working Group the Head of Human resources and Customer Services provided Members with a presentation giving an overview of Customer Services.
- 30.2 The presentation included an outline of the Corporate Customer Service Team including the Contact Centre and Reception areas, information on the Customer Access Strategy, the contact channels of website, face to face and telephone, Service Standards, Performance Indicators, Technology, where we are now and how Customer Services will be reviewed.
- 30.3 Key points raised:
It was explained that a major project, reviewing Customer Services, will commence shortly. The review will focus on what the customer wants and consider the Customer Access Strategy which was not fully ratified at its start in 2010, the technology used to deliver our services and how the reception areas and departments of Customer Services can work together to develop a practical and efficient working synergy.
- 30.4 In terms of technology the Head of Human Resources and Customer Services emphasised its importance in delivering effective Customer Service. It was noted that technology is in the process of upgrade and review.
- 30.5 The Contact Centre was highlighted as an important area of Customer Service Delivery. It was noted that the Central Services Working Party reviewed the work of Arun Direct in March 2010. Since this time the Contact Centre has taken on more calls from departments such as Elections and now takes 190000 to 200000 calls annually. It was confirmed that the Contact Centre currently answers calls at 38 seconds, under the target of 30 seconds which is not considered achievable due to staffing issues.

- 30.6 The Head of Human Resources and Customer Services emphasised the need to avoid customer contact as the result of failure demand and the Council's aim of resolving a customer's query at first point of contact.
- 30.7 Members responded to the presentation by making it clear how deeply impressed they are with the manager, team leaders and customer service staff who work for Arun Direct noting the hard working and self-motivated approach the team adopts. The Deputy Cabinet Member for Customer Services stated that she had visited Arun Direct and had been impressed with innovative, proactive staff who multi-tasked to achieve high levels of customer service. The Head of Human Resources and Customer Services stated that all members would be welcome to visit Arun Direct and an invitation will be extended to them shortly.
- 30.8 Members felt that the website is a good channel of customer contact when used for basic information but that most customers with a query or problem would want the opportunity to speak to a member of staff.
- 30.9 Members agreed that answering a call within the target of 30 seconds was an unachievable target.
- 30.10 It was pointed out that the standard of letters, sent to customers, requires improvement and the Head of Human Resources and Customer Services agreed with this comment.
- 30.11 It was also pointed out that cost to the Council actually means a cost to the taxpayer and this should be borne in mind when providing services.
- 30.12 Members agreed that multi skilled teams, especially in reception, will result in better provision of customer service. It was emphasised that to achieve this much will depend on the investment in IT and Members felt that an improved technology base, with better synergy, will be very important in helping staff deliver a quality customer service. The Head of Human Resources and Customer Services agreed that technology is critical and a lot of work is required in this area. The update to the Lagan system was mentioned as was middleware that helps to link silo customer information systems. It was also noted that the council's website was in need of update and that the Communications Manager had been tasked with this responsibility.
- 30.13 It was agreed that a detailed project plan for the Review of Customer Services will be presented to Members for discussion at the meeting of the Housing and Customer Services Working Group on 11th December.
- 30.14 Members thanked the Head of Human Resources and Customer Services for her informative presentation.
- 31 REVIEW OF TERMS OF REFERENCE & WORK PROGRAMME 2012/13
- 31.2 The revised Terms of Reference for the Housing and Customer Services Working Group was agreed.
- 31.3 The Housing and Customer Services Working Group Work Programme 2012/13 was agreed with the addition of Customer Service Review project plan scheduled for the meeting on 11th December 2012.

32 TENANTS SCRUTINY WORKSHOP ON 21st SEPTEMBER 2012

- 32.1 The Housing Project Manager provided members of the working group with feedback on the Tenant Scrutiny Event held on 21st September 2012 and thanked the councillors that attended. A programme of the day and a copy of the presentations given by Reading Borough Council and Hyde Martlett tenants had been circulated to members prior to this meeting with the agenda. It was identified that a video from South Oxford Housing Association on how they approached tenant scrutiny was shown.
- 32.2 It was reported that five tenants attended and they were encouraged to express their opinions which were positive. The Chairman stated that it was important to encourage more representation from tenants and Members discussed how the Council could encourage participation from a wider group of tenants. The issue of payment of expenses was raised and the Housing Project Manager confirmed funding was now in the budget to meet reasonable expenses for tenants attending meetings and events.
- 32.3 In response to a question on the legal status of requirements for tenant scrutiny the Housing Project Manager explained that tenant scrutiny is included in the Housing Regulatory Framework (Tenant Empowerment Standard) and the Council is required to meet this standard by the Housing Regulator, the Homes and Communities Agency. It was pointed out that tenants are a good feedback resource and that a number of Local Authorities have been working in this way for years.
- 32.4 It was confirmed that funds have been identified for tenant scrutiny in the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) Business Plan to take this work forward year on year.
- 32.5 The Housing Project Manager informed members that a briefing paper, setting out a range of options, will be presented to the Housing and Customer Services Working Group at the next meeting on 11th December 2012.

33 COUNCIL HOUSING STOCK AND EXPANSION OPPORTUNITIES

- 33.1 The Housing Project Manager presented his report on Council Housing Stock and Expansion Opportunities. The report outlined options and proposals for potentially repurchasing former Council homes sold under the Right to Buy (and covered by Right of First Refusal Regulations), purchasing existing and new properties and opportunities to acquire land for increasing the Council's housing stock. The report included an outline of the specific Housing (Right of Refusal) (England) Regulations 2005 and, in section 3, a proposed formal approach to dealing with Buy Back (right of first refusal) applications.
- 33.2 Members discussed the report and stated that mechanisms must be put in to place to bring existing stock back into use which can be extremely cost effective for the Council.
- 33.3 Members identified actions required to move forward including having a budget in place and deciding rent levels. The Housing Project Manager confirmed that there is flexibility to set rents at social rent levels for affordable homes when using the Housing Revenue Account and surpluses of our own land to buy or build new

homes. He also confirmed that Full Council would have to agree a supplementary estimate from the Housing Revenue Account for 2012/2013 and there are surpluses in the Housing Revenue Account to meet this cost and provide a funding stream in future years.

- 33.4 A question was raised as to whether the Legal Department will be able to provide adequate resource to complete purchases quickly. The Housing Project Manager responded that he had spoken with the Head of Legal & Administration. She said that sufficient resources are available and as the conveyance work can be outsourced, Arun Staff may not be directly required. He advised that he had been informed that valuations could be obtained within 3 to 4 days from Chichester District Council.
- 33.5 The Cabinet Member for Housing emphasised the need for our response valuations and legal work to operate at an effective level aiming to be more efficient than the equivalent in the Private Sector. He stated that it was important to work smarter for our tenants and be able to move quickly when presented with the opportunity to redevelop sites or sell property outside of our requirements. Members concurred and expressed opinion that we must be efficient and cost effective.
- 33.6 Members considered the report's recommendations and after slight amendment agreed to recommend the following to Cabinet;
- a) The options generally outlined in the report for purchasing newly built homes, Council shared ownership properties, former Council and other privately owned homes to increase the Council's housing stock and acquiring land to build new Council homes be adopted.
 - b) The criteria outlined in paragraphs 3.2 to 3.7, in the report, for repurchasing former Council homes covered by the Housing (Right of First Refusal) (England) Regulations 2005 be adopted and applied to all purchases of Council shared ownership properties, former Council and other privately owned homes.
- 34 NEXT MEETING- 11 December 2012

The meeting concluded at 7.50pm