

'Subject to Approval at the Next Working Group Meeting'

## HOUSING & CUSTOMER SERVICES WORKING GROUP

23 May 2013 at 6.00 p.m.

Present: - Councillors Clayden (Chairman), Edwards (Vice-Chairman), Mrs Bower, Mrs Oakley, Oliver-Redgate [from minute 7], Mrs Pendleton [from minute 7] and Squires.

Councillors Dingemans, Elkins and Mrs Madeley were also present for either all or part of the meeting.

### 1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN

Nominations for the role of Chairman of the Housing and Customer Services Working Group for the Municipal Year 2013/14 were requested. Councillor Clayden was proposed, seconded and duly elected as Chairman.

The Chairman then requested nominations for the role of Vice-Chairman of the Housing and Customer Services Working Group. Councillor Edwards was proposed, seconded and duly elected as Vice-Chairman.

### 2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

### 3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

### 4. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Housing and Customer Services Working Group's Terms of Reference for the Municipal Year 2013/14 was agreed.

### 5. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2013 were approved by the Working Group and were signed by the Chairman.

### 6. ITEMS NOT ON THE AGENDA THAT THE CHAIRMAN OF THE MEETING IS OF THE OPINION SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AS A MATTER OF URGENCY BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The Chairman confirmed that there were no items to consider.

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## 7. REVIEW OF HOUSING CONTRACTORS MEARS

The Head of Housing introduced representatives from Mears. He informed the working group that the Mears Contract with Arun District Council is worth 2.5 million pounds annually, the contract had a balance of seven years left and that the Council and Mears have the joint aim of maintaining a close, in-house, working relationship.

The Mears Regional Director gave a short presentation on Arun District Council's Working Partnership with Mears. Key points presented were:

- Mears had partnered more than 70 local authorities, Arm's Length Management Organisations and Housing Associations. Mears currently operates three other contracts in Sussex with Brighton and Hove City Council, Crawley Borough Council and Eastbourne Homes. It was stated that the service aimed to achieve value for money, exceptional levels of customer service, continuous improvement and help the local community.
- Mears had provided all basic repairs to Arun District Council's properties amounting to 900 repairs per month. A 24 hour, 365 day service had been made available to residents.
- Noted as a good example of joint working, an appointment booking system had recently been implemented by Mears and the Council, enabling customers to receive their appointment at the first point of contact without the need for a second phone call.
- Mears reported on their ethos of supporting the local community and described their work with a local primary school to improve the school's outside space. It was noted that Mears had worked with the Council and Stonepillow on the works required to convert Glenlogie into a suitable shelter for the homeless. It was also noted that during the 2012 floods in the Arun District a small team of 14 Mears tradesmen attended to nearly 100 emergency calls.
- Mears will set up DIY workshops to help train tenants in basic DIY.
- Members were informed that Mears and Arun District Council had formed a partnering board with the aim of promoting co-operative working. The partnering board's aim is to achieve excellent customer satisfaction, dealing with any complaints immediately and effectively and seeking to continually improve.
- It was reported that responsive repairs had been completed in an average of 8 working days and in the last quarter the time taken to complete voids had reduced from 18 days to 15 days.

The Chairman invited Members of the Working Group to ask questions. A question was raised asking if Mears were able to offer timed appointments. It was confirmed that appointments are offered on a morning, afternoon basis with a first and last appointment slot available. It was noted that Mears operatives carry hand held units that are used to contact customers alerting them to the expected arrival time.

Members agreed that DIY workshops for tenants were a good idea. Tenant responsibility to maintain/improve upon the condition of their property

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was discussed. The Head of Housing explained that there had been some confusion as with the introduction of Flexible Tenancies the Flexible Tenancy Policy stated that tenants could not undertake their own modifications. The Head of Housing confirmed that this policy would need amendment.

Following question it was confirmed that Mears achieved an 80% first time fix rate. This performance was described as mid-ranging and it was acknowledged that improvements were a possibility. Mears performance was then questioned further in terms of void properties and tenants complaints. It was confirmed that Mears Void turnaround time was 15 days and the contractors were still seeking to improve this. It was stated that the average time for a void to become empty and then be made available for a new tenant was 29 days which was described as being good.

Members discussed the standard of a property at handover to a new tenant and were concerned that tenants should receive a property which is safe, clean with no basic repair needs. Members felt that properties should be checked regularly especially those that had never been visited for repair and therefore could have been poorly maintained and cost the Council a large amount of money to rectify. The Head of Housing pointed out that due to the Council’s Savings exercise a £600,000 cut had been made in housing refurbishment. He stated that resources were limited but Neighbourhood Officers had been visiting properties and would continue to do so. It was noted that properties with a gas supply had to, legally, be visited on an annual basis.

A question was raised with respect to compensating tenants. It was confirmed that under the Act for Tenancy Improvements certain items could require compensation. Members agreed that properties should be inspected regularly. Members were informed that electronic invoicing would be introduced shortly that will provide data on what properties had been visited whilst also identifying the type and number of repairs.

The need for visiting properties was discussed further in terms of tenant welfare and how a visit can help identify those occupants that could benefit from a disabled facilities grant. It was suggested that the Council’s Wellbeing Team, Neighbourhood Officers could work with Housing to form a joint approach in order to visit properties and report vulnerable tenant’s needs to the correct agencies.

It was confirmed that Invoices were up to date with three weeks work in progress and no backlogs. It was noted that the introduction of electronic invoicing would help to ensure further efficiency.

The Regional Director of Mears confirmed that the joint working approach with Arun District Council was working well and the Partnership Board would continue to improve the service provided to tenants of Arun District Council.

The Chairman thanked Mears for their informative presentation.

## 8. CUSTOMER SERVICE ACCESS STRATEGY

The Head of Human Resources and Customer Services presented the report on the Customer Access Strategy 2013-17. It was stated that the report describes the background to the Customer Access Strategy, presented the proposed strategy and set out proposed actions.

The Head of Human Resources and Customer Services raised the following key points:

- The challenge of delivering a wide range of services in a complex and changing environment was outlined. It was pointed out that no aspect of customer service exists in isolation and every opportunity must be sought in order to "join up" service delivery for a more efficient and cost effective service.
- The Head of Human Resources and Customer Services recognised that Members had concerns about ensuring customers will be able to contact us in a number of different ways according to their choice. It was emphasised that "face to face" contact was being improved and not forgotten. It was explained that Arun District Council had adopted a new web based system from West Sussex County Council which is designed to provide help point information. Reception staff will be trained with the expectation that they will be able to provide a cost effective and quicker service.
- The need to integrate technology was highlighted and it was noted that the lack of widespread integration between systems had remained a barrier to improved customer service. It was confirmed that the Council will explore the most cost effective way of achieving the required integration.
- Members were provided with a high level action plan with more detail to be provided in the coming months. The Head of Human Resources and Customer Services stated that the aim was to complete the action plan within two years subject to appropriate resources being available.

The Working Group discussed the Customer Access Strategy and it was agreed that maintaining a customer's choice of access was important, as was the integration of IT systems.

It was suggested that a flexible approach to working was considered to provide the customer with a service that extended beyond the normal working day. The Head of Human Resources and Customer Services agreed this would be possible and discussions had taken place with the Manager of Arun Direct concerning this idea. It was confirmed that customer research would be required to ensure the Council offered opening hours that match demand at a cost effective rate.

Following further discussion it was agreed that the Head of Human Resources and Customer Services would amend the wording of the Strategy slightly to reflect Member's comments and the report's recommendation was then agreed.

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The working group agreed to

RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL

that the Customer Service Access Strategy 2013-17 be approved.

9. WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14

The Head of Housing presented the Work Programme 2013/14 stating that the broad aim was to achieve two items per meeting. Members considered the programme and acknowledged that as the work programme would be added as an agenda item at every meeting any required revisions would be addressed.

The Housing and Customer Services Working Group agreed the Work Programme 2013/14.

(The meeting concluded at 7.40pm)