

'Subject to Approval at the Next Working Group Meeting'

HOUSING & CUSTOMER SERVICES WORKING GROUP

5 March 2015 at 6.00 p.m.

Present: - Councillors Clayden (Chairman), Edwards (Vice-Chairman), Mrs Bower [from Minute 45], Mrs Oakley, and Squires.

Councillors Elkins and Gammon were also present.

39. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors; Mrs Goad, Mrs Harrison and Mrs Pendleton.

Apologies had also been received from the Cabinet Member for Community Services, Councillor Wotherspoon.

40. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

41. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 January 2015 were approved by the Working Group and were signed by the Chairman.

42. CHANGE TO THE ORDER OF THE AGENDA

The Chairman requested a change to the order of the agenda and the Working Group agreed to consider the Council's Website Update as the first item.

43. COUNCIL'S WEBSITE UPDATE

The Service Development Manager presented an update with respect to the launch of the Council's improved website. It was explained that the website had been modernised in line with consultancy advice from the Society of Information Technology (SOCITM) which encouraged a customer focused approach.

The Service Development Manager advised Members that he and his team of two Web Content Writers had been trained to use the new system with the aim of redesigning the content of the pages to SOCITM standards. Members were informed that, as part of this redesign, the web content had been streamlined reducing the existing 2000 pages to just over 400.

It was explained that additional software had helped enhance the customer experience. Site-Improve was a system that allowed the Council to

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track the website’s performance in terms of elements such as spelling errors, broken links or website failure. BrowseAloud was another tool that the Council had employed with the aim of producing the best possible customer experience. The Service Development Manager explained that BrowseAloud added speech, reading and translation support to the website giving access to those people with print disabilities, dyslexia, low literacy, mild visual impairments and those with English as a second language.

The Service Development Manager stated that, in the most part, feedback had been positive. He informed Members that he had received divided opinion on the colour scheme and, although corporate colours had been used, any visual problems would be addressed. It was also pointed out that the Council’s website could now respond to screen size and the view would be adjusted according to the device used to access the site. Members were pleased to note that mobile devices would now be able to access the site in a visually balanced way.

The Head of HR & Customer Services congratulated the Service Development Manager and his team for their work in launching the new website. It was pointed out that the Council had managed the development with additional dedicated resources and it would be important, going forward, to continue maintenance and progression of the site.

Members discussed the update and also congratulated the website team on a job well done. Members were impressed with the streamlining and aesthetics of the website and comment was made that it was easy to use and accessibility was quicker. Following a question, it was noted that the front page of the website provided links to West Sussex County Council and other relevant organisations to efficiently link customers to County or other relevant service providers.

The Chairman and the working group gave their particular thanks to the Service Development Manager and his team for the positive transformation of the Council’s website. Members of the working group were keen that the good work achieved should be both sustained and further developed.

Following discussion, the working group agreed to

RECOMMEND TO CABINET – that

the Council continue with maintaining, developing and supporting the Digital Arun Project to invest in the progress of Arun District Council’s website.

44. GAS SAFETY CERTIFICATES UPDATE

The Head of Housing reported that there were 5 outstanding Gas Certificates. It was noted that the Council was moving from one gas contractor

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to another and Gas Safety Certificates were part of the new contract. It was expected that the number outstanding Gas Certificates would be reduced.

45. ROUGH SLEEPER UPDATE

The Head of Housing circulated a written update from Stonepillow. It was noted that the Rough Sleeper count, taken annually during November, had dropped from 18 rough sleepers to 13.

Members were informed that the Council had agreed a contribution of £10,000 towards Glenlogie’s running costs until 2016. Following this the Council would consider an ongoing arrangement.

The working group were pleased to note the progress with the Glenlogie Project and the Chairman praised the work that had been done as one of the successes of the Council.

46. COUNCIL HOUSING DISABLED ADAPTATIONS POLICY

The Principal Environmental Health Officer Housing presented the report on Council Housing Adaptations Policy and provided details of the updates that had been made to this policy.

Members were informed that the main policy change had been to include the consideration of whether a property was under occupied before adaptation. This was noted as a way of managing housing stock more efficiently. Under occupying tenants would be encouraged to downsize to enable the Council to meet the housing demand of other housing applicants. The under occupation incentive of £1500 would be paid to Council tenants downsizing to a right sized property.

The working group discussed the report. A question was raised with respect to the number of adaptation referrals against numbers completed. In 2013/14 there were 93 referrals with just 64 completions. The Principal Environmental Health Officer Housing explained that resources had been limited and this had been addressed by adjusting the way the team works. It was also explained that some referrals may be cancelled or may not complete in the same financial year.

Following further questions which were responded to at the meeting the working group considered the report’s recommendation.

The working group agreed to

RECOMMEND TO CABINET - that

the updated Council Housing Disabled Adaptations Policy November 2014 be approved.

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47. DRAFT HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUSINESS PLAN 2015-2025

The Head of Housing presented the report on the Draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2015-2025 for consideration prior to Cabinet at its meeting on 16 March 2015.

It was explained that the amendments to the previous HRA Business Plan took account of the changes which have impacted on the HRA's financial position. Changes outlined included:

- Increased level of Right to Buy (RTB) Sales which impact on rental receipts
- The Council's commitment to the 1-for-1 replacement scheme, which requires the Council to contribute £70 towards each £30 it is able to retain from RTB receipts, to be invested in replacement housing
- Potential impact of changes in welfare reform and rent collection
- Member's ambition to build 150 homes over a 5 year period

The working group noted the key objectives for the 2015-25 HRA Business Plan. These priorities were considered by Cabinet on 18 August 2014 and the following had been identified as the highest priorities for the Council's Housing Service

- The development and acquisition of 150 new homes by March 2020, as in the Council's Corporate Plan
- A 5 year programme of boiler replacements to communal heating systems within sheltered housing schemes, beginning with a £600,000 programme to upgrade boilers to 4 schemes in 2015-16 was agreed by Cabinet in December 2014
- A 5 year programme to improve and develop the Council's sheltered housing, estimated at £1million per annum;
- Establishing appropriate funding mechanisms to ensure the delivery of the above capital programme.

The Head of Housing informed Members that the other key objectives would be to maintain the Council's housing stock, manage the housing service, meet housing needs and effectively manage resources.

It was noted that the established Tenants Scrutiny Review panel had completed one review on complaints and had begun a review on Void properties.

Members of the working group discussed the report and asked questions. Key points raised were:

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- The Head of Housing confirmed that the Council was at the limits of its affordability but recognised the importance of investing in current housing stock.
- It was noted that the development of 22 new homes on the Wick site in Littlehampton would begin no later than October 2015.
- Referring to the financial analysis Members noted that the Council would need to borrow money to invest in properties. This would result in a small annual surplus in 2015-16 followed by gradually reducing deficits for the next 5 years, due to increased provision for repairs and improvements. The Head of Housing emphasised that Risk Management issues had been considered by the Council’s accountants and the financial situation would be continually monitored. The Council’s accountants were satisfied that the Council could borrow the level of money required comfortably.
- Members made comment that they were keen that suitable existing properties were acquired for Council Housing stock as more cost effective than new builds.
- Members were keen and the Head of Housing agreed that the sheltered housing works should begin as soon as possible. It was confirmed that there would be major improvement works to the Council’s sheltered housing during the first 5 years of the Business Plan. This would be funded by a mixture of loans and capital receipts, principally from proceeds from Right to Buy sales.
- A suggestion was made that solar panels should be installed on all new Council housing builds as opposed to after a housing development was completed. The Head of Housing stated that this was a good idea and would be considered. A member urged caution with respect to the installation of solar panels and planning permission, having recently dealt with a case where a new extension had been granted to a property that, when built, blocked light access to the adjacent property’s solar panels.
- A question was raised with respect to short term tenancies and their rights under Right to Buy. The Head of Housing stated that he would investigate this and provide answer outside of this meeting.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Housing for a comprehensive report and the working group then considered the report’s recommendations.

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The working group agreed to

RECOMMEND TO CABINET –

- (1) Agree the Business Plan
- (2) Agree the maximum borrowing of £18.1m to fund the Business Plan
- (3) Agree the commencement of work to build 22 homes in Wick
- (4) Authorise expenditure on the social housing element of the new properties in Barnham, developed by WSCC
- (5) Note a 5-year programme to improve and develop the Council’s sheltered housing, estimated at £1m p.a., with work commencing in 2016/17
- (6) Note that a further review of the Business Plan will be presented to the Committee in early 2017

48. WORK PROGRAMME 2015/16

The work programme and meeting dates for the new Municipal Year 2015/16 were noted.

As this was the last meeting of this working group for this Municipal Year (2014/15) the Chairman thanked Members and Officers for their contribution and steadfast support. The Chairman gave special thanks to the working group’s Committee Manager for all her good work and support to the committee over the year.

(The meeting concluded at 7.07pm)

Signed..... Dated.....