

'Subject to Approval at the Next Working Group Meeting'

HOUSING & CUSTOMER SERVICES WORKING GROUP

03 November 2015 at 6.00 p.m.

Present: - Councillors Mrs Ayres, Bence, Mrs Bence, Bicknell, Blampied, Mrs Bower, Clayden, Mrs Harrison-Horn, Mrs Pendleton & Mrs Porter.

Councillor Elkins & Councillor Gammon were also present for all or part of the meeting.

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

The Working Group was asked to elect its Chairman for the remainder of the municipal year 2015/16. Councillor Clayden was proposed and seconded for the post of Chairman.

On putting this proposal to the vote, the Working Group

RESOLVED

That Councillor Clayden be elected Chairman for the remainder of the 2015/16 municipal year.

2. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

The Chairman then asked for nominations for Vice-Chairman. Cllr Mrs Pendleton was nominated and seconded for the post of Vice-Chairman.

On putting this proposal to the vote, the Working Group

RESOLVED

That Councillor Mrs Pendleton be elected Vice-Chairman for the remainder of the 2015/16 municipal year.

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors; Edwards & Mrs Daniells.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

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5. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5 March 2015 were approved by the Working Group and were signed by the Chairman.

6. MEETING TIMES

The Working Group

RESOLVED

That its start times for meetings during 2015/16 be 6.00 pm.

7. HOUSING SERVICES UPDATE

The working group received a presentation from Managers of the Housing Service on their roles and responsibilities.

The Head of Housing introduced his Managers and highlighted key points from the briefing paper that had been circulated to working group Members as follows:

- It was noted that the Council dealt with 3,500 homes across the District with an approximate rental income of £17m (2015/16) and an approximate expenditure of £16.5m (2015/16).
- Following amendments to the Allocations Policy the Housing Register had been reduced to 700 plus applicants.
- The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan’s priorities were to deliver 150 new homes, replace boilers to communal heating systems in sheltered housing over a 5 year programme and a 5 year programme to improve sheltered housing schemes.
- It was noted that the Council had not met the deadline of October 2015 to build 22 new houses at Wick but this project was expected to commence at the beginning of 2016.
- The Head of Housing emphasised the impact of changes, recently announced by Government that had produced doubt over the Council’s ability to complete and achieve HRA Business Plan objectives. As a result the Council would have to revise the HRA Business Plan to take account of the new revenue position.

The Head of Housing concluded his presentation by explaining to Members that Housing Services would approach the challenges of future funding by taking steps to mitigate loss of income. This included the review of contracts, smarter ways of working, review of Lettable standards, disposal of non-essential land, viability of existing assets and potentially extending planned maintenance cycles.

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In discussing this part of the briefing Members expressed their concern at the impact to the Council’s HRA Business Plan and asked financial questions which were responded to at the meeting. It was agreed that a copy of the Council’s Allocations Policy would be circulated to all Members.

The Principal Environmental Health Officer outlined the Private Sector Housing Service and highlighted the following key points:

- It was noted that there was an upward trend of people moving into the private rental sector.
- The Private Sector Housing Team was responsible for ensuring Private Sector Housing Standards were maintained.
- Members attention was drawn to Disabled Facilities Grants as the Council was receiving a high number of referrals for Council and privately owned properties. The service worked with West Sussex Occupational Therapist Team to provide necessary adaptations to properties to maintain independence.
- A key part of this service was to ensure empty homes were brought back into use. It was noted that an Empty Homes officer had been appointed and worked 2 days a week, offering advice where appropriate, financial assistance through grants and loans and where necessary starting enforcement action.
- It was noted that the Transit Site had helped deal with the illegal encampment of travellers by giving Police powers to move them on quickly.

Members discussed the issues around empty homes and noted the importance of this work.

The Housing Policy & Performance Officer explained the service points around Housing Policy Development and Business Improvement. Policies recently reviewed were the Housing Complaints Policy and the CCTV policy. It was noted that a new Housing IT system was being implemented to help improve methods of working and service delivery.

In the absence of the Housing Services Manager the Head of Housing presented information with respect to this Council department. Processes behind Housing Allocations, Housing Options, Homelessness, Neighbourhood Services, Money Advice and Housing Fraud were explained.

The impact of Universal Credit was discussed. Members were informed that the Council had appointed a Money Adviser to help clients maximise income and assist those starting Universal Credit to help them afford and pay rents. It was explained that the Money Adviser was a new post and its benefit to the Council would be assessed and reported on within 9 months.

The Housing Customer Services Manager informed Members of the work of the Reactive Repairs Team which included repairs to Council Houses, Council House voids and Tenant Participation. It was noted that:

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- Reactive repairs was valued by tenants as a service with between 300 to 400 weekly calls to the Council with 1000 repair orders raised per month. Repairs ranged from quick fixes to those that needed technical repair or ongoing advice such as condensation/damp issues.
- There was a staff of 3.4fte that handled repair requests and 90% of these repairs were carried out by Mears. It was noted that Mears and Council staff were situated in the same office so that any problems with job issues could be resolved, mostly on the same day. Compliance officers post inspect Mears jobs that cost over £500 and spot check repairs of lower value.
- The Tenant Participation work was ongoing and the Tenant Scrutiny Panel, that the Housing & Customer Services Working Group endorsed, had completed complaint handling and void process reviews and would embark on customer journey mapping for repairs.

In discussing this service, Members were pleased that the Tenant Scrutiny Panel was successfully undertaking reviews. A question was raised with respect to void turnaround time. The Housing Customer Services Manager confirmed that the Council was on target at 12 days and better than the 28 day benchmarked standard.

The Planned Maintenance & Mechanical & Electrical (M&E) Manager provided information with respect to the Planned Maintenance Service. The Planned Maintenance Programme, Gas Maintenance Contract and the M&E Maintenance Contracts were outlined.

The Chairman commented that the Gas Safety Certificates were of great importance and would like an update reported to every meeting of this working group.

The Rent Arrears Team Leader presented information on the processes within the Rent Arrears Team and highlighted points were:

- This service was a team of 5 with the objective of income maximisation and minimising rent arrears. It was noted that the team worked closely with Financial Services to ascertain and monitor arrears.
- It was reported that the new housing IT system would be able to provide improved management information to aid the team. This would help enable realistic and achievable performance targets to be set.
- The expected impact of Universal Credit was outlined. Members were informed that unlike Housing Benefit, Universal Credit would be paid to tenants in arrears which would instantly increase the amount of the Council's rent arrears. Work was being undertaken to encourage tenants to plan and save for this change now.

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The Rent Arrears Team Leader concluded her briefing by inviting Members to visit the team. Members asked questions on rent arrears procedures and were pleased to note that action was being taken now to minimise the possible effects of Universal Credit to the Council’s rent arrears.

The Housing Project Development Officer presented Members with information on Housing Project Development. This work centred on the development and acquisition of new land and houses as well as Asset Management and Leasehold Management. Key points made were:

- Members were informed that the Council could not act as a private developer would and the process was therefore more laborious and longer for a local authority, having to adhere to European Union procedures. As a result the Council was also looking at developing new Council Homes on section 106 sites with land and build agreements with developers. One example was a development at Barnham where the Council had brought homes at 45% of the market value and would commence in Spring 2016.
- The Council was also acquiring existing homes for use as Council Homes.
- It was confirmed that all properties acquired for Council House use would be let at social rent rates.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Housing and his Managers for their informative presentations.

8. CUSTOMER SERVICES UPDATE

The Head of HR and Customer Services provided the Working Group with an update on developments within Customer Services since the Working Group last met in March 2015.

Key points noted were:

- Members were informed of the role of the Arun Direct Contact centre and the Council’s Reception Team. Customer Services had to continually adapt to meet customer demand. Reception staff could now take switchboard calls from their workstations when they were not busy with face to face Customers. This had resulted in reception staff taking 20 – 30% of switchboard calls. In the interests of multi-skilling contact centre staff would also work with face to face customers in reception.
- The expected impact of Universal Credit on Customer Services was outlined. As applicants of Universal Credit would only be able to apply online the Council was considering the best way to support customers through this process.
- Members were reminded that the new Arun website had been running since the Spring. Members were referred to a pie chart which detailed customer website hits by service. It was pointed out that the Corporate Management Team were discussing the

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future of the website and what further requirements were to ensure that it would be able to deliver all the functionality required for future needs.

- Members were advised that 30% of customers were accessing the website on mobile devices and so half of the e-forms used by the Council were now mobile friendly. Further work on this would continue.
- The Head of HR and Customer Services stated that Customer Services was aware that sending out poor written communications causes problems to the customer and becomes a huge source of inefficiency. Figures from Arun Direct indicated that as much as 40% of the Benefits calls into the Contact Centre were from customers who did not fully understand the letter they had received. Work had been done to improve the language and layout of letters which go out in large numbers to customers. Members were informed that if this decreases the amount of unnecessary calls letters would also be revised in other service areas.
- Business continuity arrangements had been made with Chichester District Council which would be trialled shortly. This would mean a team of 6 people would be available to answer phone calls, in an emergency situation, if no telephony was available at the respective Council.

Members asked a number of questions surrounding the contact centre and customer service issues which were responded to at the meeting.

The Chairman thanked the Head of HR and Customer Services for her comprehensive update and encouraged Members who had not yet visited the Contact Centre to do so.

9. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Terms of Reference for the Environmental Services & Community Development Working Group for the Municipal Year 2015/16 were agreed.

10. WORK PROGRAMME 2015/16

The working group considered the work programme for the new Municipal Year 2015/16 and noted the items for inclusion. Items were then scheduled to the appropriate meeting date as follows:

- Rough Sleepers Report with update from Stonepillow – 07 January 2016
- Customer Services Update – 07 January 2016
- Housing Complaints Policy – 07 January 2016
- Empty Homes Report – 10 March 2016

(The meeting concluded at 8.10pm)

Signed..... Date.....