

‘Subject to Approval at the Next Working Group Meeting’

HOUSING & CUSTOMER SERVICES WORKING GROUP

26 January 2017 at 6.00 p.m.

Present: - Councillors Clayden (Chairman), Mrs Pendleton (Vice-Chairman), Mrs Ayres, Bicknell, Blampied, Edwards, Mrs Harrison-Horn [from Minute 25 to 29 Part], Mrs Porter and Mrs Rapnik.

Councillors; Ambler, Bence, R Bower, Chapman, Dillon, and Haymes were also present for all or part of the meeting.

25. APOLOGY FOR ABSCENCE

An apology for absence had been received from Councillor Mrs Daniells.

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Monitoring Officer has advised Members of interim arrangements to follow when making declarations of interest. They have been advised that for the reasons explained below, they should make their declarations on the same basis as the former Code of Conduct using the descriptions of Personal and Prejudicial Interests.

Reasons

- The Council has adopted the government’s example for a new local code of conduct, but new policies and procedures relating to the new local code are yet to be considered and adopted.
- Members have not yet been trained on the provisions of the new local code of conduct.
- The definition of Pecuniary Interests is narrower than the definition of Prejudicial Interests, so by declaring a matter as a Prejudicial Interest, that will cover the requirement to declare a Pecuniary Interest in the same matter.

Where a Member declares a “Prejudicial Interest” this will, in the interest of clarity for the public, be recorded in the Minutes as a Prejudicial and Pecuniary Interest.

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

27. MINUTES

An amendment to the minutes of the meeting of the Housing & Customer Service Working Group held on 24 November 2016 was made as follows:

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- Councillor Mrs Ayres was removed under Members Present as her apologies had been given and recorded.
- Councillor Blampied was added as attending under Members Present.
- Councillor Mrs Porter was added as attending under Members Present.

Following this amendment the minutes were approved and then signed by the Chairman.

28. UPDATE FROM STONEPILLOW

The Chairman welcomed the newly appointed Chief Executive of StonePillow, Geoffrey Willis, to the meeting.

Members received an update on the work of StonePillow from the Chief Executive. Having recently joined StonePillow, he outlined his background in Health, Education and Social Care charities that supported vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

StonePillow’s objectives were outlined as a five stage plan towards successfully offering shelter, information and support and empowerment to homeless individuals that would help make positive changes in their lives. It was noted that the work of StonePillow continued against a background of a national rise in homelessness whilst public funding was being cut. The Chief Executive informed Members that a recent estimate indicated a 30% increase in Rough Sleeping in the last 12 months and so StonePillow’s services were being challenged to meet demand.

StonePillow’s five stages towards successfully housing a homeless individual were explained:

1. Outreach – The first step was to find and engage with homeless individuals. StonePillow did not undertake outreach work but were passed cases from other agencies that referred individuals to StonePillow’s day centres at Chichester or Bognor Regis.
2. Engagement – Following outreach StonePillow could engage with individuals at their day centres, assessing their needs and providing appropriate support.
3. This included Recovery Services for alcohol and drug addiction. StonePillow operated a residential rehabilitation centre, a 12 bedroom facility at Canada Grove which was staffed 24 hours, 7 days a week. StonePillow had a strict abstinence policy with anyone failing a drug test being asked to leave after one chance.
4. Hostels and Supported Accommodation – In a move towards independent living individuals could be housed in hostels or

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supported accommodation. This was largely funded by Housing Benefit. The majority of supported accommodation was based in Bognor Regis and Littlehampton as Chichester was more expensive.

5. Inclusion and Wellbeing – The next stage towards independent living was to empower an individual and help recover their confidence. A number of StonePillow projects such as Restore and Revive which offered work based skills and training enabled a sense of self-worth through work.

StonePillow’s Chief Executive stated that this type of approach towards tackling homelessness was 87% effective, better than the national average of 65%.

As well as long term help for homeless people StonePillow operated an emergency, Severe Weather Emergency Protection (SWEP) service. It was noted that figures for rough sleeping had doubled since 2010. This was due to the national problems of a lack of affordable housing, private rent evictions increasing and a large increase in mental health issues and Social Care referrals. StonePillow used their Lodge as a facility for those that had been discharged from hospital with no home.

Stonepillow’s Chief Executive outlined the concerns he had with SWEP provision in that numbers of homeless needing emergency facilities were increasing but the cost of provision outstripped the grant the Council provided. It was noted that StonePillow were actively seeking to find a more suitable location for cold weather, emergency, rough sleepers.

Following the briefing from StonePillow’s Chief Executive a number of questions were asked which were responded to at the meeting. The Chief Executive outlined his concern that the number of cases of homelessness was increasing with 1 in 3 people who lose their job unable to pay their mortgage/rent after the second month. A number of homeless cases were due to mental health issues and numbers of homelessness cases from the Social Care system was also increasing.

The Chief Executive’s vision for the future was to provide a ‘one stop shop’ type of facility where all relevant agencies could be situated in one hub so that homeless individuals had immediate access to the required support. This would include mental health support as StonePillow was part of a Mental Healthcare Alliance. This would aid engagement and help to effectively progress a homeless individual’s circumstances.

Following discussion, the Chairman and Members of the Working Group thanked StonePillow’s Chief Executive for attending the meeting and providing an excellent, informative presentation. Members agreed that the Council would continue to take a keen and active interest in StonePillow and their work.

29. HOUSING FRAUD INVESTIGATION

The working group received a presentation from the Housing Fraud Investigator. It was explained that the Housing Fraud Investigator was a new role introduced by the Government's Housing Fraud Act which came into force in 2013. Previously the Council had very few powers to look at Housing Fraud.

Members were informed that the Council was committed to finding and preventing Housing Fraud to ensure that their properties were being given to the people that really need them. Arun District Council's Fraud Investigator had started the position in January 2016 and had achieved an excellent standard of success in detecting fraud. It was reported that from 1 January 2016 to 31 March 2016 the Council received 6 properties back following detected fraud. From 1 April 2016 to 31 December 2016 the Council obtained a further 6 properties. The official savings to Arun District Council from 1 January 2016 to 31 December 2016 was reported as £488,230.43.

Examples of success stories were outlined together with pictures of properties that had been converted and illegally sub-let. The Housing Fraud investigator pointed out that a Council Tenant could make a large amount of money by paying council rent prices whilst charging other individuals a much larger fee to stay in the property. Members were shocked to note some of the lengths people would go to in committing housing fraud and the subsequent damage to the Council's property.

The Housing Fraud Investigator had also stopped fraudulent Right to Buy Applications once enquiries had been made as to the legality of the requests.

Following questions responded to at the meeting, the working group invited the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor Bence, to speak. The Cabinet Member for Housing was extremely proud and pleased with the Council's Housing Team and confident they would continue to deliver including with respect to the Housing Revenue Account. He announced that the Council would be taking a Housing Stock Survey with each Council property being checked for its condition. It was expected that this exercise could identify further cases of fraud as well as monitoring stock for suitability. He was pleased that the Council was embracing opportunity and planning to build more properties at affordable rents. The Cabinet Member for Housing was also very pleased with the outcome of the Housing Fraud Investigator's appointment. It was pointed out that the post holder had worked tirelessly to achieve good results. The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for Housing for his contribution.

Further discussion highlighted the following key points:

- The Housing Fraud Act did not include Housing Association Properties. The Housing Fraud Investigator stated that the

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Council could expand its team and offer their services to Housing Associations.

- It was anticipated that detecting cases of Housing Fraud would get more difficult as time goes on as all the more obvious cases are addressed and word of mouth alerts fraudsters.
- The numbers of Council properties damaged by fraudsters were noted and although the Council billed for damage there was no guarantee they would receive monies.

The Chairman thanked the Housing Fraud Investigator for her informative presentation and the working group praised and thanked her for her excellent work.

The Housing & Customer Services Working Group was in strong agreement that the post of Housing Fraud Investigator should be made permanent.

30. DIGITAL TEA PARTY

The Head of Housing & Customer Services provided an update on Arun District Council’s initiative to host a ‘Digital Drop-In’ for the residents of Arun to help them access the Council’s services on their computer, tablet or mobile phone. Any other technical questions would also be addressed as well as giving coaching on how to use google and navigate a local government website.

It was noted that the ‘Digital Drop-In’ would be held on Wednesday 15 February 2017 in the Council Chamber at Bognor Regis Town Hall. Five members of the Council’s Customer Service staff would be on hand to assist customers. Moving forward other suitable locations in Arun would be investigated for a further ‘Digital Drop-In’. It was explained that the Council could host this every two or three months but would be led by demand and plans remained flexible.

Public access to the Council’s digital services had reduced staff workloads by encouraging digital contact. One example given was the Council’s Christmas closure where information on the Council’s website with respect to emergency contact numbers was used by residents. In 2015 66 people had used this website page. This year, following promotion through Facebook and Twitter, 1000 had made use of this website page.

In discussion the working group mentioned groups which could be made aware of the Digital Drop-In idea as it would be of benefit to them as a customer base. U3A (University of the Third Age) and Age UK were two organisations that were suggested. The Head of HR and Customer Services welcomed these ideas and asked for further suggestions to be mailed to herself or the Committee Manager.

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The working group recognised and praised the five members of Customer Services staff who had worked very hard, with enthusiasm on the forthcoming Digital Drop-In. The Chairman thanked them for their hard work and thanked the Head of HR and Customer Services for her informative briefing. The working group were pleased to note the progress that had been made.

31. WORK PROGRAMME 2016/17

In discussing the work programme 2016/17 it was noted that the meeting on 23 March 2017 would consider the work programme for 2017/18. The Vice- Chairman stated and it was agreed that it would be beneficial to include StonePillow in 2017/18 to monitor progress especially with Severe Weather Emergency Provision.

The working group then noted the work programme 2016/17.

(The meeting concluded at 7.38pm)