

‘Subject to Approval at the Next Working Group Meeting’

HOUSING & CUSTOMER SERVICES WORKING GROUP

4 January 2018 at 6.00 p.m.

Present: - Councillors Hughes (Chairman), Mrs Porter (Vice-Chairman), Mrs Ayres, Blampied and Mrs Harrison-Horn [from Minute 21 to Minute 26 Part].

Councillor Bence was also in attendance as Cabinet Member for Residential Services

21. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Mrs Rapnik.

22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

23. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Housing & Customer Service Working Group held on 2 November 2017 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

24. REVIEW OF THE ROLE OF WORKING GROUPS

In the absence of the report’s author (Group Head of Council Advice and Monitoring), the Group Head of Technical Services presented and advised that the Constitution Working Party had requested that the operation of the current Working Groups be reviewed as part of its ongoing work on reviewing the Council’s Constitution. Members’ views were sought to inform the review.

It was explained that there were two areas to be considered, particularly:-

- Size of membership – the practice at the moment was to rely on volunteers, which had led to unwieldy numbers of 22 last year and 19 this year. A more practical membership was felt to be a maximum of 15. However, if there was a move away from volunteers then, under current rules, there would be a requirement to have political balance as that would be the only way to allocate seats.
- Past feedback from Members had indicated that it was felt that the Working Groups needed a clearer purpose and role in the decision making structure – the way forward could be to make changes to allow them some delegated authority as a decision maker.

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It was being suggested that both Working Groups could become Subcommittees; be politically balanced with a membership size of no more than 10 to 15; and have a degree of clearly specified decision making powers.

It was explained that in putting forward these proposals, consultation had been undertaken initially with the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the two Working Groups and the Group Leaders. The Chairman of this Working Group and the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Environment & Leisure Working Group all supported a review, together with the Leader of the Council. The Leaders of the Liberal Democrat and Independent Group had both advised they would present their views at Working Group meetings.

It was noted that this report had already been considered by the Environment & Leisure Working Group at its meeting on 19 December 2017. A number of Members of the Environment & Leisure Working Group did not support any change to current arrangements as they wished to see the status quo continue and that the levels of delegation being proposed would not make a significant difference to the role of the Working Groups. The Group Head of Technical Services advised that the final recommendation of the Environment & Leisure Working Group, to the Constitution Working Party, was that the proposals to change the remit of the Working Groups should be rejected and no change should be made to current arrangements.

The Housing & Customer Services Working Group was asked to compile its response to the proposals, as presented in the report, for submission to the Constitution Working Party. It was noted that once all views were known and considered by the Working Party, then any proposal for change, would then be presented to Full Council for consideration.

In discussing the report’s proposals Members generally felt that working groups, too often, became an information gathering forum rather than providing backbenchers with the capacity to contribute to the Council’s decision making process. Councillor Bence was permitted by the Working Group to speak on this matter and explained the main differences between Working Groups and Sub-Committees. He stated that the proposals would provide Members with decision making authority and therefore more involvement in Democratic Processes. The Chairman advised that, when consulted, he had agreed with the report’s proposals as Members would be given an opportunity for more active participation.

In further discussion and after questions had been asked and responded to at the meeting the Housing and Customer Services Working Group Members rejected current working group arrangements and unanimously voted for change as described in the report and set out below:

- Both Working Groups should become Sub-Committees;
- they should be politically balanced with a membership size of no more than 10 to 15; and
- they should have a degree of decision making powers with these being clearly specified.

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The Housing and Customer Services Working Group then,

RECOMMEND TO THE CONSTITUTION WORKING PARTY

That the proposals to change the remit of the Working Groups be accepted and changes be made to current arrangements.

25. EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

The Working Group received a report from the Group Head of Technical Services on the Empty Homes Strategy 2018 – 2023. The strategy had been updated and detailed the positive work that had been achieved since 2012. The strategy also outlined a revised plan for the next five years to tackle empty homes across all tenures within the Arun District.

Members noted that long term empty homes could:

- Attract crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour.
- Become a public health hazard and magnet to vermin as well as look unsightly and pose a potential danger to the community including children.
- Detract from the neighbourhood amenity.
- Reduce the value of adjacent properties.
- Cost the community for visits and action by Police and the Councils Private Sector Housing and Public Health Team as well as the loss of Council tax revenue.

The Group Head of Technical Services explained that Arun District Council was committed to bringing empty residential properties back into use. It was noted that since 2006 the Council had employed a part time Empty Properties Officer and from April 2017 this position was made full time. Focus had been placed on properties that had been empty for more than six months.

The Group Head of Technical Services highlighted the advantages of the Government’s New Homes Bonus grant that was paid for increasing the number of available homes. It was explained that the work of the Empty Properties Officer contributed to the amount of New Homes Bonus the Council received and since 2014 this had equated to approximately £1 million.

The Group Head of Technical Services concluded by referring Members to the report’s recommendation that requested their recommendation to Cabinet that the Empty Homes Strategy 2018-2023 be adopted.

The Chairman thanked the Group Head of Technical Services for his comprehensive report. In discussion, where questions were asked and responded to at the meeting, Working Group Members welcomed the strategy, recognising the positive work that was taking place to bring empty properties back in to use, and the report’s recommendation was agreed.

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The Housing and Customer Service Working Group,

RECOMMEND TO CABINET

That the Empty Homes Strategy 2018-2023 be adopted.

26. HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION ACT AND WELFARE REFORM PRESENTATION

The Group Head of Residential Services and the Rent Arrears Team Leader provided the Working Group with a presentation on the impact to the Council with respect to the Welfare Reform and Homelessness Reduction Act.

Welfare Reform

The Rent Arrears Team Leader outlined the Government's Welfare Reforms as:

- Freezing of Local Housing Allowance Rates and Welfare Benefits
- 1% Rent Reduction
- Voluntary Right to Buy (Housing Association Tenants)
- Sale of High Value Assets (Council Stock)
- Spare Room Subsidy (Under occupation Charge)
- Further Reduction in Benefit Cap
- Universal Credit (UC)

It was explained that these reforms affected working age people and could affect the ability of some of the Council's tenants to pay their rent on time and in full. The Rent Arrears Team Leader highlighted how the Benefit Cap, Spare Room Subsidy and Universal Credit could impact on Arun District Council's tenants and outlined what strategies the Council was putting in place to help with any negative consequences of Welfare Reform.

It was noted that the introduction of Universal Credit had been piloted and the lessons learned in this pilot would help inform the Council on expected impacts and how these may be mitigated. These mitigations were outlined as:

- Housing Options Advice
- Improve links with Job Centre Plus to aid early intervention
- Welfare Rights Advice and Representation
- Money Advice
- Financial Capability
- Education
- Access to IT
- Affordable Credit (Credit Unions)
- Use of Discretionary Housing Payments

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It was noted that full roll out of Universal Credit for “all” new claimants in Arun had been deferred from 1 April to 1 July following the November 2017 Budget.

After a number of questions responded to at the meeting, the Cabinet Member for Residential Services praised the Rent Arrears Team Leader for her hard work and thanked her for the effective methods that had been implemented to assist Arun District Council’s Tenants.

Homelessness and Housing Need

The Group Head of Residential Services outlined the Council’s position with respect to Homelessness and Housing Need. Members were informed of the following National trends:

- Increase in homelessness presentations over the last 3 years
- Increase in use of and length of stay in temporary accommodation
- Increase in households applying to join the Housing Register
- Affordability issues – Local Housing Allowance Rate not keeping pace with private rented sector rents
- Housing Associations introducing stricter allocations criteria – affordability checks

It was noted that, as a result of these National trends, Central Government were introducing the Homelessness Act with effect from April 2018. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 set out new duties on local authorities with the aim of preventing homelessness. The Homelessness Reduction Act amended Part 7 - Housing Act 1996 but did not replace it. The Group Head of Residential Services explained how Residential Services would be responding to the increased demands and how it was preparing to meet the new responsibilities that would be placed on the council upon introduction of the Act.

Members were informed that the Council would no longer assess cases on ‘priority need’ but would be expected to provide meaningful help to all eligible households irrespective of priority need. Obligations were noted as:

- new legal obligations on English councils to provide meaningful help to all eligible households irrespective of priority need
- Extended definition of threatened with homelessness – 56 days
- Assess and agree a plan if someone is homeless or threatened with Homelessness within 56 days
- Take reasonable steps to help someone avoid homelessness –the new prevention duty
- Take reasonable steps to help to secure accommodation for homeless –the new relief duty
- An expectation that applicants should cooperate with efforts to assist them
- New duty on public services to notify a local authority if they come into contact with someone they think may be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless

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Members were informed that ‘new burdens’ funding would be provided by Central Government to assist with the Council’s implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act but it was not known how long this funding would continue. Another challenge was noted as the supply of suitable accommodation.

The Group Head of Residential Services outlined some of the measures that the Council would adopt to meet the Homelessness Prevention Duties:

- Personalised approach as opposed to process led
- Continue to focus on Homelessness Prevention Work
- Partnership working with Housing Associations/Private Rent Sector to maximise available social housing
- Joint working with community services that provide housing support such as housing advice/ money advice

Following questions that were responded to at the meeting the Chairman thanked the Group Head of Residential Services and the Rent Arrears Team Leader for their comprehensive and informative presentation.

(The meeting concluded at 7.18pm)