

HOUSING & CUSTOMER SERVICES WORKING GROUP

19 September 2019 at 6.00 pm

Present: Councillors Bennett (Chairman), Coster (Vice-Chair), Bicknell, Charles, Mrs Cooper, Mrs Haywood, Hughes, Mrs Pendleton and Ms Thurston (Substitute for Mrs Catterson)

[Note: The following Councillor was absent from the meeting during the following items of business – Councillors Mrs Pendleton and Ms Thurston Minute 1 to Minute 4 (Part).]

Apologies: Councillors C Blanchard-Cooper and Chapman

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

2. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2019 were approved as a correct record by the Working Group and signed by the Chairman.

3. MEETING START TIMES

The Working Group

RESOLVED

That the start times of meetings for the remainder of 2019/20 be 6.00 p.m.

4. RE PROCUREMENT OF RESPONSIVE REPAIRS CONTRACT UPDATE

The Group Head of Residential Services presented her update report outlining the current Contract for repairs and maintenance and associated works and services for Council Housing Stock with Mears Limited was due to expire in June 2020.

She explained that earlier in 2019 the Council appointed Faithorn Farrell Timms LLP (FFT) as its consultants to assist with the procurement of a new contract. There were now four candidates who had been invited on 16 August 2019 to tender for the new Contract, with a view to secure a contract term based on 5 years with the option to extend for a further 3 years and a further 2 years thereafter.

Members were advised that a future report would be taken to Cabinet to request the award of the new Contract when appropriate.

Housing & Customer Services Working Group - 19.09.19

A number of questions were asked by Members of the Working Group, the key points raised were:

- If an end of contract report from Mears Limited would be provided to evaluate their performance over the last three years of the contract
- Confirmation was sought about the void process and if residents would be required to pay for the work undertaken. Members were advised that charges only applied if deliberate damage had been caused. In this scenario residents would be recharged the cost of fixing the damage.

The Chairman thanked the Group Head of Residential Services for her update and the Working Group noted the report.

5. STRATEGIC DIRECTION OF CUSTOMER SERVICES

The Group Head of Neighbourhood Services and The Customer and Parking Services Manager presented their report and outlined that the new draft strategy contained within his report reflected the Council's 2020 Vision and suggested a new Customer Service Vision that would put the Customer at the heart of everything the Council does. This is summarised as follows:

- The report briefly reviewed progress since the implementation of the 2013-17 Strategy
- It introduces a new draft strategy and sets out a process of implementation. This includes consultation and workshops with elected members and staff
- The draft Customer Access Strategy (2020-25) reflects the Council's 2020 Vision and suggests a new Customer Services Vision which aims to place the customer at the heart of everything that the Council does.
- It sets out how a new strategy will be embedded into the organisation together with a proposed timescale.

Some key areas of progress that had been made were highlighted:

- Training had been provided to multi-skill staff across the Customer Service teams
- Website redesign although there was further work to be completed on this item, it had seen significant progress made and was now providing a much better service for the customer e.g. smartphone access, improved self-service options from reporting missed bin collections online to making online payments.
- Social Media, regular updates across all social media channels allow the Council to respond directly with Customers as well as using these platforms to keep our customers informed of updates.

- From the Customer Satisfaction Survey (2019) the results showed that the largest percentage of our customers (44%) said that their preference was to make contact with the Council via the website.
- Implementation of a new vision across the organisation would be vital to ensure success of the new strategy and it would require everyone across the Council to be putting the customer first in everything they do in order for this culture change to be successful.

Members to part in a full debate, the key points raised were:

- Suggestions to make improvement to the telephone Interactive Voice Response (IVR) as these can be difficult and frustrating to use
- Support for customers who want to use the website but don't have a computer or access to the internet
- A suggestion to investigate Repeat Contact reasons was made as this had not be detailed in the report provided.
- How contact is logged at the Council, and the ease of locating all the customers information was discussed and a suggestion of logging contact to a case number was made.

It was confirmed that the aim of the new strategy was to ensure that customers had options to contact the Council to suit their needs. Whilst there had been a focus on boosting the number of customers who use the website to serve themselves, it was acknowledged that this does not suit everyone.

For those customers who may find using the internet difficult, there had been computers available in the reception areas along with staff to support anyone who wanted help accessing the website. A suggestion of working with Libraries and local community groups in a bid to help support and educate specific target groups of customers was made. Further confirmation was given by the Customer & Parking Services Manager that work was being completed to identify why customers contact the Council which included investigation into customers who would be classed as repeat contact.

Further discussion took place as to how the Council would manage such a big culture change in order to see the new vision be successful, Members felt that it would require a lot of work. Officers were in agreement with Members, this was a big task, however work had already started under the existing Strategy, working with key managers across the business implementing improvements to processes. Workshops for staff to attend would be taking place as part of the implementation of the Strategy, and there was consideration to employing a consultant as required.

The Chairman advised that he had spent time in the Contact Centre last week and wanted to express his thanks to the team for the great work they do. This was echoed by the rest of the Working Group who all appreciated what a demanding role they have. He then thanked the Group Head of Neighbourhood Services and the Customer and Parking Services Manager for their update and the Working Group noted the report.

Housing & Customer Services Working Group - 19.09.19

6. ASBESTOS MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Group Head of Residential Services presented her update report and outlined that the Council as a Landlord of social housing has responsibility for managing the maintenance and repairs of its housing stock, including managing asbestos in each property.

She advised that the Control of Asbestos Regulations had come into effect from April 2012, with the aim to protect workers and other people from the potential dangers of asbestos. Explaining that duty holders must take reasonable steps to find materials in premises likely to contain asbestos and check their condition, make and maintain a record of location and condition of asbestos, assess the likelihood of anyone being exposed to asbestos and manage that risk accordingly.

In summing up she explained that Members would receive a fully updated Asbestos Policy and Management Plan at the December meeting of this Working Group.

Members had a full discussion on the update provided, the key points raised were:

- Members sought clarification on the categorisation for different risk levels for the different forms of asbestos and it was confirmed that it would be clearly defined in the next update.
- Thanks, was given to The Group Head of Residential Services in particular the work and change that she had driven since joining the Council was expressed as amazing and this was evidenced by the great results that had been achieved by her team.
- A request to understand how near the Council was to be being compliant in respect of asbestos was made. It was confirmed that this information would be shared at the next meeting as part of the Health & Safety update report.

The Chairman thanked the Group Head of Residential Services for her report and the Working Group noted the report update.

7. REPORT BACK FROM CABINET/FULL COUNCIL

No queries or questions on recommendations that had been forwarded from the Working Group to Full Council on 7 February 2019 were raised.

8. WORK PROGRAMME 2019/2020

The Group Head of Neighbourhood Services presented the Work Programme for 2019/20 to members.

Members put forward a number of suggestions to be considered, these are listed below:

- Council Housing Stock update to be provided in December in particular confirming the Council being fully compliant across all Health & Safety areas by November 2019.
- Invitation to have Stone Pillow and Turning Tides attend one of these meetings to provide an update, as there is concern that when the West Sussex County Council (WSSCC) cuts are implemented in November that these will impact the District significantly.
- An update on the number of Empty Homes within the district was requested as members were aware that the figure reported at 7 February 2019 meeting of 416 had now increased to 600. It was confirmed an update on this report is due to be presented to the Working Group in February 2020.
- Members were keen to confirm if the Working Group would have the opportunity to influence the Allocations Review Policy before it was presented at the February 2020 meeting. The Group Head of Residential Services confirmed that a briefing session could be arranged for members to attend.
- The Energy Efficiency and Fuel Poverty report also due in February 2020 would Carbon Emissions be addressed within this report.

Following consideration, the Working Group

RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL

That the Housing & Customer Services Working Group Work Programme for 2019/20 be approved.

(The meeting concluded at 7.00 pm)