

HOUSING AND WELLBEING COMMITTEE

23 November 2023 at 6.00 pm

Present: Councillors Birch (Chair), Haywood (Vice-Chair), Bicknell, J English, Long, Pendleton, Wiltshire, Dr Walsh, Yeates, Madeley (substitute for Bence) and McDougall (substitute for Butcher)

[Councillor Walsh was absent for discussion of the matters referred to in the following minutes - Minute 412 to Minute 416 (Part)]

Apologies: Councillors Bence and Butcher

405. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Bence and Butcher.

406. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Bicknell declared a Personal Interest in Agenda Item 7 as a Member of Angmering Parish Council.

407. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Housing and Wellbeing Committee held on 12 September 2023 were approved and signed by the Chair.

408. ITEMS NOT ON THE AGENDA THAT THE CHAIRMAN OF THE MEETING IS OF THE OPINION SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AS A MATTER OF URGENCY BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The Chair confirmed that there were no urgent matters for this meeting.

409. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The Chair confirmed that no public questions had been submitted for this meeting.

410. BUDGET MONITORING REPORT TO 30 SEPTEMBER 2023

The Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer was invited by the Chair to present the report. He referred to Table 1 that set out the 2023/24 revenue out turn forecast for Quarter 2 against the budget, highlighting an anticipated underspend of £240,000, which was an adverse change since Quarter 1 of £160,000. He drew attention to the major changes to the Revenue Budget at paragraphs 4.2 to 4.4. in particular referring to the homeless estimate which had increased by £300,000 since Quarter 1. It was anticipated that the Council's recently approved capital investments for projects would reduce the financial impact. However, it should be noted that homelessness expenditure is driven by price and volumes, and whilst the Council could

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exert some influence over the former, it could not control the volume of homeless clients, which was the issue that adversely affected the budget.

He reported that the Chancellor had released his Autumn Budget Statement the previous day. Of particular interest for Housing was the increase in the Local Housing allowances. Once officers had considered the impacts, the outcome would be reported to this committee via the budget monitoring report. It had also been announced that there would be additional Local Authority Housing Fund money available, but at this stage it was not known if the council would benefit from this fund. It was noted that the Council had previously successfully applied for a grant to purchase seven properties to accommodate homeless clients, which was hoped would have a positive effect on the budget.

Turning to the Capital Programme this showed an under spend of £6.4 million due to slippage. The Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer said he would speak further on this at item 12. Whilst there were no immediate signs of financial distress, members should bear in mind that homelessness presented a real risk in cost terms for the council, as was the same for other councils across the Country.

The Chair then invited questions and comments from members. It was asked why, at table 1, the Fred Lyons Pool, Wave Leisure Centre, Windmill Theatre and Leisure were shown as four separate headings, as these services were run by Freedom Leisure, which made comparisons difficult. The Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer undertook to provide a written answer explaining why these budget cost codes were separated and whether it was possible to merge them in future reports. Responding to a question of the timescale of when the report on Sheltered Accommodation would be considered by this Committee, the Interim Group Head of Housing advised that work on this matter was progressing. A meeting to discuss feasibility had taken place earlier in the day to discuss the next steps and a briefing would be arranged for councillors in the new year. The Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer undertook to provide a breakdown of the costings for each of the services provided by the Wave Leisure Centre.

During the discussion views were expressed that it was hoped that there would be progress on more social housing and council houses being built and the Decarbonisation Scheme slippage was of concern if the money was used for match funding other grant pots.

The Committee noted the report.

411. SAFER ARUN PARTNERSHIP SCRUTINY REPORT

The Community Safety Officer was invited to present his report. The report provided details of the previous two Safer Arun Partnership meetings and the decisions on Grant funding made, set out at paragraphs 4.4, 4.5 and 4.13 of the report.

The Chair then invited members to make comments or ask any questions. Details of the concerns of shoppers, including the elderly, of incidents of youths gathering in Littlehampton town centre at the end of the day, which had made it a no-go

area. Details of the same issues happening in Bognor Regis Town centre were also reported. It was felt that Community Wardens and Police Community Support Officers were not challenging the youths who caused problems. The Community Safety Officer advised that the Local Action Team (LAT) were the 'boots on the ground' officers. The LAT was aware of the issues, which also included incidences of youths riding e-scooters and were discussing how to best address these issues, having requested support from Sussex Police and the Community Safety Team on these issues. The Community Safety Officer provided details of the provision for volunteers to borrow equipment to undertake road speed watches in areas where there were issues. Sussex Police can issue warning letters to drivers caught speeding. The re-introduction of Youth Outreach sessions was welcomed by members. The Community Safety Officer confirmed that the sessions had started, with Arun Youth Project providing three evening engagement sessions a week in Littlehampton town centre. It should be noted that recognising the need for youth provision, although a partnership, was ultimately the responsibility of WSCC who should be left to lead on this provision.

The Community Safety Officer undertook to include less acronyms in future reports.

The Committee noted the report.

412. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS 2022-2026 - QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR THE PERIOD 1 APRIL 2023 TO 30 SEPTEMBER 2023.

(Councillor Walsh left the meeting at the start of this item)

The Interim Group Head of Housing was invited to introduce the report.

The Chair invited questions and comments from members. During the discussion members raised concern as to CP16 (average days to average days to re-let all properties key to key excluding major voids), although some improvements had been made since Quarter 1, it was considered that the out turn was still not acceptable. The Interim Group Head of Housing provided details of the tender process carried out during Quarter 1 to appoint a second contractor who was now working though the majority of the voids to improve turnaround times. With regards to the estimated timeline of when the voids target would be met, it was expected that the trajectory set out in Appendix for both Quarters 3 and 4, which showed an improving target, would be met. It was requested that the Committee should receive a report providing details of the number of all voids, with explanations for the reasons for the longer-term voids (more than 60 days), so that the Committee to understand the progress being made.

The Interim Group Head of Housing was pleased to the recruitment of a Technical Services Manager and three Technical Officer posts, filling posts previously occupied partially by interims and its as hoped they would form a long-standing relationship with Arun DC. As well as improving the Voids situation, these posts would be involved in responding to and resolving any issues that arose from work undertaken, which in turn would reduce the number of complaints received. It was commented that

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these posts would only help to improve the situation and thanks were expressed to the Interim Group Head of Housing.

Councillor Bicknell referred to the number of issues in his Ward asked if he could attend a site visit with one of the Technical Officers, which he agreed he would take up with the new Interim Head of Housing.

The Interim Group Head of Housing undertook to provide members with a copy of the previous Voids Policy 2020-2023 and the current Voids policy, as well as details of the process.

Members thanked the officers for arranging the Housing Tour held on 20 October 2023, which had been very informative. The Interim Group Head of Housing said he would pass on the members thanks to the officers involved.

The Committee noted the contents of the report and provided questions and comments on the indicators relevant to this Committee to the Policy and Finance Committee on 8 February 2024.

413. PERFORMANCE MEASURES FOR HOUSING SERVICES - QUARTER 2
PERFORMANCE FOR THE PERIOD 1 JULY 2023 TO 30 SEPTEMBER 2023

The Interim Business Improvement Manager was invited to present the report to members. Compared to Quarter 1, improvements in performance had been achieved for seven targets during Quarter 2. Referring to Appendix 1, it was expected that this trend would continue at a higher rate, particularly in relation to Voids. Compliance performance had also improved across Gas Safety and Electrical Checks. Despite unprecedented demand, the time households were spending in temporary and emergency accommodation fell slightly. With regards to repair response times, the contractor was still not meeting the targets set and was not providing the service that residents expect. The continuing work to improve the response times and the processes expected to achieve improvements. Appendix 2 set out the work undertaken by the Council's Fraud Investigation Enforcement Officer who had recovered six properties this financial year.

The Chair invited members to make comment or ask any questions. The re-introduction of a Fraud Investigation Enforcement Officer role was welcomed, as it would ensure properties were provided to those who needed them and stop abuse of the system. Reports of fraud were increasing, specifically for subletting and non-occupation. The Interim Business Improvement Manager undertook to include a comparison in the Quarter 3 report, in terms of fraud with a breakdown of the different types. A member requested a copy of the terms of reference for sub-letting for Council houses, as he felt there was confusion as to what was allowed. The Interim Business Improvement Manager advised that Sub-letting, was a term set out within the tenancy agreements. She undertook to check the tenancy agreement document was correct and to forward a copy of the tenancy agreement to members.

The Interim Business Improvement Manager agreed to provide the actual numbers in addition to the percentages for each target in future reports.

The Committee noted the contents of the report.

414. HOUSING SERVICES COMPLAINTS PERFORMANCE AND DETERMINATIONS Q2

The Chair invited the Interim Business Improvement Manager to present the report to members. There has been a slight increase in the volume of complaints during Quarter 2 with high volumes of complaints impacting workloads, which was in line with increases other councils were experiencing, particularly concerning the repairs service. It was expected that the situation would improve during Quarter 3 and at this point benchmarking would be available against other councils.

The recommendations were proposed by Councillor McDougall and seconded by Councillor Yeates.

The Interim Group Head of Housing explained that He advised a member who had concerns about the number of long-term complaints concerning outstanding repairs and other actions still outstanding within his Ward that the member could contact him outside of the meeting to discuss his concerns further.

A typographical error was identified in the chart showing the root causes of complaints at page 61, 'Homeless Compliant' should read 'Homeless Complaint'.

It was explained that the types of complaints received under 'Compliance' related to health and safety compliance. Generally a range of complaints were received concerning Homelessness, which could include a complaint about a decision where there was no statutory right of appeal or about the service provision itself. The Interim Business Improvement Manager undertook to confirm details of each of the complaints received in respect of 'Compliance' and 'Homeless Complaint' received during Quarter 2.

The Interim Business Improvement Manager agreed to provide the actual numbers in addition to the percentages for each target in future reports.

The Committee:

RESOLVED

1. To note the contents of the report.
2. To note the improve performance in complaint response times for quarter 2.

415. RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2022-2026 ANNUAL UPDATE

The Chair invited the Interim Resident Engagement Officer to present the report to members, which provided an update to the Resident Engagement Strategy approved

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during 2022. It was reported that all the Year 1 priorities and achievements were on target for completion in the first year. Work had also commenced on the Year 2 priorities. Since the publication of this report, the first community grants application had been assessed and the Christmas tree decorating competition was about to launch.

The recommendations were proposed by Councillor Yeates and seconded by Councillor McDougall.

The Chair invited questions and comments from members. Referring to paragraph 4.12 of the report, Aim 3 – Engage digitally, assurance was sought that all groups of people were being reached, such as those who may not have the necessary IT skills or be fluent in English. The Interim Resident Engagement Officer responded that some digital skills classes had taken place for those who wanted to improve their technical skills. The Getting Involved survey had asked residents what their preferred method of communication was, and it was confirmed that the paper method would still be used for those who had expressed that as their preference. With regards to community clean-ups, she confirmed that a date for a clean-up in the Hastings Close area of the Pevensey Ward was planned to take place during the second week of December 2023 subject to confirmation of the availability of all parties due to take part.

A suggestion was made that at Page 98, Changes within the Neighbourhood Housing Team, the colour yellow indicating the location of one of the Neighbourhood Officer's on the map should be replaced with a colour more visible to see.

The Committee:

RESOLVED

1. To note the contents of the report note; and
2. To note the progress against the aims of the strategy.

416. HRA FORECAST UPDATE

(Councillor Walsh returned to the meeting during the discussion of this item)

The Chair reminded the Committee that Appendix 1 of the report was a restricted document. If the Committee wished to discuss the appendix members will need to pass a resolution for the press and the public to be excluded to this item. Following a question from a member concerning the order of items on the Agenda pertaining to exempt matters, the Committee Manager explained that once the Committee had considered the appendix they would need to make a resolution to return into open session to enable them to vote on the recommendation.

The Chair invited the Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer to present the report to members.

He explained that this was a forecast report, produced by Finance and Housing, providing a detailed review of the Housing Revenue Account's financial position as at Quarter 2. All major cost elements in this account had been reviewed and revised. He drew attention to the Table 1 at paragraph 4.1 that summarised the forecast for 2023-24 for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) reserve. The HRA was expected to reduce to £902,000 by the end of March 2024, which was a reduction of approximately £281,000 below the budget forecast originally predicted for 2023-24. He referred to the minimum balance set by the Council for the HRA of £2million. He stressed that this target was a Council set target, not a statutory target, and referred to the Committee to paragraph 4.2 that explained the Council's position. Therefore, it could be necessary for officers to revise the target at a future date to ensure it was realistic. It should also be noted that the reserve level set by this Council was high for the size of its housing stock. It was crucial that the HRA budget avoided a deficit, as this would result in an intervention from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities with the Council possibly losing control of its housing stock.

Details of mitigating actions being taken to improve the forecast were set out at paragraphs 4.12 to 4.14. Details of the main variations in the report were provided: The situation concerning Supervision and Management overspend of £386,000 due to the use of agency staff was improving but still had some distance to go; Loan Charges was £111,000 overspent, as an interest rate of 3.2% was used to set the budget but the actual rate is currently 4.81%, but this had been partially offset due to no borrowing on the De-Carbonisation and the Sheltered Accommodation schemes; Whilst Repairs and Maintenance had a small underspend of £48,000 it was important to note that there was a large overspend of £304,000 for Responsive Repairs within this budget. Details of the steps being taken to improve this budget, at Paragraph 4.7, were outlined.

The recommendation was proposed by Councillor Wiltshire and seconded by Councillor Bicknell.

The Chair invited questions and comments from members.

During the discussion concerns were raised about the balances in the HRA and whilst it was understood that setting a minimum balance was not mandatory, the Council was in a situation that should be taken seriously. As regards to the actions set out to improve the HRA forecast, clarification was requested on the amounts set out in Paragraphs 4.12-4.14. A question was asked that if there was a reduction in spending what the implications of that on the Housing Service's ability were to carry out its service. The Interim Group Head of Housing advised that the forecast had been positively adjusted to that of the current profile of spending assuming there would not be an increase in the current spend during the remainder of the financial year. Savings had been made due to fewer voids than originally predicted. The Cyclical Redecorations and Maintenance budget was currently unspent with funds set aside for repairs on a property expected to commence during Quarter 4. He advised that there would not be an underspend during 2024-25 as the remainder of the planned works would be carried out during Quarters 1 and 2. The completion of the backlog of Fire Compliance work had reduced the financial impact on the budget. Details were provided of the Retrofit Inspections due to be carried out that involved inspections to

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assess the general standards of housing stock, ensuring the Council's de-carbonisation obligations were met. These inspections would also assess the quality of the Council's housing stock for reporting to the Council's Regulator, which he confirmed could be done within the budget. He confirmed that inspections would also be carried out by the Technical Service Team of the retro fit work undertaken to ensure it had been carried out satisfactorily. He confirmed that the savings made would not result in a reduction of services.

Responding to further questions, the Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer advised that the outstanding HRA debt in respect of the Housing Revenue Account Reform buyout that had taken place in 2012 was approximately £35million. He referred members to the Audit and Governance agenda papers of the meeting held on 30 November 2023, which provided further details. Whilst he understood the Committee's concerns that the HRA account was in a serious situation, which officers were taking very seriously it should be stressed that it was not a situation that would lead the Council to enter into bankruptcy. With regard to housing rent increases the Interim Group Head of Housing explained that the Council's 7% Council housing rent increase for 2023-24 was the rate agreed by the Government. The increase going forward year on year was expected to be the conventional rate of CPI plus 1%.

The Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer explained that both the Housing and the Finance services had reviewed the HRA's depreciation charges and they were confident that the figures arrived at were correct but they also stated that they would be kept under review. The Interim Group Head of Housing added that a reduction of 1.2 million in depreciation had already been achieved already and had been included in the updated forecast.

Responding to a question on the Government's position as regards to relacing gas boilers with air source heat pumps and whether the replacement of these boilers was factored into voids, the Interim Group Head of Housing explained that the current boiler replacement programme replaced the boilers on a 'like for like' basis. The trajectory for the Council's de-carbonisation programme included electric sources of heat. However, one of the challenges of air source heat pumps was they were only suitable for houses with a C EPC rating or above. If homes were not properly sealed it would allow air to escape, creating fuel poverty whilst meeting the Government's carbon neutral targets. A member commented that he hoped the Council was looking into installing efficient electric sources of heat for its new builds, as they should be properly insulated.

The Committee:

RESOLVED

That the Committee has made observations on and noted this report.

417. ARMED FORCES COVENANT IN THE COMMUNITY CONFERENCE IN NEWCASTLE

Councillor Turner provided an update on the Armed Forces Covenant and related matters arising from the Community Conference held on 15 September 2023. There were now additional pathways to help veterans in the community, but the issue was how to identify veterans in the first place.

Discussion took place on how veterans could best access services. It was suggested that organisations could be provided with the details of those leaving the armed forces. However, this would be subject to GDPR compliance and the Armed Forces agreeing to provide details of these veteran. It was for the veteran to decide if they wanted to provide their details. Comments were made of the importance of veterans, who were well cared for whilst in the services, being able to access services, whilst giving them the opportunity for equality and not advantage. It was considered that the Council responded well to the housing and wellbeing needs of veterans in the District. It was commented that veterans affected by trauma may find it difficult to seek help. Mention was made of the support provided by Crimsham Farm, a breakfast club at the Waverley Pub and lunch club at the Laburnham Centre Bognor Regis for veterans. Thanks were given to the staff responsible for the support they provided to veterans. Councillor Turner advised that identifying veterans was difficult but would become easier once Veteran ID cards were introduced.

The Committee thanked councillor Turner for his report .

The Committee

RESOLVED to

- a) Note the contents of the report particularly the “legal obligation” now on specified public bodies shown at Paragraph 10 of the report.
- b) Agree to the publication of the report on the Council’s website member area.
- c) Agree to continue to receive reports and updates on the Armed Forces Covenant.

418. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair advised members that the work programme for 2023/24 was for information and asked members if they had any questions or comments.

The following items were agreed to be added to the work programme:

- Voids Process: A progress report was requested on void reductions. A report would be considered by the Committee during Quarter 1 2024-2025, which will have given the new Technical Services Team time to make improvements.

Subject to approval at the next Housing and Wellbeing Committee meeting

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- Sheltered Housing: A member briefing on the feasibility of Sheltered Housing would be arranged for members before a report was considered by the Committee. The timing of these was to be determined being dependent on the process for the resident consultation and the outcome.

(The meeting concluded at 7.59 pm)