

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - HOUSING
27 NOVEMBER 2018

(To be read in conjunction with the Agenda for the Meeting)

Present

Cllr John Ward (Chairman)
Cllr Carole Cockburn
Cllr Paul Follows

Cllr Michael Goodridge
Cllr Richard Seaborne
Cllr Liz Townsend

Cllr Bob Upton (Substitute)

Co-opted Members

Mr Adrian Waller

Mr Terry Daubney

Apologies

Cllr Pat Frost, Cllr Patricia Ellis and Cllr Tony Gordon-Smith

1. MINUTES (Agenda item 1.)

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 18 September 2018 were confirmed as a correct record and signed.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTES (Agenda item 2.)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Pat Frost, Cllr Gordon-Smith and Cllr Patricia Ellis. Cllr Bob Upton and Terry Daubney attended as substitutes.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Agenda item 3.)

There were no declarations in relation to items on the agenda.

4. QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Agenda item 4.)

There were no questions.

5. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS (Agenda item 5.)

There were no questions.

6. OCKFORD RIDGE UPDATE (Agenda item 6.)

Andrew Smith, Head of Strategic Housing and Delivery, provided an update about the Ockford Ridge regeneration project.

During the discussion, it was noted that a new community-minded contractor had now been appointed for site A. This action would provide economy of scale and hopefully confine any disturbances to a single piece of work. Waverley had continued to successfully improve its local engagement activities with the Ockford Ridge Liaison Group meetings including the Ward Councillors, local drop-in sessions, as well as, discussions with the families.

Cllr Paul Follows highlighted that serious Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) was reported in the area which was being dealt with by the police and other relevant stakeholders. He added that if the ASB continued to increase he would report back to the Committee and highlight it more forcefully. Cllr Paul Follows thanked Andrew Smith for guidance about the reporting of the ASB incident.

Cllr Seaborne highlighted the need to check the current performance in order to sense check against the baseline of the project. He added that £4m seemed to have dropped off the Gantt's Chart and a show home was missing from the project overview on page 15.

Andrew Smith sought the Committee's approval to widen the scope of future report under this regular item to include other regeneration/housing projects, instead of just focussing on Ockford Ridge regeneration - this request was agreed by the Committee.

Resolved:

Subject to the above, the Committee noted the update.

7.a HOUSING PERFORMANCE REPORT - Q2 (Agenda item 7.a)

Annalisa Howson, Service Improvement Manager, introduced the report.

The report provided a summary of the Housing service performance over the second quarter of the financial year. It detailed the team's performance against the indicators that fell within the remit of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Committee welcomed the opportunity to comment and scrutinised the presented performance data. During the discussion, the following points were noted:

- a. Rent collection (H2) - there was a narrowly missed target (49.2% against the target of 49.3%). At the end of September 2018, 3,744 accounts were in credit with the total value of £550,000 and 1,069 accounts in arrears with a total value of £206,000;
- b. Responsive Repairs, Right first time (H8) - WSG were currently reviewing;
- c. Page 67 - there were new performance indicators around homelessness and number of affordable homes; and
- d. LPP1 and affordable housing - Cllr Paul Follows requested the comparative performance statistics/data about the planned affordable housing targets delivered. He wondered why there were no specific key performance

indicators/targets to monitor this activity. Andrew Smith responded that such targets could be introduced but was unsure how meaningful these would be. He agreed to speak with planning colleagues and report back.

Adrian Waller, Tenants' Panel representative, enquired about the transparency and information relating to a recent housing contract based on a query originally raised by James Remnant, Secretary of Waverley Scrutiny Group. For ease of reference, the questions, which related to the Council's due diligence and financial checks prior to awarding of the contract to Mitie, were listed below:

- It view of recent events where Mitie had sold off its Housing branch to Mears due to mounting debts and the average debt of its financial year would be £40 million higher than expected at £308 million in September 2018. Given that Mitie's financial position was becoming less viable what undertakings did the Council secure to confirm Mitie's future before signing the contract?
- As Mears would, presumably, be taking over the Mitie contract, what action was the Council taking now to ensure the present contract with Mitie was honoured by Mears?
- If Mears attempted to renegotiate the contract what would the Council's response be?
- As Mears had lost the contract yet now would be coming in the back way, did the Council have a contingency plan i.e. in a position to opt out of the present contract with Mitie and offer the contract to the second placed contractor?

Hugh Wagstaff, Head of Housing Operations, stated that he was happy to take away the questions raised and come back with a response.

Resolved:

Subject to the above comments and request for a response about the housing contract, the Committee agreed the recommendations.

7.b CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT - Q2 (Agenda item 7.b)

The Committee noted the Corporate Performance Report which provided an analysis of the Council's overall performance for the second quarter of 2018-19. The report, set out as Annexe 1, was presented to each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees for comment and any recommendations they wished to make to the Executive or senior management.

Unless there were any questions raised for further information or clarity, at the request of the Chairman and Vice-chairman of the Housing O&S Committee, this item was presented to the Housing O&S Committee for information only since the specific housing performance under this Committee's remit was comprehensively covered under the previous item 7a. There were no such questions.

Resolved:

The Committee noted the report.

8. HEALTH INEQUALITIES (Agenda item 8.)

Yasmine Makin, Scrutiny Officer, introduced the report.

The report summarised the findings relating to housing from the Health Inequalities Scrutiny review that was carried out by a task and finish group of the Community Wellbeing O&S Committee. The review report was presented to the Community Wellbeing O&S Committee in June 2018.

Cllr Carole Cockburn asked if an information leaflet/wall-mounted chart was provided in the HMOs, as well as, in similar properties, identifying key health and housing guidelines with helpful contact numbers. Cllr Paul Follows requested a list of enforcement actions taken against private landlords in the Borough. Andrew Smith responded that that he would look into the requests and report back.

Resolved:

Subject to the above requests for information, the Committee noted the content of the report and the important link between health, wellbeing and housing.

9. HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION ACT UPDATE (Agenda item 9.)

Michael Rivers, Housing Needs Manager, introduced the report. The Committee noted an update about the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA 2017) in Waverley from 3 April 2018. He stated that, in his view, this was the most radical change about homelessness for almost 40 years.

The Committee noted that some of the new changes meant:

- an extension of time from 28 days to 56 days when a household could be threatened with homelessness;
- a requirement for Councils to work with households for 56 days to try to prevent their homelessness;
- if homelessness could not be prevented, a duty to work with the households for further 56 days to try to 'relieve' their homelessness; and
- local authorities were required to notify applicants as to what duty was owed to them at different stages of the 'prevention' and 'relief' processes, in addition, they must provide written personalised action plans, outlining the tailored support that would be given, as well as, what was expected of applicants.

Cllr Follows raised a concern about the cumulative impact of various changes introduced by the Government, including the Universal Credit, which could put vulnerable people in jeopardy.

The Committee noted that the Council's ability to adjust to the new burdens of the HRA 2017 had been significantly helped through the use of the Government's new burdens funding and flexible homelessness grant e.g. the funding of initiatives such as the purchase of additional bed spaces in supported housing schemes.

The preparation for the introduction of the HRA 2017 had been a massive task and an additional administrative burden was a real issue. However, on balance, it was noted that Waverley was well prepared due to the hard work of all concerned. The transition to the new way of working had been successfully managed as the Borough currently benefited from the New Burdens Funding and the Flexible Homelessness Grant from the Government but this was only guaranteed until April 2020.

Resolved:

Subject to the above comments and observations, the Committee noted the content of the report and congratulated the relevant officers for their fantastic work.

10. RESPONSE TO WSG MUTUAL EXCHANGE REPORT (Agenda item 10.)

Annalisa Howson, Housing Service Improvement Manager, along with, Pat Wright and James Remnant from Waverley Scrutiny Group introduced the item.

The Committee noted that Waverley Scrutiny Group had completed a successful review of the Mutual Exchange Policy and process, including reference to downsizing to senior living schemes. It was noted that the Housing Service team had addressed the highlighted issue and taken on board all of the recommendations raised in the Waverley Scrutiny Group's report on mutual exchanges.

Cllr Paul Follows was of the view that there was a need for greater accountability and scrutiny of the exchange process. Cllr Seaborne cited an example of asbestos found under the carpet after the exchange took place but no alarm or concern was raised in survey/checks during the process before the exchange. Annalisa Howson responded that the Council did not wish to be too prescriptive about the process but all exchanges would have an asbestos report.

Cllr Seaborne highlighted that there were two very good but separate pieces of work under this item, i.e. Senior Living, as well as, Mutual Exchange. However, he felt that the Senior Living had somewhat been buried in the report and ought to be addressed and highlighted separately.

Resolved:

Subject to the above comments and observations, the Committee:

1. thanked the Waverley Scrutiny Group for conducting the review and report;
2. supported the implementation of the scrutiny recommendations and action plan **(with the request for a separate action plan for Senior Living)**;
3. supported the reviewed Mutual Exchange Policy; and
4. wished to receive a progress report in February 2019 on implementation of the recommendations, details of the number mutual exchanges during 2018/19 and number of registered tenants who sought such a move.

11. WAVERLEY SCRUTINY GROUP RECHARGE PROGRESS (FOLLOW UP REPORT) (Agenda item 11.)

The Committee noted that Waverley Scrutiny Group completed a review on how the council manages the process of recharging certain costs to tenants and leaseholders. The report and recommendations were previously shared with the Committee in March 2018 and again in July 2018.

The Committee noted the update informing how the Housing Service team had addressed the recommendations raised. All actions had now been completed as highlighted in the Waverley Scrutiny Group's report on recharges with an internal review to take place in February 2019.

Resolved:

Subject to the above, the Committee:

1. thanked the Waverley Scrutiny Group for their report;
2. agreed the implementation of the scrutiny recommendations, action plan including the recharges pilot; and
3. wished to receive a more detailed report in future about the income collection/recharge from mutual exchanges.

12. UPDATED RENT SETTING POLICY (FOLLOW UP REPORT) (Agenda item 12.)

The Committee noted the updated report about the draft Rent Setting Policy incorporating the Committee's comments from September 2018.

The policy provided a clear framework for setting and reviewing rent levels for all Council homes. It ensured that the Council adhered to legislation and regulations when setting rents for Housing Revenue Account properties.

Resolved:

The Committee supported the endorsement of the updated Rent Setting Policy.

13. DAMP STRATEGY ACTION PLAN (FOLLOW UP REPORT) (Agenda item 13.)

The Committee noted the report setting out the final version of the strategy along with the action plan for responding to reports of damp, mould and condensation in Council homes.

Resolved:

The Committee supported the strategy with an updated action plan for responding to reports of damp, mould and condensation.

14. GARAGE REVIEW (Agenda item 14.)

Steph Aves, Special Projects Officer, introduced the item.

The Committee welcomed the findings of the garage management review.

During the discussion, the following points and comments were noted:

- a. the garage review project started in January 2018 in response to the historic lack of priority, subsequent poor service and potential to increase income;
- b. the Council owned 682 garages across 60 sites - the standard price (53 of the 60 blocks) was £14.43 per week for a council tenant and £17.32 per week for a private resident. The remaining seven sites had a higher rent which ranged from £14.86 to £29.80 per week due to being in popular central locations;
- c. 450 garages were let at 66% occupancy rate, from which, 73% were private licensees and 27% were council tenants;
- d. as a result of the poor garage management practices over recent years, the rate of occupancy had been lower than expected and the statistics did not reliably reflect the true garage service potential. Over time, the unused garages had become a wasted asset, which could fall into disrepair and attract opportunists attempts to break in or fly tip incurring large costs to the Council;
- e. the rent benchmarking exercise showed a comparison of the standard weekly garage charges by councils following a benchmarking desk top exercise. It demonstrated the weekly Waverley tenants charge was very similar to that charged by Runnymede Council but Waverley's non-tenant charge (£17.32 per week) was 52% higher than that charged by Guildford Borough Council;
- f. there had been a 26% increase since 2014/15 when comparing Waverley's garage rental charges each year;
- g. the term 'Percentage occupancy' was an umbrella statistic which took into account, demand and affordability, a useful indicator of the current letting situation. This was maximised in 2016, having 474 live licences though as a result of inefficient garage management over the past few years, occupancy levels began to decline each year after;
- h. as at 1 April 2018, just 64% (439) of the total garage stock was let, leaving 36% (243) of garages void. On 1 October 2018, Waverley had seen a 2% increase, reaching 66% (450) let rate while 34% of garages (232) remained void;
- i. there had been 100 new sign ups since August 2018 with £83k per annum of income. There was a potential to optimise the income to or over £0.5m a year if all garage were let eventually;
- j. in response to various queries and comments, it was learnt that: the review had cost Waverley about £100k which included planned upgrades, day to day requests and refurbishments, the term of lease was on weekly basis with seven days termination period. This review had opened up the market for storage as majority were not using garages to park cars but to store other

general belongings, including bikes and mobility scooters etc. There was a need to make the garages affordable with improved lighting and maintenance around the sites, there were 70 garages at one site in a estate in Haslemere; and

- k. before and after photos of the work carried out were circulated and noted.

Resolved:

Following a wholesome discussion, it was agreed that the Committee:

1. supported the proposal to fix the current garage rental charges for at least one year in order to reach maximum occupancy, in turn increasing total income; and
2. to receive a progress update on the garage occupancy, applications and income in 2019/2020.

In addition, the Chairman on behalf of the Committee praised the good work carried out thus far and requested that:

- garage update became a regular item on the agenda at appropriate intervals with the next full update in six months' time; and
- information update about the garage patches/location be provided in February 2019.

15. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda item 15.)

Yasmine Makin, Scrutiny Officer, introduced the item.

The Committee noted its forward work programme which took into account the items identified on the latest Executive Forward Programme.

It was highlighted that there would be a special budget O&S meeting on 22 January 2019 by VfM and CS O&S and all Overview and Scrutiny Committees/members would be invited to attend.

The Senior Living item, previously known as sheltered housing, was on the work programme for February as requested by Hugh Wagstaff.

The Committee noted an update from Cllr Liz Townsend, Chairman of the task and finish group, Social Housing: Pride or Prejudice. She informed that some good work was underway along with surveys as well as drop-in sessions planned across the borough. She thanked the officers for their input and efforts.

Resolved:

Subject to the above, the Committee noted the forward work programme.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and concluded at 9.00 pm

Chairman