

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **22nd July 2014**.

Present:

Cllr. Chilton (Chairman);
Cllr. Davison (Vice-Chairman);

Cllrs. Apps, Bartlett, Buchanan, Burgess, Davidson, Feacey, Hodgkinson,
Mrs Hutchinson, Mrs Martin, Mortimer, Sims.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 9.3 Councillor Davidson attended as a Substitute Member for Councillor Aaby.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Aaby, Hicks, Miss Martin.

Also Present:

Cllr. Smith.

Head of Community and Housing, Housing Strategy Manager, Senior Scrutiny Officer, Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer.

100 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Chilton	Announced an 'Other Interest' as a Trustee of the Ashford Volunteer Bureau.	102
Feacey	Announced an 'Other Interest' as the Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Bureau.	102
Hodgkinson	Announced an 'Other Interest' as a tenant of Ashford Borough Council.	102

101 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meetings of this Committee held on the 20th May 2014 and 11th June 2014 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

102 Annual Report of the Housing Framework 2013-18

The Housing Strategy Manager introduced the item. She advised the Committee that the Framework had been adopted in July 2013; the report before Members was

an annual progress report. They were continually working to meet the needs of residents by improving existing housing stock and ensuring the best use of housing in the Borough. The Department was more than about bricks and mortar. Good quality homes benefitted residents' health and wellbeing and social and economic agendas. She was pleased to announce that the HCA had made an announcement earlier that day that Ashford Borough Council had been successful in their bid for £2.12m for new build homes as part of the 2015-18 programme. The Social Lettings Agency had also been expanded into Shepway.

During the discussion, the following questions/comments were raised:

- Members were concerned about the low number of housing completions and questioned whether it would be possible to place pressure on developers to provide more affordable housing. The Housing Strategy Manager agreed that the delivery of affordable housing had not been as high as previous years. A high percentage of those houses had been constructed through the Council's own new build programme. Discussions with developers were ongoing regarding provision of affordable housing; however it should be borne in mind that developers could argue for a lower proportion of affordable housing due to the viability of the site. Housing Officers worked closely with Planning Officers on this matter. On a positive note there were over 200 starts on sites with dwellings expected to be completed over the next twelve months. The Head of Community and Housing added that affordable housing was delivered through Section 106 Agreements and as part of this there were many others that were trying to ensure their share of the monies, such as Highways, KCC etc. Working with developers to ensure the required amount of affordable housing was provided was difficult but Officers would continue to push for the provision of affordable housing where possible.
- A Member was concerned about an incident in her Ward whereby a tenant had not been kept informed of when work would be taking place at the property. The contractor had turned up three or four times to carry out the work but had not had the proper equipment and tenants were given the wrong information. She was concerned that issues were not being followed up. The Head of Community and Housing advised that the bad weather had put the Council's contractor under pressure due to unexpected problems within the housing stock. This had created a backlog which was being cleared. Officers were looking at the contract and ways to improve the service, including whether more resources would be required to manage the contract itself.
- Members questioned what action could be taken to encourage tenants to tidy up their gardens. The Head of Community and Housing advised that Officers did try to get tenants to improve their gardens however it was a difficult issue. She drew attention to a report that had recently been to Cabinet regarding the introduction of a 'star' service. This would rate tenants in terms of what level of service they would receive based on a number of factors, including garden tidiness.
- The Head of Community and Housing advised that all of the Council's housing stock had current gas safety certificates. There was an eight month rolling programme to try to ensure that all properties held a current certificate. **Post meeting note:** The Planned Maintenance Manager has confirmed that all Council properties have an up to date gas safety certificate.

- In response to a number of questions from a Member the Head of Community and Housing advised that they had been contacted by the South East Consortium regarding possible access to grants for properties that were in fuel poverty, this would be explored further. The Council did not have any contact with 'care navigators', it was suspected they were able to make referrals to the Occupational Therapist who would then make recommendations to the Council. The Council could only carry out disabled adaptations to properties once a referral from the Occupational Therapist had been received. In respect of the Wilson's announcement that they would be selling their housing portfolio the Council had had some discussions regarding the potential purchase of some of the houses, however the properties were expensive and they had not found the right opportunity to take the matter further.
- Residents affected by the social size criteria (bedroom tax) had the option to pay the difference for the vacant rooms, they were also encouraged to downsize which could be done through a mutual exchange or bidding for a smaller property. They were also encouraged to consider taking in a lodger to not only fill the empty room but fund the gap left by the reduction in housing benefit as a result of under-occupation. Tenants were able to apply for a discretionary housing payment that would last for six to twelve months on the proviso that they were actively trying to move. **Post meeting note:** the welfare reform impacts report can be found at www.ashford.gov.uk/welfarereform
- There were no HMOs within the Councils housing stock. HMOs that, met the relevant criteria, including those that were three storeys, required a licence which was renewed every five years.
- A Member questioned whether the newly formed national probation service, which now dealt with homelessness, would be involved in the review and refresh of the homelessness strategy. The Housing Strategy Manager advised that all stakeholders would be consulted and fed into the strategy process.
- Were there plans to carry out works on 'Airey' homes within the Council's stock throughout the Borough as highlighted in the papers? The Head of Community and Housing advised that a pilot had been carried out in Egerton. This had been successful with residents happy with the work and the reduction in heat loss. Work to improve 'hard to heat' homes would be built into the planned maintenance programme.
- A Member was concerned about perceived levels of damp and mould in some of the older properties in the housing stock. The Head of Community and Housing advised that properties that had issues with damp would be examined and solutions found where available. In respect of mould it was often the case that this was linked to the ventilation of the property. Drying of clothes inside a property could create a humid atmosphere. It had been necessary to install auto humidity systems into some properties to assist with this.
- The Head of Community and Housing advised that there were fewer than 6,000 homes in the housing stock with approximately 1,400 people on the housing register. She advised that she would provide the exact figures to the Committee after the meeting. **Post meeting note:** At the 1st April 2014 there

were 4,729 dwellings owned and managed by the Council. In July 2014 there were 1,390 applicants on the housing register.

- The first phase of the Property Company would be to provide affordable housing at 80-85% of market rent. Following that it was hoped to start building dwellings for the rental market at market rent. They had to ensure that any borrowing was within state aid regulations. Properties owned by the Property Company would not be subject to the Right to Buy.

There was further discussion on the viability of sites and the reduction in affordable housing being provided. A Member felt that there was a need to be clear about what was expected from developers. The 35% target for the rural areas seemed fair and needed to be pursued. The Housing Strategy Manager advised that the split of affordable dwellings to market housing was 30% in the urban areas and 35% in the rural areas, on qualifying sites i.e. sites of 15 or more units. Officers agreed that more were needed and the latest Strategic Housing Market Assessment indicated that the figure would be nearer to 50%. Developers argued about the viability of sites with 35% provision of affordable housing which meant that a higher number would be even more difficult to achieve. Some Councils had a different approach when dealing with Section 106 Agreements with the provision of affordable housing the most important priority and effectively 'top-slicing' monies to ensure that this was provided. Members requested that Officers looked at the how other Local Authorities in Kent dealt with Section 106 Agreements and the provision of affordable housing. The Housing Strategy Manager advised that the Planning Task Group would be dealing with affordable housing and its provision through the work on the new Local Plan. The future introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy would also need to be considered. Officers confirmed that they would be able to look at what other Councils did in respect of affordable housing and would report back to the Committee at its September meeting.

Resolved:

- That (i) the Annual Report of the Housing Framework 2013-18 be noted and the Committee agrees to its publication on the Ashford Borough Council website.**
- (ii) The Committee requests that Officers investigate the arrangements that Local Authorities in Kent have for dealing with the provision of affordable housing through Section 106 Agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy and report back to the Committee at its Meeting in September.**

103 Sickness Absence

The Chairman advised that Officers were not present to answer questions on the report following the Committee's decision last year for the report to be less detailed than it had been in previous years.

Members were pleased that the number of working days lost through sickness absence had reduced. They felt it would be useful to have an Officer attend when the next yearly report was put before the Committee.

A Member drew attention to the objective in the conclusion of the report in respect of ensuring that support and training would be provided to managers dealing with absence issues. He felt that all managers should be aware of the procedures and was concerned that some had not received the appropriate training.

Resolved:

- That (i) The report be received and noted.**
- (ii) The Committee requests that a further report be put before the Committee in a year's time and that an Officer be present to answer any questions arising from the report.**

104 Future Reviews and Report Tracker

The Chairman drew Members' attention to the items scheduled for the next few meetings. He advised that he would be unable to be at the meeting on 28th October and so, subject to the agreement of the Committee, he proposed that the October meeting be bought forward to the 21st October. Members indicated that they would be content with this proposal.

The Chairman advised the Committee that a number of items had been put forward for inclusion on the future reviews and report tracker. He suggested that the Committee considered each proposed review individually, and highlighted the Chairman's recommendation for each review.

Ashford International Model Railway Excellence Centre

As there was no information available at the current time the Committee felt that the item should not be added to the tracker.

Section 106 Agreements

The Senior Scrutiny Officer reminded the Committee that earlier in the meeting they had requested that Officers investigate the arrangements that Local Authorities in Kent had for dealing with the provision of affordable housing through Section 106 Agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy and report back to the Committee at its Meeting in September.

The Committee agreed that an information report on Section 106 Agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy should be presented to the Committee at a future meeting. The report to include; why they had agreements, what contributions could be sought, how the Council worked with Parishes and other organisations to identify projects that could utilise contributions and how payments were obtained and compliance was monitored.

Conningbrook Lakes

The Committee agreed that the report should be rescheduled for October/November 2014.

Update and progress report on Ashford Borough Council Commercial Companies and the Overview & Scrutiny Call-in Recommendations

The Committee agreed that an update be requested for six months' time.

Town Centre – Update on the Portas Pilot Project

Members agreed that the report should be put before the Committee for consideration once it had been to Cabinet.

Lorry Parking Problem – Dover to London

The Committee felt that this item should not be included on the tracker as work was already being carried out on this topic by the Joint Transportation Board.

Purchase of Commercial Properties

A Member requested that a report be put before the Committee on the structure used to acquire commercial property in order to protect the General Fund from exposure to liability which might arise. He had some concerns regarding the way in which commercial purchases had been structured, in particular the purchase of International House.

The Committee agreed that this item should be placed on the tracker.

Resolved:

- That (i) **The following reviews be added to the Future Reviews and Report Tracker; Section 106 Agreements, Update and progress report on Ashford Borough Council Commercial Companies and the Overview & Scrutiny Call-in Recommendations, Town Centre – Update on the Portas Pilot Project and Purchase of Commercial Properties.**
- (ii) **The Future Reviews and Report Tracker be noted.**
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