

## 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 **24<sup>th</sup> October 2017**.

### Present:

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

Cllrs. Bartlett, Burgess, Feacey, Hicks, Knowles, Krause, Macpherson, Miss Martin, Mrs. Martin.

### Also Present:

Head of Housing, Housing Strategy Manager, Senior Policy, Performance and Scrutiny Officer, Corporate Scrutiny and Overview Officer, Member Services Officer.

## 199 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Burgess	Made a "Voluntary Announcement" as a Private Landlord	201
Feacey	Made a "Voluntary Announcement" as Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Bureau	201
Hicks	Made a "Voluntary Announcement" as the Deputy Portfolio Holder for Housing and as a Private Landlord	201
Krause	Made a "Voluntary Announcement" as a Private Landlord	201
Mrs. Martin	Made a "Voluntary Announcement" as she had received a grant for a wet room at her property	201

## 200 Minutes

### Resolved:

**That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 26<sup>th</sup> September 2017 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.**

## 201 Housing Framework Annual Report

The Housing Strategy Manager introduced this item. She described how the report

reviewed the Housing Framework from adoption in July 2013 to the end of March 2017. The Housing Team had reviewed the format for the new Housing Strategy and were considering an overarching structure for goals across the borough, with more specific areas to sit underneath. The aim of this structure was to ensure that more local issues would be addressed in the future. The Report noted that there was an overall rate of 76% of successfully completed actions and it was important to remember that much of the work was ongoing over longer periods.

The Head of Housing explained to the Committee that there had recently been a major review of Housing Services, and the Department had tackled many challenges whilst at the same time facing a £10 million shortfall. Going forward it was now in a stronger position with a robust Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The Council welcomed the news that with effect from 2020 the Local Authority could look to raise rents, which in turn would help to meet the actions outlined in the report. The rollout of Universal Credit (UC) in March 2018 and implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018 would no doubt bring fresh challenges to the Housing Team.

The presentation was then opened up to the Committee and the following questions and points were raised: -

- In response to a question asking whether the priorities on page 3 of the report would continue to be met, the Housing Strategy Manager explained that when the team set the future priorities they would take into account any changes such as demand and demographics, and some priorities could fall under numerous strategies. A review of the Homelessness Strategy would be undertaken in 2018 in light of the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act and this would make sure that the priorities were refreshed and aligned accordingly.
- A Member spoke about Fuel Poverty and asked what could be done to address this issue and reduce costs. The Housing Strategy Manager said that the Private Sector was a tricky area to tackle regarding fuel efficiency issues, since Landlords were not always willing to make changes to properties. The Council encouraged them to join the ABC Landlord Accreditation Scheme, which offered support, advice and a range of other benefits including financial assistance through a grant, for improving energy efficiency. She added that ABC had undertaken a lot of work to address fuel efficiency in their own Housing Stock, but a lot more resources were needed to wholly tackle the problem. The only funding available at present came from national schemes and energy company grants.
- Members discussed in detail the upcoming implementation of Universal Credit in March 2018. The Head of Housing confirmed that UC was already in operation for single claimants, but by March 2018 it would be rolled out to include families. Concerns had been raised over the potential for delays to claimants receiving their payments and the Head of Housing confirmed that the Council had no power over this, since DWP were in control of making the payments. UC was intended to encourage claimants to become more financially independent and simplify the benefits system by introducing a single payment. Claimants therefore would have to adjust to receiving monthly,

rather than weekly payments in the future. The Council was looking at raising awareness and putting measures in place for those claimants that were considered vulnerable and who would struggle with the change. This included Discretionary Housing Payments which could help to make up any shortfall between eligible rent and the Housing element of UC. An increase in homelessness was also a concern as some Landlords had already stated that they would not rent properties to tenants in receipt of UC. It was the Council's intention to intervene as early as possible to prevent anyone becoming homeless. However, this could lead to extra pressures on the General Fund and a pre-cabinet briefing had been arranged to advise Members about this. The Government had introduced a "New Burdens Funding" and £56,000 had been awarded to the Council to enable staff to advise and support tenants, and Officers were looking at ways in which they could work with other agencies to assist people.

- The Committee discussed the challenges the Council faced when the Under-Occupancy Charge was introduced in 2013 and the Head of Housing explained that some of the problems that arose at that time were also owing to the introduction of the Benefit Cap, which in effect was a double whammy on families. Officers were able to give advice to the tenants affected which included the option of a mutual exchange or DHP's. A Member commented that on the other side, a lot of larger properties that had been occupied by older single people had now been released and made available to families that needed them.
- The Council had approached the DCLG to ask if the debt cap could be increased. A Member enquired whether if that increase were granted, would it result in more Social Housing being built, since this seemed to present a genuine opportunity to create much needed housing stock. The Head of Housing advised that a decision from DCLG was expected around the same time as the National Budget. She added that Officers were considering purchasing another building to be developed along the same principle as Christchurch House, which provided temporary short-stay accommodation.
- A Member asked whether it was possible for the Council to run a Holding Deposit Scheme for tenants to assist those that struggled to manage their own finances. The Head of Housing confirmed that a Deposit Guarantee Scheme was already in place whereby ABC paid the deposit to the Landlord and the tenant would then make monthly contributions to pay the amount back. The onus was then on the Council to pursue the tenant if they failed to make the payments.
- The Housing Strategy Manager explained the definition of Affordable Housing to the Committee and that Housing considered the following three tenures as affordable housing: - Affordable rent where the rent was set at up to 80% of the market rent value including service charges; shared ownership properties; and social rent which was about 60% of the market rent value. ABC's homes were classified as Affordable, but inevitably there was a waiting list. The figures relating to the waiting list and year on year projections were included in the Housing Performance Report which was available to view on the Dashboard. A Member asked if a glossary of Housing terms and jargon could also be

added to the Dashboard and if this was something that could be put forward for the Members Training Panel. The Senior Policy, Performance and Scrutiny Officer advised that there was also a Quick Start Guide available for Members.

- A Member asked if the Council would consider alternative housing options including self-build and modular homes. The Housing Strategy Manager confirmed that the Council were looking at a wide range of solutions, but there were issues around managing group self-build properties that could be problematic.

**Post Meeting Note:** An Officer Working Group has begun to conduct research in to housing delivery options within the Borough.

- A Member commented that there were 3 main constraints when building new homes; Land, Capital and Management. ABC were able to offer Land and Management, and he suggested the Council facilitate an Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Project and invite Landlords to invest Capital through a scheme of social impact or municipal bonds (or similar). Members agreed that this was a good idea.
- The Committee then discussed the Right to Buy Scheme for Housing Association tenants and the Housing Manager explained that recent government proposals meant that Local Authorities were required to sell off their high value assets in order to fund the RTB scheme. This new model had come under scrutiny and the issue remained un-resolved at this stage.
- There was some discussion around Church Commissioners and the role they played in agreeing to provide land in Mersham for local needs in return for an equivalent reduction of affordable homes at Finberry and could this approach be used elsewhere? The Housing Strategy Manager reminded Members that at Chilmington Green the affordable housing provision was lower than the policy target due to viability and would only increase as and when site viability improved. A Member talked about the negative implications of leaseholder arrangements and stated that it would be preferable to not give building consent where developers were intending to use leaseholder measures. The Local Authority needed to be able to negotiate and stand up to developers where necessary. The Corporate Scrutiny and Overview Officer advised the Committee that the Council had, in September, responded to a Department for Communities and Local Government consultation regarding Ground Rents and Leaseholder arrangements. Central Government had not yet issued a response to this consultation.
- A Member spoke about Credit Unions and the assistance they could offer to people on low incomes when considering deposits. The Head of Housing advised that there was a Credit Union based in Kent and in the past they had worked alongside the Churches. Kent Housing Group had also contributed funds into Kent Credit Union.

**Resolved:**

**That (i) the Report be noted and formally published on the ABC website**

- (ii) the Committee's request for Officer research in to the following areas be noted and (resource permitting) taken forward: -
- (a) The viability of schemes to encourage capital investment in to social housing provision by landlords.
  - (b) The viability of modular homes as a means to accelerate the delivery of less costly social housing.
  - (c) The viability of self-build as an additional housing delivery option.
  - (d) The role of Credit Unions operating in the Borough.

## **202 Future Reviews and Report Tracker and Topic Selection Flowchart**

The Corporate Scrutiny and Overview Officer confirmed that 4 volunteers had been recruited to the Budget Scrutiny Task Group but one more was still required. Cllr. Ovenden agreed that if he was available on the date of the meeting then he would be happy to sit on the panel. A Member spoke about an incident that had taken place in the Town Centre recently where the CCTV cameras may not have been working and asked if this could be investigated. The Chairman asked for the details to be emailed to him so that he could look further into the incident.

**Post Meeting Note:** The Health, Parking and Community Safety Manager with responsibility for the Ashford Monitoring Centre has contacted the Member concerned regarding this matter and the Head of Health, Parking and Community Safety will be in attendance at the next meeting to update the Committee.

### **Resolved:**

**That the Tracker be received and noted.**

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Queries concerning these Minutes? Please contact Clare Ricketts:  
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