

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held as a virtual meeting on the **13th October 2020**.

Present:

Cllr. Chilton (Vice-Chairman in the Chair)

Cllrs. Blanford, Hayward, Howard-Smith, Iliffe, Krause, Ledger, Mulholland, Suddards, Wright.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 1.2 (iii) Cllrs. Suddards and Wright attended as Substitute Members for Cllrs. Farrell and Campkin.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Burgess, Campkin, Farrell, Ovenden.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Feacey, Harman, Pickering.

Head of Corporate Policy, ED & Communications, Head of Housing, Strategy and Policy Development Manager, Housing Operations Manager, Policy & Scrutiny Officer, Member Services Officer.

98 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of this Committee held on the 8th September 2020 be approved and confirmed as an accurate record.

99 Homelessness Update Report

The Housing Operations Manager introduced this item, and explained that the report covered the Council's position both pre and post Covid. He provided a comprehensive summary of progress since the Homelessness Reduction Act was implemented in 2018, including new legal duties to intervene earlier to prevent homelessness and avoid placing households into temporary accommodation. The report was then opened up to the Committee and the following questions and points were raised: -

- A Member had been informed that the Winter Night Shelter would not be in operation following Covid and she wondered what impact this would have.

The Housing Operations Manager explained that despite originally being advised that shared space accommodation should be avoided, the Government had recently announced plans for a national shelter scheme. However, ABC were still focussed on placing individuals into settled housing solutions.

- In response to a question regarding the proportion of male to female homelessness, and whether there been an increase in domestic abuse cases since the pandemic, the Housing Operations Manager explained that the gender split for homelessness was approximately 60% male to 40% female, and there had been a higher number than expected of younger female homeless cases. The complex nature of domestic abuse cases required a more personal service from the Team, and they anticipated an increase in applications from domestic abuse victims following the lockdown period that had occurred since March 2020.
- A Member said that she had heard ABC's reputation for Homelessness provision was known to be so good that rough sleepers from outside the Borough had been known to make applications to Ashford. The Housing Operations Manager agreed that the Team's reputation preceded them, and routine conversations were held with the Kent Housing Operations Group about how best to deal with placements in and out of area. The Head of Housing reassured Members that ABC were also recognised to undertake robust preliminary investigations to ascertain a local connection for applicants, and where this was not determined, ABC would then redirect them back to their local area if possible. An additional problem occurred where other Local Authorities used Bed and Breakfast (B&B) facilities within Ashford for their own applicants, but if these bookings were terminated; those applicants had then built a connection within the Borough.
- Regarding current numbers of rough sleepers, it was confirmed that there were 10 cases with an additional 2 or 3 European nationals with no recourse to public funds sleeping rough in Ashford, and those individuals had not wanted to engage with ABC to seek a solution.
- In response to a question asking how often B&B was being used, the Housing Operations Manager confirmed that there were instances where certain rough sleepers had 'burnt their bridges' with proprietors of temporary accommodation, and therefore B&B was the subsequent option. This was not the preferred choice and a last resort.
- In respect of the small number of rough sleepers within rural areas, the Housing Operations Manager highlighted the importance of communication from outreach workers who were already in contact with those people. Stronger communication was vital also in terms of preventative work, with prison and hospital discharges being examples of where early liaison between agencies meant that the chance of someone falling into homelessness was

minimised.

- A Member spoke about the recent government announcement that there was an intention to reopen night shelters and asked whether the Officers felt that it was safe to do this in light of Covid. The Housing Operations Manager explained that the consensus throughout most organisations was that shared accommodation was a safety net, but was not the preferred option.
- Following the “Everybody In” initiative that had been co-ordinated in response to the pandemic, there were approximately 10 outstanding cases that had not yet been placed in accommodation, and work was still ongoing to house these rough sleepers, with needs that were more complex.
- A Member asked about targets and the timeline for monitoring each case. The Housing Operations Manager confirmed that there were regular Rough Sleeper cell meetings to keep check on all cases. Concerning timescales, it was important to establish that the individual was in the right frame of mind to receive the help/accommodation, and every case was unique in terms of need so in an ideal world, each individual would be housed as soon as possible, but it was often necessary to take longer with the more challenging cases.
- The Vice Chairman in the Chair asked how the Council were expecting to manage the predicted increase in homelessness cases owing to the pandemic, and with adherence to social distancing. The Housing Operations Manager explained that ABC would expect to work more closely with partner agencies, and other forms of tenure would have to be considered including intermediate supported housing as opposed to settled accommodation.
- The Housing Manager expanded on some of the points discussed and confirmed that in addition to the 10 outstanding cases of rough sleepers, there were still a large number of other types of applications, currently in temporary housing and awaiting move on accommodation. There were also around 1000 applications on the Housing Register. She went on to say that housing demand was high, and this meant that people could not be housed as quickly as the Council would like. Therefore, to resolve this problem the Council strove to improve the delivery of housing options on the ground. These solutions included ABC’s own new build council housing, the purchase of additional units at New Quarter, and a programme of street purchases through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The aim was to maximise the delivery that could be brought forward through the HRA and work alongside partners in terms of registered providers or housing associations, to deliver affordable housing.
- The Vice-Chairman in the Chair asked whether the Housing Dept. felt adequately resourced to be able to deal with the likely increase in demand and associated costs over the next few months. The Housing Manager responded that they were aware of a budget pressure in terms of expenditure. One of the major costs in the General Housing fund was temporary

accommodation, and so more that was managed in house resulted in less pressure on the budget. Funding had been received from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and this had been invested in front line staff. Following the Departmental restructure last year, demand was being met, but was also constantly reviewed and any change would be reported back to Members.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

100 Final Report of the Digital Transformation Task Group

The Policy and Scrutiny Officer introduced this item, and explained that the report summarised the findings of the Digital Transformation Task Group and advised eight recommendations to the Committee. These recommendations would assist further digital transformation of services and enhance the digital experience for Customers, Members and Officers.

Resolved:

That the Committee endorse the recommendations made by the Task Group:

Recommendation 1: Note the implementation of the digital strategy to date and endorse the emerging digital programme to be delivered up until 2025.

Recommendation 2: That a digital survey regarding homeworking and virtual meetings is conducted for Members, to find out what lessons have been learnt since new arrangements were introduced in March 2020 as a result of Covid-19, and what can be improved for the future.

Recommendation 3: To continue to support homeworking, virtual meetings and hybrid meetings as valid ways of running council services and meetings in the future and ensure that there are adequate IT systems in place to deliver these efficiently.

Recommendation 4: Create a Corporate Etiquette protocol for Microsoft Teams that covers making calls, leaving messages and showing availability.

Recommendation 5: That the online calendar function on Mod.gov is updated regularly to inform Members of future meetings for at least the next six months.

Recommendation 6: Proceed with creating an online central database for local and national data that residents are able to access and view statistics regarding Ashford Borough.

Recommendation 7: That a fact sheet is produced for all Members and staff with advice on broadband and how to check your connectivity whilst working remotely.

Recommendation 8: Prioritise completion of an IT asset register to ensure that all council owned equipment is logged and returned to the Civic Centre when appropriate.

101 Future Reviews Tracker

The Policy & Scrutiny Officer introduced this item and advised the Committee that she hoped to arrange a short briefing session in preparation for Budget Scrutiny, which would commence in December 2020. Members agreed that the briefing session would take place at 6pm, before the next Meeting on Tuesday 10th November.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

Queries concerning these minutes? Please contact
membersservices@ashford.gov.uk

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