

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on 14 January 2014 at 7.00 pm in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent.

Present: Councillor Gideon (Chairman); Councillors Harrison, Campbell, I Gregory, K Gregory, Hibbert, Huxley, Hornus, King, Matterface, Moore, Nicholson, D Saunders, M Tomlinson and Watkins

In Attendance: Councillors Fenner, D Green and Poole

368. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Driver, substituted by Councillor King.

369. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at this meeting.

370. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Campbell proposed, Councillor Hornus seconded and Members agreed the minutes.

371. CABINET PORTFOLIO HOLDER PRESENTATION -COUNCILLOR D. GREEN, CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING & PLANNING

Councillor D. Green, Cabinet member for Housing & Planning Services gave the presentation on the current housing strategy and state of housing in Thanet. He said that Thanet District Council was aiming at providing good quality housing for Thanet residents. New housing would be provided in the context of the current housing strategy and the Local Plan which was being updated. Council was likely to approve the development of about 11,500 new houses over the duration of the Local Plan. The Housing Strategy would be developed later this year, in order to back up the new Local Plan.

The housing register was being revised. Currently there were 637 people in the register who could be said to be in need of housing. There was a backlog in processing the applications. This means that the figure may rise once the exercise to process all the applications has been completed; perhaps above 1,000. Councillor D. Green said that there were a number of approaches being used by Council to improve the housing situation in Thanet. These included the following:

1. Margate Housing Intervention Project;
2. Homes & Community Agency's Empty Properties Project (Ramsgate);
3. Selective Licensing.

Selective Licensing was meant to help control the quality of housing in the district. However at the early stages of implementation of the programme, Council encountered legal challenges, which delayed the start of the programme. Another officer had recently been employed to join the legal team to support the Selective Licensing Programme. The Council had reached decent homes standards on 99.7% of the housing stock.

East Kent Housing (EK Housing) was performing very well as regards managing void times. Customer satisfaction with EK Housing is improving. Council would continue to monitor the performance of East Kent Housing. The Council was learning good practices

from other East Kent partners. He was however concerned with performance of the capital works especially the Disability Facilities Grants projects. Rent arrears were rising and they were £17,000 higher than last year's.

Councillor Green reported that EK Housing had requested TDC to help upgrade the IT System. It was hoped that this would improve efficiency levels. EK Housing was also requesting Council to renew the contract with MEARS. Councillor Green reported that in 2012-13 Council had made a number of achievements that included the following:

1. Development of 39 new homes by Orbit;
2. 184 empty units had been brought back into use as family units through the Cliftonville Intervention Project;
3. The old Embassy Hotel has been renovated and 2x4 bedroom houses had been let to households on the Housing Register.

There was an intention to make better use of the Housing Revenue Account Assets. To this end, a garage audit had been carried out which reflected a 50% vacancy rate. Plans were currently being worked out to deliver 50 new homes on these garage sites. Council was proposing a capital programme for new build in 2014-18 amounting to £3.4million. The Housing Revenue Account financial plan was going to be re-worked in 2014/15 to take into account the provisions of the newly proposed legislation on Rent policy, Right to Buy discount changes and Affordable Housing.

HOMELESSNESS

The Council had reduced expenditure in temporary accommodation and negotiated a reduction in rates with local providers of temporary accommodation. An out of hours service had been introduced to tackle homelessness and a new Allocations Policy had been adopted by Council in September 2013 that prioritises local people.

WELFARE REFORM

Welfare Reform had caused some problems for some households. Currently in Thanet 296 people have been affected by the social sector size criteria (SRSC). The original number of individuals that had been identified in February 2013 was 401. Sixty three individuals had been affected by the Benefit Cap with nine of such individuals living in Council housing. The new Allocations Policy sets aside 25% of housing stock for individuals affected by the SRSC.

FUTURE ISSUES TO CONSIDER

An increase in interest rates may have a significant impact on homelessness as this may negatively impact on affordability to pay rent increases in order to cover mortgage rates. Any further Welfare Reforms will make the situation worse for some individuals. Right to Buy may lead to loss of Council housing stock.

HOUSING STRATEGY ACTION PLAN

Councillor D. Green concluded that the Plan will be refreshed early during the year and reported before Cabinet for approval in April. A cross party Cabinet Advisory Group was established to advise Cabinet during the refresh exercise and this approach was working well. He offered the Panel the opportunity to consider the draft Plan before Cabinet finalised it.

During the question and answer session, Councillor D. Green reported that there was an intention by Council to develop 11,500 housing units during the duration of the Housing Strategy Action Plan and that this was in addition to the housing development list that had already been approved. He said that he would need to consult on the development to confirm the final number of housing units to be developed.

Some Members of the Panel said that they were proud of the Council's achievements. Councillor D. Green said that the Government was actively encouraging Councils to build

more houses in order to accommodate an increasing population and inward migration into South East. In response to another question Mr Craig George, Housing Services Manager said that the current figure of on the housing register in Thanet may increase to 2,000 because Council was still processing applications.

Members expressed concern that there were still some properties in Thanet (for example in Newington and Birchington); which were of non standard construction due to poor thermal protection. Mr George concurred with that Member view and he said that it was difficult to make any improvements especially for terraced properties as this would involve substantial costs. When asked about the proposed development of garages into housing units, Councillor D. Green said that Council was going to consult on the proposals. Mr George added that Council would also consider re-negotiating lease hold in order to make the required changes.

Members said that there was a need to improve the capital spend area of the housing budget. Councillor D. Green advised that there were two types of Disability Facilities Grants (DFGs):

1. DFGs for Council housing stock;
2. DFGs for EK Housing stock.

He said that there were discussions on how best to deal with the issue of DFGs and that some of the options that could be considered were either to keep the DFG function with EK Housing or move it back to Council.

Members asked whether the Council was actively lobbying Government to consider giving Thanet District favourable treatment in relation to the impact of the Welfare Reforms. Madeline Homer, Director of Community Services said that TDC was indeed lobbying through the Local Government Association (LGA). She said that Council had made a joint representation with Hastings Borough Council as the lead to raise the issue. Hastings Borough Council was facing similar challenges. Madeline Homer said that officers had attended a meeting in November 2013 where this issue was discussed.

Members wanted to know where the decision making authority lay as regards the power to review the contract with MEARS that was due for review. Mr George said that the Council had the authority to review the contract with MEARS. Members also asked whether an analysis had been done to check if there were possible opportunities for Council to access additional New Homes Bonus by building more housing units. Councillor D. Green said that the issue regarding the New Homes Bonus was a collective Cabinet decision which was made through the budget process. Members observed that there used to be about 6,000 people on the housing register. They further queried that if Council was only going to process 2,000 applications; what would happen to the remaining 4,000. In response Councillor Green said that the 4,000 would be accounted for through the private sector housing initiatives.

372. TDC PARKING FEES AND CHARGES FOR 2014/15 - CABINET MEMBER RESPONSES TO MEMBER QUESTIONS

Councillor Poole, Cabinet Member for Operational Services led the discussion with a brief introduction of the subject. He said that Council had simplified the car parking charging regime and had also introduced free parking on Saturdays to support businesses in ailing town centres.

Members of the Panel asked whether the charging structure compared with similarly sized local councils to which Robin Chantrill-Smith; Civil Enforcement Manager said that Council charging compared favourably with Dover District Council and Canterbury City Council. Some Members queried the budget figures in the Council budget reports to be considered by Cabinet on 21 January 2014. They queried why the report highlighted a

fall in income from car parking fees & charges of £99,000 yet an overall increase in fees & charges of £141,000 if reflected in the proposed budget for 2014/15. Officers agreed to clarify the issue with Financial Services and then advise Members accordingly.

Members wanted to know if there were any more areas that could be considered for parking facilities with pay meters. In response Councillor Poole indicated that there were such areas that might be suitable, but that a decision was made not to increase the number of areas with parking meters. Members asked whether the adoption of on-season and off-season for on-street parking was to increase revenue. In response, Mr Robin Chantrill-Smith said that whilst this approach would increase revenue, the objective of adopting the policy was to increase off street parking.

373. RESPONSES OF CABINET / COUNCIL TO RECOMMENDATIONS OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

The report was noted.

374. EXCELLENT HOMES FOR ALL - KENT HOUSING PRIVATE FINANCE INITIATIVE (PFI)

Councillor D. Green introduced the item. He said that the Excellent Homes For All was a good project and a good news story for the district. There were risks associated with the project. However most of the risks would be borne by Kent County Council. The project was nearing completion.

Some Members of the Panel reported that they had been on a site visit to one of the projects and were impressed by the high quality of the development works done to the properties. Such projects offered good quality life style for residents as it offers them an opportunity to engage in social activities and encouraged independent living.

Councillor Nicholson proposed, Councillor Harrison seconded and Members agreed to recommend to Cabinet the following:

1. To continue to participate in partnership with Kent County Council and the district and borough partners in the Excellent Homes for All Private Finance Initiative Project;
2. To approve delegated authority to Corporate and Regulatory Services Manager in consultation with the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Housing and to sign the Back to Back Agreement to share the benefits and risks of the project with Kent County Council and our District Council partners.

375. POSSIBLE REVIEW OF COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULES, PARTICULARLY IN RELATION TO OPPORTUNITIES FOR BACKBENCH MEMBERS' PARTICIPATION AT MEETINGS OF FULL COUNCIL

Councillor Harrison proposed, Councillor M. Tomlinson seconded and Members agreed to defer the item until the Panel meeting on 11 March 2014 in order to enable all TDC Members to forward their views on the subject to their respective Political Groups. The Groups would then forward the views to the Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel through Democratic Services.

376. PETITION REFERRED TO OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL BY COUNCIL - CHANGES TO EMERGENCY SERVICES AT QEQM HOSPITAL

Councillor Gideon, Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel advised Members that she met Mrs Betty Renz and Councillor Johnston to discuss the issues in the petition. Some Members said that if the Panel were to agree on setting up a task & finish group, then it was important to make sure that the terms of reference for that sub-group should

reflect the issues of concern raised by the public in the petition received by Council. They said that the sub-group could focus only on issues relating to QEQM Hospital's Accidents & Emergencies services.

Members asked if Council officers checked to verify the identity of the petitioners to ensure that they were Thanet residents. Mr Harvey Patterson, Corporate & Regulatory Services Manager said that the Council's Constitution did not currently require the addresses to be checked and there were no resources to undertake a comprehensive verification. Rather officers conduct a cursory check for obvious non compliant submissions such as missing signatures. This cursory validation helps determine the size of the petition and how the petition should be progressed.

Councillor Nicholson proposed, Councillor Campbell seconded and Members agreed to establish a QEQM Hospital Accidents & Emergencies Review Task & Finish Group.

Councillor Hornus proposed, Councillor Campbell seconded and Members agreed the following membership:

3 Labour;
3 Conservative;
1 Independent

Members generally agreed that Councillor Gideon and Councillor Harrison will draft the terms of reference that will focus on addressing the questions from Mrs Betty Renz, the petitioner.

377. REVIEW OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14

Responding to a query from Members, Mr Patterson said that he would produce a report summarising the external legal advice received by Council regarding the Pleasurama Site Development Agreement. Members with an established need to know would be able to read the full text of the advice on appointment, but will not be allowed to take notes as this is still confidential advice.

Members noted the report.

Councillor Watkins proposed, Councillor Gideon seconded and Members agreed to add the following to the TDC Artefacts Management Review TFG terms of reference:

1. To review possibility for improving linkages between signage in Margate (Old Margate Town) and the Margate Museum.

The Panel agreed that Councillor Matterface as the new Member to the Overview & Scrutiny Panel replaces Councillor Gibson on all the Panel sub-group activities.

378. FORWARD PLAN AND EXEMPT CABINET REPORT LIST:-21 JANUARY 2014 TO 10 JULY 2014

The report was noted.

Meeting concluded: 8.55 pm