

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 22 January 2018

Present:

Cllr I Johnson (Chairman)
Cllr K M Davis (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Mrs H J Addison	Cllr R Mohammed
Cllr J E Bond	Cllr M I Raja
Cllr G G Chrystie	Cllr C Rana
Cllr J Kingsbury	

Also Present: Councillor S Hussain, Nicola Norman, Manager of Sythwood Children's Centre, Reverend Kate Wyles, Vicar at St Andrews Church, Ian Lelliott, Thamesway Housing Ltd and David Ripley, Revenues and Benefits Manager.

Absent: Councillor A-M Barker

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 27 November 2017 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, Councillor J Kingsbury declared a non-pecuniary interest in minute item 6 – Raynes Close – arising from his position as a Councillor Director of the Thamesway Group of Companies. The interest was such that speaking and voting were permissible.

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, Councillor J Kingsbury declared a non-pecuniary interest in minute item 7 – Online Transactions – arising from his position as a local landlord. The interest was such that speaking and voting were permissible.

4. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman drew the attention of the Members of the Committee to the items to be considered at future meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. These included air quality monitoring, the Climate Change Agenda, the waste and recycling contract, a presentation by the Surrey Heathland Partnership and affordable housing. It was noted that a site visit was being arranged to one of the heathland sites in the Borough and that a formal invitation would be sent to Members in the coming days.

The Chairman encouraged the Members to propose topics for future consideration by the Committee within the remit of its scrutiny role.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

5. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MONITORING INFORMATION

The Committee had before it the recently published 'Green Book' for November 2017 and the Chairman welcomed Councillor Hussain, Portfolio Holder for the Green Book.

Councillor Kingsbury welcomed the excellent progress achieved in recycling, with up to 59% of waste now being recycled (page 9). Councillor Kingsbury drew attention to the details of the income through car parking charges and, noting the below budget figure, enquired whether the level of income had been affected by the town centre road works. Councillor Hussain advised that car park income had been adversely affected by the road works and, whilst the impact was of concern, it was anticipated that income would improve once the road works had been completed.

The Chairman referred to page 7 of the Green Book and noted that the number of homeless households was increasing, with 96 people placed in non-secure accommodation. Councillor Hussain advised that the Council was working to address the issue. The Chairman noted the opportunity purchase of a house in Hill View Road. Councillor Hussain undertook to report back on the purpose of the purchase.

Councillor Chrystie reported that he had asked for future Green Books to include the costs to the Council any properties the Council had purchase or was in the process of purchasing as part of the Sheerwater Regeneration Scheme (page 19); the current Green Book only indicated the expenditure in respect of those purchases which had been completed.

RESOLVED

That the Green Book be noted.

6. COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT IN SYTHWOOD

The Chairman welcomed Nicola Norman, Manager of Sythwood Children's Centre, and Reverend Kate Wyles, Vicar at St Andrews Church, Goldsworth Park. Nicola and Kate gave a presentation on the work being undertaken in the local community to support the residents, in particular those from an ethnic minority background, including refugee families from Syria. Through the support of the Lakeview Action Group and partner organisations, individuals unable to speak English were offered the opportunity of weekly language classes managed by a tutor from Woking College and to socialise with people from all different backgrounds. A crèche was available during the classes to ensure that those with young children were able to participate and certificates of achievement were presented to the individuals.

Kate outlined the background to the Community Café and the work undertaken to support Syrian refugees through initiatives such as the 'Craft and Chat' sessions, a new pilot scheme to encourage development of language and communication skills in an informal setting. A number of case studies were presented to the Committee, demonstrating the impact of the classes and the subsequent achievements of the individuals.

The Members of the Committee thanked Nicola and Kate for their presentations and expressed their admiration for the outcomes being achieved in the local community. It was noted that the biggest issue faced by the Group was a lack of funding and constant waiting list for the support. It was noted that Ray Morgan had asked the Group to draw up a proposal on the future provision of the support for consideration by the Council.

RESOLVED

That the presentation be noted.

7. UPDATE ON RAYNES CLOSE

The Committee received a presentation and report from Ian Lelliott on the progress achieved in addressing the concerns of the residents of Raynes Close in respect to the 'eco' equipment installed in each of the twelve properties. The Members were reminded that the matter had been considered by the Committee in July 2017 at which a number of concerns over the quality of the equipment and its maintenance had been raised.

Ian explained that the properties had been let as shared ownership properties, with the maintenance contract held by Thamesway. A service charge was made for each of the properties. Of the twelve properties, two were fully owned by the occupants, three were owned and let by Thamesway Housing Ltd and seven remained shared ownership properties. Since the meeting in July, Thamesway had appointed a consultant to review the heat recovery equipment and the rainwater harvesting systems. The heat recovery system had been deemed fit for purpose and required no enhanced remedial works. Whilst the rainwater harvesting system had been found to be fit for purpose, a number had been found to be lacking their filter covers. Furthermore, the consultant had proposed a series of further measures to improve the performance of the systems and Thamesway itself had chosen to drain, wash through and partially refill the underground chamber.

Residents had been informed of the outcome of the survey and the proposed remedial works which would be undertaken over January and February 2018. In April 2018, Thamesway intended to contact the residents with proposals to amend the lease, to provide the leaseholders with the choice to maintain the equipment directly.

A number of questions were raised by the Members, expressing concerns over the current arrangements and the effectiveness of the eco equipment. Ian explained that all existing rainwater harvesting systems worked and that the residents had been kept informed of the work being undertaken. In view of the concerns, it was agreed that the matter would be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee to ensure all the actions had been completed. Representatives for the residents of Raynes Close would be invited to attend the meeting.

Ian was thanked for his report and presentation.

RESOLVED

- That
- (i) the report and presentation be noted; and
 - (ii) a further report be brought to a future meeting of the Committee.

8. ONLINE TRANSACTIONS

David Ripley, Head of Revenues and Benefits, presented a detailed report on the background to benefit payments and the Council's old cash desk. In regard to benefits payments, attention was drawn to two issues faced across the country.

The biggest issue surrounded the payment of Universal Credit by the Department of Work and Pension and the delays in issuing initial payments which include housing costs. The second issue had arisen in recent years and reflected a change in approach by a number of Housing Associations in respect of the timing of rent payments; all social security benefits were paid in arrears and more and more Housing Associations were starting to demand rent payments in advance, causing significant payment difficulties for the tenants. It was noted, however, that the majority of Housing Associations were not changing their approach and would continue to accept payments in arrears.

In regard to the Council's former Cash office, through which residents had been able to make cash payments to the Council, it was noted that it had been closed in May 2015. In the months leading to its closure, staff had discussed the changes with residents using the Cash Office, and had promoted alternative options for payments, including direct debit, over the phone and through the internet. As a result, the closure had proceeded smoothly and the majority of residents had changed their payment methods by the time of the closure. The Council had since seen an increase in the percentage of Council Tax payments by direct debit from 64% to 74%.

The Committee raised a number of questions in respect of the benefits available to residents and discussed some of the difficulties faced by those on low income in accessing the relevant benefit schemes.

David Ripley was thanked for his presentation and the supporting report.

RESOLVED

That the report and presentation be noted.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 8.40 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: _____