

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 24 February 2020

Present:

Cllr D E Hughes (Chair)
Cllr M A Whitehand (Vice-Chair)

Cllr S Hussain	Cllr M I Raja
Cllr R Mohammed	Cllr G G Chrystie
Cllr C Rana	Cllr J R Sanderson

Also Present: Councillor D Harlow, Adam Thomas (Family Support Programme Manager), Nicola Norman (Family Centre's Team Manager), Louise Strongitharm (Director of Housing) and Jacqui Dixon (Private Sector Housing Manager).

Absent: Councillors J E Bond

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Bond.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 20 January 2020 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES

Following the last meeting of the Committee that included the recommendation of the Community Lottery Scheme to the Executive, it was reported that the recommendation was approved at the Executive meeting on 6 February 2020.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business to discuss.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Officer Procedure Rules, the Housing Director, Louise Strongitharm, declared an interest in any items under which the Thamesway Group of Companies are discussed, arising from her position as a Director of the Thamesway Group of companies. The interest is such that speaking was permissible.

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, Councillor D Harlow will declare a non-pecuniary interest in any items under which the Thameswey Group of Companies is discussed, arising from her position as a Director of the Thameswey Group of Companies. The interest is such that speaking was permissible.

6. WORK PROGRAMME (OSC20-005)

The Work Programme was reviewed and noted the items that were on the agenda for the final meeting of the Committee in the 2019/20 municipal year.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

7. CHILDREN AND FAMILY CENTRES UPDATE FOLLOWING CONSULTATION

The Chairman welcomed Adam Thomas, Family Support Programme Manager, and Nicola Norman, Family Centres Team Manager, to the meeting, who previously attended a Committee meeting on 17 June 2019, following the Surrey County Council consultation of the closure of Children's Centres.

The consultation ended in February 2019, and resulted in Surrey County Council agreeing to endorse the re-modelling of the remaining Children's Centres in the Borough to create Family Centres as part of a wider Family Service to support families with children ages 0 to 11 that were thought to be the most vulnerable. The Executive agreed that Woking Borough Council would take lead on the Family Centres in question moving forward.

Together, they provided a presentation on the changes that had been implemented since the consultation and information on the new team, that went live on 1 November 2019. The changes included embedding a new team and training them, encouraging flexible working throughout the borough, moving to an electronic casefile system and a new service delivery plan, with the next service review scheduled to take place in April 2020.

It was noted that the two remaining centres were at Parkview in Sheerwater and The Bungalow at Sythwood School. However as part of the service delivery, specialist support was also provided to families in the form of one to one personal visits at the family's home, and an outreach service available in other community centres: The Vyne in Knaphill, Moorcroft in Westfield and St Marys in Byfleet. These centres also provide universal support services for families including health visiting, midwifery, citizen's advice and support with housing and employment.

Following a question from a member it was reported that approximately 130 families were benefitting from the family support services and that the length of time families require the service for varies from a matter of weeks, up to a year and a half; the centres were coping well with the demand at present. The flexible service provided various benefits including centralised locations for families using multiple services and the option for home visits which are preferred by mothers/parents.

Mr Thomas reported that the team were confident the budget was sufficient to provide the services required to meet the demand.

The Chairman thanked Mr Thomas and Ms Norman for their presentation and time, and regular updates would continue to be brought to the Health & Wellbeing Task Group as well as feedback from the review scheduled in April.

8. EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY REPORT (OSC20-003)

The Chairman welcomed Louise Strongitharm, Housing Director and Jacqui Dixon, Private Sector Housing Manager, who provided a presentation on the Empty Homes Strategy. The presentation reported that there were 769 empty homes (as of 27 January 2020) within the borough, and explained the various reasons why a property could be empty and how they were identified.

A breakdown of the 769 properties was provided and noted:

- 97 of which are Long Term Premium empty (>2 years)
- 259 are Long Term empty (6 - 24 months)
- 126 are empty due to the Sheerwater regeneration scheme and will be brought back in to use through the Project.

There were three priorities from the existing Empty Homes Plan 2015-2018 that were still relevant;

- **Priority 1** – To minimise the number of empty homes through the Council's interventions
- **Priority 2** – To maximise the opportunities for returning empty homes back into use through initiatives and incentives
- **Priority 3** – To use innovative interventions to bring empty back in to use.

The current performance was discussed noting a dip in performance when the Selective Licensing Scheme was introduced however there had been an improvement since. The Housing Team were looking of ways to spread positive messages and engage with the public via Woking Magazine and social media.

After finalising the Allocations Policy and Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy within recent months, it was noted that future work would include updating the Empty Homes Plan and the overarching Housing Strategy.

Members suggested the empty homes plan include provision for more stringent action (e.g. CPO) if a property was left empty for five years and over, which had the support of officers however could be dependent on the reason why the property was empty, such as a vulnerable person or sensitive circumstance. There would also be a council tax premium cost for the owner as the property was empty for longer than five years.

The Chairman thanked Ms Dixon and Ms Strongitharm for the information provided.

9. OVERVIEW OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED AND PERFORMANCE REVIEW (OSC20-006)

Members reviewed the Overview of Complaints Received – Annual Report, noting that fewer complaints had been received since the previous year, 65 received in 2019 vs 93 received in 2018.

There were no obvious trends identified.

10. FOI REQUEST ANNUAL REPORT (OSC20-004)

Members noted the FOI Annual Report, which detailed the total amount of FOIs received between January – December 2019, broken down by month and department. It was suggested that a future report would include example of the FOIs received in the two departments that received the most – Democratic Services and Benefits, Revenue and Customer Services.

It was explained that as the Democratic Services Team manage the FOI system, they would often co-ordinate responses if answers were required from multiple departments, and would liaise with Joint Waste Solutions and Thameswey on their FOIs and also refer applicants to other organisations, such as Surrey County Council if the response did not fall within Woking Borough Council's remit.

It was reported that no ICO decisions were made in 2019.

11. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MONITORING INFORMATION

The January Green Book was reviewed and discussed, with members noting the refuse collection indicator link with previous reports in regards to what was believed for waste collection, this would be identified to Cllr Davis, as Portfolio Holder for environmental services to review and possibly amend the KPIs reported in the green book.

Members were pleased to see the low figures reported for abandoned vehicles.

12. TASK GROUP UPDATE

The Chairman provided an update on behalf of the Finance Task Group that had recently reviewed the budget and investment strategy, and members noted the useful update on the HIF terms and conditions.

The Chairman then provided an update from the recent meeting of the Woking Football Club and Associated Developments Task Group, that had concluded their planned meetings, and the report would be reviewed at the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 23 March 2020. Thanks was given to the officers working on the task group and the guest who had attended the meetings.

The draft recommendations from the group were mentioned however discussion would not take place as members did not have the report from the task group yet.

13. THE CHAIRMAN WILL MOVE AND THE VICE-CHAIR WILL SECOND:-

RESOLVED

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of item 14 in view of the nature of the proceedings that, if members of the press and public were present during these items, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A, to the Local Government Act 1972.

Paragraph 3 – Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

14. EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY REPORT (OSC20-007) - REPORT TO FOLLOW

Ms Dixon referred to the Part II report, that documented all the empty homes within the borough, as requested by the Chairman.

Members were able to inform the Housing Team of the situation of some properties, and issues raised by residents for officers to investigate, such as an empty property preventing the sale of a neighbouring house and the change of use of a property.

Officers informed members that it was difficult to engage with some owners of the empty properties and were working hard on trying to get as many empty properties back into use as possible.

It was agreed that officers would circulate the list of empty homes to members, organised by ward, to see if any further information could be identified.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 9.04 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: _____