

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 23 November 2020

Present:

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

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

Also Present: Councillors D Bittleston, K Davis and D Harlow, Jon Herbert (Strategic Housing and Development Manager), Gareth John (WBC Solicitor), Ray Morgan (Chief Executive) and Louise Strongitharm (Housing Director).

Absent: Councillors R Mohammed

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor R Mohammed.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 19 October 2020 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES

The Chairman advised the Committee that the Woking Football Club and Associated Developments Task Group Part II report had since been published on Woking Borough Council's website and available for the public to view.

Councillor Sanderson provided an update on the small group of members that were working with Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership and liaising on joint working and future projects. Three focuses had been identified which were: a Bike Project, funding and support for 18-24 year old to find work and support for younger families.

Following the recent meeting of the Joint Committee, where the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had submitted a paper of suggested improvements to consider, it was reported that many of the recommendations were agreed by the Committee. The Chairman thanked members and officers for their help and contribution.

Members shared their experiences applying for CIL funding and the process involved, some felt that officers could be more involved with managing larger projects.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business to discuss.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, Councillor D Harlow declared a non-pecuniary interest arising from her position as a Council appointed Director of the Thamesway Group of Companies.

In accordance with Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Director of Housing, Louise Strongitharm, declared a disclosable personal interest (non-pecuniary) arising from her position as a Director of the Thamesway Group of Companies.

6. SHEERWATER REGENERATION PROJECT UPDATE

Cllr David Bittleston provided an overview of the history of Sheerwater, which was built up in 1950s to rehouse 5,000 people who had been effected by the bombing in the Second World War One of the biggest issues was that the estate was built when few people owned cars however now-a-days there were at least two cars per household and parking had been a major problem.

The desire to build affordable and social homes and new leisure facilities in the area was discussed and it was previously suggested by a previous developer to knock down the centre of Sheerwater and re-build. The previous proposals were supported by Council however funding prevented the project going forward.

Cllr Bittleston referred to the report detailing the scheme outline and that the Council had purchased 110 out of the 120 properties required, contract discussions were taking place with a further eight and then final two were in contact. The work undertaken by officers, including Peter Bryant, Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Louise Strongitharm, Director of Housing and the Housing team was praised. The 120 properties were previously Council Homes, however had been purchased through the "Right to Buy" Scheme and two thirds of these properties became private rents.

The CPO was required to ensure that acquisition for all other items, such as land was clear and prevented issues arising in the future.

Thamesway had managed to deliver the scheme on target, on budget and to deadline to date, with few impacts from Covid-19 due to forward thinking and ordering materials in advance and storing securely on site. The Leisure facilities would be available for Bishop David Brown School to use by July 2021, and open to the public by October 2021. The 92 dwellings in the purple phase of which 46 would be social rents and 46 market rent, would be completed by May 2021. Preparation for work on the next phases - Red, Yellow and Copper, had begun.

Members were greatly appreciative of the update and history of the project that had been detailed. Cllr Bittleston that once the public were able to see the finished product, there would be increased interest in the properties. It was confirmed that more than 50% of the units would be rentals (similar pricing to the Kingsmoor Park properties) with the option to

participate in the “Earn Your Deposit” Scheme. The Purple phase would be 100% rental units.

Some concern was raised over future issues that may arise from the use of the Compulsory Purchase Order, and how Woking Borough Council would address these issues. Cllr Bittleston addressed the potential issues and advised that the two properties that did not have an agreement in place were in the later phases of the programme, and the Tenant Liaison Team were working hard to provide suitable options for those who had not yet come to a decision. The position of those living within the Red Line Zone, whether it be in temporary accommodation, tenants or homeowners, were reviewed regularly and reported to officers at the monthly Sheerwater Regeneration Officer Group meetings.

The aim of the project is to build facilities that a community needed, and therefore the leisure facilities would be delivered first, followed by the housing. Compassion was voiced for any disruption caused to the public during this time, but their health and wellbeing would benefit from improved community facilities and infrastructure.

Within 50 years the project would have paid for itself, the properties would remain Council stock and therefore the Council would be able to continue to provide affordable housing to those who need it.

It was confirmed that 46% of the entire project would be social rent equivalent (Kingsmoor Park rates). The Committee discussed the ongoing demand to produce more social homes within the borough, which was a priority for the Housing team which were being creative with Government funding to assist with meeting the housing need. Mr Morgan added that further difficulties were faced for families affected by the benefit cap.

The positive impact of the completion of the Sheerwater Regeneration Project would have on the housing supply was discussed, and that the pressure on the Housing Register would also decrease as there would be more options of good quality properties available.

Details of what a Thamesway Home meant was shared, and that the environmentally friendly homes would be affordable to run with efficient heating costs. The estate would also include electrical vehicle charging points, bicycle provisions and sufficient parking spaces.

The flood risk was reduced from the town centre, through Sheerwater and to West Byfleet as a result from the Victoria Square development, which retained one third of the water leaving the site and relieved the pressure on the Rive ditch. Members praised the environmental considerations within the development.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Bittleston and Mr Morgan for the update.

7. HOUSING TOPIC SCRUTINY - FUTURE HOUSING STRATEGY

Jon Herbert, Strategic Housing and Development Manager, introduced the report which was the final instalment of the three part review undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee which would help to develop the Five Year Housing Strategy. Since the last strategy there had been various changes to government legislation and policies, the priority of the new strategy would be to increase the delivery of affordable housing, utilising the current housing stock and to deliver an improved experience for customers and residents.

Mr Herbert summarised the details of the draft objectives in the report, and advised the Committee of the link between Housing provisions and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy which would be discussed in the near future, and would result in actions to be implemented.

The viability of affordable housing in planning applications was discussed, Ms Strongitharm advised that 19% of affordable housing was delivered through the Section 106 Agreement, more diverse ways of delivering affordable housing need to be explored such as reviewing land assets for any potential sites that could be developed and to continue to bid for government grants, continue working with Thamesway on private sites and programmes with Housing Associations.

Members felt that the housing demand, with 1,100 people on the Housing Register, would never be met for various reasons including private developers not committing to the delivery of affordable housing as advised in their original proposals. Cllr Harlow, Portfolio Holder for Housing, advised that not all those on the Housing Register required a property urgently and that they were prioritised into different bands which identified those with the greatest need. The ageing population and increase of families splitting up affected the needs analysis. Helping the elderly downsize to a more appropriate home for their needs then allows additional homes for families to move into, that are three and four beds. The number of those of the Woking Borough Council Housing Register would not be viewed as particularly high in comparison to other local authorities, however it was dependent on the Allocations policy. In Woking the Allocations Policy was strict with who can join the register. Ms Strongitharm felt that it would be difficult to ever meet the growing need for housing but hoped that the waiting time would reduce, and in the future work towards meeting wider needs.

Data was fed into House Mark, that provided benchmarking figures however the majority of data was held by NVH, and when that service moves in-house it was anticipated that the service could be better utilised.

During discussion, Ms Strongitharm advised that a resident would be offered a cash incentive to downsize their property and would also be placed in Band B on the register however it was unlikely that someone would move from a three bed house to a one bedroom flat, but it was thought that the offer could be made more appealing to them, such as having a property with a spare bedroom. More research was being conducted in how other authorities reviewed downsizing and what they offered.

The Social Housing White Paper was being reviewed by the Housing Department currently and the Government's response to the Planning White Paper was also awaited.

For those wishing to purchase via the open market, there were shared ownership schemes available however did come with their own issues.

In order to focus developers on delivering quality properties, an awards scheme could possibly be implemented which would highlight the good quality developments by ranking new build developments using the results of a satisfaction survey.

Following the presentations over the three Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings by the Housing Team, members were encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions with the Chairman and it was agreed that a paper brought to the next meeting of the Committee on 21 December that summarised member feedback on the housing scrutiny topic review.

The Chairman also requested that a small group of Councillors would review three viability case study examples following concerns raised and to understand the rights developers had as it dramatically effects the amount of affordable housing within the borough. The findings would be reported to the meeting in December.

The Chairman thanked officers for the in-depth review and contribution to the Committee over the three meetings.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman introduced the Work Programme, and noted the upcoming topics that would be scrutinised by the Committee. Members would have the opportunity to feedback following the Housing Scrutiny Topic Review at the meeting scheduled for 21 December.

The Committee agreed that the Investment Strategy review would be deferred until the 2021/22 municipal year following Covid-19. The follow up work on Freedom Leisure scheduled for January and March would be condensed into March's meeting as it was felt that Covid-19 had effect its operation so much that it would not be an appropriate time to hold another survey and review customer experience etc.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

9. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MONITORING INFORMATION

Cllr Davis, Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services highlighted, for public awareness, that 2,000 dwellings in the borough do not put out food waste, which may be composted or it could be included in the general waste, which is not good for the environment.

Cllr Sanderson highlighted that the amount of recycling, that was steadily increasing, was down in August and that the amount of fly-tipping showed an increasing trend from last year which might possibly be an impact of Covid-19.

Following the observations from Cllr Sanderson, it was advised that the figures for the waste were reported one month behind, the latest information would be discussed at a meeting later in the week and reported in the next Green Book which would assist with identifying any issues or trends. The trend in fly-tipping may be a result of dumps being shut during the pandemic and lockdown period.

Businesses within the town centre tend to use private contractors for their collection of recycled waste therefore it is unsure how much was being recycled. The Council and subsidiary companies should set an example for recycling waste, however there was also room for improvements to ensure best practise.

Following a question raised by the Chairman, Louise advised that resources were redirected from the work on empty homes to assist with the impacts of Covid-19. However last month the work was able to resume and over 300 properties that were believed to be empty for 6 – 24 months were written to, responses were received back from 1/3 and it was reported that 33 weren't actually empty. The Housing team would liaise with Benefits on

the properties that were occupied but had not paid council tax. Work would begin next month on the properties that had been vacant for longer than 24 months. As previously requested by the Committee, the Chairman asked whether the list of empty properties could be given to Cllrs, broken down for their Ward.

It was agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should focus on the performance element of the Green Book, and that if the Committee had previously reviewed a version of the Green Book then it would not be required to look at it at the next meeting if a more recent version was not available. The financial performance is considered at the Finance Task Group and also the Executive, however, this did not preclude discussion at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee if members wished to do so.

The Chair made a commitment to following up on elements discussed by members on performance in the Green Book, if portfolio holders were not present at the committee meeting. The feedback would be circulated. Following feedback from members it was requested that the latest version of the Green Book would be included in the agenda and on Modern.Gov software for members to access easily.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 9.35 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: _____