

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Communities Select Committee **Date:** Tuesday, 17 January 2017

Place: Committee Room 1, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 7.00 - 9.50 pm

Members Present: Y Knight (Chairman), G Shiell (Vice-Chairman), R Baldwin, R Brookes, K Chana, L Girling, S Heap, L Hughes, S Murray, A Mitchell, B Rolfe, B Surtees and W Marshall

Other Councillors: J Lea, S Stavrou and J H Whitehouse

Apologies: A Beales, S Jones and H Whitbread

Officers Present: A Hall (Director of Communities), R Wilson (Assistant Director (Housing Operations)), R Wallace (Housing Options Manager), G Wallis (Community, Health & Wellbeing Manager), G Gold (Assistant Community Health & Wellbeing Manager) and A Hendry (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance: R Poulter and R Kelly

47. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (MINUTE ITEM 39 - 23.7.02)

It was noted that Councillor R Brookes was substituting for Councillor A Beales.

48. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the last meeting of the Select Committee held on 21 November 2016, be agreed.

49. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made pursuant to the Member's Code of Conduct.

50. TERMS OF REFERENCE/WORK PROGRAMME

(a) Terms of Reference

The Select Committee's Terms of Reference were noted.

(b) Work Programme

The Select Committee's Work Programme was noted.

51. PRESENTATION BY THE EPPING FOREST CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

The Committee received a presentation from officers of the Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) outlining their value and impact on society especially in the Epping Forest District area. The CAB officers attending were Rachel Poulter, the District Manager and Rachel Kelly one of their Debt/Money Advisors.

The Committee noted that during 2015/16 the CAB service for Epping Forest had advised 2,761 clients on 8,061 issues. They had 9 part time staff and 52 volunteers working in 6 locations and were one of over 300 independent charities that made up the Citizens Advice network. Nationally, 2 in every 3 clients had their problems solved. And it was noted that they were now offering “web chat” in the Epping Forest area.

They worked with some of those most in need, some 38% of their clients were less likely to be in employment; 35% were likely to be in debt; 39% had a long term health problem or were disabled; and 26% were less likely to own their own homes.

They gave examples of some clients’ stories giving case history and eventual outcome. It was noted that 78% of their clients said that they would not have been able to resolve their problem without the CAB. They also had an impact on their clients’ health and wellbeing, most significantly around mental health. 4 in 5 clients felt less stressed, depressed or anxious following advice.

During April and September 2016 the two Debt Advisors had 253 client appointments assisting with 680 debt problems amounting to £734,000. General debt advice was given to a further 517 clients.

They played a vital role in ensuring people paid their priority bills first (such as rent, council tax and fuel payments). Many of their clients also require and receive Benefits and or Housing Advice. They were also looking to do more work on budgeting in schools, giving pupils a good grounding in personal finance.

The CAB also offers advice on the welfare system such as benefits or tax credit problems, with 438 clients gaining a new award or an increase to their benefits worth an average of £6,200 per client. Maximising income helps clients by reducing their financial difficulties, promoted inclusion and benefited the economy, preventing the need for more critical and costly state intervention.

They also worked closely with the Council’s Homelessness Prevention Team. Their knowledge of legal rights and local processes was vital, especially in helping to formally or informally de-escalate situations where someone was in danger of losing their home.

The CAB also aimed to carry out research and campaigns in the privately rented sector and by listening carefully to people who go to them. Looking at their own data and gaining insights can spot emerging issues, policies and practices and regulation that were not delivering. They campaigned around issues affecting the local community and also come together nationally where they had a voice to really change things. One of their reports was around affordable rental properties and Ms Poulter had concluded that “this report confirms our advisers’ impression: it was extremely difficult for families to find affordable rental properties in the private rental sector in the Epping Forest District. If we do not want to see families on even moderate wages driven out of the area policymakers need to take this issue seriously and look for solutions”

The CAB work with volunteers, with all volunteers gaining at least one practical skill through volunteering, it also helped the unemployed volunteers overcome barriers to employment and helped them gain knowledge of local issues and made them feel more engaged with their community.

As a national network they were able to campaign on big issues such as pay day loans and on the latest scams and was able to have independent quality assurance of national standards, such as the Advice Quality Standard. Provision of good advice led to savings to local and national government, had wider economic and social benefits as well as providing benefits to the individual. They also provided value to the local authority, for example by reducing the cases of homelessness estimated to be about £114,573, and also to society in general whereby for every £1 invested in Citizens Advice Epping Forest District:

- generated at least £2.94 in fiscal benefits savings to the government by reducing health service demand, local authority homelessness services;
- provided £15.28 in public value with wider economic and social benefits such as improvements in participation and productivity for clients and volunteers; and
- provided £18.50 in benefits to individuals giving income through benefits gained, debts written off and consumer problems resolved.

During 2016 they had relocated their Loughton branch to Loughton Library and their Epping branch to Hemnall Street. They implemented their on-line Frontline Referral System and continued with their "Web Chat" facility. In 2017 they hope to have an extra volunteer at Limes Farm, have an outreach facility at the Ongar Library and raise their profile generally using Social Media.

The meeting was then opened out for questions from the members present.

Councillor Brookes asked for a 'ball park' figure if possible for all cost to run CAB in the Epping Forest District. She was told it was that it was approximately £200,000 for everything during the year.

Councillor Brookes then asked how long did the volunteers stay. She was told that some stayed for 20 years and some for 10, but an average they liked them to stay for at least 5 years, which they usually did.

Councillor Surtees noted that they planned to go to Ongar and asked if there was any way Ongar Town Council could assist them and also how long did it take for a client to be seen after they first made contact. Ms Poulter replied that initial interviews usually lasted 15 to 20 minutes and if not solved there and then they would make an appointment for the following week (at most) unless the case was urgent. They were already in touch with the town council about moving to Ongar Library.

Councillor Knight asked, on behalf of Councillor Waller, if the CAB was able to extend its services throughout the district and was there any geographical issues for the use of the service. She was told that they had three locations where they were based and they would be extending out to Abridge and Ongar. Mr Hall, Director for Communities, said that Councillor Waller was in Sheering, people there would go to Harlow. Ms Poulter said there had been some issues about access but they had only 2 complaints this year so it was not a large problem.

Councillor Knight praised the services the CAB provided on such a tiny budget. Was there any where else they could look to for more funding? She was told that they had funding from the Lottery in the past and would reach out to them again in the future. There were also a lot of other, smaller grants available. Councillor Lea asked if they

did any of their own, direct, fund raising. She was told that they did hold some events to raise money such as quiz nights and Barclays match funded these events. They hoped to hold more events in the future.

Councillor Murray proposed that they should ask some of the smaller Parish authorities for contributions. Ms Poulter replied that they have asked them and had received some contributions in the past.

Councillor Shiell asked about their telephone advice services and what kind of clients used that. She was told that they worked with Essex Advice Line a service available from Monday to Friday from 10 to 4pm. They dealt with a large spread of subject matters over the phone, mostly the same as their first contact interviews.

Councillor Stavrou, noting that Local Authorities were being financially squeezed by Central Government asked what sort of percentage of their total income came from the District Council and from the Town and Parish Councils. She was told that it was around 75% but they were trying to diversify their sources of funding in the coming year.

Councillor Surtees noting the transport difficulties in the rural areas wondered if there were any people who were denied access to their services. Ms Poulter did not believe so, as they now could do home visits if needed, also they have their phone service which had been improved. She believed that no one was excluded. Councillor Mitchell asked if their home visit staff had been DBS checked; she was told that they were.

The Chairman thanked the officers from the Citizen Advice Bureau for their clear and interesting presentation

52. EXTENSION OF THE FUNDING OF 2 EPPING FOREST CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU DEBT ADVISORS

The Assistant Director (Housing Operations), Roger Wilson, introduced the report for the extension of funding of two Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau Debt Advisors. He explained that the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee had agreed to extend the funding for these two posts until end March 2017.

The CAB had reported that during the first six months of 2015/16 the Advisors managed debts of around £713,000 and assisted 304 clients. Around 97 (32%) of these clients were Council tenants. The CAB was required under the Agreement to have one Debt Advisor based at the Limes Centre, Chigwell for one half day each week. The CAB extended this service to 2 half days each week in 2015. The CAB had reported that in the first 6 months of 2015/2016, around 120 (40%) of the clients assisted were first seen at the Limes Centre.

Bearing in mind the expected reductions in the overall national Welfare Budget, there will be an increased need for residents to receive continued support around personal budgeting and debt advice. Such advice may reduce the risk of some households presenting to the Council as homeless, resulting in savings in costly bed and breakfast, hostel or even temporary/interim accommodation in the Council's own stock.

Councillor Surtees commented that it was essential that this service was continued as this contributed to the welfare and mental health of people and he strongly supported this.

Councillor Lea wondered how we could continue supporting in the future with all the cut backs. This should be reviewed each year. The Director of Communities replied that this funding would provide a lot of savings. By using the CAB this would save the Council money, but it was difficult to quantify. Only by cutting the funding would we know the effect it would have on our budgets.

Councillor Shiell thought that they all agreed that this funding was vital, but she would also like the CAB to do more fundraising. Mr Marshall said that Ms Poulter was aware of this and was looking to do this in the coming year.

Councillor Surtees said it was also the responsibility of this committee to consider the problems we had and what we could do about them. Mr Hall said that the next big thing was the introduction of the Universal Credit. Some preliminary figures suggest that in area when this had been introduced 85% of tenants were in arrears with their rent in comparison of 39% in other areas. Also the amount owed had doubled in areas with Universal Credit.

Councillor Stavrou noted the questions raised and the response and the affect of homelessness on people. But here were lots of competing bids for our pot of money and wondered if the CAB should get all the money when we did not have the accommodation for the homeless to be put into. Very difficult decisions would be coming our way in the near future and we should be cautious.

Mr Marshall said that it was vital that this was brought to this Committee every year to consider based on any new information available. Councillor Knight noted that it went to the Cabinet Committee on a yearly basis. Mr Hall clarified that the funding was now on a yearly basis. Councillor Knight agreed that she would like this committee to have sight of this first on a yearly basis.

The Committee debated if an updating six monthly written report should be asked for from the CAB to keep us abreast of their work. However it was noted that officers already held quarterly meetings with the CAB and their managers and we also monitored their core funding on a quarterly basis. Community Services officers have also asked for SMART objectives to be set up for the coming year. Noting this, the committee thought the CAB should be left unburdened with writing yet more reports and reporting back in yet another way to this Council.

RESOLVED:

That the Communities Select Committee strongly recommend to the Finance Cabinet Committee at its meeting on 19 January 2017, that the funding of the Citizens Advice Bureau's (CAB) two existing Debt Advisors be extended for a further year from 1 April 2017.

53. REALITY ROADSHOW

The report on the last years Reality Road show was introduced by Ms Gold the Assistant Communities Health and Wellbeing Manager. She reported that the Reality Roadshow initiative was a personal safety, health & wellbeing event that brought together a host of statutory and voluntary agencies, to deliver a full day of educational workshops to Year 9 (14 year old) pupils at secondary school in the district. It was specifically tailored to address young people's issues that have been identified as a priority concern locally.

The Roadshow was co-ordinated by the Council's Community Health and Wellbeing Team providing over 900 pupils in the District with expert advice and guidance on making the right choices in life for good health and wellbeing.

Pupils participated in either 5 or 6 sessions depending on individual school timetables and each session was specifically designed to address current issues facing local young people. These workshops were:

- The consequences of Crime – delivered by Essex magistrates;
- Online Internet safety – Essex Police;
- Sexual Health – Essex County Council;
- Legal Highs and Substance Misuse – Alcohol & Drugs Advisory Service;
- Alcohol Awareness – AlcoHELP;
- Healthy Relationships and Domestic Abuse – Safer Places;
- Gangs and Peer Pressure – Sparks 2 Life.

Real life advice was provided by ex-offenders and ex-addicts relating their stories.

The schools were not charged for the Roadshow as they were funded by the Police and Crime Commissioner and Essex County Council.

The Reality Roadshow was delivered to the following schools – Davenant Foundation School, Debden Park High School, Epping St Johns School, King Harold Business and Enterprise Academy, Roding Valley High School and West Hatch School. The Ongar Academy will be incorporated into the Reality Roadshow annual programme during the academic year of 2017/18.

Each participating Year 9 pupil was required to complete an anonymous feedback questionnaire and every teacher involved was asked to feedback on the scenario they had attended. Usually the feedback was very positive and teaching staff were delighted with the additional support and information that they gained from the day.

Councillor Girling asked if any information was passed on to the parents and was there anything covered on mental illness. Ms Gold said that they did send a letter to the parents giving background information and yes, they did do items on mental health. There was a recurring theme on bullying throughout the day.

Councillor Stavrou asked if this replaced the Crucial Crew Programme. She was told that it did not. Crucial Crew was a separate programme run for younger Year 6 pupils.

Councillor Surtees asked if there was any feedback from the Youth Council. He was told that there was no recent feedback but they did get consulted regularly. Councillor Surtees went on to ask if the mental health items did anything on anti-stigmatizing. Ms Gold said that they concentrated on exam stress but there was a further workshop that went deeper into this, but it was held separately. This was a big thing now both locally and nationally.

Councillor Girling asked if there had any problems or concerns with the stakeholders. He was told that there had been some problems, but it was easier to organise and run the Roadshow than for Crucial Crew. It was an ongoing conversation.

The Chairman thanked the officers for their helpful and useful presentation.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted the success of the Reality Roadshow initiative, which was a personal safety and awareness event aimed at Year 9 pupils and was now in its seventh year of delivery.

54. HOMELESSNESS INITIATIVES

The report on the Homeless Initiatives was introduced by the Assistant Director, (Housing Operations), Roger Wilson.

The Committee was asked as part of their Work Programme to consider various mitigation strategies in order to deal with the current and future increasing pressures due to the rise in homelessness. The latest figures on homelessness in England reveal that nationally the total number of households in temporary accommodation had increased by 53% from 48,010 in December 2010 to 73,120 in June 2016, with 14,930 households being accepted as homeless between 1 July and 30 September 2016. Local Authorities took action to prevent a further 52,920 households becoming homeless in the same period which increased by over 2,000 compared to the previous quarter.

The Committee was asked to consider strategies for the Homelessness Prevention Service. In 2015/2016 the service prevented homelessness in 625 cases. The number of cases being prevented in the first six months of this year was 264 which may result in a lesser number being prevented in 2016/2017. This was due to the difficulties being experienced by the Team in being able to place applicants in the private rented sector which had resulted in the number of homelessness acceptances increasing from 52 in 2014/2015 to 71 in 2015/2016 and the numbers placed in temporary accommodation increasing from 74 in 2014/2015 to 111 in the second quarter of 2016/2017.

As at 30 September 2016 (date of the last Government statistical return) there were 111 applicants placed in both temporary and interim accommodation which has resulted in the homeless persons' hostel at Norway House, North Weald and Hemnall House, Epping being full most of the time. In order to increase the number of applicants being able to be accommodated at Norway House, officers were investigating the possibility of dividing up some of the larger rooms at the hostel to provide greater flexibility of use. Furthermore, as the chalets in the grounds of the Hostel were falling into disrepair, the option of replacing the chalets with "modular units" was being investigated which may enable the Council to increase the number of units in a more cost effective way. It may also be possible to use such accommodation in other areas.

Genesis Housing Association, under the Housing Association Leasing Direct Scheme (HALD), originally provided 20 units of accommodation for our homeless applicants. However, as private landlords are becoming increasingly reluctant to lease their properties in this way, Genesis now only has 15 units of accommodation, all of which were now occupied.

The Council also provided bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation for predominantly single homeless applicants and has a contract with a number of Hotels who were selected following a 3 yearly competitive tendering exercise which had taken place now on 2 occasions. The numbers placed in B&B had increased from single figures to around 20-25 applicants. Under Government Regulations, the Council should not place families in such accommodation for more than 6 weeks.

It is important to note that over recent months the Hotels used have been full due to placements being made at the Hotels by other Councils. This has left officers with no option other than to use other Hotels in accordance with the delegated authority granted to the Director of Communities. Furthermore, due to the increasing pressure on homelessness, the Council currently had 14 homeless families placed in its own housing stock (very often without the applicant meeting the 5 years residency criteria under the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme) on non-secure tenancies until their cases were resolved.

Mr Marshall asked if the proposed 'Modular Units' had shared kitchen facilities. Mr Wilson said that officers were keen that they had shared facilities in order to ensure no tenancy status was created. Councillor J H Whitehouse noted that at present they shared bathrooms; would these new units have specially designed shared facilities. She was told that they would, they could be designed and placed at different locations. A pilot scheme was proposed for a few units to see how it would work. Councillor Whitehouse asked where else they would be located, Mr Wilson said that this was yet to be decided. Councillor Surtees asked if they could be put in some of the Council's car parks and was advised that there were all sorts of options, but they were taking it one step at a time.

The Committee then considered the 'invest to save' funding proposals for two initiatives.

One was for '*rental loans*', a scheme to provide applicants with a rental loan to meet the costs of (or contribute towards) the first month's rent in advance when securing accommodation in the private sector. Applicants were required to repay the loan on an interest free basis over 24 months recycling the budget to enable others to benefit from the Scheme in the future.

The other invest to save proposal was for '*Landlord Deposits*'. In addition to meeting the cost of the first month's rent, applicants also must pay a landlord's deposit. The cost of the deposit was in accordance with Housing Benefit Local Housing Allowance rates (being the maximum housing benefit a person can claim towards their rent), which ranged from £296 to £1,359 per month depending upon the rent, size and location of the property.

It was therefore considered that the funding should now be made available for rental loans equivalent to 4 weeks rent and/or landlord deposits (lodged with a third party by the landlord) in appropriate cases with repayments being made for both loans over an increased period of 36 months in order to make it more affordable to the applicant.

The Committee then went on to consider the placements of homeless households by London Boroughs outside of London. Following representations from Essex councils, figures for placements across Essex have now, for the first time, been provided by around 24 of the 32 London Boroughs. As not all London Boroughs had provided this information, the true figures were likely to be much higher, but Boroughs have placed applicants in 47 private properties (that we were aware of) in the last 12 months.

Some are in order for London Boroughs to discharge their homelessness duties which can lead to the Council taking responsibility for such households should homelessness re-occur after two years.

One of the problems that these placements cause the Council is that it makes it very difficult for our own Homelessness Prevention Service to secure accommodation in the private rented sector for homeless and potentially homeless households. This was one of the main reasons why the numbers of homeless households in EFDC's own temporary accommodation was increasing. Furthermore, landlords are reluctant to accept applicants from the Council due to London Boroughs paying landlords in the District generous incentives ranging between £2,500 and £6,000, in addition to rental loans and landlord deposits.

For the above reasons, the invest to save budget remained unspent. Officers explained the difficulties of landlord deposits being held by a third party on behalf of the Council and why this had proved to be unworkable.

Councillor Surtees noted that the effect of exporting people from London could be devastating, Thurrock for instance. We should follow the recommendations of the officers and do something to help.

Councillor J H Whitehouse asked if officers were flagging up this issue with MPs and Parliament. Mr Wilson replied that they were doing so. Members were keen that our 5 year residency was increased to 10 years. But the homeless had a much less qualifying period. He could not see legislation stopping the London Boroughs from placing people here. They could however, change the law about us accepting responsibility after two years, but this was unlikely. The problems were radiating out from the London Boroughs who reported they were swamped by homelessness and were pushing this out to the outlying local authorities. We could use the invest to save to help our problems.

Councillor Baldwin asked why couldn't the Council rent housing from the private sector and then sublet to their tenants and not use Genesis Housing Association. Mr Wilson said that it was easier for them to do it. We would need much more staff and would need to set ourselves up as a private company to enable us to do this. It was just cheaper and easier to outsource it. Mr Wallace the Housing Options Manager added that landlords have found other tenants to take on their property and not use Genesis.

The Committee then went on to consider rough sleepers, noting that in August 2016, the two year Government funded Essex-wide Rough Sleeping Outreach service ended. This service provided visits to rough sleepers late at night and in the early hours 24/7 to offer assistance and case management until the person was able to move off the streets. When the funding ended, the Council approached the service provider to provide a stand-alone service to the Council. But they were not able to assist. Although the Council only receives around one report each month of rough sleeping, there was a risk of a person becoming at risk due to rough sleeping without specialist help.

Officers were having discussions with other providers of specialist rough sleeping support and expect the cost of such services to be around £200 per case. This would result in a budget of £2,500 per annum funded by the General Fund to provide specialist services to rough sleepers.

Councillor Surtees commented that it would be of benefit to co-operate with neighbouring authorities. Mr Wallace commented that Harlow ran a successful scheme; we had also run a successful scheme, but had run out of funding.

The Committee then noted that the Homelessness Reduction Bill was currently making its way through Parliament and was likely to become law later this year, this

new Bill would put a significant call on our resources by putting additional duties on authorities to prevent and reduce homelessness. It would also place substantial additional work on an already stretched Homelessness Prevention Team.

Councillor Stavrou commented that pressures were building up on our staff. In the past the Cabinet had laid down stringent ways on the way money was spent; but we have to act now to enable our staff to cope with the future.

Mr Marshall asked when this Bill would come into force and was told probably by this summer.

Councillor Surtees commented that a lot of this would not be needed if every authority was as good as Epping Forest DC in dealing with homelessness. We have to make provisions to keep our standards of service.

The Committee noted that the Council had discontinued with the in-house Housing Appeals and Review Panel (HARP) and officers have suggested that an outside company be employed to take up the burden of carrying out these reviews. The Housing Options Manager had undertaken 30 reviews this last year with a further 15 being undertaken by the Assistant Director (Housing Operations). Soft market testing had established that the average cost per review by an external company would be around £200. Based on the number of reviews undertaken in the last 12 months an annual budget of £9,000 funded from the General Fund would be required.

In the future we will also need to carry out detailed reviews on each homelessness case and this would create a lot more work and doing this and undertaking homelessness reviews would entail taking on more staff which would cost a lot more than employing an outside company.

Councillor Surtees was amazed that a case would cost just £200, was it a loss leader? Should we be wary of this?

Councillor Rolfe was worried that the external company would only cost £200; would they be good enough. Mr Wilson said that the decision not to have the HAR Panel was correct, counsel was concerned that members were making these decisions, and said that they should not be doing this. No other Local Authority, bar one, had a HARP. It took a lot of officer's time. An external company would go through a selection process and would also be closely monitored by officers. Mr Hall added that if they were not up to an acceptable level we would not use them. Experience from other authorities suggested that this worked and they were happy with it.

Councillor Rolfe was still worried about putting our faith in an outside company.

Councillor Knight commented that £9,000 was a small amount for the use of a specialist outside body. We were out of our depth with HARP and members were really not qualified to hear the appeals. Also, an outside company would be monitored and scrutinised by us.

Mr Wilson stated that there were experienced companies out there who were monitored and regulated by the law.

Councillor Lea agreed with the officers on this.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That, in accordance with its Work Programme, the Communities Select

Committee undertook a review of the homelessness loans and tenancy deposits scheme (funded under “Invest to Save”); considered the homelessness situation generally in the District and mitigation strategies, and recommend to the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee that the following bids be made for CSB Growth from April 2017/18:

(a) £32,000 per annum for the appointment of 1 FTE additional Grade 6 Homelessness Prevention Officer in order to deal with the requirements of the expected Homelessness Reduction Act and the additional workload generally due to increasing homelessness pressures;

(b) £9,000 per annum to fund an external company to undertake Homelessness Reviews; and

(c) £2,500 per annum to fund an external company to provide specialist services to rough sleepers;

(2) That the Communities Select Committee recommend to the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee that the existing Invest to Save Funding of £90,000 over a 3 year period now be used for providing applicants with a rental loan of up to the equivalent of 4 weeks rent to meet the costs of rent in advance when securing accommodation in the private rented sector and /or a landlord deposit in accordance with LHA rates (lodged with a third party by the landlord) with applicants being required to repay loans on an interest free basis over an increased period of 36 months, thereby re-cycling the budget to enable others to benefit from the Scheme in the future; and

(3) That a report be submitted to a future meeting of the Cabinet on the feasibility of the use of “modular units” to provide temporary accommodation for homeless applicants.

55. COUNCIL RENT INCREASE 2017/18 - BRIEFING

The Director of Communities, Alan Hall gave a short briefing about the required rent reductions for Council tenants for 2017/18 and explained that the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee, at their meeting on 19 January 2017 would be asked to make a recommendation to the Cabinet on a Council rent reduction for 2017/18.

The Government had determined that all councils must reduce their rent by 1% each year for four years. This started last year, leaving the Council with an estimated £390,000 less rental income in the current year.

A reduction of 1% for next year would mean a further £303,000 forecast reduction for the next year; the reduction for next year would be less than for the current year as the first new properties under the Council Housebuilding Programme would be built next year, bringing in additional income.

It was noted that although this was generally good news for tenants, it would leave the HRA with less money to deliver the Council’s Housing Service.

Mr Marshall asked if the potentially increased number of sales of council properties that would have arisen if the Government's Pay to Stay policy had been introduced and had been factored into the budget. He was told that since the Government had recently decided to abandon its compulsory scheme, no increased sales had been included in the forecasts.

Councillor Stavrou asked if the loss of income from the rent reductions were the compound reduction over the two years. She was told that it was. It would be a total of £693,000 over the two year period.

RESOLVED:

The Committee noted the recommendation being made to the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee for recommendation on to the Cabinet on the Council rent reduction for 2017/18.

56. HOUSING STRATEGY KEY ACTION PLAN 2016 - 12 MONTH PROGRESS

Mr Hall introduced the report on the 12 Month progress report on the Housing Strategy Key Action Plan. He explained that the purpose of the Strategy was to assess the District's current and future housing needs and to set out the Council's approach to meeting those needs. This Committee was charged by the Cabinet to monitor the Action Plan associated with the Strategy on a six monthly basis.

Officers were now working on a new Housing Strategy and it was hoped that a draft Strategy would be ready for consideration at the next meeting of this Committee.

Action Plan comments:

Item 1: Mr Hall explained that the timescale for this should be changed to read September 2017 and not remain as April 2017;

Item 10: Councillor Brookes asked if the Council was selling the Council's garage site adjacent to the Sir Winston Churchill PH site to Higgins Homes. She was told that the Cabinet had agreed to make this land available to provide the majority of car parking spaces for the occupiers of this new development;

Item 14: Mr Hall explained that the timescale should be revised to September 2017 and not remain as April 2017;

Item 34: Councillor Brookes asked why Lindsay House, Epping had been empty for so long. She was told that the Neighbourhoods Directorate was dealing with the sale of this property. It was explained that this property had been taken out of the deal with Essex County Council and the Council now intended to sell Lindsay House on the open market. A report would be going to the next Cabinet meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the 12 Month Progress Report on the Housing Strategy Key Action Plan 2016 was reviewed and noted.

57. REPORTS TO BE MADE TO THE NEXT MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Committee thought that a brief summary of the two main reports considered at this meeting, on the CAB and grant funding and the Homeless Initiative should be reported back to the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

58. FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the dates of their future meetings.