

Minutes of the Meeting of the COMMUNITY AND WELLBEING COMMITTEE held at the Council Chamber, Epsom Town Hall on 9 July 2024

PRESENT -

Councillor Clive Woodbridge (Chair); Councillor Bernice Froud (Vice-Chair); Councillors Tony Froud (as nominated substitute for Councillor Graham Jones), Rob Geleit, Alison Kelly, Rachel King and Kim Spickett

Absent: Councillor Graham Jones and Councillor Humphrey Reynolds

Officers present: Rod Brown (Head of Housing and Community), Arjan de Jong (Strategic Housing Manager), Richard Appiah-Ampofo (Senior Accountant) and Dan Clackson (Democratic Services Officer)

1 QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC

No questions or statements were received from members of the Public.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of any Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or other registrable or non-registrable interests were declared by Members with respect to any item to be considered at the meeting.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Committee confirmed as a true record the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 16 January 2024 and authorised the Chair to sign them.

4 HOMELESSNESS: ANNUAL ACTION PLAN UPDATE

The Committee received a report setting out the actions taken to minimise homelessness expenditure, identifying the funding which was utilised to cover the additional expenditure for 2023/24, and giving an indication of the anticipated costs for 2024/25.

The Committee considered the following matters:

- a) **People housed in temporary accommodation.** In response to a Member, the Strategic Housing Manager explained that a variety of people from a range of life circumstances, including single people and families, are housed in nightly paid accommodation by the Council. He

explained that people housed in nightly paid accommodation are typically those who are considered vulnerable for a number of reasons, such as having young children, or having physical or mental health needs, and to whom the Council duly has a duty towards. He stated that the most expensive accommodation is that for family units, though the Council also provides a large amount of accommodation for single persons.

- b) **Accommodation inside and outside of Epsom & Ewell.** Following a question from a Member, the Strategic Housing Manager explained that the Council has a large amount of temporary accommodation within the Borough, much of which is provided by registered providers, such as 'Town and Country Housing' (formerly by Rosebery Housing). He went on to explain that the Council's nightly paid accommodation, however, is mostly located outside the Borough, and that people are oftentimes housed in such accommodation for 2-3 years at a time. He stated that the Council's temporary accommodation outside of Epsom & Ewell Borough is predominantly located within Thornton Heath, in Croydon Borough. He explained that due to Thornton Heath's close proximity to Epsom, it allows people housed there to maintain their lives and to stay close to their support networks in Epsom & Ewell.
- c) **Recruitment.** The Strategic Housing Manager confirmed that two posts had been recruited within the housing team over the past 18 months, one of which was the Single Persons Officer, who works closely with people in need of single person temporary accommodation.
- d) **Collaboration with other authorities.** In response to a question from a Member in relation to the possibility of partnering with other authorities in order to mitigate the increasing costs for nightly paid accommodation caused by the inherent competition between authorities, the Strategic Housing Manager stated that he was aware that conversations on the topic had been had between Epsom and Surrey County Council, and that the Housing Solutions Manager would be able to provide further details. He said that he would contact the Housing Solutions Manager in order to provide the Member with further information after the meeting.
- e) **Accommodation rates and Homelessness Prevention Grant.** In response to a question from a Member, the Strategic Housing Manager explained that the rates set by Government at which the Council can charge for temporary accommodation was low and had remained unchanged since 2011. He explained that the Council consequently has to spend a large portion of the Homelessness Prevention Grant received from Government on covering the shortfall on the accommodation rent.
- f) **Temporary accommodation tenants moving into privately rented accommodation.** The Strategic Housing Manager explained that the rates for properties within the private rental sector are set at open market rates. He explained that the Council can assist people with rent deposits and advance rent in order to help them to move into privately rented properties but will always consider the long-term sustainability of the

arrangement to ensure that the tenant(s) will be able to afford the rent for the property in question.

- g) **Encouraging landlords to increase the length of tenancies.** In response to a question from a Member in relation to Appendix 1, Key objective 3, section 3.19, the Strategic Housing Manager explained that shorthold tenancies can be as short as 6 months. He stated that rising interest rates and higher mortgage rates had seen a rise in the number of landlords selling their properties, resulting in an increase in section 21 evictions. He explained that the Council seeks to build relationships with landlords, many of whom the Council places within the 'rent in advance' and 'rent deposit' schemes to provide stability for landlords and to encourage lengthier tenancies periods.
- h) **Correction to be made to appendix 1.** It was highlighted by a Member that each objective spreadsheet within appendix 1 contained an entry for Severe Weather Emergency Provisions, but the progress status was not consistent across the different objectives. The Strategic Housing Manager took note of this and explained that the progress status for Severe Weather Emergency Provisions should have been listed consistently across all the objectives, and that he would amend the spreadsheet accordingly.
- i) **Empty properties.** In response to a Member, the Strategic Housing Manager explained that multiple properties had been identified as having been empty for more than two years, and the owners had been written to encouraging them to contact the Council. He explained that he was hopeful that this may result in some properties being offered to the private sector lease scheme.
- j) **The Epsom and Ewell Hub.** In response to a question from a Member, the Head of Housing and Community explained that for people who are unemployed and not exempt from application of the benefit cap, the benefits received with the cap in place are too low to afford rent on properties within the borough, frequently resulting in such people being housed in temporary accommodation. He explained that the Epsom and Ewell Hub plays a key part in the homelessness strategy by assisting people in finding employment, consequently becoming eligible for full benefits or coming off benefits entirely, and being able to afford to move out of temporary accommodation.
- k) **Fairview Road and Stoneleigh Library.** In response to a question from a Member, the Head of Housing and Community advised that the application for the proposed microhomes on Fairview Road was expected to go to Planning Committee in the coming months. He explained that microhomes provide temporary accommodation at a fraction of the cost of standard housing. He explained that discussions had been had with Surrey County Council (SCC) regarding Epsom & Ewell Council bringing two vacant flats owned by SCC near Stoneleigh Library into its private

sector leasing scheme. SCC, however, had withdrawn their offer as they wished to make use of the properties themselves.

- l) **Town & Country Housing.** In response to a Member, the Strategic Housing Manager explained that Town & Country Housing were looking into potentially diverting some of their funding from their other stock holding area (Tunbridge Wells) to the Epsom & Ewell area, following their acquisition of the Epsom & Ewell area housing stock from Rosebery Housing.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) Agree the priority actions points which have been taken to manage homelessness over the past 18 months.**
- (2) Note the use of Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG) and homelessness grant reserves to cover the increase in expenditure, during 2023/24, to enable the Council to meet its duties under the Housing Act 1996 and Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.**
- (3) Agree that a further update regarding nightly paid accommodation (NPA) expenditure be provided at the Community & Wellbeing Committee in October 2024.**

5 URGENT ITEMS

The Committee received a report on the decisions taken by the Chief Executive and Directors on the grounds of urgency, in compliance with the requirements of the Constitution.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) Note the urgent decisions taken and the reasons for those decisions, since the last meeting of the Committee.**

The meeting began at 7.30 pm and ended at 8.13 pm

COUNCILLOR CLIVE WOODBRIDGE (CHAIR)