

Minutes of the Meeting of the COMMUNITY AND WELLBEING COMMITTEE held at the Council Chamber, Epsom Town Hall on 8 October 2024

PRESENT -

Councillor Clive Woodbridge (Chair); Councillor Bernice Froud (Vice-Chair); Councillors Rob Geleit, Graham Jones, Alison Kelly, Rachel King, Humphrey Reynolds and Kim Spickett

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

6 QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC

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

7 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

8 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Committee confirmed as a true record the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 09 July 2024 and authorised the Chair to sign them.

9 NIGHTLY PAID ACCOMMODATION EXPENDITURE UPDATE 2024/25

The Committee received a report setting out the anticipated costs for 2024/25 and outlining the actions taken to minimise homelessness expenditure.

The Committee considered the following matters:

- a) **Limited Affordable Housing Options.** A Member enquired as to whether any groups were affected in particular by the limited affordable housing options in the Borough. The Strategic Housing Manager stated that the issue affects households of all sizes. He explained that, for the Council, family-size units incur the highest cost.

- b) **Homelessness Population Figure.** The Committee acknowledged that the homelessness population number was not static – the Chair explained that as people leave homelessness, new people enter into homelessness.
- c) **Government’s 2024 Autumn Statement.** The Strategic Housing Manager stated that officers were anticipating the release of the Government’s 2024 Autumn Statement, and were hopeful that there would be an increase to the Homelessness Prevention Grant (‘HPG’), a favourable distribution around the Affordable Housing Programme, and a higher priority afforded to social rented housing.
- d) **HPG Expenditure.** The Strategic Housing Manager stated that regardless of how much money the Council receives through the HPG, the Council shall provide support to all to whom it is duty-bound to protect. The Senior Accountant stated that the current forecast suggested that the Council would spend the remainder of the Grant - he explained that expenditure was being monitored and considered in the planning of the coming year’s budget.
- e) **Rough Sleeper Population.** Following a question from a Member, the Strategic Housing Manager stated that Epsom & Ewell has a relatively low rough-sleeper population.
- f) **Landlords Forum.** In response to a Member, the Strategic Housing Manager stated that the Landlords Forum held in September had been successful and was well attended. He explained that the event promoted the Private Sector Leasing Scheme and the Rent Deposit Scheme, both of which play a key role in reducing and preventing homelessness.
- g) **Housing Options (Move On) Officer.** In response to a Member, the Strategic Housing Manager stated that the possibility of making the ‘Housing Options (Move On) Officer’ a permanent role was being explored. He stated that the role, since its inception, had been greatly successful in reducing and preventing homelessness in the Borough.
- h) **Joint Working with Housing Providers.** The Strategic Housing Manager stated that the Council work collaboratively with Town & Country Housing, along with other smaller housing providers.
- i) **Empty Properties.** The Strategic Housing Manager confirmed that all empty properties on the empty properties list had been written to. He confirmed that 15 properties had been removed from the list, but overall the figure remained consistent as additional properties had been added to the list.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) **Note the use of Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG) and reserves to cover the anticipated expenditure, for 2024/25, to enable the Council to meet its duties under the Housing Act 1996 and Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.**

- (2) **Agree that a further update regarding nightly paid accommodation (NPA) expenditure be provided at the Community & Wellbeing Committee in March 2025.**

10 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UPDATE

The Committee received a report setting out proposals on how the Council will engage with residents to receive feedback on services and better understand residents' needs.

The Committee considered the following matters:

- a) **Engagements with Veterans.** The Committee considered the importance of engaging with and supporting veterans, and noted that the Armed Forces Champion was investigating opportunities to meet with key representatives from organisations within the Armed Forces sector.
- b) **Engagement with Young People.** The Committee considered the importance of engaging with the youth of the Borough. It was considered that opportunities could be explored with Nescot and UCA, amongst other organisations, to run events such as Q&A panels for students. It was noted that the Council used to run a Local Democracy Day, where Councillors would visit local schools to talk with students.
- c) **Councillor Community Involvement.** The Committee considered the importance of Councillors being involved in and having a presence in the community. UCA, Nescot, and the Longmead Community Centre were listed as possible partners/venues to hold events for people in the local community to engage with Councillors directly.
- d) **Council Presence at Community Events.** The Committee considered the importance of the Council having a visible presence at community events (i.e. uniformed officers, Council stands, etc.).
- e) **Working with Partners.** The Committee considered the importance of working with partners to reach seldom heard groups. The Head of Housing and Community explained that much of the work historically delivered by the Council is nowadays delivered instead through partnerships with other organisations.
- f) **Engagement Strategy.** The Acting Director of Corporate Services suggested that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to community engagement, and that the most suitable approach is often determined on a case-by-case basis. He explained that the Councils Communications Strategy acts as a guiding document for consultations and other form of engagement with the public.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) **Endorse the approach taken to consultation.**

11 2025/26 BUDGET TARGETS

The Committee received a report informing the Committee of the Council's revenue budget targets presented to the Strategy & Resources Committee in July. The report sought guidance on the preparation of the Committee's service estimates for 2025/26.

The Committee considered the following matters:

- a) **2023/24 Year-End Review.** In response to a question from a Member, the Senior Accountant explained that explorations to identify potential savings opportunities were ongoing.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) Note the implications of the budget targets presented to Strategy & Resources Committee on 23 July 2024.**
- (2) Support the changes to services and savings previously identified in Table 1 of the report and that those are included within the budget presented to this Committee in January 2025.**
- (3) Consider how additional income or savings can be generated to address the projected Council wide funding gap of £573,000 in 2025/26, rising to £720,000 per annum by 2028/29.**
- (4) Note that owing to the Council's projected budget deficit, any additional new revenue growth items (i.e. service enhancements resulting in increased net expenditure) supported by Policy Committees will need to be fully funded from existing budgets.**

12 URGENT DECISIONS

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 decision taken and the reasons for that decision, since the last meeting of the committee.**

13 HOUSING REPORTS FROM STRATEGY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

In accordance with decisions made by the Strategy and Resources Committee ('S&R') at its 17th September 2024 meeting, the Community and Wellbeing Committee received a report asking the Committee to note two reports brought before S&R at said meeting, namely the Town & Country Housing Temporary

Accommodation Agreement report, and the 33-39 High Street Lease for Temporary Accommodation report.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) Note the two reports attached as Appendix 1 and Exempt Appendix 2 to the report.**

14 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

Under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the Committee unanimously resolved to exclude the press and public from the meeting for Part 2 of the agenda on the grounds that the business involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act (as amended) and that pursuant to paragraph 10 of Part 2 of the said Schedule 12A the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

15 CONTRACTING OUT OF HOMELESSNESS REVIEWS FUNCTION

The Committee received a report proposing to enter into a new contract to undertake statutory reviews of housing decisions relating to homelessness and the suitability of temporary accommodation, when they are challenged by households who have approached the Council for assistance.

The Committee's consideration of this item is recorded in a separate (not for publication) restricted Minute.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) Approve the award of a contract for the conduct of reviews of allocation and homelessness decisions to Housing Reviews Limited for a period of 1 year with an option to extend for a further period of 1 year and;**
- (2) Nominate and authorise to Housing Reviews Limited the Council's statutory functions pursuant to the provisions of s166A(9) and s202 of the Housing Act 1996 to perform reviews of decisions made either regarding the suitability of accommodation offered s166A(9) or as the result of a decision upon a request for assistance as homeless s202.**

The meeting began at 7.30 pm and ended at 8.26 pm

COUNCILLOR CLIVE WOODBRIDGE (CHAIR)