

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 31 January 2017

Present: Councillor P Brightmore (Chair)

Councillors	S Foulkes	A Sykes
	J McManus	B Berry
	C Muspratt	T Pilgrim
	L Reecejones	L Rowlands
	T Usher	C Carubia
	J Walsh	M Sullivan (In place of T Jones)
	I Williams	

37 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST / PARTY WHIP

Councillor S Foulkes declared a Personal Interest in Item 3 - Magenta Housing Association - Impact of Welfare Reform by virtue of his appointment of Board Director of Magenta Living.

38 MINUTES

Subject to the amendment of Minute. 36 – Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Work Programme Update Resolution (2) to read Chris Carubia (LD), Phillip Brightmore (L), Julie McManus (L), Christina Muspratt (L) and Tracey Pilgrim (C).

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 30 November 2016 be confirmed as a true record.

39 MAGENTA HOUSING ASSOCIATION - IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM

The Committee considered a presentation from Magenta Living updating Members on the impacts of welfare reform on their tenants.

Mr B Simpson, Chief Executive of Magenta Living introduced the presentation giving a brief introduction to Magenta Living which was established in February 2005, their vision was to 'Provide homes and build communities'. Mr Simpson reported that 1,319 homes were let last year and 751 new homes

had been built since the transfer. The presentation reported the impacts that tenants faced as a result of the Welfare Reform, in particular the under-occupancy deduction, Universal Credit, and the benefits cap.

He highlighted just some of the impacts this had, had on service provision including an increase in tenants terminating their tenancy; returning to live with family; evictions; property vacancies. Officers had also faced difficulties in re-housing couples and single people who had access to children.

Magenta was faced with increase pressure on their resources in particular, assisting tenants applying for DHP or Universal Credit; resources were also stretched in supporting those at risk of losing their homes. This had a massive impact on the officer's ability to provide timely assistance to the non-urgent cases.

Mr Simpson commented on the future changes that would affect Magenta Living in the future to include the changes to the LHA Cap which would be come into force from 2019.

In relation to the Council's 2020 Vision, Mr Simpson highlighted some of the ways in which Magenta Living was supporting the People, Environment and Business pledges. He indicated that Magenta Living was more than 'bricks and mortar' and provided a wide range of services including: welfare benefits advice, jobs and training, community involvement and future plans to build new homes for rent and for sale to meet the wider demand.

The Chair advised the Committee that if they felt it would be beneficial a spotlight session could be arranged.

Mr Roach explained that there was five weeks in between each claim for Universal Credit but for the first seven days a claimant would receive no benefits. He commented that it was inevitable that people would struggle to manage for 5 weeks with no money. Officers were advising tenants in this situation to access loans from the DWP but these were funds that had to be repaid quickly therefore, it was envisaged that tenants would fall into arrears. But the team advised tenants the importance of paying their Council Tax as a priority.

Following the roll out of Universal Credit, Mr Roach indicated that there would be an expected spike in demand as at present the system could not cope with complex cases. It was expected that there would be a spike in November and there was a danger that officers would be inundated with applications.

To assist those tenants who were computer illiterate, Magenta had established a customer hub with staff on hand to assist tenants using the PC's to process claims, pay online bills etc. during the transition to the new online payments system this would be monitored on a regular basis.

Under the Right to Buy Scheme, Mr Simpson indicated that tenants had the right to purchase their homes. He highlighted the current pilot scheme being undertaken in the Midlands in relation to a new scheme for Housing Association Agreements, this could be introduced 2018/19.

In response Member questions, Mr Simpson reported that two organisations (Hilbre Homes and Bamboo Lettings) had been established to provide social housing. Profits from both organisations could be used to subsidise the lack of Government grant received.

In relation to Clifton Avenue, Magenta was looking to re-house tenants and re-use the site to develop a new homes scheme. They had spent funds on to re-configuring 3/4 bed properties but this had not worked. Officers had also further explored shared accommodation schemes as a possible option; whereby tenants were encourage to approach Magenta with a view to sharing their accommodation with people they know. This was proving more popular amongst younger tenants.

RESOLVED:

That Mr Simpson and Mr Roach be thanked for their informative presentation.

40 **WIRRAL HOUSING STRATEGY**

The Committee considered a presentation from the Assistant Director – Environment giving a update on work in relation the Council’s Housing Strategy.

Mr Ball indicated that the Housing Strategy formed part of the Council’s 2020 pledges and its aim was to provide good quality housing which met the needs of Wirral’s residents.

Wirral’s Housing Objectives were to build more homes to meet economic growth ambitions; improve the quality of Wirral’s housing offer and meet the needs of the boroughs most vulnerable people to enable them to live independently.

Mr Ball highlighted the priorities to be delivered by 2020, which included delivery of at least 3,500 new homes; improve private sector homes; bring back into use 1,250 empty homes; deliver 300 new extra care units; prevent homelessness and ensured that 70% of Choice based Letting went to those in housing need priority A-C.

Achievements to date to included; 712 new homes delivered on time; 524 empty homes brought back into use; 698 private sector homes improved;

2290 vulnerable people benefitted from home adaptations; 1025 households helped to prevent homelessness and there had been a successful bid from the Liverpool City Region for Starter Homes.

Mr Ball highlighted the challenges faced and opportunities available to the Council.

A copy of the Council's Housing Strategy was attached to the agenda for information.

In response to a Member's question, Mr Ball indicated that Wirral Waters provided key economic opportunities with 16,000 residential consents in place; officers would be working with Peel to encourage them to bring forward these developments. He reiterated that not all of Wirral's housing need would be met by Wirral Waters because it would be largely apartment development.

He indicated that there was a need to build more homes for people in Wirral based on the Strategic Housing Market Assessment and a report would be going to Cabinet on 27 February 2017 about the detail of this.

In response to a Members question regarding the lack of adapted housing for disabled families, Ms Newman, Head of Operational Housing Services indicated that the department worked closely with registered providers and building developers but they tended not to supply adapted houses. Bungalows were not normally included on new developments as they took up too much development space. To assist with this the Government were bring in the "all homes accessible for all" scheme to help with this provision. Ms Newman indicated that within the Housing Strategy, it made reference to the use of smart technology, which could assist disabled families to live in homes independently given that there was not a wide range of accessibly family homes available.

In response to another Member's question Ms Newman indicated that the Liverpool City Region (LCR) Asylum Seekers Dispersment Plan was a national programme between the Council and the Home Office, working with CIRCO to identify the most appropriate areas to place. Work on this was ongoing and the quota (30 properties) was almost reached with 28 properties identified and secured.

In relation to the Syrian Resettlement Programme, there would be 510 placements over a five year program throughout the LCR with Wirral signing up to 100 placements with re-settlement support given by DWP, GP's, NHS England and the CCG.

The Adaptation Programme had been reviewed and realigned with the Council's health and social care priorities in relation to hospital discharges and getting people back to their own homes. There would be a further review

in six months to see if this had been effective. A Member asked for a progress report on this to a future meeting.

In relation to the land supply issues for future housing, Mr Ball indicated that the consultation had been undertaken last year on the Strategic Housing Assessment and a report would come to Cabinet on this matter.

It was suggested and agreed that a Spotlight Session would be arranged to look at the strategy and plans going forward.

RESOLVED:

That a Spotlight Session be arranged to look at the strategy and plans going forward.

41 **HOMELESSNESS IN WIRRAL AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION BILL**

The Committee considered the report of the Managing Director for Delivery advising of the extent of homelessness in Wirral and the potential effects on levels of homelessness arising from welfare reforms. The report also informed of the progress of the Homeless Reduction Bill and how the new legislation may change how Council's respond to the issue of homelessness.

In response to Members, Ms Newman reported that three funding applications had been submitted and the CLG feedback would be discussed at LCR level as part of devolution discussions with a further proposal to CLG targeting rough sleepers, establishing homeless hubs etc.

In relation to the information pertaining to rough sleepers, Ms Newman indicated that the Government's criteria for rough sleepers were quite specific and the figures published within the report were a mere snapshot following CLG guidance. Ms Newman indicated that officers were aware that the figures for Wirral were higher but this was decreasing due to the support services such as the night shelter, YMCA and 18 people so far accessing the intensive support services.

Mr Ball indicated that this was a very serious issue and a big challenge for the Council. Officers would continue to work alongside other agencies to respond to the challenge.

RESOLVED:

That Mr Ball and Ms Newman be thanked for their report and update.

42 **2017/18 BUDGET SCRUTINY REPORT**

A report from the Chair presented the work of Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee in relation to scrutinising the 2017/18 budget proposals. A workshop had been held on 18 January for Members to explore in more detail the various budget proposals being put forward that fell under the remit of this committee. A report on the workshop was included as an appendix to the report. The Committee was requested to acknowledge this report as its response to the 2017/18 budget proposals to be referred on to Cabinet as part of its considerations in developing any budget recommendation to Council.

The Chair then opened the matter up for debate by the Committee.

Councillor Walsh indicated that in relation to the comments captured on the proposal for garden waste collection he reiterated that his comments were that the Council should look into increasing the charge for additional garden waste bins.

The Chair indicated that at any point Members could make suggestions for budget saving and these would be fed into the consultation.

Cllr Muspratt asked for the targeting of the dog fouling patrol to concentrate on areas where it could best enforce Council policy, as she believed the Council to be unable to fine individuals in certain green spaces that were currently patrolled.

Councillor Carubia suggested that the Council should consider ceasing the Wirral View as this was a cost to the Council. In response Councillor Sullivan reported that the publication was delivered at no extra cost, therefore the suggestion that the publication relied on additional investment was inaccurate.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) That the report and the Committee's response to the 2017/18 budget proposals be noted; and**
- (2) the report be referred to Cabinet as part of its considerations in developing any budget recommendation to Council.**

43 **POLICY INFORM**

The Chair introduced a report on the September Policy Inform Briefing paper which focussed on the policies and legislation to emerge from the Queen's speech of 18 May, 2016 and which were relevant to this Committee's remit.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

44 **ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report of the Chair that updated Members on the current position regarding the Committee's work programme as agreed for the 2016/17 municipal year.

The report informed on the process of developing and managing the scrutiny work programme for the municipal year. Members noted that the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee, in cooperation with the other two Overview & Scrutiny Committees, was responsible for proposing and delivering an annual work programme and that the work programme should align with the corporate priorities of the Council, in particular the delivery of the Wirral Plan pledges which fell within the remit of the Committee.

Members noted that the report provided an update regarding progress made since the last Committee meeting held on 30 November 2016 and that the current work programme was made up of a combination of scrutiny reviews, standing items and requested officer reports, providing the committee with an opportunity to plan and regularly review its work across the municipal year.

The Chair informed that a task and finish review of the Modern Slavery Act would commence shortly.

RESOLVED:

the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme and direction of travel for 2016/17 be approved.