

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER,
WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON TUESDAY
22 SEPTEMBER 2015, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs D Hollebon (Chairman)
Councillors G Cutting, R Henson, J Jones,
A McNeece, D Oldridge, M Pope and
R Standley

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors A Alder, M Allen, D Andrews and
P Ruffles

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Lorraine Blackburn	- Democratic Services Officer
Simon Drinkwater	- Acting Chief Executive/Director of Neighbourhood Services
Philip Gregory	- Head of Strategic Finance
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Will O'Neill	- Head of Communications, Engagement and Cultural Services
Ceri Pettit	- Corporate Planning and Performance Manager
Ben Wood	- Head of Business Development
Ben Cannell	- Front of House Manager
Rhys Thomas	- Arts and Entertainment Programme

Director

275 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors J Goodeve and K Warnell.

276 MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 June be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

277 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR RIVERSMEAD AND CIRCLE AND SOUTH ANGLIA HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS 2014/15

The Executive Member for Health and Wellbeing submitted a report on the progress made by the two large scale voluntary transfer housing associations on the three remaining undertakings which remained following the end of the Delivery of Promises Programme in 2007.

The Manager, Housing Services explained that there were three indicators which the Council continued to monitor, Nomination Percentages, spend on Aids and Adaptations and the number of Right to Buy sales under the Clawback Agreement. Of particular concern was the fact that Riversmead Housing Association had not met its target spend for Aids and Adaptations on their tenants' homes. They stated that this was a result of a re-structure and gave an assurance that this would be monitored much more closely in future by their Senior Management Team on a monthly basis. An update was provided on the low level of Right to Buy sales which had been affected negatively by the Government's cap on the discounts which could be applied.

In response to a query from Councillor M Pope regarding missed targets on aids and adaptations, the Manager, Housing Services explained the role of the County Council and previous difficulties that had been experienced in making Occupational Therapist referrals, which could have impacted

on the aids and adaptations target, although there was an element of self-referral in relation to smaller adaptations. Assurances had been given by Riversmead that no one had been refused an aid or adaptation. Members were reminded that over the past seven years Riversmead HA had consistently overspent on its aids and adaptations target.

In response to a query from Councillor D Oldridge, the Manager, Housing Services explained that no penalties or claw backs had been imposed within the contract.

In response to a query from Councillor D Andrews regarding references to “centralised” and loss of “key personnel”, Members were advised that both Housing Associations had centralised a lot of their key functions and this had needed time to “bed” in

Councillor A McNeece referred to his difficulties in contacting Riversmead HA by telephone, adding that this might be the reason targets were not being met as people could not get through. The Manager, Housing Services stated that this issue had been raised at a quarterly meeting with the Associations. They had advised that more staff had been employed but that this had taken time to be effective. She commented that both HAs were keen to promote “walkabouts” within their areas with local Councillors and they could provide dates when these were scheduled to take place.

Councillor D Andrews expressed his frustration at trying to engage with the Housing Associations. The Manager, Housing Services advised that quarterly meetings were held with both housing associations and that all Councillors were invited to attend (with the meetings chaired by Councillor Buckmaster).

In response to a query from Councillor M Pope regarding Right to Buy and the Government’s stance on capping and what the Council could do, the Manager, Housing Services explained that letter drops by the Government had taken place and both the Council and Housing Associations had advertised, but that the central issue was high property values in the District.

In response to a query from Councillor A McNeece, the Manager, Housing Services provided a definition of “Affordable Housing” adding that this was an issue addressed in the Council’s Local Plan. The Chairman suggested that the Member might wish to discuss the issue further with the Officer, outside of the meeting.

In response to a query by Councillor D Andrews, the Manager, Housing Services explained that no “void” properties targets were included in the Stock Transfer Contract. The Chairman advised that she and the Acting Chief Executive and Director would be meeting with Housing Associations shortly and would discuss performance and report back to Members in November 2015.

Members supported a suggestion that the Executive Member for Health and Wellbeing be advised that both Housing Association targets should be monitored more closely and that communication links, allowing better access by the public be put in place. This was supported.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that (A) the performance of both Riversmead and Circle South Anglia Housing Associations on the three remaining stock transfer undertakings for the year 2014/15 be noted; and

(B) the Executive Member for Health and Wellbeing be advised that targets should be monitored more closely and that communication links, allowing better access by the public, be put in place.

278 HERTFORD THEATRE ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR 2014/15

The Executive Member for Health and Wellbeing submitted a report detailing the fifth annual report for Hertford Theatre.

The Head of Communications, Engagement and Cultural Services explained the main elements of the report concluding

that the figures showed that this was another successful story of continued business growth. He referred to the mid-term potential alternative governance options, the detail of which was set out in the report. It was noted that from April 2016, the theatre would be open on Sundays as well.

The Director of Hertford Theatre provided a summary of the report in terms of his vision to consolidate the Theatre's position as an arts venue both locally and further afield to expose the theatre's work and further increase audiences. He explained that the Arts Council had granted the Theatre a "Producers Fellowship" to develop a greater understanding of services to all audiences across the District. The Director commented on other challenges in terms of audience inclusivity and referred to a planned performance of "Welcome to Biscuit Land" by a performer living with Tourette's Syndrome and of proposals to introduce "relaxed" cinema performances for people suffering with autism and other challenging conditions.

Councillor J Jones congratulated both the Director of Hertford Theatre and the Head of Communications, Engagement and Cultural Services for the excellent figures achieved and of the growing popularity of the Theatre. He hoped that Buntingford could benefit from satellite links to the Theatre and to performances.

Councillor D Oldridge referred to the "patchy" figures achieved in the cinema and queried what could be done to maximise attendance. The Director stated that although there was a large choice of films, Members needed to have regard to the fact that the Theatre was one of the largest independent cinemas in the country with a 408 seat auditorium. He stated that the pricing policy was constantly reviewed and competitive and that the pricing for Saturday mornings had been reduced to appeal to a family audience.

Councillor M Pope thanked the Officers for the detailed report and asked whether benchmarking and comparative figures could be included in future reports. This was supported. In response to a further question in relation to negative feedback about the cooling systems and technical equipment, the

Director provided an update on recent work undertaken to address this.

The Chairman praised the work of the volunteers. The Front of House Manager explained that the Theatre had a fantastic team of 70 at the moment which was sufficient to deliver the current programme.

Councillor D Oldridge referred to wheel chair access to the stage and back stage and queried what could be done to rectify this. The Director explained that the Theatre was fully wheel chair accessible for people coming to watch shows but back stage remained a problem. He summarised the difficulties and that an audit had revealed that the costs would be “astronomical” to reconfigure what was currently there in terms of the differing floor levels and the narrowness of the corridors.

In response to a query from Councillor M Pope regarding the marketing strategy, the Marketing Manager explained that the Theatre had a structured and collaborative approach to marketing to achieve good value for money and was making increasing use of online media.

The Chairman, on behalf of Members, thanked the Director and his team at Hertford Theatre for another successful update and looked forward to next year’s report.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Annual Report for Hertford Theatre for the year 2014/15 be received;

(B) the cohort of volunteers be congratulated and thanked for their contribution to the success of the venue; and

(C) benchmarking and comparative data on discrete strands of the business be included in future reports.

279 REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES CALCULATIONS AND LEVELS

The Executive Member for Finance and Support Services submitted a report providing Members with an opportunity to review the current level of fees and charges within the remit of Community Scrutiny Committee. The Head of Strategic Finance explained the key principles on which fees and types of charges were set and of the three types of charges levied.

The Head of Strategic Finance reminded Members that the MTFP had been set based on an increase of 2.5% for fees and charges but this figure was an overall percentage, not necessarily levied on every fee/charge. Heads of Service were currently drafting their budgets and any comments would be fed back to relevant Officers for further review by the joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees in 2016. He stated that Corporate Business Scrutiny and Environment Scrutiny Committees had already reviewed their Fees and Charges and that Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee had requested more detail in respect of usage data against the fees and charges where the Authority had discretion.

In response to a query from Councillor R Standley regarding the costs associated with dispensations for builders and what was charged when parking outside of a home being worked on, the Head of Strategic Finance explained that this was within the remit of Environment Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor G Cutting referred to the need to include comparative data, e.g. listing the number of dog breeding establishments in order to make an informed judgement. The Head of Strategic Finance commented that Corporate Business Scrutiny had asked for information on volumes, whether a charge was statutory, full cost recovery or whether the Council had full discretion.

In response to a query by Councillor D Oldridge, the Head of Strategic Finance explained that customer satisfaction data would be included in future Service Plans.

The Committee agreed the report and supported the

suggestion made at Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee regarding the inclusion of information about usage data (volumes) and comparative figures on fees and charges within the remit of Community Scrutiny Committee where the Authority had discretion.

RESOLVED – that the report be approved and that information about usage data (volumes) and comparative figures on fees and charges within the remit of Community Scrutiny Committee, be included in future reports where the Authority has discretion.

280 COMMUNITY SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME
(SEPTEMBER 2015)

The Chairman submitted a report setting out the proposed work programme for the 2015-16 civic year.

The Scrutiny Officer commented that a request had been submitted regarding the development of a new Leisure Strategy for the Authority for consideration by Members at its meeting on 17 November 2015. She explained that this would be a large piece of work which would also encompass the Health and Wellbeing Strategy adding that the request was for an initial report to come to Members in November, which would request that a Task and Finish Group be established to work out the detail. This was supported.

The Scrutiny Officer referred to the need to identify a “Crime and Disorder” item for inclusion on the agenda for the meeting on 15 March 2016. “Rural Crime Trends in East Herts” had been identified as a suitable item for scrutiny given the changing pattern of rural crime discussed recently at a meeting of the Community Safety Partnership. This was supported.

In response to a query from Councillor A McNeece the Scrutiny Officer stated that the review would focus on rural crime, this would not include incidents such as cyber-crime as this was not location specific.

The Committee approved the report, as amended.

RESOLVED – that the work programme, as now detailed and amended, be approved.

281 COMMUNITY SCRUTINY CORPORATE HEALTHCHECK REPORT - APRIL TO JULY 2015

The Director of Finance and Support Services submitted a report on the performance of key indicators for Community Scrutiny Committee for the period April to July 2015.

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager provided a summary of the report highlighting those which were on target or exceeded their target (3); those which were off target (2) and why and including indicators (17) which identified trends.

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager explained how Heads of Service would be managing declining trends. She explained that going forward, it was proposed that targets be profiled and why this was necessary in terms of recognising peaks in service demand.

In response to a query regarding EHPI 181 (Time taken to process Housing Benefit, new claims and change events) and meeting targets, the Corporate Planning and Performance Manager explained that new profiled targets would be introduced with immediate effect.

In response to a query from Councillor A Alder regarding the age group of cohorts presenting themselves as homeless, the Acting Chief Executive and Director of Neighbourhood Services undertook to provide a written response.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that the Executive be advised that Community Scrutiny Committee noted the performance for the period April to July 2015.

The meeting closed at 8.25 pm

Chairman

Date