

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER,
WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON TUESDAY 6
NOVEMBER 2018, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT:

Councillor J Jones (Vice Chairman),
Councillors D Abbott, D Andrews, S Bull,
M Casey, G Cutting, H Drake, M McMullen,
P Moore, M Stevenson and N Symonds

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillor J Goodeve

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Lorraine Blackburn	- Democratic Services Officer
Isabel Brittain	- Head of Strategic Finance and Property
Claire Bennett	- Manager of Housing Services
Mike Edley	- Interim Scrutiny Officer
Su Tarran	- Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service

252 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors M Allen, B Deering, I Devonshire and Mrs D Hollebon. It was noted that Councillor D Andrews was substituting for Councillor Mrs D Hollebon.

253 MINUTES

In respect of Minute 197 - Draft Community Transport Strategy 2018 – 2021, Councillor N Symonds suggested that the fifth paragraph, last sentence, should be amended as follows:

Insert “and that Central Ward had the lowest car usage” after “in Bishop’s Stortford”.

It was moved by Councillor M Casey and seconded by Councillor M Stevenson that the Minutes of the meeting held on 18 September 2018, as amended, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 18 September 2018, as amended, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

254 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Vice Chairman on behalf of Members, wished the Chairman, Councillor M Allen, a speedy recovery.

The Vice Chairman reminded Members of a number of housekeeping issues in relation to fire alarms, exits, the unisex toilet and the need to silence mobile devices for the

duration of the meeting.

The Vice Chairman welcomed the new Interim Scrutiny Officer, Mike Edley, to the meeting.

255 REVENUES AND BENEFITS - SHARED SERVICES

The Head of Strategic Finance and Property and the Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service submitted a report in relation to the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service arrangements. The Head of Strategic Finance and Property explained that the supporting Essential Reference Paper "B" showed that the service was very well run and provided bench-marked information which helped illustrate that it was a robust service and that both Councils paid their share of the service.

Clarification was sought by Councillor M McMullen and provided regarding the debt position in relation to Council Tax and the processes the Council undertook to recover debt including applications to the Magistrates Court, seizure of property, attachment to earnings, accessing HMRC data and making arrangements with individuals (covering a number of years), to secure the return of debt.

Clarification was sought by Councillor M Stevenson and provided regarding the £5M increase in the collectable debit and how this was generated from increases in each of the precepts.

Councillor N Symonds sought and was provided with assurances that help would always be available for those unable to use the online housing benefit claim form and that nationally, the CAB would be providing support for those applying for Universal Credit from April 2019. The

Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service acknowledged the additional help which was needed to support the vulnerable and homeless.

Councillor H Drake was provided with clarification on the issue of declining housing benefit claims and escalating overpayments and how a change in an individual's circumstances could impact (within a short time frame) and result in the generation of an overpayment.

The Vice Chairman, commented on the timeframes achieved for processing housing benefit claims and was assured that these reflected harmonisation of performance across the two Councils.

Councillor M Casey commented on the delivery of the service in relation to revenue savings in a full operating year. The Head of Strategic Finance and Property explained that approximately £50-£70K had been achieved in the first year, adding that further information would be available on 5 December 2018 which could be circulated to Members.

Councillor M McMullen sought and was provided with clarification regarding the debt status as at 31 March 2018 of Live / Dormant / Fraud HB overpayments.

Councillor M Stevenson referred to the issue of recruitment within the service. The Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service explained that staff numbers had been increased for two years (2015 and 2016) reflecting the additional work generated by the Government's welfare reforms. The staff numbers had reduced from 1 April 2017. The Council Tax service however, had continued to experience increases in workload from the

number of properties being built. Councillor N Symonds asked the Head to pass on her thanks for the hard work and excellent advice that her team continued to provide.

The Vice Chairman thanked Officers for their overview of the Shared Service arrangement.

It was moved by Councillor M McMullen and seconded by Councillor D Andrews that the recommendations, as detailed, be approved. After being put the meeting and a vote taken, the recommendations were declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that (A) the value for money assessment of the Shared Revenue and Benefits Service be noted; and

(B) the Annual report as detailed within Essential Reference Paper 'B' be noted and any comments be forwarded to the Head of Strategic Finance and Property and the Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Services.

256 HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2019 – 2024

The Service Manager, Housing Services submitted a draft of the Council's new Homeless Strategy 2019-24 and sought Members' endorsement of the strategy for the purpose of consultation. The Service Manager provided an overview of the report and summarised the objectives of the revised strategy to take account of the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.

Councillor D Andrews commented on the issue of affordable homes and the fact that people who would like

to down-size their homes and release them for larger families, but were prevented from doing so because the rent on a smaller property was often higher and not affordable. The Service Manager explained the constraints within which housing associations had to work in relation to rents charged and affordability.

Councillor Andrews referred to the Government's involvement in the rental sector and housing stock which he felt, had generated a negative approach to making accommodation affordable and useable.

Councillor H Drake commented that Hertfordshire was one of the most expensive places to buy and rent and that more should be done in relation to Help to Buy schemes adding that it was cheaper to buy than to rent in some instances.

Councillor M Stevenson referred to the occupants of some rental properties with anti-social behaviour and mental health problems and the need to work closer with partners.

Councillor N Symonds sought and was provided with clarification about why the number of homeless people had changed within the table from 92 to 54 and what type of accommodation was used to provide those who were unintentionally homeless. She had concerns that homelessness would probably rise as a result of Universal Credit. The Service Manager – Housing agreed that she could foresee an increase in homelessness, but that the Council would continue to work with its partners to help mitigate the situation.

Councillor D Andrews sought and was provided with

clarification regarding assistance given to veterans and the allocation of additional points.

Councillor M Casey raised the issue of rough sleepers. The Housing Manager – Services explained that it was likely to be higher than the estimate (of 3) last year.

The Vice Chairman thanked the Officer for the report summary.

It was moved by Councillor D Andrews and seconded by Councillor H Drake that the recommendation, as detailed be supported. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the recommendations were declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Homeless Strategy 2019-24 be received, and

(B) the draft Homelessness Strategy be endorsed for the purpose of consultation with external partners and stakeholders, prior to its submission to Council for adoption.

257 EXECUTIVE UPDATE BY THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR HOUSING

The Executive Member for Housing provided Members with a presentation on issues within the remit of her portfolio. She provided Members with a summary of points affecting the housing service. Members considered the key statistics provided and raised a number of queries in relation to the presentation.

It was noted that the Housing Options team now sent a weekly list of properties which had become available for

people to bid on. This change had been driven by the Housing Association.

The issue of Universal Credit was raised. Councillor D Abbott suggested that Members might benefit from training on this new benefit system to ensure that they were better informed and could help residents in their ward if asked. The Scrutiny Officer undertook to discuss this with the Member.

The Vice Chairman, on behalf of Members thanked the Executive Member for Housing for the presentation.

RESOLVED – that the presentation be received.

258 WORK PROGRAMME 2018/19

The Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee submitted a report setting out the draft Work Programme. The Scrutiny Officer circulated an amended version of Essential Reference Paper 'B' and encouraged Members to submit proposals for inclusion on the work programme.

Councillor D Abbott referred to the need to have training on Universal Credit so that Members could advise residents, if asked. This was supported.

Councillor D Andrews raised the issue of Task and Finish Groups and commented that at Hertfordshire County Council, such groups could be concluded in a day. He suggested that Officers should try and condense these into shorter periods of time. Councillor G Cutting commented that timeframes could be affected by the need to call in external consultants for advice and that was important, in order to achieve credible results.

It was moved by Councillor D Andrews and seconded by Councillor D Abbott that the work programme as amended be supported. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the recommendation was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that (A) the work programme as amended, and as detailed within Essential Reference Paper ‘B’ tabled at the meeting, be approved, and

(B) the Scrutiny Officer investigate the possibility of arranging training for Members in relation to Universal Credit.

The meeting closed at 8.59 pm

Chairman
Date