

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE – 11 DECEMBER 2018

REPORT BY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE VICE-CHAIRMAN

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE UPDATE

WARD(S) AFFECTED: All

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**Purpose/Summary of Report**

- This report summarises the discussions and recommendations made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 6 November 2018.

<b><u>RECOMMENDATION:</u></b>	
<b>(A)</b>	<b>That Executive notes the recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee contained in the report.</b>

**1.0 Background**

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 6 November 2018 and considered the following items:
- Shared Services: Revenues and Benefits;
  - Homeless Strategy;
  - Exec Member Update: Jan Goodeve, Executive Member for Housing; and
  - OSC Work Programme.

A summary of their discussions and recommendations is set out below.

**2.0 Update from the Executive Member for Housing**

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 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.
- 2.3 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.
- 2.4 The Vice Chairman, on behalf of Members thanked the Executive Member for Housing for the presentation.

RESOLVED – that the presentation be received.

### **3.0 Shared Services: Revenues and Benefits**

- 3.1 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 benchmarked information which helped illustrate that it was a robust service and that both Councils paid their share of the service.
- 3.2 Clarification was sought by Councillors on the following:
  - 3.2.1 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;

- 3.2.2 The £5M increase in the collectable debit and how this was generated from increases in each of the precepts.
- 3.2.3 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.
- 3.2.4 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.
- 3.2.5 The timeframes achieved for processing housing benefit claims. There was assurance that these reflected harmonisation of performance across the two Councils.
- 3.2.6 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.
- 3.2.7 The debt status as at 31 March 2018 of Live / Dormant / Fraud HB overpayments.
- 3.2.8 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.

- 3.3 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.

#### **4.0 Homeless Strategy 2019-2024:**

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 The following issues were discussed:
- 4.2.1 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.

- 4.2.2 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.
- 4.2.3 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.
- 4.2.4 The challenges posed by the occupants of some rental properties with anti-social behaviour and mental health problems and the need to work closer with partners.
- 4.2.5 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.
- 4.2.6 The issue of rough sleepers. The Housing Manager – Services explained that it was likely to be higher than the estimate (of 3) last year.
- 4.3 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 as follows:

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.

## **5.0 Work Programme Update**

5.1 The Committee received a report providing an update on the current status of their ongoing Work Programme for 2018-2019, including Task and Finish Groups.

5.2 The Committee approved the ongoing Work Programme for 2018- March 2019

### Background Papers

None

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