

CORPORATE AND PUBLIC SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

22 February 2018 at 6.00pm at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members Present

Councillor A. Andrew (Chair)
Councillor P. Bott
Councillor M. Bird
Councillor S. Craddock
Councillor M. Nazir
Councillor K. Phillips
Councillor L. Rattigan
Councillor S. Wade
Councillor M. Ward

Portfolio Holder

Councillor S. Coughlan	Leader of the Council
Councillor Jeavons	Deputy Leader and Regeneration
Councillor D. Coughlan	Social Care
Councillor K. Chambers	Personnel and Business Support/Agenda for Change
Councillor I. Shires	Community, Leisure and Culture

Officers Present

Simon Neilson	Executive Director – Economy and Environment
Kelly Valente	Lead Accountant
Paul Gordon	Head of Business Change
Carol Williams	Head of Information, Communications and Technology
Craig Goodall	Senior Democratic Services Officer
Matthew Powis	Democratic Services Officer

Social Housing Providers

Walsall Housing Group
Fay Shanahan Corporate Director of Operations

Accord Housing Group
Mandy Holcroft Director of Locality
David Loon Head of Locality

WATMOS Community Homes
Kul Bains Chef Executive of WATMOS
Yusef Masih Executive Director of Housing

Housing and Care 21
Jamie Lewis Operations Manager

Bromford Housing
Suki Kaur Locality Manager for Black Country (Walsall)
Vicky Green Head of Localities for Black Country

Longhurst Group
Sharon Guest Executive Director of Housing Services
Craig Taylor Director of Housing Services

Clarion Housing

Lewin Dumper

Head of Operations (North)

239/17 Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Sohal.

240/17 Substitution

There were no substitutions.

241/17 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

Councillor Andrew declared a non – disclosable pecuniary interest on item 7: Social Housing Provider Engagement and he remained in the room during the item.

Councillor D. Coughlan declared a non - disclosable pecuniary interest on item 7: Social Housing Provider Engagement and she remained in the room during the item.

Councillor Nazir declared a non - disclosable pecuniary interest on item 7: Social Housing Provider Engagement and he remained in the room during the item.

242/17 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

There were no items to consider in private session.

243/17 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

A Member enquired whether further information could be provided on the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) and the process involved with the disposal of equipment in residential homes. The Cabinet Member for Personnel and Business Support/Agenda informed the Committee that a response had been circulated to Committee Members on the Council policy on this matter.

The Chair requested that the Council position on DFG disposal be recirculated to the Committee.

Resolved:

- 1) That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2018 copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record;**

2) That, the Council's position on Disabled Facilities Grants be circulated to Members of the Committee.

244/17 Revenue and Capital Outturn for 2017/18

The Committee received the revenue and capital outturn 2017/18 for consideration.

Members were informed that there had been revenue underspend of £984K and a capital programme underspend of £410K. Furthermore, it was proposed to carry forward £9,323K in capital.

The Chair invited Members of the Committee to propose questions and comments to the relevant portfolio holder and the following responses were made:-

Personnel and Business Support/ Agenda

ICT

A Member sought clarification on ICT funding being carried forward. The Head of Information, Communication and Technology confirmed that the Council had been successful in the implementation of a power back up supply for its ICT systems and that the Council was looking into cloud based solutions beyond 2018. It was noted that the Council had carried a historic level of risk with ICT infrastructure and was hopeful in a risks reduction with ICT planned Infrastructure investment in 2019/2020.

Aids & Adaptations

A Member queried why there was an underspend in the Aids and Adaptations budget. The Cabinet Member for Personnel and Business Support/Agenda explained that a reported underspend was due to prioritising the spending of external grants and effective demand management.

Resolved:

That the revenue and capital outturn report for 2017/18 be noted.

245/17 Engagement with Social Housing Providers

On 6 April 2017, the Committee held a discussion on engagement with social housing providers and agreed to invite social housing providers in Walsall to a future meeting of the Committee to establish ways to improve engagement and cooperation with providers.

The Chair thanked providers for attending the meeting and invited each one in turn to address the Committee on how they were delivering in the following areas:-

- Engagement between the Council and housing providers;
- Impact on benefit cuts, current government policy and current barriers;
- How housing providers serve Walsall residents;
- Future plans or proposals;
- Homeless support available and types/causes of homelessness.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:-

Engagement between the Council and Housing Providers:-

- An invitation was expressed by Bromford Housing for local Councillors to attend the new supported housing development in Bloxwich on the former Bulls Head Pub.
- Accord Housing expressed its gratitude to the Clean and Green team at the Council for work carried out in the community;
- Providers felt they had an active and positive relationship with the Council;
- Allocation policies differ across partners with most providers retaining vacancies for direct applicants.

Impact on benefit cuts, current government policy and current barriers:-

- Some providers had been experiencing a strain on funding to deliver more affordable housing. However, problems remained a national issue and this was not unique to Walsall;
- Lack of affordable and readily available land a concern for providers and remained a barrier to building affordable housing;
- Housing & Care 21 had increased the pay of the lowest paid staff and aimed to pay 10% more than the National Minimum Wage;
- Providers welcomed clarification on the rent statement from 2020 however, challenges in the sector remained;
- Challenges remain with the Universal Credit roll out and ensuring tenants prepare for changes;
- Impact of Right to Buy stock replenishment had remained a challenge for providers;

How housing providers serve Walsall residents:-

- Neighbourhood investment with regards to Community Grants Programme had been successful with Clarion Housing which aimed to fund projects in the community which show benefit to the wider area and Clarion residents. A Member requested that a copy of Clarion Housing newsletter and a copy of a new tenancy agreement be circulated to the Committee;
- Employees at Housing & Care 21 had received regular training on mental health awareness to identify patients showing signs of depression and training on drug dependency. Furthermore, training had resulted in fewer incidents with tenants;

- The Brighter Futures project with Accord Housing had been successful in helping families manage with domestic abuse;
- The Number of apprenticeships leading to permanent employment with Accord Housing had increased;
- Accord Housing Officers training on mediation between tenants on issues such as anti –social behaviour had been positively received and the protocol had been a success;
- It was noted that Accord Housing was unique with it's offer of coaching on basic DIY and general housing maintenance;
- Further information on thermal wrapping and void property disposals in regard to WHG would be provided in writing;
- Further information on allocation of properties with WHG would be provided to Members in writing;
- WATMOS model of tenant empowerment and self help had been noted by the Committee as a positive model of tenant management;
- WATMOS confirmed that it actively supports leaseholders. It was noted that the majority of leaseholders were in London. However, there were 17 leaseholders in Walsall;
- Activity Coordinators which provide social activities for residents had been a success with Housing & Care 21 in providing community links and an avenue of actively reducing social isolation;
- Community or resident champion schemes had worked well with some providers.

Future plans or proposals:-

- Bromford Housing had focused efforts to expand on a neighbourhood coach programme which aimed to make connections with tenants and the wider community to enable the provider to understand the full circumstances of tenants and address any wider social, emotional or health problems;
- It was noted that the West Midlands Combined Authority was analysing land utilisation and the availability of useable land within the West Midlands.
- Some providers were investing in digital services and transformational channel shifting
- Accord Housing had been investigating further development of resident and community engagement within Accord's Governance Model;
- Providers were assessing the financial viability of investing in new and existing housing in Walsall.

Homeless support and types/causes of homelessness:-

- Some providers had been successful in tackling homelessness reduction through incentives and welfare advice programmes. However, not all social housing providers provide services to actively tackle homelessness;
- The night shelter provided by the Council had been successful in providing support for homeless individuals;
- Though the Housing 1st Project with Accord Housing had successfully housed 6 rough sleepers. Work was ongoing to expand this project with WHG.

The Cabinet Member for Community, Leisure and Culture highlighted that engagement with social housing providers had been useful for Members. He noted connections with the West Midlands Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee's work on land availability and utilisation.

The Chair thanked the Social Housing Providers for attending the meeting and expanding on topics raised by the Committee.

Resolved:

- 1. That engagement with social housing providers be noted;**
- 2. That, the Committee receive responses in writing to the following:-**
 - a) Housing Allocation Policy and application process in regard to WHG;**
 - b) Thermal wrapping and void property disposals in regard to WHG;**
 - c) A copy of Clarion Housing newsletter and a copy of a new tenancy agreement;**
 - d) Clarion Housing provide further information on the level of funding awarded to Walsall residents from its 'Community Grant Programme';**
 - e) WHG to advise how many void properties it has sold due to being unviable for refurbishment and assessment criteria;**
 - f) WHG to advise on the help and support it offers to leaseholders.**

246/17 Areas of focus – 2017-18

The Committee considered its areas of focus and the forward plans of Walsall Council and the Black Country Joint Executive Committee.

Members noted that an item on Knife Crime in Walsall would be presented to the next meeting of the Committee.

A Member requested an item on the Saddler Centre at the next meeting of the Committee.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. The areas of focus 2017/18 be noted;**
- 2. The forward plans be noted.**
- 3. That, an item on the Saddler Centre be presented to the next meeting of the Committee.**

247/17 Date of next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 12 April 2018.

Termination of Meeting

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 8.06p.m.

Signed:

Date: