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## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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**MINUTES** of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber - Swale House on Tuesday, 2 September 2014 from 7.00 - 8.30 pm.

**PRESENT:** Councillors Sylvia Bennett, Andy Booth (Chairman), Jackie Constable, John Coulter, June Garrad, Peter Marchington, Pat Sandle (substitute for Councillor Lloyd Bowen) and Ben Stokes.

**OFFICERS PRESENT:** Amber Christou, Joanne Hammond, Bob Pullen and Roxanne Sheppard.

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:** Councillor John Wright (Cabinet Member for Housing) and Councillor Mike Henderson.

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors Lloyd Bowen, Mark Ellen, Mike Haywood, Prescott and Ghlin Whelan.

### 200 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 23 July 2014 (Minute Nos. 153 – 163) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

### 201 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

### PART ONE - SUBSTANTIVE ITEM

### 202 HOUSING BRIEFING

The Chairman welcomed the Head of Housing, Housing Options Manager and the Cabinet Member for Housing to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Housing thanked the Committee for the invitation to brief Members, and considered that it was important to share information on the services and high level of performance delivered by the Housing Team.

The Housing Options Manager gave a presentation outlining the national picture of Housing Services, the picture in Swale, the key challenges, temporary accommodation, complex cases and homeless prevention. A copy of the presentation was circulated to the Committee and is available to view on the on-line agenda.

The Head of Housing provided an overview of the work of the Private Sector Housing Team, Staying Put – the Council's Home Improvement Agency, and Strategic Housing.

The Cabinet Member for Housing emphasised the importance of partnership working with Kent County Council, Registered Social Landlords, Housing Associations and health services and the need for Swale to be pro-active in undertaking new projects.

A Member made the following comments: need to look separately at tactics and strategy; the Housing Team offer excellent assistance but there is an issue with the strategy; housing availability in Faversham was appalling; not just about homelessness but also about unsuitable accommodation; need to look innovatively at ways to create more

accommodation; how could the Council work collaboratively with Housing Associations to encourage building?; could the Council secure more Section 106 funding?; how could the Council improve our engagement with private sector landlords to provide more rental properties for residents claiming benefits; what messages should the Council be sending to central Government?; Council needs to review its overall strategic position and create a stronger policy position; need to consider borrowing to build housing; residents want to stay within the area they currently live in; moving residents out of the Borough was detrimental; there was a risk that the Council was failing residents by not providing suitable temporary accommodation in the locality.

The Head of Housing advised that the Housing Team were working with the Planning Department to secure as many affordable homes as possible on new developments. The Team had a good relationship with a number of landlords in Swale but it was important to recognise that market forces made it difficult to encourage landlords to rent to benefit claimants, especially given there was a shortage of rental properties, and Faversham was the least affordable area in the Borough for private rental.

The Cabinet Member for Housing considered that it was important to support residents in gaining employment, which would then enable them to access private rented accommodation. He referred to the benefit of Life Time Homes and the Council's policy of investment, rather than borrowing.

A Member welcomed the reduction in the number of residents on the housing list, but raised concern that there was not enough smaller accommodation in the Borough and the condition of some properties was very poor.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Housing, Housing Options Manager and the Cabinet Member for Housing for the briefing.

The Chairman invited Members' views on the potential areas for review.

A Member commented on whether there was an issue with residents living in caravans for the majority of the year, and then requiring accommodation for those months they were unable to live on the caravan sites. A Member advised that she had raised this with the Housing Team and this was not a significant issue, although it required enforcement to ensure the site occupancy conditions were being complied with.

A Member suggested reviewing the demand for temporary accommodation; what could be done to improve the position; could the Council purchase more accommodation; and how could the Council improve the availability of private rented accommodation by liaising with landlords.

The Chairman referred to a previous scrutiny review of empty homes in the Borough and suggested that it would be beneficial to receive an update on the position with empty homes and the outcome of the recommendations.

A Member referred to a scheme used in London whereby a Local Authority rents a property direct from the landlord and then sub-lets the property for use as temporary accommodation.

The Chairman suggested that the Committee explored the recent Cabinet decision to purchase of a property for temporary accommodation, in particular to review if the pilot had been successful, and what was being proposed for the future. He considered that it would also be useful to have information on the categorisation of the housing list.

The Policy and Performance Officer undertook to produce a draft review plan for consideration at the next Scrutiny Committee meeting on 30 September 2014.

- Policy and Performance Officer

## **PART TWO - BUSINESS ITEMS**

### **203 REVIEWS AT FOLLOW-UP STAGE AND LOG OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Committee noted the log of recommendations.

### **204 OTHER REVIEW PROGRESS REPORTS**

Councillor Ben Stokes, Lead Member for the Contracts and Procurement Review, and Councillor Peter Marchington, Lead Member for the Asset Transfers Review, both advised that their respective review groups needed to meet with officers to progress the two reviews, and they would report back further at the next meeting.

The Policy and Performance Officer undertook to arrange a meeting with officers on behalf of both Lead Members.

- Policy and Performance Officer

The Chairman advised that a meeting had been arranged for 10 September 2014, to progress the joint scrutiny review of the Mid Kent Improvement Partnership with Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells Councils. A number of further meetings had been scheduled and it was proposed that the review would be finalised by December 2014, culminating in a joint meeting of all members of the Swale, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells Scrutiny Committees. As the Chairman was unable to attend the meeting, it was hoped that the Vice-Chairman would represent the Committee with Councillor Henderson, and they would report back on progress at the next meeting.

### **205 URGENT BUSINESS REQUESTS**

There were no urgent business requests.

### **206 CABINET FORWARD PLAN**

The Committee reviewed the Cabinet Forward Plan for September – December 2014 and made the following comments:

Beach Huts Report – welcome the proposal for additional beach huts but concern that the existing huts were not being used by the owners and were being purchased solely for investment; poor response to the consultation; lack of toilet facilities at the beach huts which needed to be addressed before further huts were built; and could all the huts be offered on a rental basis to remove the issue with purchases being made solely for investment.

A Member commented on the asset transfers reports being proposed, and considered that it was important that the Council was able to take back the asset if the community group were no longer able to manage it.

Fees and Charges – to be scheduled into the Scrutiny Committee Work Programme for review in advance of the November Cabinet Meeting.

### **207 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee noted the Work Programme.

Chairman

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All Minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel