

Overview & Scrutiny Panel

Tuesday 20 February 2018

in Council Chamber, Corby Cube, George Street, Corby

Present: Councillors Watts (Chair), Butcher, Caine, Dady, Ferguson, Keane, McNab and Watt

Co-opted Representatives:

Lyn Buckingham, Neighbourhood Associations

66. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors McEwan and Riley. Councillor Dady was present as a substitute for Councillor McEwan.

67. Declarations of Interest

Members were asked to declare any personal interests they may have in the business to be discussed and/or indicate whether these were prejudicial or non-prejudicial, the nature of the interest, and whether they intended participating in the relevant agenda item. No such declarations were made.

68. Minutes of Previous Meeting

Members were asked to approve the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 20 February 2018, copies of which had been circulated.

RESOLVED that:-

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 20 February 2018, copies of which had been circulated to Members, be agreed as a correct record.

69. Lead Member/Service Update – Housing

The Lead Member – Housing and Head of Housing Services were present to provide an update on their areas of responsibility. A briefing report had been circulated in advance covering current activities and performance across the service area.

The following areas were highlighted:

- Integrated Housing Management System – new IT system for Housing; this was a big project but would drive business improvements; 70% of the project plan work for February was now complete and training was ongoing. The Log appended to the report gave a flavour of the benefits of the new system;
- Repairs – the difficulties with materials supply had been resolved and systems were working well; there was still some backlog, mainly brickwork, fencing and roofing, but this was reducing week on week; this was having an impact on performance data but should improve once the backlog was completed;
- Gas Contractor – concerns had been raised at the previous meeting and there were issues with availability of engineers and failure to meet contractual commitments; action was being taken to resolve this and future contractual arrangements would depend on improved performance.

Queries were raised in relation to the impact of new homelessness duties and also the methodology for collecting homelessness statistics. The number of homeless people in temporary accommodation was also queried. The Head of Housing explained that the Homelessness Reduction Act put the onus on Local Authorities to start homelessness prevention work much earlier, ie 56 days instead of 28 days. In relation to collecting statistics, the Government standard was adopted to allow comparison with other areas but it was recognised that this was just a snapshot at a specific date and local knowledge was also

taken into account. Currently, four families remained in temporary accommodation but they had pending offers. The stock for temporary accommodation had also been boosted.

It was asked if the impact of the aging population was reflected in housing provision and policy. The Head of Housing explained that the Housing Strategy was due for review in the next 12 months and would take account of changing demographics. The Council had sufficient adapted housing stock to meet current demand.

Queries were raised on the proposals for development at Cheltenham Road. It was confirmed that this was the railway halt land but no decisions had been made yet on the type of units to be built. Proximity to the railway line would be taken into account by the Architect and through the Planning process. It was also confirmed that some of these units may be reserved for ex Service personnel.

Queries were raised on progress of PV panel installations and whether battery storage was an alternative to grid connection. It was explained that it could be difficult to get large numbers of properties together and viability depended on getting some income from the grid to make the investment worthwhile. The Council continued to work with external partners on energy schemes, including Robin Hood Energy.

It was asked at what stage rent arrears intervention commenced and whether cases were escalated to DWP for direct payment arrangements as soon as possible. The Head of Service confirmed that intervention commenced at the start of tenancies with advice on bill payments, etc. The Intervention Officers would also make contact with tenants within the first two weeks of arrears appearing with letters issued and personal contact made before arrears hit £500. He also confirmed that direct payment arrangements were being sought at the earliest opportunity. Further work would also be done with tenants on the Universal Credit portal and regular meetings, training sessions, etc, were taking place with DWP.

Comment was made on the potential closure of the Corby refuge due to lack of funding from April 2018. It was asked if there was a plan to provide for domestic abuse clients going forward. The Head of Service explained that those who were fleeing violence or the fear of violence would qualify as homeless and would not need to have a local connection.

It was pointed out that the refuge ran on a relatively small budget and it could be a cheaper option for the Council to keep it open compared with the alternative. It was suggested that this should be looked at but there was also concern about taking on responsibilities from other Authorities due to budget cuts.

Concerns were raised in respect of proposals for conversion of a housing unit in Southfield Road, Gretton, from two flats to a single dwelling and the lack of consultation with the Parish Council. The Head of Housing explained that this property had previously been converted to two flats from a three bed house but the conversion had not been particularly well done. The property was currently vacant and consideration had been given to its long term future. The Planning Application had been submitted by the Repairs & Maintenance Team at an early stage but it had now been decided to withdraw the application and to improve the conversion and relet the two flats as this better reflected current housing need in the area.

Queries were raised in relation to housing developments the Council was involved in and it was explained that these were delivered in a number of different ways. Larger schemes were generally delivered by private sector developers under contractual arrangements, providing a number of properties for the Council within a larger private sector scheme, eg former Kingswood and Beanfield schools sites. The Council was looking to progress a number of sites over the next few years, including garage conversions.

It was asked if local connection criteria applied to properties in the villages and it was confirmed that it did not. Arguments could be made for and against this approach but Keyways was the Council's approved housing allocation policy and did not contain this provision. Keyways was reviewed on a regular basis.

Members thanked the Head of Service and Lead Member for their attendance and input and they left the meeting.

70. Scrutiny Work Plan

The work plan had been circulated for Members' comments and input.

Councillor Butcher updated Members on the new management arrangements for the Fire Service. Arrangements were progressing to bring the Fire Service under the control of the Police Crime Commissioner, subject to Government sign off. The Police and Fire Services would continue to be distinct and separate organisations with their own chief officers.

The Northamptonshire Police & Crime Panel had received training and visited Fire Stations. All parties were keen to embrace the new arrangements.

71. Items from Forward Plan

The Forward Plan for February was noted. No items were selected.

Councillor Dady mentioned that there were regular Member Briefings on Local Plan topics and all Members were encouraged to attend these.

Councillor Butcher raised the issue of Safeguarding and it was confirmed that Member Safeguarding training was due to be delivered in due course and the Safeguarding Annual Report would go to Audit & Governance Committee in March.

72. Close of Meeting

The meeting closed at 8.25 pm.