

**MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES, HOUSING AND GOVERNANCE
OVERVIEW WORKING GROUP
HELD ON**

19 November 2013

7.40 - 9.30 pm

PRESENT

Committee Members

Councillor Waida Forman (Chairman)
Councillor Jacqui Cross (Vice-Chair)
Councillor David Carter
Councillor Simon Carter
Councillor Mike Danvers
Councillor Muriel Jolles
Councillor Dennis Palmer

Officers

Donna Beechener, Revenues and Benefits Manager
Simon Freeman, Head of Finance
Michael Pitt, Environment and Licensing Manager
Karen Vigor, Housing Options & Advice Team Leader
Joel West, Governance Support Officer
Lisa Whiting, Housing Options and Advice Manager

21. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies of absence were received from Councillors Nick Churchill and Manny Doku.

22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Muriel Jolles declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 5 – Homelessness Strategy – as the Oasis Hotel, which is currently used by the Council to provide bed and breakfast accommodation, is in her Ward of Old Harlow.

Councillor Simon Carter declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 5 – Homelessness Strategy – as Chairman and trustee of homelessness charity Streets2Homes.

Councillor Waida Forman advised that, as she had previously indicated active opposition to the Government's welfare reform agenda, she would be stepping down as Chairman during consideration of item 6 – Local Council Tax Support Scheme, Annual Review.

23. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 October 2013 are agreed as a correct record.

24. **REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S PROPOSED PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING ACTION PLAN**

The Overview Working Group received a report, from the Head of Community Wellbeing, on the Private Sector Housing Action Plan. Michael Pitt, Environment and Licensing Manager, introduced the report.

The Overview Working Group asked that the Action Plan include an exploration of whether private owners could 'opt-into' improvement schemes carried out by the Council to its own housing stock.

RESOLVED that the following be recommended to Cabinet:

- A** That the draft Private Sector Housing Action Plan 2013-16, attached as Appendix 1 to the report submitted, be approved and its actions to be incorporated into relevant Service Plans, subject to inclusion of an additional action: "Explore whether private owners can 'opt-into' improvement schemes carried out by the Council to its own housing stock".
- B** That authority to approve future amendments to the Council's Housing Assistance Policy under the Housing Act 2004 be delegated to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

25. **HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY**

The Overview Working Group received a report, from the Head of Housing, on a review of the Harlow Homelessness Strategy 2011-2014. Lisa Whiting, Housing Options and Advice Manager, introduced the report. Lisa summarised the findings of the recent workshop with stakeholders and answered questions from the Overview Working Group on the Council's work with key partners/stakeholders in tackling homelessness. Councillors were asked to note the top five priorities for tackling homelessness in Harlow as listed on page 24 of the agenda, and encouraged to email Lisa with suggestions for any other priorities to include, lisa.whiting@harlow.gov.uk.

Several witnesses had been invited to assist in the review:

Kerrie Eastman, Chair of the Harlow Homelessness Partnership and Centre Manager at Streets2Homes, summarised the work of Streets2Homes including how the charity works in partnership with the Council and ways in which it advertises/promotes its services. Kerrie also answered questions on numbers of homeless people in and around Harlow, and the most common causes of homelessness.

Harlow Council tenant representatives Bob McKenzie and Hugh Hoad were in attendance to answer Councillors' questions. Mr Hoad recounted his experiences of being homeless in and around Harlow, including his experience of temporary accommodation.

The Overview Working Group was shown a short film in which Streets2Homes clients and people placed in temporary accommodation provided by the Council recounted their experiences of being homeless and seeking help from statutory agencies. Persons of different ages and genders had been interviewed. All affirmed that the services of Streets2Homes, both in terms of practical assistance and advice/support, had been invaluable.

RESOLVED that the report is noted.

26. **LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME - ANNUAL REVIEW**

Councillor Waida Forman stood down as Chairman for the duration of this item. Councillor Jacqui Cross assumed the role of Chairman for the duration of this item.

The Overview Working Group received a report, from Simon Freeman, Head of Finance, on the Review of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme. Simon summarised the report and provided some additional information, as follows:

- a) The number of residents summonsed by the Council for failure to pay Council Tax has increased between 2012/13 and 2013/14. Simon stated that, whilst the impact of Council Tax benefit reforms may have contributed to this increase, other factors such as job losses are also likely to have had an impact.
- b) The cost of Council Tax as a proportion of overall income has been calculated as similar for both working Harlow residents, and non-working residents in receipt of Council Tax Support.
- c) The Council is unable to consider the alternative options proposed from the consultation as (i) it is required by law to set a balanced budget, and (ii) it cannot increase Council Tax by the estimated 16% needed to cover a fully funded Council Tax Support Scheme, as the Government imposes a cap on Council Tax increases of 2%.

Donna Beechener, Revenues and Benefits Manager, explained that comparing different Council Tax Support Schemes is difficult. For example, some Councils include child benefit payments in income calculations, whereas Harlow does not. Similarly, some Councils restrict Council Tax support to certain Council Tax Bands (e.g. up to Band D only) whereas Harlow does not. Donna also stressed that the current Harlow

Council Tax Support Scheme had been prepared in accordance with principles agreed by a pan-Essex Project Group, which had included input from the major precepting authorities.

The Overview Working Group felt that, in light of the limited time in which to evaluate the current scheme and the legal constraints on any alternative options, the proposal to retain the 2013/14 Council Tax Support Scheme in 2014/15 was the most sensible option. It also asked that Officers explore opportunities to promote and advertise the help and support that is available to assist those affected by Council Tax reforms.

RESOLVED that:

- A** Cabinet is advised that the Resources, Housing and Governance Overview Working Group acknowledges the current position regarding the 2013/14 Local Council Tax Support Scheme and endorses the principle of stability within the scheme for 2014/15.
- B** Officers are asked to explore opportunities to promote and advertise the help and support that is available to assist those affected by Council Tax reforms.

27. **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Overview Working Group received a report summarising its work programme for the 2013/14 year.

RESOLVED that the Resources, Housing and Governance Overview Working Group work programme 2013/14 is noted.

28. **MATTERS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE