

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 5th January 2016 at Pippbrook, Dorking from 7.00pm to 8.29pm

Present: Councillors Chris Townsend (Chairman), David Draper (Vice-Chairman), Tim Ashton, Stephen Cooksey, Claire Curran, Paula Hancock, Malcolm Ladell, Jatin Patel and Paul Potter

Also present: Councillor Vivienne Michael.

54. Minutes

The minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 17th November 2015 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

55. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Margaret Cooksey and Duncan Irvine.

56. Circle Housing Mole Valley

The Chief Operating Officer for the Circle Housing Group, Austen Reid, the Head of Housing for Circle Housing Mole Valley, Jackie Wilkinson and the Chairman of Circle Housing Mole Valley, Bob Hughes, attended the meeting to provide the Committee with an update on the work of the housing association in Mole Valley over the past year and its plans for the future.

The detailed presentation given to the Committee generated a wide variety of questions from Members, including a query about the 90% satisfaction rate from tenants who used the repairs and maintenance service. It was advised that Circle Housing were aware some tenants had experienced issues with the service provided and an action plan had been developed to address these concerns. A key issue related to the new gas suppliers used by Circle Housing, as it was known that there had been communication issues for tenants waiting for boilers repairs. Circle Housing confirmed that they were having ongoing discussions with the contractor to address these concerns and were confident that improvements to the service would be achieved.

It was advised that Circle Housing currently had 16 sheltered housing schemes for people aged over 55 within the district, which offered a total of 520 individual units including 311 which were bedsit style accommodation. However Circle Housing experienced difficulty in letting the bedsit units as this type of accommodation was proving to be unsuitable for the needs of eligible tenants. In response it was questioned by the Committee how Circle Housing planned to address this issue? It was advised that Circle Housing had already redeveloped the sheltered housing units at Douglas House in Bookham to provide more appealing accommodation and had plans for further improvements at other schemes. As these plans were still at an early stage, consultation would be undertaken with residents before concrete proposals were put forward.

It was suggested that an alternative use for the unused bedsit accommodation could be as housing for young people unable to afford housing at the market rate in Mole Valley. It was advised that this was already the case in some sheltered schemes where Circle Housing worked with Leatherhead Start to provide support for vulnerable people.

It was advised that at present there were nine separate housing associations operating within the Circle Group each with their own back office support. In light of budgetary pressures created in part by reduced income from central Government it had been decided that the Circle Housing structure would be collapsed into one larger organisation. These plans raised concern amongst Members who were particularly interested to find out how the planned changes would affect tenants and future housing development in Mole Valley. It was advised that the organisation would now be supported by a central back office team and contact centre. Although these changes would have an impact, a local team would still be based in Mole Valley to provide direct support for residents. Circle Housing had plans to develop 5,000 affordable houses annually and should suitable sites be located in the district, they would still be interested in building new housing in the district.

Concern was raised about how Circle Housing had communicated its plans to the Council. Circle Housing agreed that it would look to improve communication with the Council as their plans

progressed and would look to arrange a meeting between the Chief Executive's of both organisations as soon as possible.

Given the plans to change the structure of Circle Housing, concern was raised about the future of the Residents Scrutiny Panel's including how they would operate under the new structure and whether their influence would be reduced through being part of a larger organisation. It was confirmed that the Panel's would still form an important mechanism for Circle Housing to receive feedback from its tenants. It was also confirmed that the Panel's would continue to monitor services and would be provided with direct links to the centre of the organisation to report any issues.

It was noted that Circle Housing was also in the process of merging organisations with Affinity Sutton, as a result it was questioned how this would impact upon tenants living in Mole Valley. In response it was advised that the merger would improve Circle Housing's capital base as the combined Group would hold more stock. However on a local level it was unlikely that residents would experience any significant impact.

In response to national news coverage about the removal of lifetime tenancies, it was questioned how this would affect Circle Housing tenants. It was advised that although new tenants would not be given guaranteed lifetime tenancies, it was discretionary as to whether housing associations applied the new powers to end lifetime tenancies for existing tenants. At the present time there were no plans to introduce such a change in Mole Valley.

The Chairman thanked Mr Reid, Ms Wilkinson and Mr Hughes for attending the meeting.

57. Suitability of Emergency Accommodation for Homeless Applicants

The Committee received an Executive report setting out a proposed policy on the Suitability of Emergency Accommodation for Homeless Applicants. Members were asked for their observations or recommendations which would be reported to the Executive during its consideration of the item on 19th January 2016.

It was confirmed that the Council had 26 units in its stock of emergency accommodation which were in constant use and over the past year through working with landlords in the private sector it had been possible to secure the use of an additional 7 units. Members were particularly pleased to note that only 6 homeless households needed to be housed in bed and breakfast accommodation over the Christmas period, which was the lowest number of households requiring housing at any one time in the past year.

Overall the Committee had no objections to the Executive adopting the policy as set out in the report.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

58. Acquisition of Emergency Accommodation

The Committee received an Executive report setting out a proposal to approve capital expenditure of up to £300,000 to acquire a two bedroom property to be used for emergency accommodation for statutory homeless households. Members were asked for their observations or recommendations which would be reported to the Executive during its consideration of the item on 19th January 2016.

It was noted that a property owned by the Thomas Flack Fund in Kingston Road, Leatherhead which had previously been used as emergency accommodation may no longer be available as it was likely that the property would be refurbished and rented at the full market value to increase the income to the fund. As such should approval be given to allocate funding for new emergency accommodation, the net number of properties held by the Council for this purpose would remain at the same level.

Overall the Committee had no objections to the Executive accepting the recommendations set out in the report.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

59. Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2015/2016

The Committee received a copy of its work programme and the Executive Forward Plan for it information.

Resolved: That the Scrutiny Committee work programme and the Executive Forward Plan are noted.