

Overview and Scrutiny Committee
17 JULY 2023

Present: Councillors: Paul Clarke (Chairman), Sam Bateman, Tony Bevis, Mike Croker, Len Ellis-Brown, Nigel Emery, Alex Jeffery, Liz Kitchen, Dennis Livingstone, Jonathan Taylor, Belinda Walters and Mike Wood

Apologies: Councillors: Anthony Frankland, Philip Circus and Malcolm Eastwood

SO/14 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 June 2023 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

SO/15 **DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of interest.

SO/16 **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

There were no announcements.

SO/17 **LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING FUND ROUND 2 UPDATE**

The Director of Resources gave a verbal update on the Local Authority Housing Fund Round 2. The Council had been offered £760,000 by the government. If accepted, it would need to add just over £1 million to this sum, to give a total of £1.78 million. The purpose of the funding was to purchase four properties: three large properties that would be designated for Afghan refugees who were in bridging accommodation, and a fourth property that would be used as temporary accommodation for the homeless.

The properties would generally be larger than those under the Local Authority Housing Fund Round 1. This meant that they would cost more, however, the rental income would be slightly higher.

The Director of Resources reported that both the Finance and Resources and the Housing, Communities and Wellbeing Policy Development Advisory Groups were supportive of accepting the funding. The Council had to respond to the government by 14 August.

The Director of Resources also gave an update on the Local Authority Housing Fund Round 1. The Council had committed £950,000 to the purchase of two large (four bedroom plus) properties out of a budget of £1.225 million. One purchase had completed and the other was close to exchange of contracts. This left £274,000 unspent on this part of the scheme, of which £137,000 belonged to the government and had to be returned. The Director of Resources'

recommendation was that the remaining £137,000, which belonged to the Council, was transferred to the second part of the scheme.

Of the eleven properties that were under offer as part of the second part of the scheme, eight had two bedrooms and three had three bedrooms. By transferring the unused funds to this part of the scheme, the Council could purchase a further three three-bedroom properties instead of a further three two-bedroom properties, which would result in a better housing mix. The larger properties would also generate a slightly higher rental income. The Council had until the end of November to put these properties under offer. Whilst the Director of Resources expected that the Council would be able to achieve this, he acknowledged that it was becoming increasingly difficult to secure properties.

Members had an opportunity to make comments and ask questions. Among the matters raised were:

- The impact on the Council's housing waiting lists. The Director of Resources explained that the idea was that, once the Afghans and the Ukrainians were in a position to return home or find their own accommodation, the properties would be made available to the homeless and others that were in need.
- What the risks were. The Director of Resources advised that the project could cost the Council more than it expected, however, there was no ultimate risk because the grant would be returned to the government if the Council was unable to spend it. He explained that the Council could consider expanding its search criteria in order to increase its chances of securing properties.
- Whether the purchase of the temporary accommodation property was time limited. The Director of Resources advised that contracts would have to be exchanged before 29 March, which was the same time period applicable to the properties that would be designated for Afghan refugees.
- Whether sustainable travel options were considered when searching for properties. The Director of Resources advised that these were considered. The Council was trying to group properties together and ensure that they were situated in areas where local amenities were within walking distance.
- Whether Afghan refugees would be relocated from local hotels. The Director of Resources advised that the Council was working with West Sussex County Council to determine who the appropriate families were.

Note: The meeting paused at the start of and during this item due to issues relating to the audio.

SO/18 **HOUSING GRANTS UPDATE**

The Director of Resources gave a verbal update on two housing grants that the Council had been offered by the government. These were a Homelessness Prevention Grant of £271,911 and a Home Office Asylum Dispersal Grant of

£72,000. The purpose of the Homelessness Prevention Grant was to assist the Council in supporting Ukrainians move into suitable accommodation, in order to reduce the risk of them becoming homeless. The purpose of the Home Office Asylum Dispersal Grant was to reduce the risk of homelessness of all asylum seekers.

The Housing team was exploring options for spending the grants. Council would need to amend the budget in order for the grants to be accepted and spent.

In response to a question asked as to whether the Housing team would liaise with local Ukrainian support groups to find out what the Ukrainians needed, the Director of Resources confirmed that he would remind them to do so.

SO/19 **LAND CHARGES FEES UPDATE**

The Director of Resources gave a verbal update on the Cabinet report on Land Charges fees. West Sussex County Council had increased the amount it charged Horsham District Council for Land Charges searches by £5 (from £21 to £26), and it was proposed that this fee increase be passed on to Horsham District Council's customers, so that the Council was not subsidising it. Council would need to approve the fee change.

A question was asked as to whether the fee increase reflected the rate of inflation. Whilst the Director of Resources did not know when West Sussex County Council last increased its fees, he confirmed that it did not usually increase them by £5 per year.

SO/20 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chairman invited Councillor Bateman to brief the Committee on her work programme suggestion, details of which had been circulated to members of the Committee prior to the meeting.

The suggestion was to investigate how well outdoor sports and leisure facilities were working for residents, with a particular focus on women and teenage girls. If these facilities were not working well for women and teenage girls, then to understand why not and to determine how the facilities could be made more inclusive.

It was proposed that the process would involve consideration of the Council's policies and planning documents to determine whether these were a barrier to inclusivity, as well as engagement with teenage girls to find out what facilities they wanted.

Members debated the suggestion and among the points raised was a view that the needs of older women should also be considered, as the district had an ageing population and there were significant health benefits to be gained from participation in sport. Some concern was expressed that this might result in the scope of the review becoming too wide.

It was agreed that a Task and Finish Group would be set up with the membership comprising Councillors Bateman, Emery and Wood. The Group would formulate its terms of reference and report these to the next meeting of the Committee.

It was considered that the Group could ask questions of Councillor Olson, the Cabinet Member for Leisure, Culture and Green Spaces. The Group could also seek advice from the Head of Leisure and Culture and the Head of Strategic Planning.

The Overview and Scrutiny work programme was noted.

SO/21 **CABINET FORWARD PLAN**

The Cabinet Forward Plan was noted.

SO/22 **URGENT BUSINESS**

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at 6.17 pm having commenced at 5.31 pm

CHAIRMAN