

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Community, Leisure Services and Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 12 NOVEMBER 2013

Present: Councillor Mrs Blackmore (Chairman), and Councillors Brindle, Mrs Gibson, Mrs Joy, Mrs Mannering, Vizzard and Yates

Also Present: Councillors Newton

56. THE COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER WHETHER ALL ITEMS ON THE AGENDA SHOULD BE WEB-CAST

RESOLVED: That all items on the agenda be web-cast

57. APOLOGIES

It was noted that apologies for absence were received from Councillors Munford and Mrs Parvin.

58. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no Substitute Members.

59. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS/WITNESSES

The Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services, Councillor JA Wilson and Councillor Newton were noted as Visiting Members.

60. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures.

61. TO CONSIDER WHETHER ANY ITEMS SHOULD BE TAKEN IN PRIVATE BECAUSE OF THE POSSIBLE DISCLOSURE OF EXEMPT INFORMATION

RESOLVED: That all items be taken in public as proposed.

62. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 10 SEPTEMBER 2013.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September be approved as a correct record and duly signed.

63. EVIDENCE FROM THE HOMELESSNESS REVIEW; GUIDING THE HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting:

- Paul Howarth, Director of the Welfare Reform Club;
- Paul Easterbrook, Housing Services Manager, Porchlight;
- Mike FitzGerald, Chairman, Homeless Care;
- Neil Coles, Housing Services Manager; and
- Sam Bailey, Research and Performance Officer.

Neil Coles, Housing Service Manager provided the Committee with an overview to the draft Homelessness Review evidence.

He explained that the Council was required to publish a Homelessness Strategy every five years. The previous strategy had been adopted in 2008 and was therefore due for renewal in 2013. A key element of the Strategy was undertaking a review.

Mr Coles informed the Committee that the review had highlighted five key themes:

1. The emerging importance of Private Sector Renting which had overtaken Social Housing;
2. Landlord possessions –the primary cause of homelessness;
3. A reduction in preventions work - which was linked to the new housing allocation scheme;
4. The reduction in the number of referrals to Kent County Council's Supporting People Programmes
5. Increasing number of mortgage repossessions which were not being enforced – potential spike hidden at present.

Mr Howarth, Director of the Welfare Reform Club was invited to update the Committee on national policy and its impact on Homelessness. He outlined how the impact of Welfare Reform policy was measured. In order to measure impact of a policy, the objectives needed to be known. In terms of Welfare Reform policies the objectives included reducing the budget deficit, lessening dependency on benefits and making 'work pay'. He informed the Committee that for every new policy written Her Majesty's Revenues and Customs (HMRC) would write an impact assessment. However the impact assessment would consider the financial impact only and not the social impact.

Mr Howarth informed the Committee that there had been a larger increase in Maidstone of those claiming Housing Benefit than compared with the national picture. From November 2008 until 2013 that had been a 24-25% increase in those claiming Housing Benefit. The biggest increase in Housing Benefit claimants known had come from those already in work. Mr Howarth questioned whether this pointed to lower incomes in Maidstone. He told the Committee that the government had been reluctant to undertake research in this area, however it had been pressurised into doing so and there would be a series of reports emerging in this area that would add further scope to the Homeless Review and Strategy providing the evidence base to adjust its objectives over time.

The Committee was informed that Sheffield Hallam University, in conjunction with the Financial Times, had undertaken research on the impact of Welfare Reform. This had resulted in the 'Austerity Index' which provided the ability to work out the proportional impact of each reform by area and therefore the loss of money coming into Maidstone.

The Committee was advised that so far the direct impact of Welfare Reform was negligible with approximately 100 households affected in Maidstone. The transition of Disability Living allowance to Personal Independence Payment was yet to come however and could have a significant impact on Maidstone.

Mr Howarth also highlighted Mental Health and the changes to incapacity benefit as a possible area of focus for the Committee. He explained that shared accommodation was a hidden part of the Welfare Reform agenda and could provide a solution to the 'bedroom tax' (otherwise known as 'size criteria' within Welfare Reform policy). He suggested taking in a lodger and encouragement to share accommodation as options to consider. With regards to shared accommodation Mr Coles informed the Committee that Maidstone did not have a large stock of shared accommodation as it did not have a large student population.

Paul Easterbrook from Porchlight commented on the increased importance of the Private Rented Sector in the current climate. This coupled with the benefits cuts would leave a significant gap which meant it was difficult for people to sustain the accommodation they were already in. He informed the Committee that assistance in providing a deposit was a way providing sustainability for their future. Porchlight were working with Crisis who had accommodation in the private rented sector in Kent. Maidstone Borough Council also provided a rent deposit scheme.

Mr FitzGerald from Homeless Care updated the Committee on the recent merger with local charities including the Day Centre, all of which were now known as Homeless Care.

He aired his concerns with regards to the findings of the Homelessness review, outlined his concerns as follows:

- Private Sector landlords freeing up housing stock for higher rents;
- The impact of Domestic Abuse;
- The Council's Housing Allocation Scheme;
- The instant loss of benefits when claimant cannot keep an appointment;
- 16-18 year olds who are NEET; and
- Gaps in provisions which including temporary/emergency accommodation and the elderly.

A further challenge to the homeless highlighted was the online application process for Universal Credit. He informed the Committee that that Day Centre was able to provide a homeless person with its address to use.

Mr FitzGerald referenced Maidstone's current Health profile which showed Maidstone to be 'significantly worse' than the national average in relation to statutory homelessness.

The Committee raised concerns about crisis situations such as family breakdowns and the impact this had on provisions for homelessness. Mr Coles responded by explaining that early intervention and prevention of homelessness was an important area of focus for the Homelessness Strategy. The risks of returning someone to a household were highlighted to the Committee. It was emphasised that there had to be certainty that they were not being returned to risk, for example, Domestic Violence.

The Committee felt that intervention and prevention should be a priority of the Homelessness Strategy. Robust interventions from the Borough Council and Housing Providers were required to prevent homelessness and appropriate measures should be identified and set out in the Homelessness Strategy.

Members considered ways in which to encourage residents to come forward for help and advice at an early, preventative stage. It was felt that the Council needed to improve its signposting to other services, working more closely with stakeholders and partners.

The Committee raised concerns about Mental Health and well-being and the impact this would have on the homeless. Mr Coles told the Committee that Mental Health was an issue and was common in households facing homelessness; the evidence gathered as part of the Homelessness review in relation to Mental Health would be subject to further investigation.

Members considered the Housing Allocations Scheme. Prior to the Housing Allocations Scheme a 'points' scheme had been in place. This had awarded a higher number of points to the homeless. The new scheme was assessed on the date of application. There was one band for homeless applications and a percentage of available social housing was allocated to each band. This was set at 5% for the homelessness band. The bands were as follows:

- A – Community Contribution
- B - Assistance
- C – Reasonable Preference
- D – Homeless

The Committee were informed that the 5% homeless allocation had been used. There was the ability to adjust the quota but the result would be to reduce the allocation in another band. Members felt that the allocation of each band should be reviewed.

The Committee considered whether or not Maidstone was a victim of its own success i.e. in its ability to cope in the economic down turn to such an extent that it was now drawing people to it. Members were concerned about the lack of funding now available and the impact this could have.

Mr Coles confirmed that in line with policy the only exception to those coming to Maidstone, other than those with a local connection, were those fleeing Domestic Violence. With regards to inward migration Members were informed that claims that people moved to other areas because of changes to Benefits were greatly exaggerated.

The inclusion of the armed forces who were found to be particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless as part of the review was discussed. Mr Coles informed the Committee that the armed forces along with ex offenders were often institutionalised which limited their life skills as everything had been done or provided for them.

Members considered the evidence presented in the Homelessness Review and the gaps in provisions that had been identified. The Committee felt that a further area of investigation and analysis required was to look at initiatives used in other areas to address similar gaps in provisions and determine whether or not they could be utilised in Maidstone.

A member recommended that in taking the draft review evidence forward, the presentation of the diagrams used should be improved as they were difficult to interpret in their current form.

The Committee recommended that the contact details of the groups and organisations that had been involved in the review's consultation be collated and made available to Councillors to enable signposting of services to residents.

RESOLVED: That

- a) Intervention and Prevention should be a priority of the Homelessness Strategy. There should be more robust interventions from the Borough Councils and Housing Providers to prevent homelessness with appropriate measures identified and set out in the Homelessness Strategy.
- b) Maidstone Borough Council should work closely with its stakeholders and partner organisations (particularly Maidstone Families Matter, the Community Safety Unit and Community Wardens and Maidstone Mind) to improve its signposting to services and to encourage residents to come forward for help and advice on homelessness at an early, preventative stage.
- c) The Housing Services Manager should ensure that further research is undertaken as part of the homelessness review in areas where there are gaps in provisions and look for established, innovative schemes in other areas that could be adopted in Maidstone;
- d) In taking the draft review evidence forward, the presentation of the diagrams used should be improved as they are difficult to interpret in their current form; and

- e) The contact details of the groups and organisations that had responded to the Homelessness Review consultation be collated and made available to Councillors to enable improved signposting to residents.

64. FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered its future work programme.

The Scrutiny officer updated the Committee on items to be included:

- 10 December 2013 – interviews with the Mental Health Nurse and Police Officers involved in the Pilot Street Triage Scheme as part of the Mental Health Review;
- The draft Homelessness Strategy would be returning to the Committee in the New Year, date to be confirmed; and
- The March meeting could be utilised for a follow up on the Waste Review and to evaluate the Waste Contract thus far.

RESOLVED: That the future work programme be noted.

65. DURATION OF MEETING

6.30pm to 8.05pm