

Your Plymouth

Monday 8 July 2013

PRESENT:

Councillor Tuffin, in the Chair.

Councillor Bowyer, Vice-Chair.

Councillors Casey, Damarell, Philippa Davey, Jarvis, Jordan, Martin Leaves, Michael Leaves, Rennie, Ricketts and Tuohy.

Co-opted Representative: Mr Steve Meakin

Also in attendance: Councillor Smith, Deputy Leader, Councillor Penberthy, Cabinet Member for Co-operatives and Community Development, Andrew Stephens, Assistant Director for Customer Services, Stuart Palmer, Assistant Director for Homes and Communities, Matt Garrett, Head of Housing Options, Darin Halifax, Lead Officer, and Katey Johns, Democratic Support Officer.

The meeting started at 4 pm and finished at 6 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the committee will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

1. TO NOTE THE CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR

The panel noted the appointment of Councillor Tuffin as Chair and Councillor Bowyer as Vice-Chair, as had been agreed at the Annual General Meeting held on 17 May 2013.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the code of conduct, the following declarations of interest were made –

Name	Subject	Reason	Interest
Mr S Meakin	Housing Options – Homelessness	Citizens Advice Bureau has two people seconded to Housing Options	Personal
Councillor Damarell	Housing Options – Homelessness	Employed by Plymouth Community Homes	Personal

3. APPOINTMENT OF CO-OPTED REPRESENTATIVES

Agreed that Steve Meakin is appointed as a co-opted representative to the panel for the municipal year 2013/14.

4. **CHAIR'S URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

5. **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The panel noted its terms of reference.

6. **CABINET MEMBER FOR CO-OPERATIVES AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

The panel heard from the Cabinet Member for Co-operatives and Community Development who was in attendance to provide an overview of his portfolio responsibilities. Councillor Penberthy reported on the following four areas within his portfolio which he felt could benefit from scrutiny –

- Civil Society Policy – this will focus on how the council engages with the people of Plymouth, including neighbourhood working and localism, and is closely aligned to the Community Asset Transfer Policy which had been approved at the last meeting of City Council;
- Safer Plymouth (former Plymouth Community Safety Partnership Safe and Strong Board) - works collaboratively with statutory partners to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour. In addition to its new name, the terms of reference are currently being redrafted and consideration given to its current responsibilities and structure;
- Welfare Reform – it is known that the benefit cap being applied within the next few weeks will impact on 140 families in Plymouth. This change, combined with the introduction of direct payments to landlords, will result in many people finding it hard to manage financially. The Council is working with its partners to find out what the implications of these major changes will mean for those directly affected and the for the City as a whole;
- Housing Delivery (waiting lists, homelessness, private sector housing) - there are currently not enough large properties in the city and those that are around aren't affordable. A major housing conference is being hosted in the City later in the year where, amongst other things, consideration will be given to how we can work differently in terms of housing provision.

In response to questions raised, members were advised that –

- (a) responsibility for Strategic Housing lay with the Cabinet Member for Finance and fell outside of this panel's terms of reference;
- (b) part of the on-going growth and development of the University of Plymouth includes provision for a large amount of student accommodation on campus which it is hoped will free up areas of the City which are currently occupied by students living off campus. Discussions were on-going between the City Council and the City's Registered Social Landlords to see if this would be a viable option for them to buy into. However, care

would need to be taken to ensure that any one community did not become overloaded and consideration would need to be given to how this could be mitigated and/or controlled;

- (c) in addition to a lack of three-plus bedroomed properties, there was also a shortage of one-bedroomed accommodation. Where possible, mutual exchanges were negotiated between occupants looking to up/downsize;
- (d) it was too soon to comment on the effect of the 'bedroom tax' as no studies had been undertaken though it was acknowledged that there were anomalies in the system which would take time to work through;
- (f) ten sites had recently been identified and sold providing 47% of affordable housing for the City;
- (g) whilst the Council was working hard to address the issue of blocked sites, unfortunately, there was nothing they Council could do to free up property that was restricted by covenants as this was a matter for Government to address;
- (h) the Council worked with 24 Registered Social Landlords in the City, including specialist housing providers of which 500 units had recently been agreed with Tamar Housing.

Whilst Members welcomed the growth of the University, concern was expressed at the assumption being made that students would move onto campus and out of private rented accommodation. As University accommodation was generally more expensive than that available in the private sector this could not be guaranteed.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for his portfolio overview and commented that many of issues highlighted had been identified as possible areas for scrutiny at the recent scrutiny conference.

7. **HOUSING OPTIONS - HOMELESSNESS**

The panel heard from Matt Garrett, Head of Housing Options, and Stuart Palmer, Assistant Director for Homes and Communities, on the 'Housing Choices Smarter Solutions Delivery Plan'. The report –

- (a) advised that the Housing Options Service was responsible for managing advice to people about housing issues, preventing homelessness, statutory homelessness, temporary accommodation and the housing register;
- (b) set the context for what was happening both locally and nationally;
- (c) provided details of service demand in respect of –
 - footfall;
 - telephony;

- casework;
 - temporary accommodation;
- (d) identified the Council's plans for –
- preventing homelessness and mitigating the likely rise in homelessness;
 - finding housing solutions for rough sleepers;
 - ensuring that vulnerable people can access a range of support to sustain accommodation and build skills toward independence;
 - make the best use of social/affordable housing;
 - linking with broader causes and effects of homelessness such as unemployment, poor health, and the transition from care, hospitals or prisons.

In response to questions raised, Members were advised that –

- (e) the length of time spent on the register was dependent upon the type of property available;
- (f) the amount of time people spent in temporary accommodation was increasing with one quarter of families staying for a period of more than six months compared to 12 per cent a year ago;
- (g) disabled children had been excluded from the 'bedroom tax' and the outcome of a Judicial Review into the cases of four adults with disabilities was awaited with interest;
- (h) the Housing Options Service was currently adequately resourced to cope with the demand, however, should demand continue to rise resources would need to be reviewed;
- (i) there were currently 850 empty homes in the City and the Council was proactively working to bring those properties back into use, however, this was difficult where no known owner could be identified;
- (j) with regard to ensuring that accommodation was of the required standard, the Council had proved successful in two areas –
- working with landlords by offering training and support to ensure that the benchmark is set at an acceptable level; and
 - tackling those landlords who neither wished to engage nor work at the required level through the courts.

The panel welcomed the concise and detailed report and thanked the officers for their attendance.

(Councillor Damarel and Steve Meakin both declared personal interests in respect of the above item).

8. **CUSTOMER SERVICES TRANSFORMATION**

The panel heard from Councillor Smith, Deputy Leader, and Andrew Stephens, Assistant Director for Customer Services, on progress with implementing the Customer Services transformation programme.

The presentation highlighted the Council's vision and principles for customer services which included –

- provision of a single point of access to most services;
- resolution of most customer enquiries at first point of contact;
- engaging customers in the redesign of services to make them more efficient and effective;
- delivering services through preferred channels to make them more accessible and deliver savings;
- making effective and efficient use of our investment in corporate customer facing ICT;
- working with partners to make services more customer focused, better connected and more efficient.

In response to questions raised, Members were advised that –

- (a) the process comprised three phases – modelling/discovery phase, service review and implementation. Consultants had been engaged for the first phase of modelling and this model was now being used to train staff in-house;
- (b) sufficient resources were in place to undertake the service reviews and, as each review took place and generated change, more resources would be freed up to put back into the process;
- (c) Directors were supportive of the proposals for change and there was buy-in throughout the organisation, headed up by the Chief Executive;
- (d) one area of focus was digital inclusion and, whilst many of the City's libraries provided free computer and internet access, they did not have wi-fi. A rolling programme of wi-fi installation was now underway with work at four libraries having already been completed;
- (e) it was acknowledged that communication with customers was not always simple, straightforward or in plain English therefore, as service reviews were undertaken, the various types of communication (letters, forms, etc) would be looked at by going through a check-list;
- (f) scrutiny into customer access to services, particularly through the internet and with a view to looking at what was done elsewhere, would be welcomed.

It was pointed out that whilst the internet may be less accessible in the more deprived areas of the City, it was also those areas who made most use of the payday loan providers and who were only accessible via the internet. Consideration should therefore be given to how this was happening and what opportunities were being missed.

The Chair thanked the Deputy Leader and Assistant Director for Customer Services for their attendance.

9. **WORK PROGRAMME**

The panel considered its draft work programme for 2013/14 and agreed that Close Up Reviews be undertaken in the following order of priority in respect of –

- (1) Locality Working - membership to comprise Councillors Casey, Philippa Davey, Jarvis, Jordan, Rennie, Tuffin and Tuohy;
- (2) Customer Services (including access) – membership to comprise Councillors Ian Bowyer, Casey, Jordan and Tuffin;
- (3) Recycling Rates – membership to comprise Councillors Michael Leaves, Tuohy and Tuffin.

10. **FUTURE DATES AND TIMES OF MEETINGS**

The dates of meetings for the remainder of the municipal year were noted as –

- Monday 30 September 2013
- Monday 4 November 2013
- Monday 10 March 2014

All meetings to commence at 4 pm.

11. **EXEMPT BUSINESS**

There were no items of exempt business.