

Minutes

Meeting name	Scrutiny Committee
Date	Tuesday, 1 September 2020
Start time	6.30 pm
Venue	This meeting was held by remote access

Present:

Chair Councillor P. Cumbers (Chair)

Councillors R. Bindloss (Vice-Chair) R. Browne
R. Child J. Douglas
C. Evans C. Fisher
E. Holmes J. Wilkinson

A. Pearson (Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities)

Officers Chief Executive
Director for Housing and Communities
Democratic Services Manager
Democratic Services Officer (CR)

Minute No.	Minute
61	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE Apologies were received from Councillor Smedley.</p>
62	<p>MINUTES The minutes of the meeting held on 23 June 2020 were approved and authorised to be signed by the Chair.</p>
63	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST There were no declarations of interest.</p>
64	<p>INTERIM UPDATE REPORT - RECOMMENDATION OF THE HOUSING VOIDS TASK AND FINISH GROUP Andrew Cotton, Director for Housing and Communities gave a brief summary of the report, the purpose of which was to update Members on the work of the Housing Voids Task and Finish Group, in relation to the Housing Service’s void management.</p> <p>Mr. Cotton highlighted that the report detailed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • context and performance, particularly in relation to the Covid-19 impact on the landlord and void function. This would feature in the Council’s new ways of working, as it progressed its recovery planning. • changes in the structure of the landlord function to make sure the Council had capacity across tenancy management, specifically in dealing with voids. • the mission statement of the Council’s weekly Working Group, which was based around the efficient letting of homes at the right time to the required standard. • current void turnaround performance. This was difficult to predict as average monthly figures were subject to change. • that the Housing Voids Working Group had started to develop the performance indicators needed to identify and categorise void properties (as re-let properties, properties in need of decent homes work or properties held for regeneration or redevelopment purposes). This would help the Council to understand the demands on the voids process. • the Group’s recommendations and comments on activities and challenges to delivery, including input into the work on the Northgate system, which was an important aspect of service delivery. • contract arrangements relating to management of the void properties contract. Quality and performance issues were being dealt with as necessary. • the recommendation to implement a new voids policy. A voids policy and re-let standard was key and it was anticipated that this would be in place by April 2021.

Councillor Alan Pearson, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities advised that a review of the Council's voids management had revealed that a great deal of work was needed to improve the service. The Council had a good focus on this issue and recognised that the service needed to be fit for purpose long-term. Many improvements had already been undertaken but there was still much to be done.

Councillor Pearson highlighted that there may be a number of additional issues to be dealt with as a result of Covid-19. The Council needed to consider building more social housing (as well as purchasing it).

Councillor Pearson thanked the Committee for their work in gathering information, which had been very helpful to the review.

During discussion the following points were noted:

- Members were pleased with the improvement to the turnaround times of void properties and thanked Councillor Pearson and Mr. Cotton for their work.
- reducing the need to use bed and breakfast facilities as much as possible was a priority for the Council. Families and individuals needed permanent, secure and safe properties to live in. Use of bed and breakfast was also not a cost effective solution. A lodging system, where home owners were encouraged to take-in lodgers was an option for consideration but there may always be a need to use bed and breakfast facilities in cases of emergency.
- consideration of the use of 'golden goodbyes' to encourage tenants to keep properties in good condition was noted and it was highlighted that it was vital to establish the correct management of properties before considering other initiatives and strategies.
- Mr. Cotton would provide the Committee with the latest void turnaround figures and would identify the relevant categories (re-lets, in need of decent homes work or held for regeneration or redevelopment), as referred to above).
- Members requested figures on homelessness, rent areas, expected eviction etc. and a list of the anticipated suite of policies to enable progress and prioritisation to be tracked.
- Councillor Pearson expected to receive an update report on homelessness and would circulate this to Members of this Committee.
- Mr. Cotton would confirm whether a Council grant/loan in respect of private rent deposits was available to those eligible.
- The importance of balancing the need for good social mix with social type was highlighted.

RESOLVED

The Committee **NOTED** the report and **PROVIDED** the above comments in relation to progress on previous recommendations and current Covid-19 impact.

REVIEW OF SCRUTINY WORKPLAN 2020-21 AND THE ANNUAL FORWARD PLAN

Councillor Pat Cumbers, Chair of the Committee provided a brief overview of the draft Work Plan, highlighting:-

- the draft Work Plan outlined the areas of work, which the Committee expected to scrutinise during the remainder of the Civic year;
- at the Scrutiny Workshop on 16 July 2020, Members discussed suitable items to include in the Work Plan;
- the draft Plan had been agreed by herself and the Vice Chair;
- the Work Plan was a 'living document' and further amendments and additions suggested by Members, due to changing priorities were welcomed, subject to guidance on items for the Work Plan, as set out in the Constitution.

During discussion the following points were noted:-

- The Cattle Market was a Work Plan item for both Scrutiny and Audit and Standards Committees. It was noted that the Committee remits differed in that this Committee dealt with the formation of policy and Audit and Standards Committee were concerned with ensuring policy was followed.
- The audit of the Cattle Market had commenced. This included review of the financial transactions and obligations to the Council. Scrutiny would receive an update on the ongoing work in relation to the Cattle Market from Councillor Leigh Higgins, as Portfolio Holder for Growth and Prosperity.
- Audit reports were available to Members upon request but it was suggested that all audit reports should be circulated to Members of this Committee.
- It was vital that the Council should identify priority areas to focus on. Businesses in the town were experiencing great difficulties and problems needed to be addresses quickly.
- The first meeting of the newly established Place Task and Finish Group would be held on 24 September. Here, the main issues facing the town would be considered and priorities would be identified.

RESOLVED

The Committee **APPROVED** the draft Work Plan.

TERMS OF REFERENCE - RESPONSE/RECOVERY TASK AND FINISH GROUPS

Councillor Cumbers gave a summary of the report, the purpose of which was to provide Members with the draft Terms of Reference and draft Scoping Documents for the two task and finish groups, which had been established to review the response and recovery in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Councillor Cumbers advised that at the Scrutiny Workshop on 16 July, Members had agreed that it would be useful to review the local response, impact and recovery in relation to the current national Covid-19 crisis. The proposed Terms of

Reference for a People group and a Place group had been drafted and agreed with herself, the Vice Chair and relevant Lead Officers for each group and were detailed in the report.

Councillor Cumbers confirmed that the task and finish groups would have the opportunity to review their Scoping Documents at their first meetings. She highlighted that:

- the timetable for the reviews was short and it was proposed that each group review 3 overarching themes.
- Members would collate evidence and information on these themes in advance of the meetings and would present their findings to the group.
- the relevant Lead Officers could provide data on Council run services.
- it was envisioned that evidence would be collated from other sources (wider stakeholder, interest groups etc.) The purpose of the groups was to evaluate evidence and establish if the current and planned response of the Council and external groups would be sufficient to meet the needs of residents and to make recommendations in relation to any additional measures.

Councillor Cumbers confirmed the membership of the groups:

- People Task and Finish Group – Councillors Browne, Child, Cumbers, Fisher, Smedley
- Place Task and Finish Group – Councillors Bindloss, Douglas, Evans, Holmes, Wilkinson

During discussion the following points were noted:

- Mental health issues in all age groups had worsened due to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly as a result of fear and isolation. The value of Scrutiny Committee's work would be evidence collation to identifying any gaps and clarify plans to tackle this.
- Each Group would provide periodic verbal updates to the Committee and there would be a detailed interim report to the Committee on 22 December.

Members noted that the opportunity for the groups to speak with external experts would be of considerable benefit.

RESOLVED

The Committee:

- 1) **APPROVED** to establish task and finish groups to review the response and recovery in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic;
- 2) **APPROVED** the Terms of Reference for the task and finish groups;
- 3) **NOTED** the draft Scoping Documents for the task and finish groups, which would be finalised by the groups at their first meeting.

67	URGENT BUSINESS There was no urgent business.
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The meeting closed at: 7.35 pm

Chair