COMMUNITY POLICY AND REVIEW PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 12th September, 2013, at the Council Offices, Farnborough at 7.00 pm.

Voting Members

Cr. R. Hughes (Chairman)
Cr. R.M. Cooper (Vice-Chairman)

Cr. Attika Choudhary
Cr. M.S. Choudhary
Cr. Liz Corps
Cr. Jennifer Evans
Cr. M.J. Roberts
Cr. P.F. Rust
Cr. Jacqui Vosper

An apology for absence was received on behalf Cr. Attika Choudhary.

1. MINUTES –

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 13th June, 2013 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

2. FIRST WESSEX –

The Panel welcomed Ms. Carol Williams, Operations Director, and Mr. Jeremy Duckworth, Head of Property Services (First Wessex), who had been invited to the meeting to give details on First Wessex performance and policy issues. Members where provided with hand outs in advance of the meeting which included information on annual reports, customer satisfaction survey results, maintenance summary, core benchmarking summary, estate inspections programme, key performance indicators and policies.

The information had set out details of annual reports for residents from 1st April, 2011 to 31st March, 2012 and the First Wessex annual report from 2011-2012. The Panel also received the First Wessex Board report and financial statements for the year ending 31st March, 2012, First Wessex quarterly magazine for customers, customer annual opinion survey 2012/13 results, asset review/inspection programme, planned maintenance summary for 2013/14. Performance information on repairs and maintenance including details of income and arrears and lettings for 2012/13 were also included and information on the findings from the core benchmarking exercise undertaken in 2011/12 and detail of First Wessex policies on anti social behaviour and tenancy.

The Panel raised a number of questions relating to the information including leaseholder issues, rent payments, tenant management, rent arrears, and anti social behaviour. The Panel also discussed the criteria for those appointed to First Wessex Board of management and residents’ panels.
Ms. Williams gave details of First Wessex’s new approach to tenant engagement which encouraged involvement at local estate or street level and she confirmed that they were making good progress in identifying residents with a desire to become engaged in this work. There was an over-subscription of those wanting to take part in their residents’ panel.

The Panel highlighted that there had been an issue regarding the training of telephone operators on dealing with emergency works for those tenants with life threatening illnesses and the issue of leaseholders. This had been raised at a previous meeting including First Wessex inaccuracy with forecasting and charging. In response, Ms. Williams informed the Panel that this had been a one-off case and assured the Panel that staff would be made aware of the issue so it was not repeated. With regards to leaseholders, Ms. Williams explained that First Wessex was currently in the process of updating its database in order for more streamlining of service charges and gave details of what may cause a rise in charges.

The Panel then raised its concern on the impact of the introduction of Welfare Reform and questioned the provision made by First Wessex to address the implications.

Ms. Williams confirmed that First Wessex had not seen the full repercussions of the introduction of the spare room subsidy. There were around 1000 tenants who had indicated a desire to downsize their homes and an equal number had requested larger homes to support growing families. First Wessex was currently working hard to try to match tenants’ needs but clearly that would not be possible in all cases. First Wessex staff had been working with residents regarding the issue. She then provided details on the work of First Wessex on the impact of Universal Credit; staff had also been working with tenants who would be impacted and there was an increase of those approaching food banks. It was felt to be a worrying time and the impact had still yet to be seen.

The Panel AGREED:

(i) to note the information provided by First Wessex, however future information should be more localised to Rushmoor tenants; and

(ii) that First Wessex be requested to address the issue of service charges.

3. WELFARE REFORM – UPDATE –

The Panel welcomed Mr Ian Harrison, Head of Customer Services, who had been invited to the Meeting to give a presentation on the latest position in relation to Welfare Reform and its impact locally and on the work of the Council’s Welfare Reform Task and Finish Group.

Mr. Harrison gave a presentation, which set out the rationale behind Welfare Reform and gave an update on the Government’s plans for the
introduction of Universal Credit (UC). This was currently operating on a limited pilot basis in four local authority areas and would be rolled out progressively to a further six areas later in the year. Originally, local authorities had been expecting to start introducing UC at the beginning of October, but that was now not the case, although the Government had remained committed to delivering UC safely and securely during the period up to 2017.

Mr. Harrison then gave details of the spare room subsidy which had taken effect from 1st April, 2013, with a 1% reduction in housing benefit where the applicant had one extra bedroom and 25% reduction for two or more bedrooms. He highlighted that pensioners, certain disability cases, those requiring overnight carers, properties in shared ownership, i.e. partly rented/purchased, and homeless cases moving through temporary accommodation were excluded.

Mr. Harrison informed the Panel that Rushmoor currently had 405 cases, the majority of which lived in First Wessex properties and this had reduced from the initial figures in April, which were 500. Of these, 86% were under occupying by one-bedroom and the remainder by two-bedroom. The Council had been working closely with its Registered Providers and had awarded 134 discretionary payments to date at a total cost of £45,000.

Mr. Harrison then provided details of the benefit cap which came into force from 15th July, 2013 and this had been set at the average net earning for working households of £500 per week (£26,000 per annum) for lone parents or couples with or without children. For single people without children it was £350 per week. Rushmoor currently had 19 cases affected by the cap, which was down from 25 in July. The impact had ranged from a weekly loss of welfare support between £2.33 and £258.31 per week.

Mr. Harrison highlighted that from 1st April the localised council tax support scheme had been implemented which limited support to a maximum of 92% for working age claimants and included child benefits and child maintenance as an income. Around 3,000 residents had been affected. The range that people were paying if they got 92% support was between £1.47 and £3.67 a week (with no single person discount). Payments had been monitored and made by those who had never had to pay council tax. By 1st September, 1,635 accounts of previous non-payers had been affected by the change, 10% had paid their charge for the year in full and 73% had made a payment of some sort, which meant that 83% of accounts were paying.

Mr. Harrison then gave details of the work of the Welfare Reform Task and Finish Group, which had been established to develop an approach to Council Tax support and, if approved by the Panel, the Group would broaden its role to take on wider welfare reform issues and continue to monitor the effectiveness of the localised council tax support schemes.

Mr. Harrison concluded that the impact of the multiple reforms had resulted in an increase in benefit caseloads. Discretionary funds had been made available by the Government to help customers affected by individual circumstances where some form of discretionary award was needed. These
funds had been inflated to help smooth over the localised effects of the boarder welfare reform changes; claimants applied in a similar manner to claiming benefits and awards were normally for the short-term and conditions were often applied. There had also been a significant impact on housing services, with the number of homeless applications increasing by 58% on last year. 132 households had been placed into bed and breakfast during 2012/13 compared to 59 households during 2011/12. Those provided with food parcels had increased from 694 in 2011/12 to 2480 during 2012/13.

The Panel discussed the presentation and raised a number of questions on the UC impact on those who were self employed. The Panel also raised concern on the impact and pressures on housing and other services within in the Council, which Mr. Harrison confirmed was being monitored.

The Panel AGREED:

(i) to note the update; and

(ii) for the Welfare Reform Task and Finish Group to broaden its role to take on wide welfare reform issues and continue to monitor the effectiveness of the localised council tax support schemes.

4. NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL STRATEGY –

The Panel AGREED to defer this item to a future meeting.

5. HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2011-2016 – SECOND UPDATE 2013 –

The Panel AGREED to defer this item to a future meeting.

6. WORK PROGRAMME –

The Panel noted the revised work programme and work schedule.

The Meeting closed at 8.45 p.m.

R. HUGHES
CHAIRMAN