

HOUSING WORKING GROUP UPDATE

Executive Summary

This update covers the last two meetings of the Housing Working Group (HWG), held on 26 July 2023 and 4 October 2023.

July Meeting

At the meeting on 26 July 2023, the HWG received an update on homelessness. The team were experiencing unprecedented levels of homelessness, which had resulted in families staying in Bed and Breakfast accommodation for longer than 6 weeks. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) Homelessness team had conducted a diagnostic visit and subsequently provided feedback on 14 July 2023. The feedback received from DLUHC highlighted the commitment of staff and relative success of homelessness prevention work, which stood at 75% compared with an average of 50%. However, it noted that staff and accommodation resources were stretched in dealing with the levels of demand. A B&B Elimination Plan had been developed. The Group discussed sources of Government grants and the possibility of empty homes in Sheerwater being used as temporary accommodation to help meet demand.

The HWG received an update on the Housing Service, including the self-referral to the Regulator for Social Housing. It had been identified that the Council was unable to bring 137 homes up to the Decent Homes standard due to funding constraints and a time extension had been sought to achieve the standard. The Group discussed the focus on reducing void turnaround times, increasing rent collection and improving resident engagement across the service. A successful day of Tenancy and Home Visits had been conducted in the Lakeview area, with a further day planned in September.

The HWG considered the wider challenges faced with the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), which had been discussed at July's Council meeting. It was noted that if the HRA could not be brought into balance it would necessitate another Section 114 Notice being served. The Group discussed the approach to property disposals in order to bridge the capital funding gap.

Following the issuing of the S114 notice the group discussed how affordable homes would be delivered by the Council in the future as the Council would not have the funding to deliver affordable homes itself. The focus will need to be on securing affordable homes through the planning process and building relationships with housing associations.

October Meeting

Following discussions at the previous meeting around the Council's future delivery of affordable homes, Stephen Lodge, Executive Director Development and Strategic Asset Management at Abri (housing association), was invited to the HWG meeting on 4 October 2023. Stephen gave the HWG an informative presentation, covering the role of housing associations and their funding; challenges and opportunities facing the sector and further information on Abri and how they may assist Woking. It was noted that Abri and the Council shared many of the same objectives and aspirations for the community.

The HWG also received an update on the work of the Housing Assets team, including the ongoing dialogue with the Regulator for Social Housing and progress with policy development. The mutually agreed contract termination between the Council and Mountjoy was discussed. The Group were encouraged to hear that the Council had already secured 2 additional void contractor and a specialist gas contractor for communal boilers. Members requested an update on communal boiler issues before Christmas, after the outages last winter. The Group also discussed progress with fire safety

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remedial works, properties that had been identified for disposal and the learning from the fire at Ash Road.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE That the report be noted.

The Committee has the authority to determine the recommendation(s) set out above.

Background Papers: None.

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Date Published: 6 October 2023