

BUSINESS AND HOUSING POLICY COMMITTEE**9 February 2021**

Attendance:

Councillors
Weir (Chairperson)Bell
Brook
Craske
HiscockHorrill
Lumby
Power
ScottOthers in attendance who addressed the meeting:

Councillors Thompson (Leader and Cabinet Member for Communications), Cutler (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Risk), Learney (Cabinet Member for Housing and Asset Management), Ferguson (Cabinet Member for Local Economy and Climate Emergency) and Murphy (Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency).

[Full audio recording and video](#)

1. APOLOGIES AND DEPUTY MEMBERS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Rutter.

2. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

Councillor Hiscock declared a personal (but not prejudicial) interest in respect of various agenda items due to his role as a County Councillor.

Councillor Scott declared that he was a council tenant in respect of the matters relating to the Housing Restoration presentation.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 1 DECEMBER 2020

RESOLVED:

That subject to Councillor Rutter being shown as being in attendance and Councillor Clear (deputy member) being shown as not in attendance, the minutes of the previous meeting held on 1 December 2020 be approved and adopted.

4. **TO NOTE THE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2020/21**

RESOLVED:

That the Work Programme for 2020/21 be noted.

5. **CHAIRPERSON'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairperson welcomed to the meeting TACT representatives Mrs M Gill and Mr D Light.

6. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

No members of the public were present to make representations.

7. **BRIEFING ON ECONOMY AND HOUSING RESTORATION WORK - PRESENTATION**

The Service Lead – Economy and Tourism and the Strategic Director – Services gave a presentation on the Covid 19 restoration work.

Members asked questions and raised various comments which were addressed by Councillors Ferguson and Learney and the relevant officers.

The Chairperson stated that it would be of benefit to report to a future meeting an updated allocation of grant funding table to show how the grants that had been dispersed to businesses had been distributed throughout the district and where the benefits had been gained.

Responding to questions, officers emphasised that the priority had been to support the sectors most affected during the pandemic. The objective was to increase pedestrian footfall on the district's high streets and to be in the strongest position to bring people back when restrictions eased.

The Chairperson observed that the recovery strategy was not about one big project but rather about transformational change. The green economic development strategy was fundamental and getting the digital infrastructure in place was key to remaining competitive. Working in partnership across the district and with neighbours was also essential to enable the transition.

Officers explained that the landscape for retail had irreversibly changed and that developing the experiential component of the high street offer would be critical to future success. The e-commerce platform was supporting independent retailers. The high streets would be used by the public in a different way; festivals and markets would play an important role in animating them.

Support through 'Love Local' had been rolled out across the district into the market towns.

Members discussed a range of ideas for rebuilding economic activity. These included optimising the use of assets in the district to attract employment and inward investment.

The Design Festival would showcase the strengths of Winchester's economy and exemplify why locating in the district was good for business. Partnerships were seen as key to filling the gaps in broadband/digital infrastructure. The Chairperson undertook to seek clarification on the objectives and membership of key partnership groups outlined in the presentation.

In response to questions about the e-commerce platform, the officers and Cabinet members clarified that there were expectations that businesses would make a small contribution at a future date but the council was committed to ensuring that the platform was sustainable.

The strategy for the digitally enabled economy would provide a road map for transition to a greener, more sustainable, digitally enabled economy and the key was to obtain buy-in from the whole business community for a shared vision.

In respect of housing recovery it was noted that, despite the challenges presented by Covid measures, the housing team had been operating very much as business as usual. New homes completions were coming forward and the council was on target to meet its 1000 homes objective; tenancy services and property services were operating to business as usual and plans were coming forward for delivery of the housing response to the climate emergency.

The "Everyone in" programme for the homeless continued and the no eviction policy remained in place. A priority was to sustain tenancies through the difficult times.

The housing team emphasised that the needs of vulnerable tenants had increased during the pandemic. Mental health issues were dominating the work of tenancy services and options were being looking at to increase support in this area by commissioning support from other agencies and if possible by employing a further mental health officer (currently 1 officer).

A report on the findings of the Next Generation Winchester project looking at housing for younger people would be brought to the summer 2021 meeting of the committee.

In response to questions raised at the Scrutiny Committee regarding the options to provide additional support to tenants, it was noted that rent increases were set nationally and for those receiving a housing component in Universal Credit, this was automatically uplifted to cover a rent rise. Measures to support vulnerable tenants such as rent discounts or rent free periods would not therefore benefit those most in need and could cost the Housing Revenue Account in the region of £500,000. Social rents were on the whole 50-60% of market rents.

In response to further questions about the rent increase, officers confirmed that Universal Credit would meet the full increase in rent where rent was covered in full. Those in most need would be receiving this assistance. The number of tenants on housing related benefit had increased from 400 to 1000 during Covid. A rebate scheme could cause difficulties for tenants and the preference would be to add extra tenant support or benefits – putting funds from the Housing Revenue Account balances into an additional hardship fund or similar. The proposals for an enhancement of the hardship fund was welcomed by the committee.

The housing team were therefore considering how to build on the existing targeted hardship fund to help those who needed it most, possibly through a voucher scheme or a range of alternative measures. These would be brought to a future committee meeting.

In response to a question about the steps that could be taken to partner with other organisations to build capacity among local trades to respond to the climate emergency, reference was made to the recruitment of an energy officer to the housing team who would play a key part in increasing the council's capacity to respond.

Members asked that in future years they expected to see more policy papers come to the Policy Committee before going to Cabinet. It was expressed that due diligence on papers going to Cabinet should be undertaken in this committee. In response it was suggested that moving the February meeting of the committee to March would allow more time to do this.

Concerns were raised about contacts with older people not in sheltered housing schemes. Officers advised that all residents in de-designated schemes continued to have out of hours support and access to life lines. Re-engagement with tenants as lockdown was lifted was a priority for the Housing Team.

The mental health specialist in the Tenancy Sustainment Service was working with colleagues across the housing service and with the Community Health Service team. Mental health had been a growing problem during lockdown; upskilling housing teams and commissioning more services would be part of any additional response. Members agreed this should be revisited at a future meeting.

TACT members supported the need for more capacity for mental health interventions and any measures directed towards people on low incomes and other vulnerable tenants.

Questions were asked about reductions to the outreach team. Officers confirmed that outreach was a vital part of the service to vulnerable people and they were reviewing how the service was delivered. Homeless people still had access to support.

It was also raised by a member that the housing development strategy might have benefitted from increased scrutiny prior to its consideration by Cabinet in March 2021 and it was asked how important housing issues such as this could

be better considered in the future. In addition, the question was raised on how to engage with TACT more effectively and how the outreach service could be delivered for homeless people.

The Chairperson also thanked members for raising the issue of building capacity within trade teams to support the council's zero carbon strategy within the public and private housing stocks.

RESOLVED:

That the presentations be noted and that a further report on the option of an additional hardship fund that was targeted at those tenants that were in most need be brought back to the next meeting of the policy committee for further consideration.

The virtual meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and concluded at 8.50 pm

Chairperson