

ECONOMY AND HOUSING POLICY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 28 November 2023

Attendance:

Councillors
Batho (Chairperson)

Chamberlain
Eve
Miller

Power
Prest

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor Isaacs

Deputy Members:

Councillor Horrill (as deputy for Councillor Isaacs)

Other members in attendance:

Councillors Thompson, Westwood and Lee

[Video recording of this meeting](#)

1. **APOLOGIES AND DEPUTY MEMBERS**

Apologies for the meeting were noted as above.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

No declarations were made.

3. **CHAIRPERSON'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

No announcements were made.

4. **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 19 SEPTEMBER 2023.**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 19 September 2023 be approved and adopted.

5. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Julian Perkins on behalf of Tenants and Council Together (TACT) and Councillor Lee addressed the committee, and their contributions were summarised within the following agenda items.

6. **HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT RENT SETTING AND BUSINESS PLAN**

Councillor Westwood, Cabinet Member for Housing; introduced the report, ref BHP 49 which set out proposals for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Rent Setting and Business Plan, ([available here](#)). The introduction included the following points.

1. That the plan aimed to provide affordable Council housing, maintain, and expand the housing stock, and prioritise tenant welfare.
2. That the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) faced an unprecedented financial challenge.
3. That the HRA functioned as a ring-fenced landlord account, ensuring financial sustainability through rents and service charges.
4. That the HRA's 24/25 draft plan addressed both the high inflation and increased building costs.
5. That two significant work programs aimed to improve existing housing and construct energy-efficient new homes. £45 million was being invested in retrofitting council homes for energy efficiency, with an additional annual £2 million for repairs, maintenance, and staffing.
6. That modernising services, enhancing digital access, and improving customer service were deemed necessary and that £2 million was provisionally allocated for housing management system review and maintenance contracts.
7. That the HRA business plan aimed for sustainability, including a £45 million investment and a commitment to constructing 1,000 homes.
8. That it was proposed to acquire more homes from developers and adopt 80% market rents for new eco-friendly homes.
9. That proposed rent increases were based on CPI plus 1% for 24/25.
10. That measures encompassed cost recovery for service charges, revised rent increases for shared owners, and asset disposals for capital investments.
11. That comments and views on the draft HRA business plan were invited before final approval in March 2024.

Simon Hendey, Strategic Director provided the committee with a presentation which included the following:

1. The report projected a 7.7% rent increase for the upcoming financial year and provided a summary of anticipated expenses and income.
2. The Housing Revenue Account estimated an expenditure of £37.927 million, and an income of £36.476 million, resulting in a forecasted deficit of £1.451 million.
3. The proposed deficit offsetting approach involved identifying £318,000 in savings, using £492,000 from interest on balances, and funding the remaining deficit from changing balances, aiming to bring forward £640,000 in the next year.
4. The broader 30-year business plan highlighted:
 - a) A £30 million investment to achieve EPC - C for all housing stock by 2030.
 - b) Enhancements in Energy Efficiency, maintaining the Decent Homes Standard, increased repair and maintenance expenditure, and the delivery of new homes.

- c) Policy options focused on potential strategies such as property acquisition, rent adjustment at 80% of market rates, and prioritising energy-efficient homes, aiming to save £400,000 over two years (£318,000 in 24/25 and £82,000 the following year).
5. The plan included a disposals program, involving small plots of land and unfeasible vacant properties.
6. A proposal aimed at full cost recovery for service charges was pending review after consultation.

Julian Perkins on behalf of TACT addressed the committee and highlighted the following points.

1. The report on page 17 highlighted the need to enhance customer digital access and service, based on consultation, recent tenant satisfaction survey results, and a provisional budget of £2 million.
2. He was concerned that many older tenants found the digital world intimidating with limited access, and he emphasised the vital role of face-to-face engagement for many.
3. He suggested that in devising these improvements, the council should recognise the necessity for additional front-facing staff to enhance communication and complaint handling.

Councillor Lee addressed the committee, and highlighted the following points:

1. That he noted a rise in the local housing allowance and asked about its implications.
2. He welcomed the proposal relating to the £45 million “Fabric First” program, however, he raised concerns regarding the commitment to addressing climate and nature challenges in building and retrofitting, considering the latest UN climate report and the upcoming COP climate talks.
3. He felt that there was a need to enhance housing building elements for climate and nature challenges and suggested a focus on a new metric centred on nature-based materials.
4. That excessive consumption of construction materials in the UK highlighted the urgency to shift towards sustainable materials and design approaches, aimed to reduce waste and environmental impact.
5. That the council's commitment to building new homes was welcomed, however, he encouraged the improvement of sustainable procurement processes and contracts to mitigate potential environmental impacts due to increased housing quantity.
6. That he proposed a three-point approach to enhance the housing business plan, focusing on fast and high-quality building retrofitting, considering pooled housing budgets and coordination with neighbouring authorities, and creating improved metrics for decision-making.

These points were responded to by Councillor Westwood, Cabinet Member for Housing, Gillian Knight, Corporate Head of Housing, and Simon Hendey, Strategic Director, accordingly.

The committee was asked to note and comment on the policy options for the 2024/25 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) rent setting and the HRA business plan.

The committee proceeded to ask questions and debate the report. In summary, the following matters were raised.

1. Regarding Wastewater Treatment Plants, the following points were raised:
 - a. the level of HRA subsidisation for private housing served by wastewater treatment plants.
 - b. The cost-sharing for different house types.
 - c. the risk of additional burden on smaller houses due to the current charging system, which treated a one-bedroom bungalow the same as a larger house.
 - d. the costs of removing nutrients from wastewater treatment plants and ensuring maintenance cost increases do not impact tenants and residents.
2. That concerns about the disposal strategy's impact on temporary accommodation and the need for planning flexibility were raised.
3. That vital support for tenants during the cost-of-living crisis, extending beyond affordable housing and energy efficiency, was highlighted.
4. That the possibility of purchasing ex-council houses at reduced rates for retrofitting or renting them out was raised.
5. That concerns about shared ownership rents and their impact on constructing affordable homes were expressed.
6. That further additional information regarding the workforce implications and potential restructuring within the Housing Team was requested.
7. That ensuring service accessibility through non-digital means for those who preferred or who needed these options was emphasised.
8. That further information regarding benchmarking the council's affordable housing provision against other comparable councils was sought.
9. That inquiries were made regarding the timeline and considerations in disposing of land plots and properties, focusing on both monetary and community values.

These points were responded to by Councillor Westwood, Cabinet Member for Housing, Gillian Knight, Corporate Head of Housing, and Simon Hendey, Strategic Director, accordingly.

RESOLVED:

The committee agreed to ask the Cabinet Member to consider the following:

1. The importance of ensuring accessibility to services for all whether utilising digital or non-digital methods.
2. That the committee's comments regarding wastewater treatment and cost recovery were considered as part of the formation of any future proposals.
3. That the Cabinet Member and officers note the other comments of the committee as outlined above.

7. **FESTIVALS AND EVENTS PROGRAMMING POLICY**

Councillor Thompson, Cabinet Member for Business and Culture and Andrew Gostelow; introduced the report, ref BHP47 which set out proposals for the Festivals and Events Programming Policy, ([available here](#)). The introduction included the following points.

1. That the district embraced a diverse range of festivals, hosted at various sites across the district. These festivals significantly contributed to the district's vibrancy, formed an integral part of our cultural identity, bolstered the visitor economy, and positively impacted the health and well-being of residents.
2. The paper discussed strengthening the council's offerings and reviewing approaches to better support organisations intending to stage events. This was a working document seeking input on improving the council's appeal to event organisers and ensuring comparability with our competitors. Feedback had been gathered from the Festivals in Winchester Group and other event organisers, and some immediate improvements were underway, including the establishment of a single point of contact to streamline applications, offer guidance, resolve date clashes, and enhance web-based guidance on the event application process.
3. There was also a re-evaluation of the terms and conditions for hiring Council land, particularly concerning the cleanup after large events. Going forward, greater emphasis would be placed on cost recovery while ensuring a fair and flexible approach, tailored case by case, to treat organisations equitably.
4. This marked the initial phase of creating a more accessible process for event organisation. When fully developed, it would significantly enhance our competitiveness with neighbouring local authorities, stimulate our visitor economy, and foster a stronger sense of pride in our community. Additionally, the ongoing cultural strategy, expected to be adopted in 2024, would incorporate further improvements in organising events and festivals, as highlighted in previous engagement and consultation exercises.

Councillor Lee addressed the committee and highlighted the following points.

1. He recognised the rich and diverse culture in the Winchester District, celebrated through numerous festivals and events throughout the year. This provided an opportunity for both local communities and visitors to participate, contributing positively to the local economy and well-being.
2. He appreciated the initiative to refresh the approach to developing and strengthening Winchester District's event offerings. The promotion of a curated event calendar aligned with sustainability priorities was welcomed. However, he urged greater emphasis on accelerating efforts towards environmental sustainability, especially considering the nature emergency.

3. He urged that events and festivals were made more environmentally friendly to enhance their appeal and suggested consideration of measures such as a ban on single-use plastics or providing discounts for attendees using low-carbon transport.

These points were responded to by Councillor Thompson, Cabinet Member for Business and Culture, Andrew Gostelow, Service Lead - Economy & Tourism, and Emalene Hickman, Culture and Creative Sector Development Officer accordingly.

The committee was asked to comment upon:

1. The refreshed approach to engagement between organisers and the council,
2. The approach to improve cost recovery with respect of changes to terms and conditions for the hire of council land, and
3. The potential and practicalities of adopting an overarching curated programme of festivals and events across the district.

The committee proceeded to ask questions and debate the report. In summary, the following matters were raised.

1. That having a single point of contact for council operations regarding events was welcomed, but concerns were raised about its practical implementation, especially for event organisers.
2. That a simpler process for recurring events like village fayres, distinguishing between established events and those needing more support be considered.
3. That involving ward councillors in the feedback process, particularly regarding the local impacts of festivals be considered.
4. That environmental risks and proximity to sensitive sites in event planning and to cautioning event organisers against potential damage to locations be considered.
5. That feedback from existing festival organisers regarding their reactions to the proposed form and process was sought.
6. That concerns about cost recovery, pricing differentiation for commercial, community, and charitable organisations, and proper accounting for subsidies given to community groups were made.
7. That the need for improved cost recovery, compensating for significant staff resources and responsibility for post-event cleanup and related costs was highlighted.
8. That organisers should be encouraged to collaborate with grant panels for financial support.
9. That the prolonged display of event posters and notices, highlighting inconvenience to the community was highlighted.
10. That a bond system, requiring evidence of cleanup quality and timely completion before bond return be considered.
11. The importance of consulting with Parish Councils and minimising any impact on residents or businesses was to be encouraged.
12. That the importance of diverse representation in decision-making for the inclusivity of events was highlighted.

13. That supporting Parish Councils with event organising guidance and policies to address past issues with event size and traffic management in villages due to inadequate planning was welcomed.

These points were responded to by Councillor Thompson, Cabinet Member for Business and Culture, Andrew Gostelow, Service Lead - Economy & Tourism, and Emalene Hickman, Culture and Creative Sector Development Officer accordingly.

RESOLVED:

The committee agreed to ask officers and the cabinet member to consider the following:

1. That there was some concern regarding the resource implications of the "one point of contact" proposal, particularly as events extended to parishes, requiring coordinated management.
2. That there should be an emphasis on seeking feedback not only during the preparation but also post-event, highlighting the importance of addressing resident concerns and incorporating their feedback into future planning.
3. That cost recovery methods should aim to comprehensively cover all associated costs, including infrastructure, public realm, and wider implications on other authorities.
4. That consultation with Parish Councils to understand the impact on residents and encourage events to fill gaps was encouraged.
5. That an assessment of the impact on Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Special Areas of Conservation in event applications be undertaken.
6. That the Cabinet Member and officers note the other comments of the committee as outlined above.

8. **TO NOTE THE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023/24**

RESOLVED

That the current work programme was noted.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and concluded at 8.40 pm

Chairperson