

DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET ADVISORY PANEL A

MINUTES of the meeting of the Cabinet Advisory Panel A held on Monday 22 July 2019 at 7.00 pm.

PRESENT: Councillor D E Hunnisett (Chairman)
Councillor I D Armitt JP (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor A E D Barham
Councillor D Butler
Councillor S P Butterfill
Councillor L A Canham
Councillor B Garden
Councillor R Gosine
Councillor S N Gosine
Councillor K J Grehan
Councillor T A Maddison
Councillor V Oguntope
Councillor Mrs J A Ozog
Councillor M I Peters
Councillor D J Reynolds
Councillor L J Reynolds

ABSENT: Councillor P Cutler
Councillor D T Nicklen

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The Chairman welcomed new Members to the first meeting of the Cabinet Advisory Panel A since the local elections in May 2019. He explained that the Panel was not a decision making body but had an important advisory role to the Cabinet and that these meetings offered the opportunity for Members to consider the items going forward to the Cabinet and to offer advice or make recommendations.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cutler and Nicklen.

2. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

3. ITEMS RESERVED FOR DEBATE

The Chairman advised that the following agenda item had been drawn down for debate:

15. Revenue Budget Monitoring 2019/20

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Accordingly, Members endorsed the Officer recommendations in respect of the following items:

- 9. Treasury Management Annual Report
- 10. Write-off of National Non-Domestic Rates
- 11. Write-off of Council Tax
- 12. Housing Benefit Overpayment Write-offs
- 13. Capital Programme including Prudential Indicators – Outturn 2018/19
- 14. Revenue Budget Monitoring – Outturn 2019/19
- 16. Capital Budget Monitoring 2019/20
- A. Write-off of National Non-Domestic Rates – Exempt Appendix A
- B. Write-off of Council Tax – Exempt Appendix A
- C. Write-off of Housing Benefit Overpayments – Exempt Appendix A

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST ON ITEMS IN PART A OF THE AGENDA OR ITEMS RESERVED FOR DEBATE

Councillor D J Reynolds declared a personal interest in two items in Part A of the agenda; item 7 Draft Housing Allocations' Policy – July 2019 and item 8 Draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-2023, as his partner works for the Council in the Housing Solutions Team.

There were no other declarations of interests in respect of items in Part A of the agenda or the item drawn down for debate.

5. REFERENCES FROM COMMITTEES

There were no references from other committees.

6. DRAFT HOUSING ALLOCATIONS' POLICY - JULY 2019

The Housing Solutions and Private Sector Manager presented a report which detailed the outcome of the latest review of the Housing Allocations' Policy which had been originally adopted by the Council on 18th March 2013 as the Council's framework for the allocation and management of the future allocation of properties. All housing authorities were required to have a Housing Allocations' Policy setting out how social housing properties would be allocated to eligible applicants in housing need. The policy had subsequently been reviewed in 2014 and 2018. In order to ensure a consistent approach a further review of the policy had been undertaken and amendments made, where appropriate, to reflect operational changes (including working

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practices) following the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, and the new policy met the requirements of current legislation. The report detailed the proposed changes to the Housing Allocations' Policy and the general layout had also been revised to ensure ease of understanding, clarity and transparency.

A Member said that sometimes people in Band A on the housing priority list had to wait a long time before a property became available to meet their specific needs. He wondered whether a way could be found to speed up this process, perhaps by increasing the budget. The Housing Solutions and Private Sector Manager explained that where an applicant had a medical or welfare need this went through a medical assessment process and a property then had to be identified to meet those medical needs. It could take some time to find a property that met those needs or could be adapted to do so. An Occupational Health Therapist was embedded in the Housing Solutions Team to make the medical assessment process as speedy as possible.

Another Member referred to the process by which the Council allocated properties, detailed in section 5 of the report. She said that this involved bidding for properties using the internet but asked whether there were other ways of bidding for those without access to the internet as this did not appear to be stated anywhere. The Housing Solutions and Private Sector Manager explained that the Council is a member of Kent Homechoice, a Kent-wide choice based lettings scheme, and that Kent Homechoice had focussed on internet applications as it had found that other methods of applying were not being used. However the Housing Solutions Team would accept requests by telephone and would also fill in forms for those unable to do so by themselves on request and the telephone number was widely available. The Member also sought and received clarification on the circumstances in which an applicant might be removed from the Band A listing.

A Member asked for clarification of one of the criteria in Annex 2 regarding the assessment of people who needed to move on medical or welfare grounds in Band A and the meaning of criteria e, 'severe and enduring mental health issues significantly affected by current accommodation'. In particular he asked whether this could be expanded to include aftercare registration under section 117 of the Mental Health Act for people being discharged from hospital. The Housing Solutions and Private Sector Manager explained that the application of this criteria was quite rare and would be applied on a case by case basis. Medical staff were involved in making assessments and a member of the hospital discharge team was also embedded in the Homelessness hub and these arrangements went much further than those of other authorities. The Chairman suggested that the Member might wish to discuss his suggestion with the Housing Solutions and Private Sector Manager outside of the meeting as the discussion was becoming quite technical.

A Member asked what information was available to explain the options and to provide help and advice to applicants as she had not been aware of these herself. She asked whether Members could be supplied with some kind of fact sheet which they could use when advising constituents. The Housing

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Solutions and Private Sector Manager explained that the information was mainly provided on the Council's web site and that there was a telephone number which was widely known to the various agencies involved with lettings but that she would be happy to explore other methods of communication if Members could suggest these. She also stressed the importance of fostering digital inclusion as a reason why much of the information was available electronically. There was a Kent Homechoice leaflet which provided more information and it was agreed that this should be sent to all Councillors to assist them in dealing with enquiries from constituents.

A Member noted the provisions in Annex 4 of the policy to reward 'Community Contribution' and that this gave priority to those in work. She asked how well this was working in practice. The Housing Solutions and Private Sector Manager explained that this had been introduced following the introduction of the Localism Act but that 'community contribution' was not limited to working households but also sought to recognise wider contributions from volunteers, carers, adopters and service personnel. A Member asked how the Council ensured that people who were unable to work were not overlooked. It was explained that people who were unable to work were more likely to be captured under the various medical criteria and to be given a Band A priority.

The Cabinet Advisory Panel endorsed the recommendations contained in the report and noted the issues raised by Members, which would be reported to Cabinet.

7. DRAFT HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY 2019-2023

The Housing Solutions and Private Sector Manager introduced a report which detailed changes to the existing Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023 and the proposed Draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-2023. The Housing Act 1996 and the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 placed a duty on local housing authorities to provide advice and assistance to homeless people and people threatened with homelessness in their areas. In order to ensure that a strategic approach was taken towards the Council's delivery of homelessness advice and assistance by the Housing Solutions Team, the Housing Service carries out a review of homelessness and produces a Homelessness Strategy every five years as required under the Homelessness Act 2002. However in 2018 the Government announced new measures for tackling rough sleeping nationwide and that local authorities must prepare and publish a strategy in their area by December 2019, with a view to eliminating rough sleeping by 2027 and reducing it by half within the next couple of years. The existing strategy had therefore been updated to comply with the new legislation and changes in operational measures to meet the statutory requirement to publish a strategy for tackling rough sleeping. Although rough sleeping in the Borough was comparatively low, there were estimated to be 12 people sleeping rough at the time of the last rough sleeper count in 2018, it was recognised that rough sleeping could have a distressing and detrimental impact on people and the Council's aim was to reduce the levels of rough sleeping in the borough as far as possible. The aim of the Strategy was to

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‘proactively prevent homelessness and rough sleeping through strong partnership working, and to provide an inclusive and accessible service to all’.

The proposed Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-2023 detailed the list of achievements from actions referred to in the previous Strategy and set out new actions to be delivered up to 2021.

A Member asked how ‘rough sleeping’ was defined and whether the strategy would also cover ‘sofa surfers’. It was explained that ‘rough sleeping’ referred to people sleeping outside. Dartford did not have a significant number of ‘rough sleepers’ although the 12 recorded at the last count had increased from 9 at the previous count a year earlier, but these numbers were lower than those experienced by neighbouring authorities. A Member wondered whether the Strategy should include a specific objective to eliminate rough sleeping in the Borough and also suggested that it could be helpful for the report to include case studies or examples of outcomes.

The Housing Solutions and Private Sector Manager said that it would be possible to include case studies and outcomes. In terms of eliminating rough sleeping completely in the Borough this was not realistic as 5 or 6 of the rough sleepers out of the 12 recorded at the last count had been foreign nationals for whom public funding was not available. The Council was committed to reducing the level of rough sleeping insofar as this was possible and took steps to ensure that those individuals identified at the last rough sleeper count that could be helped would not be sleeping rough by the time of the next count. She invited Members to come in to spend time with the Housing Solutions Team to get a better understanding of their work.

The Cabinet Advisory Panel endorsed the recommendations contained in the report.

8. ANNUAL TREASURY REPORT 2018/2019

The Cabinet Advisory Panel endorsed the recommendations contained in the report.

9. WRITE-OFF OF NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATES

The Cabinet Advisory Panel endorsed the recommendations contained in the report.

10. WRITE-OFF OF COUNCIL TAX

The Cabinet Advisory Panel endorsed the recommendations contained in the report.

11. HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENT WRITE-OFFS

The Cabinet Advisory Panel endorsed the recommendations contained in the report.

**12. CAPITAL PROGRAMME INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS -
OUTTURN 2018/19**

The Cabinet Advisory Panel endorsed the recommendations contained in the report.

13. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING - OUTTURN 2018/19

The Cabinet Advisory Panel endorsed the recommendations contained in the report.

14. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2019/20

The Cabinet Advisory Panel considered a report which updated Members on financial performance against the 2019/20 budget to date for the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account.

A Member asked for clarification on the vacancy savings of £136,000 reported for the first quarter of the financial year and wondered whether there was a causal link between this and the high level of staff absences.

The Financial Services Manager explained that the vacancy savings principally accrued for three reasons. The first was that, whilst some posts were filled on a part-time basis, it was the Council's practice to continue to budget for them on a full-time basis as if the current part-time postholder left it was possible that the post would be filled by someone working full-time. Also some employees opted out of the pension scheme but provision for their pension payments needed to be retained in the budget in case they changed their mind or left and were replaced. Some vacancies arose due to restructuring or where somebody had left, given that it often took longer than a person's notice period to recruit a replacement. Of the £136,000 reported the amount directly related to actual vacancies was £87,000 (£81,000 once advertising was discounted).

A Member asked how the Council sought to deal with workforce stress. The Strategic Director (External Services) explained that the Council took employee mental health very seriously and had recently delivered a number of wellbeing events including training on stress management.

A Member commented on the projected net overspend on the Dartford festival and suggested that rather than continuing to report a significant overspend each year it might be better to set a more realistic budget for this. The Financial Services Manager explained that budgets were looked at in detail every year, including over/underspends, and that in terms of special events

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the Council was looking at ways to generate additional income to offset expenditure.

The Cabinet Advisory Panel endorsed the recommendations contained in the report.

15. CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING 2019/20

The Cabinet Advisory Panel endorsed the recommendations contained in the report.

16. WRITE-OFF OF NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATES - EXEMPT APPENDIX A - EXEMPT CATEGORY SO46(1)(B)

Members noted the contents of this exempt appendix.

17. WRITE-OFF OF COUNCIL TAX - EXEMPT APPENDIX A - EXEMPT CATEGORY S)46(1)(B)

Members noted the contents of this exempt appendix.

18. WRITE-OFF OF HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENTS - EXEMPT APPENDIX A - EXEMPT CATEGORY SO46(1)(B)

Members noted the contents of this exempt appendix.

The meeting closed at 7.35 pm

Councillor D E Hunnisett
CHAIRMAN