

BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

3 FEBRUARY 2015

ATTENDANCE OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Report from: Robin Cooper, Director Recreation, Community and Culture

Richard Hicks, Deputy Director, Customer Contact, Leisure, Culture, Democracy and Governance

Stephen Gaimster, Assistant Director, Housing and Regeneration

Tricia Palmer, Assistant Director, Organisational Services

Author: Michael Turner, Democratic Services Officer

Summary

This report sets out activities and progress on work areas within the Housing and Community Services Portfolio, which fall within the remit of this Committee. This information is provided in relation to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services being held to account.

1. Background

1.1 The areas within the terms of reference of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services are:

- Adult learning
- Bereavement and Registration Services
- Disabled adaptations to housing
- Homeless and housing options
- Housing allocations for social housing
- Housing Strategy
- Private sector housing
- The development and management of the Council's housing stock

2. Achievements for 2014/2015

2.1 Adult learning

- 2.1.1 Medway Adult and Community Learning Services (MACLS) employs around 160 staff and provides courses in early years and childcare, ICT, business, beauty therapy, teaching and education, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), English and maths, Learners with difficulties and/or disabilities (LLDD) programmes, leisure, modern foreign languages, family learning and work skills.
- 2.1.2 A total of 3,866 learners were on programme in 2013/14 and from August 2014 to present, there are 2,245 learners' on programme. This is a decrease of 17% against learners on programme last year at the same time (2,706), mainly due to a 30% reduction in grant over the last two years, so we have 13% increase in efficiency- i.e. less cost per learner.
- 2.1.3 Retention on courses has increased from 92% (12/13) to 97% in 13/14 (academic years)
- 2.1.4 Achievement has increased from 94% (12/13) to 99% in 13/14 academic year.
- 2.1.5 2014/15 budget - £2.7 million
There has been a year-on-year reduction in one of the Skills Funding Agency funding streams which has resulted in a £500,000 gap in 2014/15. We have reduced costs but still have over £100,000 to find to close the gap.

Partnership Working

- 2.1.6 In November 14, we had our first Service wide celebration event which was attended by about 300 people. Our learners and their families, our partners and a range of stakeholders attended this event. We received great feedback from our learners on the event and we are starting to plan next year's event.
- 2.1.7 MACLS partnership with Mid-Kent College has developed well over 13/14. We are planning to deliver courses, from April 15, Saturdays and across the summer holidays, using the College facilities free of charge.

Business Development

- 2.1.8 Business development, community and partnership working has noticeably increased, both internally with teams at Medway Council and externally with community groups and charities. This includes an increased contribution to corporate training at Medway Council, covering a range of courses plus the re-instatement of the NVQ's and Apprenticeship programmes for Business and Administration in July 14, Leisure in November 14 and ILM, Leadership and Management qualification Level 3 and Level 5 commenced also in November 2014.

- 2.1.9 There are new initiatives with Public Health with fall prevention for the older person's workforce which ran in February 2014 as a pilot and a formal referral pathway programme with the Healthy Medway and Stop Smoking Service.
- 2.1.10 MACLS is continuing to support the Troubled Families programme, offering courses that support the hard to reach outcomes of the project – budgeting, alcohol dependency, nutritional issues, social exclusion, employability skills etc. thus offering a clear pathway out of poverty. The Family Learning department has contributed very effectively to Medway Council's healthy eating initiatives with excellent feedback and 71% of our learners are from Medway deprived wards
- 2.1.11 The Medway College of Social Care is now part of MACLS offer and is the main provider of social care training to the Private and Voluntary Care Sector. We have increased this provision by offering a range of core competencies required by the workforce and now work very closely with social care teams across the area, including the Medway Direct Payment Service for the PA workforce; Adult Social Care for care managers and social workers and JCP offering a NVQ level 1 in care and a direct route to employment. These courses are running at Mid-Kent College.
- 2.1.12 We have further developed our plans for increased business at MACLS including closer links with schools and libraries as well as working with local community groups such as the Active retired, Sunlight Trust, Men Sheds and Ethnic Minority Forum.

Looking Forward

2013-2016 Skills Funding Statement Overview

- 2.1.13 On 10 February 2014, Department of Business Innovation and Skills released The Skills Funding statement .The Statement sets out funding priorities for 2013-2016 to help accelerate skills development in the community. These priorities are:
- focus on giving people the transferable skills and job specific skills to enter and progress in work
 - support apprenticeships as the core offer for young people
 - focus on turning around the lives of local people by maximising the impact public funding has on the social and economic well-being of families and communities particularly those who are most disadvantaged
 - provide an extended Traineeship offer, making 24 year olds eligible, enabling us to help more young people get the skills they need to become work ready
 - ensure all those who have not yet reached English and Maths GCSE at A*-C are supported to do so

- extend flexibility to the sector so that FE can deploy resources more effectively.

2.1.14 It is clear from this that funding is moving away from Leisure and Community Learning to more targeted programmes, which needs to be reflected in the services priorities.

2.2 Bereavement and Registration Services

Medway Crematorium Improvement Programme

2.2.1 This project delivered additional car parking, extended and improved the two chapels and installed new cremators and mercury abatement equipment.

2.2.2 Following the cremator supplier entering into voluntary administration, there have been ongoing discussions with the principal contractors to ensue operational continuity.

2.2.3 All crematoria are part of the national auditing system for mercury abatement and we have partnered with CAMEO, the organisation that has been set up to administer these arrangements.

2.2.4 For 2014 (January – December) Medway Crematorium undertook 2699 cremations in total. This compares with 2343 for the same period in 2013. This level of activity makes the Crematorium one of the busiest in the country.

2.2.5 The Crematorium grounds have been returned to the high standards maintained before the project commenced and have received positive feedback from our customers.

Registration Service

2.2.6 Despite an ever increasing demand for birth registrations, the service continues to exceed performance standards set by the General Register Office.

2.2.7 Income from marriage ceremonies has been healthy with high volumes of activity. Our pricing strategy is to maintain competitive fees and charges which offer a range of options and costs.

2.2.8 Between January and December 2014 the Registration Service undertook 4,845 birth registrations, 1,910 death registrations, 850 weddings, Civil Partnerships and same sex marriages, along with 26 Citizenship ceremonies for 355 citizens.

2.3 Disabled adaptations to housing

During the financial year (2014/15) to date, the Council has assisted 130 households to undertake alterations and adaptations to allow them to remain living independently in their homes. The demand for this assistance, provided by Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), continues to grow. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has increased its contribution to £922,000 for DFG's in 2015/16. This should enable an additional 21 households to receive assistance.

2.4 Housing solutions and housing options

The number of households making homeless applications has increased by 77% compared to the same period last year (Q2 13/14 218, Q2 14/15 386). Despite this, the number of households in temporary accommodation (TA) has only increased by 14% over the same period (169 in Q2 13/14). This highlights the efforts of the Housing strategy team in securing alternative accommodation to TA. Whilst an increase in homeless applications had been anticipated, the level of increase has been significantly above that expected. This has meant that demand for temporary accommodation (TA) has increased, whilst applications are investigated or until suitable affordable housing is available.

2.5 Housing allocations for social housing

2.5.1 There are currently 5155 active applications on Medway's housing register in band A to D. 2240 applicants have either been removed or prevented from registering for rehousing as they have not resided in Medway for the last two years. The housing allocations policy continues to recognise those who are contributing towards their local community, with 153 households re-housed since April 2014 as they met the "Local Priority" criteria set out in the allocations policy.

2.5.2 Between April 2014 and January 2015, approximately 700 applicants have been successfully re-housed via the Homechoice scheme. The average waiting time for accommodation had improved across the scheme with applicants waiting, on average, 8.1 months for accommodation compared to 9.6 months over the same period for the previous year.

2.6 Housing strategy

2.6.1 The Housing Strategy 2011-14 was developed at a time of significant change, socially and economically. Despite these changes, the Council and its partners have been able to deliver on a range of service improvements and developments. The Housing Strategy 2015 builds on the progress made over the last three years and whilst the primary focus of the strategy is housing, the scope reaches far beyond. The Housing Strategy 2015 was approved by Cabinet on 16 December 2014. It has subsequently been called in by the Labour

Group and the strategy will be discussed at Business Support Overview and Scrutiny on 3 February 2015.

- 2.6.2 By working with the Homes & Communities Agency, Housing Associations and Developers additional affordable homes have been delivered to help meet local need. Since April 2011, 803 affordable homes were developed, creating jobs and bringing investment into Medway. Under the current 2015-18 Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) funding programme, £1,863,000 was allocated to schemes in Medway, delivering 235 homes. Further schemes are expected to be accepted into the programme via continuous market engagement and the Council anticipates that a further 70 homes will be delivered via the Affordable Homes Guarantees Programme.
- 2.6.3 In 2013/14 166 affordable homes were delivered in Medway. In common with the national and regional trend the level of completions for the year is lower than in previous years. This is largely due to the ending of the previous National Affordable Housing Programme and the delayed introduction of the new national programme. A number of schemes originally planned for completion in the last year were either completed early and fell into the counting period for the 4th quarter 12/13 or have slipped into the 14/15 council year.

2.7 Private sector housing

- 2.7.1 In January 2014 Medway Council was awarded £64,000 by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) following a successful bid to its rogue landlord initiative. This has enabled the setting up a rogue landlord team. The team is targeting four landlord/letting agents who have been identified as consistently letting properties that are substandard, which present a danger to occupiers' health and safety, and who have a track record for non-compliance with requests to undertake works. To date 175 properties have been inspected, 80 enforcement notices served and four successful prosecutions have been carried out. A further 8 cases will commence court action in March 2015 and there are a further 14 cases pending.
- 2.7.2 The four successful prosecutions have seen two landlords fined over £32,000. The action by the rogue landlord team has been well received by other landlords and publicised by the National Landlords Association.
- 2.7.3 The number of customer requests for assistance in the private sector housing service has continued to grow. There has been a 20% increase compared with the previous year.

2.8 The development and management of the Council's housing stock

Development

- 2.8.1 The Council's house building programme progressed well in the past year.
- 2.8.2 Provision of new homes on former HRA garage sites. Detailed planning permissions have been granted on 10 former garage sites, to provide 23 homes, ranging from 1-bedroom bungalows to a 5-bedroom family house. The construction contract was awarded in June 2014 and the contractor, Chartway Construction, has taken possession of 9 sites with the final site expected to be handed over to the contract early in 2015 once the rights of way issue has legally completed. The first 13 homes will be available for occupation during February and March 2015 with the final homes handed over towards the end of the year. There will be an opportunity for councillors to view the first homes completed prior to occupation, which will take place towards the end of February.
- 2.8.3 The next stage of the Council's house building programme is to develop the former Gillingham College site (Beatty Avenue) to provide 32 affordable bungalows to rent. A planning application for the scheme has been submitted and a decision is expected early in 2015. The Council are in the later stages of the procurement process for construction of the bungalows following the receipt of the Invitation To Tender (ITT) being received in December 2015. The tenders received have been evaluated and the Gateway report will be submitted to Procurement Board in March 2015, with a view of entering into a contract for the scheme in April 2015.

Asset Management

- 2.8.4 Work is currently underway to write a new HRA Asset Management Strategy. The new strategy will include up to date details on the HRA Garage Strategy, risk register, Medway Standard and energy improvements.
- 2.8.5 As at 31 December 2014 South Thames Gateway Building Control (STGBC) carried out a total of 684 stock condition surveys, which equates to 23% of the stock. The surveys are vital for us to plan our future maintenance projects.
- 2.8.6 With up to date information gained from these surveys officers have been able to improve planning for future years. Projected budget costs for the next 3 years of planned and capital maintenance and for the next 5 years for cyclical decoration programmes, have been produced.
- 2.8.7 A complete audit of electrical test data has been completed and a targeted electrical rewiring programme is now being prepared

commencing April 2015, with a continuing rolling programme in place for future years.

- 2.8.8 Over the past year HRA garage sites, which were deemed as unviable for development for new council housing, were surveyed and for a programme of works proposed, including demolition or repair. Works at the 3 sites at Davenport Avenue have already been completed with 2 sites completely demolished to make parking areas and the third demolished and re-built and ready for rental. During 2015 further projects are programmed at St Albans Close and Cornish Manors.
- 2.8.9 During 2013/2014, Medway Council secured installations of energy efficiency measures in a total of 292 council owned properties. Since the funding changes were announced in April 2014 Medway has worked with other authorities and housing providers in Kent as part of the Kent and Medway Sustainable Energy Partnership (KMSEP). Building on the success of the pilot energy schemes carried out in 2013/14, formal frameworks have now been put into place. Medway will now be able to use these to access funding streams and approved contractors to carry out energy surveys and works such as cavity wall and loft insulation.
- 2.8.10 The communal boiler at Marlborough House has been replaced. The new boiler will be more reliable and efficient for the residents there.
- 2.8.11 Plans are in place for all officers who visit HRA properties to receive Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) training. This will enable all members of staff, to identify hazards and potential hazards and address these whilst out on site.
- 2.8.12 Medway is on target to meet the Decent Homes Standard on all HRA properties at 31/03/2015.
- 2.8.13 The 2014/15 programme estimates a spend of £4,573,584. This investment underpins the Council's commitment to ensure all HRA homes continue to meet and surpass the Decent Homes standard. Between 1 April and 31 December 2014 the service installed/refurbished/completed:
- 105 Domestic Boilers
 - 79 Bathrooms
 - 87 Kitchens
 - 24 Doors
 - 136 Periodic electrical tests and remedial works
 - 191 Asbestos surveys and asbestos removals
- 2.8.14 The programme up to end March 2015 includes completion of an additional:
- 45 Domestic Boilers
 - 71 Bathrooms
 - 63 Kitchens

- 126 Doors
- 2.8.15 Roof replacement programmes are also underway at the Cornish Manors in Gillingham.
- 2.8.16 The Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) works programme is ongoing, with investment in the current programme of work at around £1 million to improve the fire protection and safety of HRA homes. This includes the fitting of fire rated front doors in communal areas, fire proofing bin chute doors and internal ducts. A further £1million of investment is also proposed for next year.

Housing Landlord Services

Performance

- 2.8.17 The performance of the service overall continues to improve, as at April to September 2014 year to date performance identifies that the HRA was on target for all of its key performance indicators: -
- Day time emergency repairs (Mears) - 100% (target 99%)
 - Urgent repairs (Mears) – 99.5% (target 99%)
 - Routine repairs (all contractors) – 99.1 % (target 98%)
 - Gas Servicing Compliancy – 100% Benchmarking data is available for this indicator; Medway’s performance is in top Quartile when compared to our peer group.
 - Customer satisfaction with the overall repairs service – 99.04% (target 97%).
 - Average time to re-let all council dwellings (Calendar days) – 13 Days (target 19) Medway’s performance is in top Quartile when compared to our peer group
 - % of rent lost through dwellings being vacant GN & HFIL – 0.43%
 - Current tenant arrears as a percentage of the annual rent roll – 1.83% (target 1.86%)

Repairs and Maintenance – Key Achievements

- 2.8.18 The HRA repairs and maintenance contract was retendered in 2014. The contract was awarded to Mears Group PLC and the new contract commenced on the 1 September 2014.
- 2.8.19 Working in partnership with residents to improve the service, the new contract was enhanced and improved to offer a better service to residents. Residents will now benefit from a property MOT, a handyman scheme and a local resource centre that will be available from February 2015.
- 2.8.20 The new repairs and maintenance contract will continue to deliver traditional work streams that cover responsive and routine repairs, gas servicing and breakdowns, void property management and capital works including kitchen/bathroom/boiler/front and back door replacement. The new contract also now includes the management of

cyclical re-decoration that will see every home externally decorated within the next 5 years and also the completion of disabled adaptations to the HRA stock.

- 2.8.21 The new repairs and maintenance contract sees the introduction of a simpler pricing and payment mechanism with an annual price per property for responsive and routine repairs and also a price per void. The contract will be overseen using an open book accountancy approach and the aims and objectives of the contract are shared with the service provider Mears.
- 2.8.22 Mears Group are incentivised to deliver savings to the contract. Any savings to Mears hinge on the delivery of continued excellent performance and a comprehensive suite of KPIs that monitor Mears performance.
- 2.8.23 The new model of delivery has also led to streamlining of processes by the Council. The new model has allowed a reduction in staffing resources to be achieved whilst increasing the amount of quality inspections and surveys by the team. This has been achieved by Mears leading on pre inspection of routine maintenance and a simpler administration process for invoicing.
- 2.8.24 The focus of the new contract is to improve the quality of the repairs service received. The focus has switched from pre inspection to post inspection of works. As a result 35-40% of all repairs completed are subject to post inspection. Since the commencement of the contract in September 2014 more than 1150 post inspections have been undertaken. During this process all customers were asked to score the service they had received and over 98% of customers were satisfied with the service.

Tenancy Services

- 2.8.25 We have now completed 402 tenancy audits. Whilst officers have not identified any further subletting, this work has enabled more effective working with tenants. It has also provided invaluable insight and information regarding the condition of our properties, which has enabled us to address any concerns directly with tenants.
- 2.8.26 In April 2014 the 'Flexible Tenancies' initiative was launched for new tenants that meet a certain criteria. The objective is to ensure that council houses remains for those in most housing need.
- 2.8.27 A complete review of the Estate Inspection regime has been undertaken. This will enable Housing Officers to manage estate standards through a traffic light rating system, to make it easier to categorise the condition of our estates. This will ensure that resources are focused on the most challenging and needing estates.

Welfare Reform/Income Management

- 2.8.28 Benchmarking data based on quarter 2 data identifies that Medway is in the Median to Top quartile when compared to our peer group (stock size 2500-5000) for Current tenant arrears as a percentage of the annual rent roll.
- 2.8.29 Overall current tenant rent arrears have reduced since the beginning of April 2014 from £254,525 to £224,412 as at 4 January 2015.]

Income Maximisation

- 2.8.30 The Welfare Reform Team continue to work with HRA tenants to maximise their income from multiple benefits. Between 1 April and 31 December 2014, the Welfare Reform Team have assisted tenants in claiming £52,595.90 in backdated Housing Benefit and £10,146.72 in Discretionary Housing Payments.
- 2.8.31 In addition to maximising income through claiming benefits, the Welfare Reform Team is also supporting tenants in setting up and managing their budgets to promote financial well-being.

Leasehold Service Charges

- 2.8.32 Up to end of December 2014 a total of £125,423.71 was collected in leasehold service charges since the beginning of the financial year. In the same period last year £97,386.41 was collected. The increased collection figure is in part due to the improvements made for billing for leasehold service charges to recover the costs of major works.

Neighbourhood Services

• Estate Services

- 2.8.33 Estate Services are a high profile frontline housing service, keeping the estates a safe and clean place for residents to live.
- 2.8.34 Following Member feedback and procurement board approval the service was prepared for tender in the Summer 2014. Tenants were involved in the production of the specification. This is currently being tendered with returns expected 13 February.

• Homes For Independent Living (HFIL)

- 2.8.35 Officers have been piloting a structure where one scheme manager has been managing two schemes. Out of the HRA's eight HFIL schemes, six of the smaller schemes have been twinned and managed by three staff. The two largest schemes, Twydall and Rainham, each have a dedicated scheme manager. This pilot proved successful in achieving improved value for money and maintaining and improving customer satisfaction.

As a result, a formal consultation process has been undertaken with the formalisation of the pilot structure being made permanent with effect from 1 January 2015.

- **Voids**

- 2.8.36 In 2014 the target for top quartile on void performance is 19 days. Housing services has remained in the top quartile for void turnaround time when compared to our peer group (stock size 2500-5000) all year. The current year to date average times to re let properties stands at 13 calendar days.
- 2.8.37 Benchmarking data also identifies that Medway is in the Top quartile when compared to our peer group (stock size 2500-5000) for the % of rent lost through dwellings being vacant.

Accreditations

- **ISO**

- 2.8.38 Following an audit in July 2014, the HRA service was successful in gaining ISO 9001:2008 certification.
- 2.8.39 ISO 9001 provides a set of requirements to operate a quality management system and represents international best practice for managing quality, designed around eight principles:
- Customer Focus
 - Leadership
 - Involvement of People
 - Process Approach
 - System Approach to Management
 - Continual Improvement
 - Factual Approach to Decision Making
 - Mutually Beneficial Supplier Relationships
- 2.8.40 The HRA's ongoing compliance will be audited by an external accredited organisation, which will also monitor our internal audits and continuous development.

- **Customer Excellence**

- 2.8.41 In June 2014, following assessment the Housing Service gained the Customer Services Excellence award.
- 2.8.42 There are five criteria of the standard including: Customer Insight; the Culture of the Organisation; Information and Access; Delivery; Timeliness and Quality of Service.

2.8.43 There were no areas of non or partial compliance with the standard and several areas of 'good practice' were noted in the assessors report.

- **Resident Engagement**

2.8.44 Throughout 2014/15 resident engagement officers facilitated a total of 22 forums across the housing service with 231 attendances with the purpose of which to consult on changes to the service, scrutinize performance and provide an opportunity to discuss individual issues.

2.8.45 Throughout the summer of 2014, officers undertook four 'community fun days' in local communities where the councils housing stock is concentrated. These were undertaken in partnership with our repairs and maintenance contractor Mears. Several other partners took part including the Community Safety Partnership, Waste Services, the Health Check team and Medway Sport.

2.8.46 In June 2014 officers undertook a Tenant and Leaseholder Conference that was attended by 49 of our customers. The main events of the day included a presentation from the Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture of regeneration in Medway, in addition to a presentation of the launch of the new repairs and maintenance contract from Mears. Officers also took part in a workshop with residents on changes they would like with this part of the service. Residents were also able to find out more information on the new council homes due to be built.

2.8.47 Officers recognize the need to engage with a wider range of customers and to ensure that the service is more outcome focused, provides value for money and meets the council's regulatory responsibilities. Officers therefore coordinated an independent review of the resident involvement service. The draft report includes recommendations to improve and officers will develop actions to respond to these recommendations Officers will also involve customers in a workshop to design the new structure resident engagement.

2.8.48 In September 2014 officers launched a Facebook page in order to engage with a broader range of customers and publicise the services that the housing service provides in addition to our partners in Youth Services and Public Health. 101 users have 'liked' the page who will then receive notifications of new 'posts' from the page. The number of users that view each post is likely to be significantly higher.

Partnerships

- **EU**

2.8.49 In conjunction with other staff in Regeneration, Community and Culture, following a bid through a European energy efficiency project, to date a return of approximately £13,000 is anticipated by the end of

the financial year 2014/15 from this investment via installing new boilers. This figure is likely to increase in the future.

- **Wifi in HfIL Schemes**

2.8.50 It is proposed to install wifi access in the communal living rooms in all eight of our Homes for Independent Living Schemes. There are no ongoing costs involved for the HRA or residents of the schemes. Internet use training is being developed in partnership with the Royal Voluntary Service and it is intended that schemes be used as a 'hub' for access to the internet for local council tenants, as part of our Digital Inclusion projects and preparation for Universal Credit.

- **MidKent College**

2.8.51 Following a successful trial, since October 2014 Officers have been working in partnership with Mid-Kent College to decorate some void HRA properties. This partnership has several benefits including a reduction in costs of 'decoration vouchers' administered to tenants that move in, improves customer satisfaction of the quality of the property and provides work experience to local students without any impact on the time it takes to relet the property.

Lead officer contact:

Richard Hicks, Deputy Director, Customer Contact, Leisure, Culture, Democracy and Governance
richard.hicks@medway.gov.uk
Tel 01634 332764

Stephen Gaimster, Assistant Director Housing and Regeneration
stephen.gaimster@medway.gov.uk
Tel 01634 331192

Tricia Palmer, Assistant Director, Organisational Services
tricia.palmer@medway.gov.uk
Tel 01634 332343

Background documents

None