

## **BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**2 FEBRUARY 2016**

### **ATTENDANCE OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES**

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#### **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 Deputy Leader and 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 Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services are:

- Adult Learning
- Disabled adaptations to housing
- Homelessness and housing options
- Housing management and allocations
- Housing strategy
- Private sector housing
- Housing Landlord Services
- Development of the Council's housing stock

## 2. **Adult Education**

### Achievements for 2015/16

- 2.1 Medway Adult and Community Learning Service (MACLS) employs around 150 staff and provides courses in early years and childcare, ICT, business, beauty therapy, teaching and education, English as a second language (ESOL), English and maths, Learning Disability (LLDD) programmes, leisure, modern foreign languages, family learning and work skills. MACLS is also delivering a pilot project under Community Learning aimed at learners with low to moderate mental health issues.
- 2.2 A total of 3,393 learners were on programme in 2014/15 and from August 2015 to present, there are 2,188 learners on programme. This is a decrease of 3.4% against learners on programme last year at the same time (2263). The reduction is due to fewer learners in Community Learning and this will be addressed by targeting disadvantaged groups.
- 2.3 Retention on courses was 96% as at 17 December 2015 compared with a final retention rate of 93% at the end of 2014/15.
- 2.4 Achievement was 95% as at 17 December 2015, compared to 95% at the end of 2014/15.
- 2.5 The 2015/16 budget is £2.7 million. There has been a year-on-year reduction in one of the Skills Funding allocations. Costs have been reduced by approximately £400,000 in the two years to 31/3/16, but there is still a projected gap of approximately £341,000 to 31 March 2016. Further discussions with Members are ongoing on how to reduce this amount to ensure continued viability. The service continues to work hard on income generation initiatives, including partnerships with Mid Kent College and MHS Homes.
- 2.6 Despite the continuing reduction of funding, the service has been turned round from an inadequate OFSTED rating in 2013 to Good in 2015. This is an excellent improvement and demonstrates the continuing commitment of staff to provide high quality learning opportunities for our community.

### **Business development and partnership working**

- 2.7 **Projects** - 5 Expressions of Interest have been submitted for new funding opportunities (Higher Education funding, Skills Funding Agency & Department for Work and Pensions) MACLS is represented at the Regeneration, Community and Culture (RCC) External Investment group to promote closer working with RCC teams at Gun Wharf. MACLS aims to be included in projects where there is a skills element, potential work with Regeneration and Economic Development, sports and leisure and housing teams through projects being bid for.

- 2.8 **Community hubs** – MACLS will continue to be represented in all 3 hubs and there are plans to further improve the promotion of courses. A MACLS officer will be attending the hubs regularly for enquiries and booking appointments.
- 2.9 **Job Centre Plus (JCP)** – Business Development Officer will be attending the JCP centre once a week commencing from 14 January 2016. JCP are reporting 600 new claims each month on average. A new Skills for Work Learning Disability programme has been developed for low level learners referred from JCP.
- 2.10 **Citizen Trust** – Citizens Trust will be closing, but contact is being maintained to pick up the work should this move to another organisation.
- 2.11 **Rethink** –Working with the employability team to develop referral links.
- 2.12 **SilverBlades (Gillingham Ice Rink)** - developing referral partnership for NEETs & 19+ learners
- 2.13 **PeoplePlus (Avanta)** - are providing a continuous stream of quality referrals. The delivery to date has been very well received with good feedback and ongoing programmes will be developed with this partner throughout the academic year.
- 2.14 **Social Isolation Summit** – MACLS was represented at the summit. MACLS is included in the Staying Connected booklet which provides information and contact details for organisations that can help.
- 2.15 **Mid Kent College** – MACLS attends open days to promote their offer at the Gillingham Campus and is developing relationships with the Maidstone 19+ campus. Construction of this site does not complete until March 2016.
- 2.16 **Norse** – compliance training planned, dates to be confirmed. All costs are covered by Norse.

### **Looking Forward**

- 2.17 In 2015 the Chancellor agreed devolved services including 19+ skills (not including apprenticeships). Area reviews will take place and begin to prepare for commissioning from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) in 2016/17 aiming for full devolution of funding from 2018/19.
- 2.18 The spending review has provided a better than expected budget for further education which recognises the importance of skills to future productivity and economic growth and provides opportunity to grow skills provision to meet the skills needed. The national budget overall has been increased by 36.5% compared to 2015-16 and there is a possible growth of 30% over the life of this Parliament. The fund will be combined into one single Adult Education Budget (AEB). The budget will support disadvantaged and or low skilled people, second chance to learn, Functional Skills, GCSE and maths for all adults and first full level 2 and level 3 for those aged 19-23. Apprenticeship spend in cash

terms will double by 2019-20 including income from the new employer apprenticeship levy. Advanced learner loans will be extended from 2016-17 to support 19-23 year olds who have used up their L3/L4 entitlement and 19+ year olds at higher levels (L5-L6).

- 2.19 The AEB includes community learning and ASB funding in one block single grant and recognises the importance of community learning activity including non-regulated learning. Community learning (CL) is seen as an important component of the adult skills agenda and that CL providers contribute significantly to the localism agenda and local area strategic priorities. MACLS is well positioned to meet this agenda going forwards. However with the advent of commissioning and uncertainty on how this will work we do not yet have certainty of funding.

### **3. Disabled adaptations to housing**

Achievements for 2015/2016

- 3.1 For the 2015/16 financial year up until 31 December the Council has provided assistance to 92 households to allow them to undertake alterations and adaptations to allow them to remain living independently in their homes.

### **4. Homelessness and housing options**

Achievements for 2015/2016

- 4.1 This service is now primarily located at Kingsley House in Gillingham. The Council continues to work with a range of organisations and services to help prevent households from becoming homeless. In most cases where households approach the Council for assistance the service is able to assist them to either maintain their existing accommodation or identify an alternative. This is achieved through a range of initiatives including those commissioned by the service through Housing Related Support, which provides one to one assistance to vulnerable households or through the provision of specialist supported housing.
- 4.2 It is not always possible to prevent households from becoming homeless. Despite more households seeking assistance the service has been more successful in preventing households from becoming homeless. This is demonstrated by a reduction in the number of households who were either actually homeless or at risk of homelessness within 28 days. For the 2015/16 financial year to the end of December this was 873 compared to 1076 for the same period last year and represents a reduction of 18%. Due to these successful prevention initiatives, of those who did make an application, the number for whom the Council accepted a full homeless duty fell by 16% compared to a rise of 3% across Kent and 3% across the southeast.

- 4.3 The number of households accommodated in temporary accommodation has reduced over the financial year by 2% from 260 to 255 at the end of December 2015. This compares to a 9% increase across the southeast and a 3% increase across Kent.

## **5. Housing management and allocations**

Achievements for 2015/2016

- 5.1 The Council's Allocations policy sets out the framework for the approach that will be taken for the allocation of social housing held by the 26 Housing Associations operating in Medway. The service also manages the allocation of specialist supported accommodation commissioned by the council including hostels, extra care and sheltered housing schemes.
- 5.2 From April 2015 to the end of December 2015, 785 households have secured accommodation through the scheme compared to 684 for the same period last year. Each application to join the register is assessed against the criteria set out within the allocations policy. Of the 20,985 on the register, 5,806 have an identified housing need considered high enough to be placed in the active bands of A to D. Of these 2,632 have a low housing need but are eligible for sheltered or extra care housing only.

## **6. Housing strategy**

Achievements for 2015/2016

- 6.1 The housing strategy team works with Housing Associations, Developers and the Homes and Communities Agency to identify opportunities to develop additional affordable housing. The service also works with other partners including Children's and Adults Social Care, Housing Associations and Charities and other organisations to identify opportunities for joint working to help meet housing needs across Medway.
- 6.2 The current affordable housing programme of more than £40million will deliver a range of family homes, 1 bed roomed flats and specialist extra care housing. A range of Housing Related Support services are commissioned to help meet client groups with specific housing related needs. This includes floating support, specialist domestic abuse advice and accommodation, hostels, schemes for offenders, young people and other vulnerable client groups.
- 6.3 Working with our specialist provider for households fleeing domestic abuse we have successfully bid for additional funding to further develop these services. We have also developed a collaborative working arrangement with Public Health Service. To help maximise opportunities for joint working, which have included housing needs survey for older people and health assessments for homeless households.

- 6.4 The team has also led on the securing of ISO 9001:2008 across the housing service with areas identified as good practice in the recent review including the way in which adaptations are provided.

## **7. Private sector housing**

Achievements for 2015/2016

- 7.1 The majority of housing in Medway is privately rented or owned and the private rented sector continues to expand locally, with one in five households now renting privately. In partnership with national and local landlords associations the council's housing service provides training and advice to landlords on effective property management through the Landlords Forum. The Council also operates one of the largest and well respected accreditation schemes for landlords in the southeast and continue to expand our tenants Accreditation Scheme. This scheme targets vulnerable clients with a poor track record of renting and provides them with targeted advice and training along with a period of supervision and on-going advice when in a tenancy. The scheme has been well received by landlords, tenants and support agencies.
- 7.2 The Council's housing service has received more than 1,500 requests for assistance for the year to date in respect of housing conditions in private sector housing, which is an increase, compared to the same point last year of just over 10%. In all cases appropriate advice is provided and in some cases it is necessary for the Council to intervene to secure improvements. For the financial year to date, following inspections some 660 homes have been improved through either informal, formal or enforcement action. The council's housing service has also continued with the programme of prosecuting those landlords and agents who continue to fail to comply with legal enforcement notices.

## **8. Housing Landlord Services**

Achievements for 2015/2016

### **8.1 Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR)**

- 8.1.1 Housing Services conducted its bi annual *Survey of Tenants and Residents* (STAR) in June 2015 to gauge resident's views of the services it provides. In total 702 (588 general needs, 114 homes for independent living) surveys were returned. When compared to the previous 2013 survey there was a continued positive direction of travel in terms of satisfaction for the service.

- 8.1.2 Highlights from the 2015 results are as follows:

- Overall satisfaction with Housing Services increased from 85% (793/936) in 2013 to 90% (591/658) in 2015.
- Satisfaction that rent provides value for money increased from 88% (780/890) in 2013 to 91% (603/665) in 2015.

- Overall satisfaction with the Repairs and Maintenance service has increased from 82% (753/917) in 2013 to 87% (592/682) in 2015
- The percentage of people very satisfied with the repairs service also increased from 41% (381/917) in 2013 to 46% (315/682) in 2015.
- Satisfaction with the grounds maintenance service has increased from 82% (714/871) in 2013 to 83% (523/633) in 2015.
- During 2013 to 2015, 29% (189/659) of residents feel that their area has improved and 54% (357/659) feel that it has stayed the same. At 31% (79/255) Gillingham has the most residents that feel their area has improved over the two year period.
- Satisfaction with aspects of the Homes for Independent Living scheme is high across all areas of the service. The overall satisfaction with the service provided by the scheme support officers has increased from 90% (106/118) in 2013 to 93% (99/107) in 2015.

8.1.3 In comparison to other providers, Housing Services ranked in the upper quartile in terms of:

- Satisfaction with repairs and maintenance
- Satisfaction with value for money for rent

8.1.4 In comparison to other providers, Housing Services ranked in the median to upper quartile in terms of:

- Overall satisfaction with Housing Service
- Overall quality of housing
- Satisfaction with the neighbourhood as a place to live
- Satisfaction with service charges

*Benchmarking Data Source - HouseMark STAR (Survey of tenants and residents) benchmarking group GENERAL NEEDS & HOUSING FOR OLDER PEOPLE 2014/15.*

## **8.2 Repairs and Maintenance performance**

8.2.1 Medway Council and Mears successfully implemented the first year of the new repairs contract. The 1st year of the new contract ran from September 2014 to August 2015 and the following 2014/15 year end figures reflect this contract period.

8.2.2 Performance Highlights are as follows:

- Direct user satisfaction with the repairs service reflects the high levels of satisfaction from the STAR survey with 98.9% satisfied with the overall service against a local target of 97% and 98.0% satisfied with the works completed against a local target of 97%.
- 100% gas compliancy figure.

8.2.3 The repairs service continued its excellent performance in terms of completion rates as follows:

Out of the 8,145 responsive repairs completed in 2014/15

- 100% of emergency repairs were completed on time, against a local target of 99%.
- 99.7% of urgent repairs were completed on time, against a local target of 99%.
- 98.4% of routine repairs were completed on time, against a local target of 98%.
- 97.3% of repair appointments were kept, against a local target of 95%.
- 94.8% of repairs were completed right first time, against a local target of 90%.

8.2.4 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Asset Management Strategy 2015-2020 has been developed and approved at Asset Management Group on 28 January 2015]. The Council has invested £5m into Council housing stock, leading to improved homes for our residents. In 2015/16 these improvements include

- 107 Kitchens
- 119 Bathrooms
- 127 Boilers
- 135 Doors
- 305 Electrical tests
- 262 Asbestos surveys
- 110 Smoke detectors
- 538 Co2 detectors
- 97 Re wires
- Pitched roof replacements in Forge Lane (Including soffits, fascia and gutters)
- Window replacements at Burnham Walk

8.2.5 HRA Housing is currently in year 2 of a 4 year programme of improvements to fire safety resulting from the completion of Fire Risk Assessments. The subsequent strategy and action plan to improve the standard of fire safety within the HRA stock was formalised by the Asset Management Group in 2015. A 3 year programme of works was tendered in the autumn/winter of 2015 with the contract being awarded and works commencing in January 2016. It is estimated that between 2015 -2018 over £3million will be spent improving fire safety to more than 1200 homes.



- 8.2.6 As well as providing a high performing repairs service, Mears have also completed 600 property MOT's that will ensure that properties are in good condition in accordance with Medway Council standards and this process should reduce ongoing day to day repairs costs.
- 8.2.7 Mears have also developed a handyman service which will assist customers in carrying out small jobs around their home not covered by the repairs service, such as putting up shelves and renewing or fixing internal doors or gates
- 8.2.8 The Mears office has moved to a more central Office base in Gillingham. The Office houses a Tenant Resource Centre where Tenant training courses are being rolled out to support them in money management, ICT skills and CV writing amongst other things.
- 8.2.9 The price per property arrangement in the new Mears contract has brought about estimated savings of £400,000 in the first year of the contract, in comparison with what might otherwise have been realised if the traditional schedule of rates arrangement had been in place.
- 8.2.10 Further streamlining of administration processes of the contract have led to staff savings of circa £100,000 by the improved efficiencies.

## **9 Re letting void properties**

- 9.1 Medway Council are top quartile compared to other providers for the average time to re let council dwellings. During April to December 2015 it took on average 11 calendar days to let normal voids.

## **10 Income management**

- 10.1 Positive work by the Housing Officers and Welfare reform team have meant that rent arrears have reduced from £236,802 in April 5 2015 to £218,662 on January 10 2016.
- 10.2 Garage arrears have also reduced from £524 in April 5 2015 to £263 on January 10 2016.
- 10.3 Former tenant rent arrears have reduced from £447,423 in December 2014 to £391,135 in December 2015.
- 10.4 Current tenant sub account arrears have reduced £259,896 in December 2014 to £179,505 in December 2015.
- 10.5 The HRA Welfare Reform Officer Board has been set up to help prepare the service and tenants for the challenges of the Welfare Reform. It also supports the work done by the Corporate Welfare Reform board.

- 10.6 To prepare for Welfare Reform the HRA service has installed free Wi-Fi at all of its Homes for Independent Living schemes. The service is also trialling a pilot initiative of providing free Wi-Fi access to tenants at one of its main Estates to encourage them to use the intranet for job searches and accessing benefit information.
- 10.7 Housing Services has also effectively managed its first Universal Credit cases, including its first direct payment.

## **11 Estate Improvements**

- 11.1 A new officer led Estate Improvement Board had been set up and an action plan developed to help improve the condition of the estates where our residents live.
- 11.2 To help improve the appearance of our estates a new Estate Inspection regime has been launched which prioritises estates via a traffic light system, with those estates rated red and Amber receiving more frequent inspections.

## **12 Estate Services**

- 12.1 Housing Services tendered and mobilised the running of Estate Services (caretaking) to NORSE, which aims to lead to efficiency savings of £377,774 over the 5 year contract period. These savings include the provision of an out of hour's service. The savings will be reflected in a reduction to resident service charges.
- 12.2 As Norse deliver the Grounds Maintenance Service and now the HRA Communal Cleaning Service, some of the Estate Warden's outside duties in clearing courtyards has been passed to the Grounds Maintenance team. Dovetailing these two services together has allowed extra time for cleaning communal areas.
- 12.3 As well as leading to savings the new service has new service delivery functions such as
- New out of hours service now available within the Norse contract.
  - Extra resource available with an additional crew to assist the normal crews if required in peak times.
  - New Environmentally friendly electric vans.

## **13 Community Development**

- 13.1 Housing Services completed a review of resident involvement, which led to the redesigning and implementation of a new resident engagement structure. The new structure will give residents more and varied ways to be involved in the running of the service. The new

structure includes customer catch up days that were held in October 2015 and a customer sounding board held in December 2015.

- 13.2 The Housing Services Facebook page launched to keep tenants informed and up to date on the service.
- 13.3 The Community Development team has developed a rolling programme of resident training courses on ICT, tenancy sustainability, budgeting and repairs. These courses will help improve customer's lives and help them maintain a healthy tenancy.

## **14 Business Development**

14.1 The following policies were developed and implemented in 2015/16

- Former tenant arrears
- Service charge loans
- Right-to-Buy Buy-back and Discount Repayment

14.2 The following strategies were developed and implemented in 2015/16

- Fire Safety Management Strategy 2015-2018
- Garage improvement
- Asset Management Strategy 2015-2020

14.3 Housing Services has successfully achieved the reaccreditation of ISO 9001:2008 and the Customer Service Excellence award, resulting in an efficient, customer based service for our residents.

14.4 Recruitment has been made to the permanent posts of Housing Manager, Tenancy Services Manager and Contracts Manager and this will help reinforce excellent service delivery.

14.5 The new Homes for Independent Living structure was launched and has led to an increase in customer satisfaction and an estimated reduction in service costs of £63,606 from 2014/15 to 2015/16.

14.6 The Business Continuity plan has been refreshed and published to ensure effective running of the service in emergency situations.

## **15. Development of the Council's housing stock**

15.1 The Council has built its first council housing since its formation. At the end of Q3 2015/16 22 properties had been completed. All of the houses are built to Decent Home standard and can be easily adapted in the future if required for someone with a disability.

15.2 The following properties have been completed in 2015/16

- Beechings Way, Twydall - 3x3 bed houses
- Eastcourt Lane, Twydall - 1x4bed house
- Westerham Close, Twydall - 2 x 1 bed bungalows
- Hazlemere Drive, Gillingham - 1 x 5 bedroom house.
- Buttermere Close, Gillingham - 2 x 2 bedroom houses
- Begonia Ave, Gillingham - 3 x 3 bedroom houses
- Tangmere Drive, Gillingham - 4 x 2 bedroom houses
- Romany Ct, Twydall - 4 x 1 bedroom bungalows
- Charing Rd, Twydall - 2 x 2 bedroom houses

15.3 Phase two of the programme at Beatty Avenue is well underway with some of the new 32 bungalows being completed to roof level.

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**Appendices**

None

**Background documents**

None