

STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY, 8 JULY 2010

Councillors Present: David Holtby, Keith Lock (Substitute) (In place of Alan Macro), Irene Neill (Chairman), Ieuan Tuck

Also Present: Shannon Coleman-Slaughter (Group Auditor), June Graves (Head of Housing and Performance), Fenja Hill (Housing Operations Manager), Stephen Chard (Policy Officer), David Lowe (Scrutiny and Partnerships Manager)

Apologies: Councillor Ellen Crumly, Councillor Mollie Lock, Councillor Alan Macro

PART I

11. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 May 2010 and 12 May 2010 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Stephen Chard advised the Committee that the report outlining the results of the scrutiny review into the performance of schools in West Berkshire had been approved by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission, subject to one amendment. This related to the recommendation to strengthen the work of the Standards and Effectiveness Panel and the amendment was as follows:

The Head of Policy and Communication should ensure that key feedback from the Standards and Effectiveness Panel on the performance of schools and support services was reported to the Stronger Communities Select Committee and onwards within the Council's reporting structures. **The work of the Standards and Effectiveness Panel should be considered in light of a more structured approach to school visits in order to improve consistency.**

Members felt that there was already a structured approach to school visits by the Panel, but were nonetheless content to accept this amendment.

RESOLVED that the amendment would be accepted and the report would be sent to the Executive for its consideration.

12. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

13. Greater Greenham Project

The Committee considered a briefing on the work of the Greater Greenham Project (Agenda Item 4).

David Lowe, attending on behalf of Councillor Marcus Franks, made the following points as part of his presentation on the work of the Greater Greenham Project:

- This was a positive example of the work undertaken under the leadership of the West Berkshire Partnership (WBP).
- The WBP was seeking ways to enhance community engagement and empowerment, and to make a sustainable difference at a local level.

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- Greater Greenham (defined as the Nightingales and Pigeons Farm Estates) had been selected as the first locality project based on indices of multiple deprivation and the child well-being index. This showed that Greater Greenham was by far the most deprived overall area in West Berkshire and was also low when considered at a national level.
- The aims and objectives of the project were to promote financial inclusion, improve the community's environment, build a safer and stronger community, and improve the reputation of the locality.
- A baseline figure and appropriate targets were to be set for priority outcomes which included increased resident participation and pride in the neighbourhood, increased income and skills, and a reduction in crime and anti social behaviour (ASB).
- The project was run by a steering group which reported to a partnership group, which in turn reported to the WBP. The membership of the steering group included local residents and this was hoped to be widened.
- Achievements of the project included:
 - An increase in communication with residents via the Greenham Grapevine newsletter.
 - The establishment of a youth club with approximately 140 members. This was successfully run by a voluntary sector organisation based in Basingstoke. June Graves advised that this was based on the success of a project in Bishops Green which had been running for a small number of years.
 - The identification of 40 community volunteers.
 - Increased availability of the MUGA (multi use games area).
 - A successful skip day held in October 2009 which was an exercise to clear bulky waste from gardens etc. The importance of the community being able to sustain this type of activity themselves was noted.
- Many of these activities had been achieved at a minimal cost. Funding was available but this was finite. There was however no time limit to the project itself and it was intended to run for as long as was deemed necessary.
- A positive outcome for the community had been a 30% decrease in ASB, as reported by Thames Valley Police.
- Many future activities had been organised as a result of the hard work of volunteers.

Members queried the involvement from the primary school, The Willows, as this was felt to be a key element. David Lowe advised that a new Head Teacher had recently been appointed, she was eager to be involved and for the activities of the school to be integrated with the project.

Councillor Ieuan Tuck described a project he was aware of in London which provided a drop in facility for parents and carers of young children. He queried whether this was something that could be looked at for Greater Greenham. David Lowe agreed to take back this idea.

RESOLVED that the briefing would be noted.

14. Housing Register

The Committee considered a report (Agenda Item 5) which detailed the outcome of the audit into the Housing Register.

Councillor Irene Neill advised that the purpose of the item at this stage was to hear the outcome of the audit and to then consider what future scrutiny activity, if any, was required by the Select Committee.

Shannon Coleman-Slaughter informed the Committee that overall the audit found that the controls within the systems and procedures reviewed were satisfactory. There were some areas of concern and these were being addressed through the action plan. Follow up work would be undertaken in November 2010 to assess progress with these actions and, if actions were completed by that time, it was hoped that the service would be considered to be well controlled or at the least a satisfactory follow up would be carried out.

Members noted that many of the actions related to the IT system, Locata, and the operation of this system was queried. Shannon Coleman-Slaughter advised that the audit found that while required actions were still undertaken, the system could be better utilised by staff and it was not always fully updated.

Fenja Hill agreed that paper files would be more up to date and this could create an issue when running a report from the system as this did not always have the full detail included. June Graves acknowledged that Locata had not been fully utilised but added that the system had recently been upgraded. This made it more user friendly and took into account the fact that the Common Housing Register had been taken back in house and the new initiative to offer choice based lettings. The introduction of this initiative would create more sustainable tenancies.

The Locata system was the sole register of information of those seeking housing but did not contain information on available housing.

Fenja Hill added that the upgrade enabled the production of more informative reports and recorded the progress of each individual going through the system.

It was hoped that the system could be widened to incorporate individuals seeking shared ownerships and privately rented homes.

Members were concerned that there was the potential for the more vulnerable people on the register, particularly the elderly, to be disadvantaged by the need to access services, such as choice based lettings, via the website. Fenja Hill advised that this was an area of particular focus for Officers and individuals who were assessed as being potentially vulnerable were offered additional support. It was also possible to produce a report to see if those assessed as vulnerable and a high priority for a new home were bidding for places and if not contact would be made and assistance offered.

Individuals who had been on the register for some time and only gradually accumulated points were contacted annually to assess whether they wished to remain on the list, which was permissible.

Members queried the level of complaints from residents and asked whether a greater understanding of the processes involved would decrease this. Fenja Hill advised that while the importance of housing for individual residents was understood there was clearly a need to prioritise those in most need. This was explained to concerned residents to help manage their expectations. However if they were not at the top of the list, but had strong reasons to move, they were encouraged to be as flexible as possible with their requirements to increase their chances of getting a home. June Graves added that

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additional points were awarded for those in exceptional circumstances. Emergency accommodation was also available for those who were homeless.

It was noted that action 5, which related to the need for clients to have their personal details fully and independently verified, had not been agreed. Fenja Hill advised that this had yet to be agreed as documentation was not always needed in the first instance in certain circumstances. It was hoped that this would be resolved by the time of the review.

Fenja Hill offered Members the opportunity to visit the team to observe their work in practice and to contact her if they had any further queries.

Members then discussed further work on this topic and it was felt that further investigation was required. In terms of timescale it was felt to be appropriate that this work would be returned to by a small working group in September 2010 to assess progress made since the audit, with a report back to the Select Committee at its meeting in October 2010. This would allow more time for the new Housing Operations Manager (Fenja Hill) to incorporate any new processes etc.

Councillor Irene Neill volunteered to participate in the work group and Stephen Chard agreed to seek other volunteers. This would be offered to all Members of the Select Committee in the first instance.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) The outcome of the audit and the resulting action plan would be noted.
- (2) A small working group would be formed to assess progress made since the audit and this would be arranged for September 2010.

15. Work Programme

The Committee considered the work programme for 2010/11 (Agenda Item 6).

Councillor Irene Neill informed Members that the work programme had been reviewed with the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission and as a result it had been reduced to the items of the highest priority.

Items scheduled for the next meeting being held on 21 October 2010 were noted as:

- An update report on the Housing Register following the working group's meeting in September 2010.
- A review of progress with the Playbuilder Programme.
- Receipt of a report from the supporting small schools Officer group to assess what further work, if any, was required by the Select Committee.

Councillor David Holtby advised that progress had been limited on the joint review with the Greener Select Committee on accessibility of public transport and Stephen Chard agreed to discuss this with the appropriate Officer.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) The updated work programme and items scheduled for the next meeting would be noted.
- (2) Stephen Chard would ascertain progress of the accessibility of public transport review.

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(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.00 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature