

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Communities held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton TA1 4DY, on Wednesday, 9 August 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Gwil Wren (Chair)

Cllr Dawn Johnson (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Simon Coles

Cllr Pauline Ham

Cllr Edric Hobbs

Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey

Cllr Mike Stanton (substitute)

Cllr Lance Duddridge

Cllr Susannah Hart

Cllr Kathy Pearce

Cllr Wes Read

In attendance:

Cllr John Hunt

Cllr Fran Smith

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Bob Filmer

Cllr Tessa Munt

Cllr Leigh Redman

Cllr Richard Wilkins

Cllr Liz Leyshon

Cllr Frances Nicholson

Cllr Sarah Wakefield

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Cllr Dawn Denton (virtual online), Cllr Andy Dingwall (virtual online), Cllr Andy Kendall (substitute Cllr Mike Stanton).

2 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 2

The minutes of the Scrutiny Committee – Communities meeting held on 21 June 2023 were agreed upon and signed by the Chair.

3 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 3

Councillors present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor of a Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

SOMERSET COUNCILLOR	CITY, TOWN AND/OR PARISH COUNCIL
Andy Dingwall	Westonzoyland Parish Council
Pauline Ham	Axbridge Town Council
Edric Hobbs	Shepton Mallet Town Council
Kathy Pearce	Bridgwater Town Council
Wes Read	Yeovil Town Council

Cllr Lance Duddridge, Cllr Pauline Ham, Cllr Kathy Pearce declared an interest in Item 7 - Annual Approval as sole shareholder of Homes in Sedgemoor from as Members of the Homes In Sedgemoor Board.

4 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

Public questions were received from Shannon Johnstone and Jean Humber.

The questions and the responses are provided below:

Shannon Johnstone

Housing and Homelessness team / staff training

Given that housing officers have to work within multiple legal frameworks and do hard and great work, making vastly important decisions, does the committee feel it would be beneficial for their housing and homelessness team to have a programme around what training each staff member should receive??A recent FOI confirmed that there was no policy or recorded data around what training they get.

Response from Service Director - Housing, Communities Services

Housing Options is the service area responsible for managing the council's statutory duties and non statutory support and prevention for households who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or those who are rough sleeping. The wider service also includes a Displaced People service.

The services is made up of circa 130 posts who previously were employed primarily by four former District Council all of which delivered there service and staff training differently.

The service recognises and agrees with the public question that the duties of the team must use a standard and consistent approach. Good induction programmes for new staff and ongoing training and development is essential to ensure this consistency is embedded.

The service has prepared a set of common induction materials for the Housing Options Officer role. These materials are now in final draft and will be piloted with new starters in September. The documents will then be adopted for other roles in Housing Options and Displaced Persons service and reviewed at regular intervals.

The service through its restructure which take place later this year will help the service bring about greater consistency as the service will establish a staff structure which is consistent throughout the Counties four customer facing localities. The service will also establish a number of officer posts responsible for establishing consistency of service and decisions.

There has been some early success in the delivery of consistency for example all locations moved to one IT case management system in April 2023.

Establishing consistency is one of the projects placed in the housing transitional programme which the service is calling 'Establish consistent approach to case management & assessment for Housing Options'.

A range of materials have been developed including:

- Induction Training Templates – Instructions. - This document explains the corporate elements to the induction which all SC new starters must complete
- Skillset Assessment and Training Recommendations- This document matches the competencies and skills listed on the Housing Options Officer Job Description, plus other skills such specific application skills (word, SharePoint etc) and asks the line manager to go through this on day one, capturing any gaps. For each competency or skill, the document suggests appropriate training which the new starter can do to address the gap in the skills. By completing this document, a training plan will be established.
- New starter plan - This document is intended as an ongoing way to capture the training and experience which the new starter acquires, so it is clear what gaps there are in their training and knowledge at all times.
- Housing Options On Boarding Plan - This doc will be used by all of the Housing options team as a reference document – both during induction and ongoing, we see this as a living document which will be regularly updated as and

when anything changes.

The service will continue to work hard to deliver a consistent service for all customers who approach the council for support.

Jean Humber

Housing in Withycombe

Is the Committee aware of the negative effect their housing policy is having on small communities?

I have written to members of the Committee individually briefly explaining a situation that has arisen recently in Withycombe, a small village in West Somerset on the edge of Exmoor. West Somerset has a strong sense of identity as have the villages within it. The current housing allocation policy attaches no importance to the local connection of an applicant and is unfairly discriminating against those from small communities where housing availability is minimal, almost non-existent. A policy which breaks up a community cannot be right.

Already many young people have to move away because of the lack of job opportunities but they shouldn't have to move out of their community because they cannot get a house particularly when they are already established in that community and making a positive contribution to that community. It is one thing when they see no house, quite another when they see it being allocated to someone with no local connection.

Without going into the reasons for it, the root cause is too many people chasing too few houses but that is unlikely to change in the immediate future meanwhile local people in small communities will be unfairly discriminated against when a local connection counts for nothing. Born, bred, living and active in the village; it doesn't get more local than that.

I would ask the Committee review their housing application policy as a matter of urgency. Members of Withycombe Parish Council would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further.

Response from Chair, Scrutiny Committee – Communities, Cllr Gwil Wren

Thank you for your letter of 31st July.

Some years ago the then West Somerset Council (WSC) transferred its Council

Houses to Magna but the contract only gave WSC and its successors limited influence over future operations. This was limited to matters such as proceeds from the sale of previous council stock being reused within the district and a handful of other clauses.

Magna as a registered social landlord is committed to the provision of well managed affordable housing and the expectations of the government and regulator as a social housing provider. Our main opportunity to influence Magna is through our relationships and partnership approach. This offers two main opportunities:

a) Homefinder policy – ‘local connection’ for the purposes of the Homefinder policy is defined as the connection to Somerset County Council area rather than specific localities within the council’s area. The policy has recently been reviewed by the Board in consultation with the landlords and was agreed to remain in place as a connection to the wider area. The main reasons for this are i) to ensure housing need receives a higher priority over location ii) there is potential for legal challenge, on grounds of discrimination, where local lettings policies encourage homes to be let to those already established in the community rather than those not established despite often being in greater housing need. As a partner in Homefinder the Somerset Council stance aligns to this policy.

b) Landlord members of Homefinder can choose to introduce local connection criteria but this is often as a planning approval requirement for new homes, although some landlords do introduce a blanket approach and allow local connection to be focused on much smaller localities. I am only aware of Falcon Housing Association in the Homefinder scheme applying local connection as a common approach and should any challenge occur Falcon would need to justify their policy. Falcon are a very small provider of homes with a rural focus and therefore they may feel better able to have this policy. Magna could make a policy decision to use local connection more often for localities however with such acute demand for housing there are benefits to the Homefinder service and council in prioritising housing need over locality.

I represent rural community and understand the strength of local feeling over issues like these. All I can say is that the Homefinder system works very well and people do get their needs addressed even if it takes a little time. I understand from the Parish Council that another Magna property is shortly to become vacant and if this family is in the Gold Band they are likely to be in a good position to be offered it.

The Parish Council has asked if the Community Scrutiny Committee can look at the issue of local connection and housing need. I am liaising with colleagues and will reply shortly.

The following comments and questions were received and discussed with Members:

- Homefinder Service all Member briefing, to gain greater insight to the 10,000 households seeking affordable accommodation to include projects and scheme to incentivise property downsizing
- The increased Home Finder Service queries and escalating demand and the challenges, including demand outstripping the supply of affordable housing, the significant cost of living crisis, national displaced persons agenda, local demand for private sector housing
- The work to address the challenges, including, joint working with Children Services and work with housing providers to grow local authority housing stock.
- Planning application law, viability and developer issues regarding set figures for building affordable housing and delivering both social and affordable housing.

5 Recommissioning of 16+ Housing/Supported Accommodation - Agenda Item 5

Members of the Children & Families Scrutiny Committee were invited to attend the meeting for this agenda item.

The Committee received a presentation from the Service Director - Commissioning and Performance (Children and Family Services) Richard Selwyn, on the Recommissioning of 16+ Housing/Supported Accommodation, with the Service Director - Housing, Communities Services, Chris Brown, further added to the introduction discussing the cross service working. The Strategic Commissioner for Childrens' Services, Julie Breeze, presented the report.

The following comments and questions were received and discussed with members:

- The progress of young people in Pathways to Independence (P2I).
- The role of multi-agencies in supporting the Council in making provision to support young people, including Somerset Drug and Alcohol Service, Police, nursing outreach teams and trials piloted with different providers.
- Accommodation provision, including escalating costs, local providers, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- Range of accommodation provided through shared houses, flats, foyers - different levels of support to meet different levels of need.
- The links and differences between Homefinder and 16+ Housing supported accommodation, with Homefinder being the stable long-term accommodation.
- Moving on from P2I, both positively; moving to a social housing tenancy, moving to the private rented sector, returning to family, living with partners/friends and negatively; evictions (non-payment of rent, deliberate

damage, threats to staff or other residents), regular breaches of house rules, no properties available.

- The indicative 9-month (270 days) timescale measure pathway and what support is available after 9 months and the individuals 25th birthday.
- The progress and good engagement of young people within P2I service and the great work across the Council making good progress against individual goals identified in their support plan.

The Committee noted the report.

6 Somerset Council Service Introduction: Customer Services - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received a presentation from the Service Director - Customer Services, Jan Stafford.

The following comments and questions were received and discussed with members:

- Comparison and benchmarking with other Councils and the upcoming work in this area with other Unitary Councils.
- Customer segmentation information, including break down of services provided, responses and satisfaction of the service.
- Data used to drive change and improvement.
- Digital inclusion and interaction with the Council, including infrastructure, the collection of feedback, data collection and provision of spaces for digitally disadvantaged (customer access points).
- Emergency response teams, including a unified lifeline service for Somerset Council and the work taking place with providers, adult social care and the Mendip area.
- Volumes and performance statistics for calls received, including satisfaction and resolution.
- Quality assurance, completion of surveys and the low number of satisfaction surveys completed.
- Roadwork emergency numbers and the review taking place on out of hours highways services.
- Adult Social Care services queries and responses.
- Face to face customer opportunities, including customer access point promotion and potential partnership models.
- Survey participation and options to leave responses.

The Committee noted the report.

7 Annual Approval as sole shareholder of Homes in Sedgemoor - Agenda Item 7

The Committee received a verbal update from the Service Director - Housing, Community Services, Chris Brown, and the Strategic Housing Manager, David Baxter on the Annual Approval as sole shareholder of Homes in Sedgemoor.

The Committee noted the verbal update.

8 Date and venue of the next meeting - Agenda Item 8

The Committee noted that the next meeting would be held on 11 October 2023 at 10am, with the meeting venue to be confirmed.

The Chair advised the Committee of the work taking place to consider increasing the frequency of Scrutiny Committee meetings and a proposal to hold Committee meetings in the former District Council offices in Somerset.

The following items were suggested for the future work programme for Scrutiny Committee – Communities:

- Homefinder (All Member Briefing to be provided by Service Director: Housing, Communities Services.
- CCTV provision across Somerset
- Budget Monitoring within Communities Directorate

(The meeting ended at 12.20 pm)

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CHAIR