

MINUTE
of
AUDIT & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minute of virtual meeting held at 2.00pm on 21 January 2021.

Present:

Councillor Stewart Miller (Chair)	Councillor Annette Ireland
Councillor Barbara Grant (Vice Chair)	Councillor Jim McLean
Councillor Charlie Gilbert	Councillor Jim Swift

Councillor Miller in the Chair

Attending:

Margaret McCrossan, Head of Accountancy (Chief Financial Officer); Phil Daws, Head of Environment (Strategic Services); Graeme Smith, Communications Manager; Bill Lennox, Digital Customer Experience Manager; Linda Hutchison, Clerk to the Committee; Ron Leitch, Committee Services Officer; and Lona Allison, Assistant Committee Services Officer.

Also Attending:

Morven Fraser, Audit Scotland.

Apology:

Councillor Angela Convery.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

1507. There were no declarations of interest intimated.

CHAIR'S REPORT

1508. The Chair reported, and it was noted, that Elected Members who were not members of the committee, had been given the opportunity to observe the presentation on the Council's new website later in the meeting, which he hoped was considered helpful. Alternatively they could view the presentation after the meeting when the footage of the meeting would be made available on the Council's YouTube channel.

PRESENTATION – EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL WEBSITE

1509. Councillor Miller welcomed Graeme Smith, Communications Manager, and Bill Lennox, Digital Customer Experience Manager (DCEM), who had been invited to the meeting to make a presentation on the Council's new website.

The Communications Manager briefly outlined the context and history of the digital customer experience project, during which he explained that a project team had been established in 2017 to take this work forward, the membership of which included officers from the Communications, ICT and Customer First teams. The aim had been to improve the digital experience offered to customers by the Council, both in terms of what was being done and could be done digitally, a key part of the project being the updating, improvement and launch of the Council's newly designed website. Despite challenges for the team associated with COVID-19, the new website had been launched as planned on 7 July 2020, without any interruption to online services, following a major procurement exercise. The Communications Manager reported that the website's modern design and greatly improved functionality had received positive feedback from both users and industry commentators, and clarified that work was continuing to improve and increase the number of processes that could be done online.

The DCEM demonstrated use of the website, during which he highlighted improvements made to it. He referred first to various legacy issues relating to the old website which there had been a wish to address. These included that it was text heavy, problematic to navigate, did not meet the newest accessibility standards introduced in 2020, and was not mobile device friendly.

Having referred to liaison that had taken place with representatives of each department on the website's content and future requirements, and a review of commercial websites undertaken to help inform discussions on the best way forward, the DCEM highlighted a range of key features of the new website, including in terms of its design and layout. It was explained that, in contrast to the previous version, the website's new design was highly user-centred with data-driven homepage content, adopted a mobile friendly approach, demonstrated sector-leading accessibility as confirmed through a recent external audit, and was compliant with current Government Digital Services (GDS) standards. The new homepage had been designed to be more aesthetically pleasing, with more consistent branding and customised icons designed in-house to take residents to the pages they needed to access most frequently at any given time. More concise and focussed information, such as on services provided by each department, had also been made more accessible from the homepage.

The DCEM clarified that to meet current expectations 60% of the previous website content had been removed, 1200 pages had been rewritten, and all pages had been given friendly URL identities making them easier and quicker to search for through search engines. The layout could also feature a number of dedicated sub-sites, such as the one currently accessible from the homepage which provided COVID-19 related information. Such sub-sites could have additional branding whilst adhering to the Council's overall design parameters. Features of the new website were demonstrated, including its dynamic search facility; a commercial-style local authority housing search facility featuring photographs and locations of properties designed to replicate the appearance of an estate agency webpage; and how past agendas, reports and Minutes could be located. The DCEM confirmed that work on the website was ongoing, such as to develop further custom homepage icons, on integrated social media feeds, and on the redesign of online forms which complied with GDS standards. He encouraged people to use the website and provide feedback to him on issues if they wished.

Councillor Ireland commented on an issue she had encountered with the dynamic search facility on the homepage to locate planning application information. In reply, the DCEM confirmed that the project team was aware of the issue, which was linked to the extent

information was held in PDF format, and was working on a solution. In response to a further comment Councillor Ireland made on access to historic Minutes being limited at present, he confirmed that this was linked to the same issue, that thus far the website had only been populated with Minutes back to 2017, but that work would be progressed soon to add those for previous years.

Councillor Grant referred to general difficulty she had reading non-highlighted narrative on the website, which she did not consider particularly visible, and asked if anything could be done to make the text clearer. The DCEM and Communications Manager commented that they had not received such feedback thus far, referred to ways in which the text could be enlarged on the screen already to assist, and confirmed that the font used had been selected to be as accessible and readable as possible to help address the needs of people with eyesight problems for example. However, they undertook to relay the comment back to the protect team's accessibility partners to determine if this issue had been raised elsewhere and if anything further could be explored.

Having heard Councillor Swift commend the team on the improvements and progress they had made and express the view that the new website was immeasurably better than the previous version and much easier to navigate, Councillor Miller thanked the Communications Manager and the DCEM for their informative and interesting presentation.

The committee noted:-

- (a) the presentation on the website, and related comments and observations made; and
- (b) that any further comments or feedback on the website could be sent to the Communications Manager for consideration.

COUNCIL'S NEW-BUILD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

1510. Under reference to the Minute of the meeting of 24 September 2020 (Page 1279, Item 1378 refers), when it had been agreed that the Head of Environment (Strategic Services) would submit a report to a future meeting outlining the challenges involved in delivering social housing in East Renfrewshire, the committee considered a report by the Head of Environment (Strategic Services) providing information on the Council's ambitious new build development programme.

The report explained that over the past 40 years, approximately 50% of rented housing stock owned by the Council had been sold through the Right to Buy scheme, the greatest proportion of properties sold having been more popular family homes in sought after areas, leaving a stock of just under 3,000 homes. Council housing remained highly sought after, with many people opting for the Council as a landlord rather than a private landlord or housing association. The Council also remained the area's most affordable housing provider.

It was highlighted that the ambition for the new build development programme had grown in the past few years, in respect of which, in November 2016, the Cabinet had approved a proposal to build up to 120 Council houses in two phases subject to consultation. This included approximately 80 properties at 4 sites in Barrhead (phase 1), and a further 30-40 on the Eastwood side of the authority (phase 2). Subsequently, in January 2018, the Cabinet had approved a proposal for phase 3 to increase the new build project target from 120 to 240 units. It had been recognised then that the delivery of new housing could take 2-4 years, depending upon the infrastructure developments required beforehand.

There had been infrastructure delays at phase 1 sites which had impacted on delivery of the project. It was highlighted that the Maidenhill sites in phases 2 and 3 were not owned by the Council, with development times based on the progress of the landowners/house builders. It was clarified that subsidy funding was only available in annual tranches.

Further details on progress made on each phase and site and on related issues was provided, including the number of units to be built relative to the initial target set. Reference was also made to related procurement options and financial issues. The report confirmed that the proposals for all sites were discussed with local Tenant & Residents Associations, and that Housing Services had written to all residents in the surrounding areas for the first 3 completed sites inviting them to comment on proposals. Although this approach would continue, online methods might need to be used for this due to COVID-19 related restrictions on public gatherings.

It was concluded that the ambitious council house new build programme was on track to deliver the target of 240 new council homes which, on completion, would include approximately 141 new homes in Barrhead and 101 in Newton Mearns. The programme had been designed not only to meet local housing needs, but also to make best use of land availability in the area. Whilst ambitions remained to extend the programme further, clarity on the level and availability of Scottish Government grant funding was required to determine the feasibility of doing so.

Whilst commenting on the report, the Head of Environment (Strategic Services) explained that challenges involved in delivering social housing included having suitable, clean land in the required location with access to services including utilities. He added that, although the Council had an entitlement to an affordable housing contribution of 25% from developers on land they owned if the authority chose to exercise that right, it was the developers who controlled the timetable for construction on such sites. Having highlighted that most available land within East Renfrewshire was located in the Levern Valley, whereas demand for social housing was highest in the Eastwood side of the authority, he referred to various associated issues, such as the higher costs of building on land that required to be decontaminated or where signalled road junctions had to be created, clarifying that subsidy was not usually available to meet such extra costs.

The Head of Environment (Strategic Services) explained that the Scottish Government currently offered a standard subsidy of £59k per housing unit, regardless of the size of house or flat constructed or the unit cost of construction, which impacted on the scale of the remaining costs to be met by the Council. Although extra subsidy was provided in some limited circumstances, such as to restore heavily contaminated land, he reiterated that the subsidy did not always cover the extra costs in full; and that many tenants aspired to renting houses, as opposed to flats, which were dearer per unit to construct and impacted on the number of units that could be accommodated on a site. He clarified further that no additional subsidy was made available to adapt homes to meet the needs of those with disabilities or special needs, referred to the additional costs of building properties which were energy efficient, and commented on the need for the Council to balance cost issues, such as for capital borrowing, with ensuring that rents remained affordable such as to help address issues relating to poverty.

Councillor Miller sought further clarification on why the Council received a subsidy of £59k per unit, whereas housing associations received more. The Head of Environment (Strategic Services) explained that this was an historic issue attributable to local authorities being considered to have access to borrowing at a lower cost which, in turn, led to a reduction in the subsidy made available to them. He was not aware of any recent research to substantiate that, but was aware of discussions being pursued by COSLA with the Scottish Government to try to make the position more equitable. In response to Councillor Ireland, he confirmed that those discussions had been ongoing for over 2 years and were becoming more intense, but there

was no indication yet of when, or if, a solution would be forthcoming. He stated that achieving parity with housing associations would be welcomed, as would addressing how extra costs of making properties energy efficient for example could be met.

Councillor Grant welcomed developments at the Barrhead Road site in Newton Mearns, and expressed the view that it was not optional, but rather essential, to ensure that properties were made energy efficient as part of any project. She sought clarification on when the subsidy for new-build social housing was actually paid to councils, in response to which the Head of Environment (Strategic Services) explained that this was usually on completion of projects. However, in the case of some larger and lengthier projects, interim payments were sometimes made.

Councillor Grant referred to the construction of social housing in Vienna which had attracted some recent, positive media coverage which she thought might be of interest to the Head of Environment (Strategic Services) to review.

Councillor Swift asked if it was possible to vary rent levels taking account of the energy efficiency of individual properties, and if it was borrowing costs that primarily drove the disparity in rents between housing association and local authority housing, the latter tending to be lower. The Head of Environment (Strategic Services) explained that there was no legal impediment to varying rents in relation to energy efficiency, but added that most Council properties already met the Scottish Government's Energy Efficiency in Scottish Homes standards following investment such as in new windows and central heating. He clarified that on average rent charged by housing associations was higher than that set by the Council, commenting that the reasons for this were not fully clear in the absence of any research on this. In response to a further issue raised by Councillor Swift, he stated that he was not aware of any proposals to harmonise rents across the local authority at present, commented on related issues, and confirmed that it remained an option for the Council to explore this further if it wished.

Councillor Miller asked if the new-build properties in Fenwick Drive, Barrhead would attract the same type of rent as similar houses in Eastwood. The Head of Environment (Strategic Services) reported that it was not intended to have higher rents in the Eastwood area to the Levern Valley, and that if he recalled the position correctly the rents for the newer properties were slightly higher than for existing stock which reflected that the incoming tenants would be living in newer houses with better amenities.

The committee noted the report and the related comments made, including that discussions remained ongoing at a national level on the subsidy provided to local authorities for each housing unit built.

AUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORKPLAN 2020/21

1511. Under reference to the Minute of the meeting of 25 June 2020 (Page 1205, Item 1297 refers), when it had been noted that progress on delivering the committee's 2020/21 Work Plan would be reviewed in due course and be the subject of a further report to a future meeting, the committee considered a report by the Clerk providing an update on the Work Plan.

The report explained that some scheduled meetings of the committee had required to be cancelled or rescheduled linked to the current COVID-19 emergency which had also impacted on when some matters were considered. It also made reference to issues relating to the publication of both national and local external audit reports in the context of the emergency, including that the Accounts Commission was considering the implications of the emergency for its own strategy and was reviewing the scheduling of its work to recognise the new reality in which local government found itself.

The report commented on the updated version of the 2020/21 Work Plan appended to the report, referring to progress thus far on various issues and related matters, including the current position on the in-depth investigations the committee had completed on income generation and commercialisation, then climate change, with support from the Scrutiny and Evaluation Officer who had been in post from April 2019 to March 2020. Reference was also made to the current position on some other potential review areas identified thus far, on which there were plans to pursue some work in future, and some new issues pursued during the year, such as the report the committee requested and considered in November 2020 on Audit Scotland's COVID-19 Scrutiny Guide for Audit and Risk Committees.

It was proposed that the committee agree that the development of the Plan, and future plans, including the position on more detailed work be kept under review, taking account of the fact that the Scrutiny and Evaluation Officer who had supported the delivery of in-depth work which formed part of the committee's 2019/20 Work Plan was a resource that was no longer available.

The committee, having heard the Clerk highlight key aspects of the report:-

- (a) noted performance against the 2020/21 Annual Work Plan thus far; and
- (b) agreed that development and implementation of the 2020/21 Work Plan should continue, and that a further report on performance against it and on the 2021/22 Work Plan be submitted to a future meeting.

VALEDICTORY – RON LEITCH, COMMITTEE SERVICES OFFICER

1512. Councillor Miller highlighted that this would be the last meeting of the committee to be attended by Ron Leitch, Committee Services Officer, who was retiring from the Council shortly. He thanked Mr Leitch for his work in support of the committee, commended his approach, and on behalf of the committee, wished him a long and happy retirement.

Mr Leitch responded in appropriate terms.

CHAIR