

Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee

22 MAY 2018

PRESENT: Councillor M Winn (Chairman); Councillors S Jenkins (Vice-Chairman), M Bateman, S Chapple, A Cole, S Cole, B Everitt, T Hunter-Watts and R King

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor P Fealey

APOLOGIES: Councillors P Cooper, S Jarvis and Sir Beville Stanier Bt

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED –

That Councillor Winn be elected Chairman of the Committee for the ensuing year.

2. ELECTION OF VICE CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED –

That Councillor Mrs Jenkins be elected Vice-Chairman of the Committee for the ensuing year.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes from the meeting held on 28 March 2018 be approved as a correct record.

4. UPDATE TO THE PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING REGENERATION POLICY

The Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee received a report which updated the Private Sector Housing Regeneration Policy with the launch of a new 'Healthy Homes on Prescription Grant'. The report also contained a change to the Discretionary Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) which would align AVDC's housing assistance measures with the other Buckinghamshire District Authorities.

The last census in 2011 reported 68,000 people in Buckinghamshire had limiting long term illness or disability which was an increase of 12.4% since the last census. In addition, the Director of Public Health for Buckinghamshire Annual Report 2012/13 noted that the aging population and those living with long term illness and disability would increase. Health and housing were linked as those living in poor quality housing were more likely to be afflicted with poor health compared to those living in good quality housing. Poorer quality housing was more likely to have the issues such as damp/mould, overcrowding and poor heating. In turn, these factors meant that the occupants were more likely to suffer heart disease, stroke, respiratory disease and mental illness, as well as an increased risk of mortality. Overcrowding also encouraged the spread of medical illness such as tuberculosis. Tackling these causal issues at the source would be better for patient care and prove more cost effective for the NHS.

Enforcement officers at AVDC were already trained to identify hazards when inspecting houses under the House Health and Safety Rating System. It was expected that referrals for the Health Homes on Prescription Grant would require an officer visit to

identify hazards and the required measures to rectify them. The maximum amount available to applicants was £5,000 per referral.

The Committee sought more information and were advised:-

- i. Referrals for Healthy Homes on Prescription Grants would be received through health/medical professionals. Some referrals would originate from GPs as they may be able to identify illnesses being caused by poor quality housing. An officer would then inspect the home and make improvement recommendations. As well as GPs, referrals to the service would come from clinics, occupational therapists or other health/medical professionals.
- ii. There was a 'Housing Health Cost Calculator' which worked out the savings that house modification generated for the NHS and wider public purse depending on the hazard resolved. For instance, a chairlift installation had the potential to save a resident from a trip or fall which would otherwise have resulted in a GP visit or an admission to hospital.
- iii. Healthy Homes on Prescription Grants were available in the private rented sector however where hazards are identified it would be the responsibility of the landlord to carry out the repairs. A lack of response from the landlord may result in enforcement action. Where the Healthy Homes on Prescription Grant was appropriate, there would need to be additional assurances that the applicant stayed in residence at the property after work completion.
- iv. There was a backlog in referrals from the BCC occupational health service last year which had delayed grant applications but now this was cleared. The number of referrals coming into the service was currently steady.
- v. The service referred applicants to relevant charities and other organisations, such as National Energy Foundation, if it was felt they could assist.
- vi. There were around 120 long term empty homes in Aylesbury Vale (long term being over 12 months) which was relatively low compared to the national average. More information would be available to Members when the Empty Home Policy comes to Scrutiny in September 2018.
- vii. Undertaking a private housing condition survey would be an expensive exercise and the other Districts had not shown interest in sharing these costs with AVDC. There was the possibility of undertaking a survey in specific areas associated with deprivation and targeting areas with high turnover. The results from any survey would then inform policy and potentially identify a stock of dwellings that may need improvement advice.
- viii. In October 2018 the definition of a House of Multiple Occupancy (HMO) would change to a dwelling with five or more people from two or more households. In Aylesbury Vale, these properties were already licensable under the Additional HMO Licensing scheme.

The Committee suggested that housing condition data could be collected through questionnaires for residents and liaison with Town Councils, and felt it should be an ongoing process rather than top-down. Members also felt that any potential savings to the NHS generated by the Healthy Homes on Prescription Grant should be publicised.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted and the Committee's comments be considered by the Cabinet Member prior to the scheme's approval.

5. DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT UPDATE

The Committee had received an update on the Development Management service at their meeting on 13 February 2018. At this meeting, it was agreed a report would come back to Committee with further information on staffing levels, recruitment activity and

workload with reference to additional workload anticipated as a result of the HS2 infrastructure project.

The service was still utilising contractors and agency staff to fill permanent, full time senior posts that were vacant. Salary grades for planning posts at AVDC ranged from SG2 to SG8 and the report contained a table outlining the number of posts employed full time and vacant. Also included was the number of post holders that held delegated authority. The scheme of delegation was important for applications to be signed off and the current number meant there was workload pressure on officers with delegation. Contractors and agency staff did not have delegation and this was not anticipated to change. It was expected that there would be no vacancies at Principal Planner level in two months as applicants had been offered and accepted the position. The one Associate Planner position had recently been approved and involved the reduction of Principal Planners from four to three. However, the Associate Planner position, which was common in the private sector, would keep the service competitive through the offering of professional development and a continuous career path for staff. Activities on recruitment were outlined which included agency headhunting, LinkedIn and financial incentives such as internal/external referrals and introductory relocation packages. The service also offered Open Days every Friday whereby potential applicants could visit the service to see the working environment and meet managers.

On National Infrastructure Projects, HS2 was being managed and led by the Corporate Planner, Susan Kitchen, and consultancy support was being funded by HS2 Ltd. This caseload was not expected to impact the day to day operations of the service. In future, the plan was for HS2 Ltd to fund one consultant post and one forward-funded post when additional workload reached this stage. The impact of East-West Rail and National Infrastructure Corridor were not yet known but it was felt that the ongoing graduate program would ensure the smooth running of the service as it developed. The plan for the next 6-9 months was to continue recruiting correctly, streamline the service through efficiencies, offer ongoing training to planners and delegate authority where appropriate.

Members had additional questions in relation to the Development Management service and were advised:-

- i. As an emerging document, VALP was starting to gain more weight. Once it was adopted, the plan was expected to reduce appeals and speculative applications which were a drain to resources. The lead time for adoption was unclear but it was hoped to be by the end of 2018 once the hearings throughout the summer were completed.
- ii. The type of work associated with the infrastructure projects were different to residential developments.
- iii. Applicants for posts were being told of unitary situation in Buckinghamshire. Initially this had been a negative impact, however applicants had realised that a new authority would still require planning officers.
- iv. Training of planners would include communicative skills such as delivering presentations at committee and public speaking. The training delivered would vary on the salary grade of post holder.

Members appreciated the update of the service and thanked the officer for his attendance.

RESOLVED –

That there were no recommendations for Development Management Committee and the report and presentation be noted.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

Published in the agenda were items coming to Committee for the rest of the year. In addition to this, an item on the Central Area Growth Board Joint Committee would be added. Members agreed that they wished to comment on the on the Joint Committee's governance structure, terms of reference and vision, and have the opportunity to comment on Joint Committee reports and minutes every six months. The next meeting was scheduled for 25 September 2018 so the Committee felt that a meeting ahead of that may be prudent. An update on Aylesbury Town Centre was already in the Work Programme and members reiterated this coming to committee in future.

The Committee also saw merit in adding the following to the work programme:-

- Air Quality with mention to the Greatmoor waste facility and the Government's recent Air Quality Strategy.
- Update on HS2 infrastructure work.

RESOLVED –

That the work programme, as discussed in the meeting, be approved.