

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 18th July 2016

Present: Councillor A Lythgoe (Chair)
Councillors James Eaton (sub for L Barnes), Eaton, Hughes (substituting for Johnson), Proctor (sub for McMahon), Roberts and Robertson

In Attendance: Christine Ashcroft, CLAW
Tahir Idris, Housing Co-ordinator, RBC
Rachel Whippy, Chief Officer, Rossendale CAB
Councillor Lamb, Deputy Leader of the Council
Pat Couch, Scrutiny Support Officer

2 members of the public

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Lynda Barnes, Johnson, Kenyon McMahon and Councillor Alyson Barnes.

2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 20th June 2016 be agreed as a correct record signed by the Chair.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Procter and Robertson declared an interest as they were both Trustees on Rossendale Citizen's Advice.

Councillor Hughes declared an interest as he was an employee of Citizen's Advice.

4. URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

There were no urgent items of business.

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The Chair agreed to deviate from the Procedure for Public Speaking and allow the members of the public to ask questions as the reports were discussed.

6. CHAIR'S UPDATE

There was no update.

7. PRESENTATION FROM RACHEL WHIPPY, ROSSENDALE CITIZEN'S ADVICE (CA)

The Chief Officer of Rossendale CA presented information on the role of Rossendale CA, which is one off over 300 independent local charities that make up the Citizens Advice network. They are based at Stubblelee Hall with other outreach building across the borough.

In Rossendale there are 36 staff and volunteers, with 2,509 clients having received advice with over 12,000 advice issues managed during 2015/16.

The 27 volunteers are vital to the way they deliver services, enabling the CA to reach many more people than if it was surely staff-run.

In 2015/16 the CA offered advice to 612 clients with 4,062 debt problems and an estimated total value of client debts of £1.8m – 112 clients successfully rescheduled £657k debt – an average of £5,687 per client and 2 in every 3 people will have their debt problems solved.

The CA play a vital role in ensuring people pay their priority bills first, such as rent, council tax and fuel payments, stopping escalation and stabilising people's finances, now and in the future.

The CA supported 1,285 clients with 5,196 benefit or tax credit problems. They also supported 285 clients with 509 housing problems and 256 people with housing costs arrears. The CA records everything they do for people on a case management system.

Forty people were facing threats of homelessness. Being made homeless has a devastating impact and the state often has to step in through local authority funded temporary accommodation or as social services to an estimated £24k-£30k per person.

Members raised a number of questions, which the Chief Officer responded as follows.

- a) When asked about what type of training there is for volunteers, the Chief Officer indicated that there are different levels of training, all of which have been modernised. There is online training which can be undertaken in three months and more intense training for those who would provide advisory services. The estimated cost of training each volunteer was £800.
- b) A question was asked as to whether training was accredited and the reply was that it was not currently, but would be if there was a need to specialise in certain areas, such as debt management.

- c) In relation to homelessness the Chief Officer indicated that there was a legal description which was used by the housing options team within the council, but there is also 'hidden homelessness' which are those people not intentionally homeless, such as people who are sofa surfing, but not a priority need.

RESOLVED:

That the Chief Officer of Rossendale CAB be thanked for the informative presentation.

8 COMMUNITY LEISURE ASSOCIATION WHITWORTH (CLAW) ANNUAL REPORT

The Secretary and Trustee of CLAW presented the Annual Report and Financial Report up to July 2016.

She indicated that without the support of the Council the pool would possibly have to close. There are numerous repairs needed within the pool, such as the changing rooms which could potentially be a trip hazard. Work is being undertaken in August to improve both changing facilities at a cost of £18k per changing room. During the upgrade one changing room would have to close, although cubicles are available for use.

A new boiler would also be required shortly.

Some of the key achievements for CLAW, which was highlighted in the report were as follow.

- Increase in bookings, especially weddings for 2016/17
- Increase in swimming lessons
- Introduction of social media at both the Riverside and the Pool, which has led to an increase in their customer network
- Increase in footfall at both facilities
- School Prom Nights have increased with six having been held this year and 2 advanced booking for the next year
- New café area and the introduction of party packages to include food

A number of questions were raised by members to which the Secretary and Trustee of CLAW responded.

- a) A question was asked about CLAW's reserve levels and what they currently were. A response indicated that the unrestricted budget was £100k but this would be used to pay for the new changing rooms, boiler and any other upgrades required.
- b) When asked about why the Council grant had changed in 2014/15, when it was only £49k and 2015/16 it was £60k. The Secretary confirmed that this was because the council had given CLAW some money for work needed and this then reduced their annual grant.

- c) In relation to a question about in-house catering, it was confirmed that they now produce buffets and hot suppers and no external caterers other than Lords are allowed on any future bookings. Improvements were required on the kitchen facilities in order to introduce additional catering.
- d) In relation to the take up of swimming lessons by the school, it was confirmed that all Whitworth schools use the facility, along with 6 from Bacup and 5 from Rochdale, with capacity for more schools.
- e) The Chair asked why there was no Council representative on the CLAW Board and the Trustee indicated that there use to be. A question therefore was asked whether this could be looked into and the Scrutiny Support Officer agreed to make further enquiries.
- f) A member of the public asked whether CLAW would still need the subsidy from the Council in the next 10 years and it was confirmed that it would and longer term more Board members were needed.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the Secretary/Trustee of CLAW be thanked for the presentation.
- 2. That a letter be sent to CLAW Board asking for a Council representative to sit on their Board.

9. EMPTY HOMES PROJECT UPDATE

The Housing Co-ordinator provided an update on the empty homes project following the demise of the managing agenda in 2015.

Rossendale Borough Council was appointed the lead authority for the delivery of the East Lancashire Homes scheme in 2012 when AAW was appointed as the agent on behalf of the Council. On 31st January 2015 the Directors of AAW informed the Council they had been advised to cease trading with immediate effect.

Rossendale Borough Council was responsible for 355 properties in total and had made completion payments to AAW in respect of 117 properties where AAW's records indicated that the properties were ready to let, expenditure for these 117 properties were circa.£1.3m. There were also significant rental arrears owing to AAW circa. £400k, and no system in place to recover the arrears.

The Council also became responsible for the empty homes council tax on circa 200 properties, with significant properties also underoccupied and consequently there were housing benefit shortfalls. AAW had not handed over all the monies collected from property owners to RBC.

Immediate action was taken by the Council in the aftermath of AAW by introducing a system for tenants to request repairs and utilised Greenvale Homes to provide an out of hours number. The Council also utilised two former AAW employees to assist tenants to complete Housing Benefit and Discretionary Housing Benefit forms.

Tenants were awarded the annualised equivalent of £90,000 per annum . Agents were also commissioned to undertake stock condition surveys of the properties.

In July 2011, the Council appointed the Housing Co-ordinator who established a number of immediate priorities which included recruiting a very experienced team of social housing staff, which their work included a backlog of repairs and renovated 40 properties by Autumn 2015.

The new Rossendale Housing service has turned around a failed initiative and begun to deliver on the promises of the Empty Homes Scheme for East Lancashire. The Housing Co-ordinator highlighted to the committee some of the key achievements.

They had a commitment to renovate properties and these were assessed by qualified contractors. Fifty homes were finalised by end May 2016 and 50 were put on hold whilst negotiations took place with the owners for additional work that was needed.

The current existing strategy is to transfer all refurbished and tenanted properties to a qualified housing provider. Therefore, it is proposed to seek, through competitive tender and appropriate due diligence, a competent and able managing agent to carry out the service on behalf of the council.

The Housing Co-ordinator explained how the proposed managing agent would provide the service.

If a suitable partner can be found and soft marketing testing by Officers have demonstrated there is interest from registered providers, it is envisaged that the housing service can be transferred by the end of summer.

A number of questions were asked by members of the committee and public, which the Housing Co-ordinator responded as follows:

- a) A question was asked about a prediction of costs and the Head of Finance indicated that the Council had set aside £2m of reserves and in 2014/15 costs were £300k and 2015/16 £900k, with £1.1m set aside for tenders. Once a new agent had been found and the properties have been handed to them. That is the time the Council would know how much the final cost to the council would have been.
- b) A member of the public asked if the homes qualified for New Homes Bonus. The Head of Finance explained that the return of empty homes did qualify for new homes bonus and was worth approximately £900 per property (currently for 6 yrs) to each district.
- c) With regards to other local authorities involved in the scheme, a question was asked if Rossendale had received any offers from these authorities. The Housing Co-ordinator explained that they were having positive discussions with the other councils.

The Deputy Leader of the Council and the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny both asked that the Housing Co-ordinator pass on their thanks to the team for the good work that has already been undertaken and the positive action taken. The Committee were impressed about the amount of work done in such a short space of time.

The Housing Co-ordinator explained that during the transition period they would finish of the renovations and then hand over to the managing agent, should one be found.

RESOLVED: The the Housing Co-ordinator be thanked for presenting his update report.

10. FORWARD PLAN

The Committee noted the information within the Forward Plan.

A member asked a question as to what happened to confidential minutes and at what stage would they be exempt from publication. The Scrutiny Support Officer agreed to make enquiries and respond directly.

RESOLVED: That the information be noted.

The meeting closed at 8.12pm

Signed.....

Date