

SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD

Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Management Board held on Friday, 15th November 2013 at 10.30am in Meeting Room 7, Darby House, Telford

PRESENT: Councillors D. White (Chair), V. Fletcher, M. Ion, A. McClements, S. Reynolds, C. Turley.

IN ATTENDANCE: J. Green, STAY Project; S. Watkins, KIP Project; A. Olver, Maninplace; C. Jones, Assistant Director Family & Cohesion Services; J. Bedesha, Cohesion Manager; T. Keever, Home Improvement Team Leader; F. Bottrill, Scrutiny Group Specialist; S. Jones, Scrutiny Officer.

SMB-7 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meetings of the Scrutiny Management Board held on the 12th July 2013 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

SMB-8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr. S. Bentley

SMB-9 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

SMB-10 HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and reminded members that the purpose of the meeting was to consider and respond to the draft Homelessness Strategy as part of the consultation process and following evidence taken by the Board from providers at the previous meeting. He invited opening remarks from the officers present.

The Assistant Director informed members that the review of the strategy had included consideration of the responses to recommendations made by scrutiny in the report on Housing and Homelessness. The Cohesion Manager outlined the approach to developing the strategy and the process for agreeing it. Cabinet had endorsed the process in September and agreed a 6 week consultation until 29th November. A Homelessness Task Force had been set up under the Local Strategic Partnership as a strategic body to oversee the delivery of the strategy. There were three key elements to the strategy:

- To look at homelessness across the board and not just statutory duties
- How to develop services with partners
- The Council's responsibility towards Gypsies and Travellers

Members then asked questions and made comments on the strategy.

- The Chair asked officers how the public had been consulted on the strategy and the Manager said they had consulted through partners who work with service users.
- The Chair said in his view partners were working with some very vulnerable people. He was aware of someone who had been through the process and received excellent support but there was a clear need for accommodation. He welcomed views from providers in attendance and said we could not work without them.
 - Mr. Green from STAY said he thought the initial strategy had been disjointed but this strategy had a more joined-up approach. There was a better relationship with STAY and other voluntary sector providers and better buy-in from voluntary sector partners. The borough was facing increased needs and challenges and the only way they would be addressed was through the relationship between the Council and voluntary sector which was key to delivery.
 - Mr. Watkins said he was glad the Council had acknowledged there was an issue with non-statutory services. The difficulty was the limited options for people coming in to use the service. Maninplace was the first choice; the SAP (Single Allocation Panel) process was laborious and took time and the only other option was private landlords. The greatest difficulty was the massive increase in demand from 18-26 year olds to the point where there was no other option than to pass them on to private landlords which Mr. Watkins said was frustrating because he felt these young people were being let down and set up to fail and this was not a comfortable position
- Cllr. McClements said she had been a member of the Housing & Homelessness scrutiny review group which had identified concerns about partners not working together and about the lack of support for non-statutory homeless and was pleased that these issues had been picked up and looked at. She noted the strategy stated that the Homelessness Task Force would meet quarterly and asked for assurance from the partners that this was happening. Mr. Olver confirmed that partners met quarterly or more often around the issue of rough sleeping. The strategy endorsed the government's No Second Night Out vision and to enable Maninplace to adopt the model there had to be quality provision in place. The Night Inn had been developed from the Bleak Midwinter project as a point of access 365 days a year to emergency or temporary accommodation for non-statutory homeless as an alternative to B&B. The Night Inn (6 beds) had been full the night before and there had been one person in B&B – these 7 people might have slept rough if the service had not been there. Maninplace provided 70 places every night for people who may otherwise be sleeping rough or sofa surfing. People referred from KIP receive an element of support but with 70-80 people they do not all get the support they need and not enough to prevent them from reappearing so accommodation was essential. The second step was to help them get support and this is where there are opportunities to work better with the Council so they can help people access the right provision.

- The Cohesion Manager explained that the Homelessness Task Force was a strategic officers group for the Council and relevant partners (e.g. mental health services) to ensure all partners were aware of what support is available from the Council and other partners. In terms of young people, the Joint Allocation Panel and Single Allocation Panel put support around the child. The Home Improvement Team was looking at a social lettings and landlord accreditation schemes to help connect potential tenants with good quality accommodation with accredited landlords. The Chair said in his view some private rented accommodation was very poor quality and not fit for young people and the Manager said there were some poor landlords but the Home Improvement Agency was working on this with property services and to help bring empties back to use. The Team Leader said that bringing empties back to use was a long-term strategy - they were aware that there were some rogue landlords and were working with scrutiny to look at this issue.
- Cllr. Fletcher asked what measures were in place to take action with rogue landlords or owners. The Team Leader said the Council could inspect and serve notice to improve if a property falls below statutory health or safety or environmental standards. The landlord is responsible for the carrying out the work. If they refuse, in some circumstances the Council will carry out the work and charge the landlord. The Cohesion Manager said for landlords to become accredited and for the Council to deal with them the properties should meet the Decent Homes standard defined by Shelter. In the past, property and people had been managed by different teams but they were now working together to make sure that a) the Council is dealing with properties that meet the Decent Homes standard with responsible landlords and are appropriate to people's needs and b) people are supported to get them tenant-ready, e.g. people with complex needs identified through the Troubled Families work. This was a long journey and the infrastructure was being put in place although resources were reducing.
- The Chair reminded members that a £150k investment had been made to bring empty properties in Sutton Hill back to use. Mr. Olver said that he had to negotiate leases with private landlords which could be expensive but was the only option and said it would be helpful if the empty properties work could help identify properties which were less expensive to run – this would make an enormous difference. The Team Leader said they were working with owners of empty properties to marry up supply with demand. Often there were emotional reasons why properties were empty such as bereavement so they were working with bereaved owners who needed a lot of handholding – it was not easy and could be a long process to bring the property back to use. Enforcement was only considered if owners are un-cooperative. They had recently written to owners of empty properties to offer them help and there had been a positive response from many with whom they were now working to help bring the empties back to use or to market. The Chair said he would prefer to use money on houses which could be rented socially and the Team Leader explained that the money ring-fenced for Sutton Hill was for loans which had to be repaid so the money could be recycled.

- Cllr. McClements said the Co-operative & Communities Scrutiny Committee had been looking at the welfare benefit reforms and was now interested in looking at the issue of debt and wanted to know if the providers had noticed any issues which the Committee may be interested to hear about. Mr. Olver said they had an immediate problem if people had their benefit sanctioned – they did not want to make people homeless because they had no money, but Maninplace was a community business and needed a contribution to the rent. Cllr. White asked if Maninplace had experienced difficulties with people moving in and out of work paying rent. Mr. Olver said there had been an issue with the non-payment of £10,700 worth of housing benefits but he had raised this with the Benefits Manager who had put an immediate plan in place to resolve the issue. Maninplace was not in business to make money, but a deficit of that amount could make or break the organisation. On further questioning Mr. Olver said the issue dated back to July but had been astounded by how quickly the Benefits Manager had taken action and the new system was set up to circumvent previous issues and they were having weekly meetings to turn around the back-log. Cllr. Ion said that members had sought and received assurance that the Homeless Task Force met quarterly, but the Scrutiny Management Board needed assurance that the financial issues had been resolved and he requested a report back to the Board at a future meeting. The Assistant Director said the Board could receive copies of the Homeless Task Force reports if they tied in – the issue with Maninplace had been raised with relevant Assistant Directors who were working to sort it out.
- The Chair referred again to support for vulnerable people and said he believed mental health services had a big role to play. The Manager said there had been an issue identified with people being discharged or self-discharging from hospital with no support in place and the Hospital to Home protocol had been put in place to ensure support was put in place before people left hospital. This had been developed with partners so that vulnerable people were not discharged with nowhere to go.
- The Manager drew attention to various ideas in the action plan including; converting one of the houses currently used for victims of domestic abuse (but not suitable for the purpose) into non-statutory homeless provision and one bed-roomed emergency accommodation, setting up a hub and crash pad for young people, and looking at options for Dodmoor Grange. He said there was a need to be more creative in involving young people in tenancies. Mr. Green informed members that STAY was working with Bromford on a supported housing project for young people with higher complex needs. A site had been identified for a 16 bed facility with 4 move-on flats on the same site. A planning application was due to be submitted soon and they were hoping to start work on-site in May/June with handover early 2015. This would go some way to filling the gap in left by the closure of Wesley House. There had been an increase in young people presenting at KIP (125 under-26s in 2011/12, 125 by September 2012/13) – the Bromford scheme would fill some of the gap but not all of it. Clarification about what was happening with Wesley House would be circulated after the meeting. The Chair said he was pleased to hear about the Bromford scheme and other members agreed.

- Cllr. Fletcher asked if STAY still provided mentoring to help get young people back home and whether they worked with the cohesion team. Mr. Green confirmed that they did and they had developed a very positive relationship with the safeguarding team so that when a young person presents they can have a conversation.
- The Chair wanted to know who owned the strategy. The Assistant Director said it was the Council's strategy but reflected the joint work of the Council and partners and further reports could be brought back to the Board.
- Cllr. McClements said the Gypsy and Traveller provision was an important part of the strategy which the Board should consider especially because there had been a lot of concerns from local residents and businesses about the challenges. The Cohesion Manager said there were a number of strands of work. As a Business Winning Council, Telford & Wrekin was working to attract business investment and there had been issues with unlawful encampments. The Council had a duty to provide for gypsies and travellers. There were 2 sites in the borough which were both full, and with a waiting list, and unlawful encampments had therefore sprung up. A transit site was required to accommodate people on unlawful encampments and to enable enforcement. If the Council offered people on an unlawful encampment a place on a transit site and the place was not accepted, the Police have powers to seize vehicles and move them out of the borough. If the Council cannot offer them a place the Police and Council have no powers to move them on from the unlawful encampment unless they are infringing the highway. It was therefore important to be able to provide a transit site and the Council had been working with the HCA to identify a suitable site. The proposal was to establish a temporary transit site with a view to having a permanent transit site. The Chair said it would be important to control the site to ensure it remained a transit site and did not become a permanent site. The Assistant Director said a planning application had been made for a transit site for 2 years in St. Georges. It was critical to get the licensing agreement right and a lot of work was being done with colleagues and the police to ensure there would be strict restrictions in place. The application was for a temporary transit site and it was also necessary to identify a permanent transit site. The risk with transit sites was that they become permanent sites and lose their transit status. If the permanent sites are full, the authority has no alternative accommodation to offer people on unlawful encampments and loses its powers of enforcement. Officers were looking at the impacts of the site and consulting with local businesses and local people. Sometimes there was a lot of ignorance about gypsies and travellers.
- Cllr. Ion said there were three points he would like to follow up:
 - Prevention was a big area of work and should be looked at further. Mr. Olver said they were taking on more long-term properties and developing high-spec accommodation to prevent homelessness, for example an old solicitors' office was being developed into a 15 en suite bed-sit units with a shared kitchen. The Chair said he had been involved in homelessness issues for a long time as was grateful for Mr.

- Olver's work over that time.
 - An update on how the accounting issues referred to by Mr. Olver had been resolved should be brought to the next meeting. This was agreed.
 - A further report on the empty properties work should be brought back to the Board. Cllr. Turley reminded members that the Housing, Economy & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee was looking at this issue and would be making a report which could come back to the Board.
- In terms of the launch of the strategy, the consultation would close in 2 weeks and a report would be taken back to Cabinet. The providers suggested launching the strategy at the same time as a homelessness event in December at Meeting Point House. It was hoped the Bleak Midwinter project could be launched at the same time. People were being invited to access pop-up tents and post photos of them in locations around the borough on Facebook and Twitter to raise consciousness about rough sleeping in the winter, although Mr. Olver said the vision was for No First Night Out and to get people into a bed and not a tent but at the moment they had no other option.

When there were no further questions the officers and providers left the meeting.

SMB-11 PLANNING THE SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14

It was noted that the two year Scrutiny Work Programme would end in May 2014 and it was agreed that a report would be brought to a future meeting with a proposal for the process for setting the work programme for 2014/15.

SMB-12 CHAIRS' UPDATES

- Cllr. Ion reported on the recommendation of the Children & Young People and Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committees to increase the base budget for children in care placements. The recommendation had cross-party support and he felt it had been well received by the Cabinet member as part of the debate. The rationale for the recommendation was that children in care are a core priority for all local authorities and the Council's budget should reflect this. It would also help take the politics out of it. Cllr. Reynolds said the recommendation was not meant to detract from the hard work that had been done to make savings which should be recognised but had been offset by the cost of new admissions. Cllr. Ion said the challenges would not go away and the recommendation was about committing the budget because children in care were so important. He said there had been a consensus on both Scrutiny Committees and the members would be failing in their duty if they did not say what they thought and make this recommendation. It was now up to Cabinet to agree or disagree with the recommendation. The Chair agreed that the Council needed to decide its priorities and he was concerned that vulnerable people may be hit because of the need to make savings. Cllr. Ion reminded members that the LGA projections for local authority funding was that by 2020 about 90% of Councils' budgets would

be spent on children's services, adult services and environmental services. The Chair expressed his full support for the recommendation and sought agreement from other members that the Board to formally endorse the recommendation, and this was agreed. The Chair also said that a similar debate needed to be held about the adult care budget. He was also concerned that the opportunity to save money by reducing the frequency of garden waste collections during the winter had been missed in the new waste contract.

RESOLVED: That the Board endorses the recommendation of the Budget & Finance and Children & Young People Scrutiny Committees to increase the base budget for children in care placements.

- The Chair Cllr. White reported the West Midlands Scrutiny Network had continued its focus on developing links with Select Committees. David Natzler, Director General of Chamber and Committee Services to Parliament, had attended a meeting hosted by Telford & Wrekin to explore ways for the network to work more effectively with the Select Committees. Telford & Wrekin had co-ordinated a submission from the network to a Health Select Committee call for evidence which was used as an example. As part of his role as Chair of the Network Cllr. White had attended the National Overview & Scrutiny Forum in hosted by the Centre for Public Scrutiny which and the agenda included a discussion about the role of local authorities and scrutiny in education. The Health & Adult Care Scrutiny Committee was finalising recommendations on the Community Meals Review. The Joint HOSC was meeting in December as part of the NHS Call to Action.
- Cllr. McClements reported that the Co-operative & Communities Scrutiny Committee has completed the review of the Employee Commission and Co-operative Values and the recommendations from the report were tabled. She felt the review had been a very positive experience and a good opportunity to promote scrutiny. Staff had been very open and honest in their views. The overall conclusions were that generally morale was good and some staff said it was good compared to other authorities. Team briefs had been identified as the best way to communicate with staff. The report highlighted some areas of good practice. Staff had raised time constraints as a key reason for lack on involvement in the Employee Commission or to reading e-mails. There were a number of recommendations which had been presented to SMT and Cabinet, and the Board were asked to note the recommendations for Scrutiny.
- Cllr. Turley updated members on the work of the Housing, Economy & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee. The key pieces of work were the waste procurement process, the review of empty properties and rogue landlords which was underway and the consultation process for Shaping Places.
- Cllr. Reynolds update members on the work of the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee. Key issues looked at were the children in care placement budget as reported by Cllr. Ion, capital receipts with the Audit Committee and the welfare benefit reforms with the Co-operative &

Communities Scrutiny Committee. Cllr. Reynolds was pleased to note that the Managing Director had presented the Council's Way Forward at a number of staff engagement sessions following a recommendation from scrutiny. Key issues for the future were the adult care budget and the budget proposals.

SMB-13 SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD WORK PROGRAMME

The time and date of the next meeting were noted. It was agreed that the agenda items would be agreed by the Chair.

The meeting ended at 12.45pm.

Chairman:

Date: