

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
VALUE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Town Hall, Main Road, Romford
22 November 2012 (6.00 - 7.15 pm)**

Present:

Councillors Robby Misir (Chairman), Ray Morgon (Vice-Chair), Damian White, Wendy Brice-Thompson and Frederick Thompson

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ted Eden, Councillor Ron Ower and Councillor Billy Taylor

+Councillors Wendy Brice-Thompson and Frederick Thompson substituted in the place of Councillors Eden and Taylor.

The Chairman reminded Members of the action to be taken in an emergency.

15 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11 October 2012 was agreed as a correct record and signed by the chairman.

16 PRESENTATION ON PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

At the request of the Committee, the Property Strategy Manager provided an overview of the work of the Strategic Property Services and how it keeps a check on council owned land to avoid encroachment.

The Committee noted the following key point of the presentation:

1. That 16% of the borough was largely parks and country parks.
2. That unregistered land regulation entails that the Limitation Act of 1980 states that a squatter must remain in adverse possession for 12 years at which point the paper owner's title to the land is extinguished.
3. That the service had been carrying out registration of all council owned land the exercise had that has taken over three years had resulted in about 3000 land titles.

In response to an enquiry on land ownership claims, the Committee was informed that the Council vigorously defend every claim as a result of a comprehensive record kept in the Town Hall.

That all the council owned land was now available on GIS and registered.

In reply to unregistered land that may also be unkept. The Committee was informed that the service on behalf of the council does not have any right to takeover such piece of land.

The Committee was informed that the council does own ransom strip (a small piece of land retained by the Seller of the land when the land is sold). The Seller retains the small piece of land (Ransom Strip) as a mechanism for retaining control over the use and/or development of the land. The Committee was informed that the council owns some strip but had no interest to takeover any such land that it did not own.

17 **PRESENTATION ON CRM SYSTEM**

Following a request by the Committee, the Head of Customer Services provided a flow chart presentation of how a Streetcare complaint raised on Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system was progressed/acted upon.

The Committee was informed that every call is logged on CRM for the relevant service, as part of the authentication process the staff member would need to identify the customer and service required, in this scenario, Streetcare (reporting a pothole).

The next stage of the logging process would require the staff member to search for location of pothole by taking as much details as possible, following which this the case is passed to the back office to arrange a visit and inspect the pot hole.

Once the visit takes place, back office staff would have to update the case and arrange for the repairs to be carried out. At this stage the CRM case would be closed. In response to an enquiry on how the resident is informed that the job had been completed, Members were informed that the CRM system is programmed to send out only an email outcome to resident and as such any complaint without an email address would not receive an outcome.

The Committee was informed that the customer satisfaction result following a call enquiry was in the mid-80s.

The Committee identified the following points of enquiry:

1. Who takes ownership of CRM issue in Streetcare

2. Who monitors Streetcare CRM issues
3. What step does Streetcare take on receipt of CRM complaint.
4. Members raised the issue of no evidence of escalation process for service request.

The Committee requested that the head of Streetcare attend the next meeting to give further insight on Streetcare services performances.

The Committee was also informed that other services that use the CRM system included Parking Services and Revenues & Benefits.

The Committee was also taken through a three tier model approach that is in operation with Customer Services and the Customer Services approach to Development and Building Control enquiries.

The Committee noted the presentation.

18 **MONITOR OF CABINET REPORTS**

As part of the monitoring of Cabinet reports, the Committee was informed that the following two reports were up for review.

The Committee decided not to take any further action on the two Cabinet reports that were due for review. These are:

1. Corporate strategy 2011-2014 – (They were of the opinion that an update report was imminent in the new year)
2. Localisation of Council Tax support – (They agreed that following the completion of the consultation, another Cabinet report was due shortly and work on this area was also being progressed via the Committee's Council Tax topic group)

19 **HOMES & HOUSING - AGE OF RENT DEBT**

The committee received an update report on Aged Debt profile in Homes and Housing. The report table outlined rent arrears cases which were more than 2 years in age. The following data was a snapshot of the number of cases broken down into the no. of weeks the account has owed rent with the last action taken when the report was produced.

- Of the 576 cases reported on 23 October 2012, 11 have cleared their arrears and 3 are now voids leaving the current number of 562 cases.
- Profiles – of the 562 cases that had been in arrears over 2 years, 36 were on no current action to pre-notice stages, 111 had current

notices against them, 74 cases were at court stage while 341 had court orders against them.

- Specifically relating to the one case which had been in arrears for 91+ weeks at pre-notice stage, this was a vulnerable case where work was being done through an agency. The tenant had an arrangement which was being kept.
- Cases with no current action were generally because the arrears owed were less than 2 weeks debit or they had a repayment arrangement in place.
- Cases remain at the last action they were on regardless of the amount of debt owed and only go back to no status when the account had cleared.
- Cases at court stage were not progressed if (a) there was a repayment arrangement in place (b) the amount owed is less than £150 if only water rate payments or less than 4 weeks full rent.
- Court orders included all cases that had been to court and had orders including warrant suspensions.
- Notices were served when an account is £50 in arrears if water rate payments or 4 weeks full rent. Where there was an arrangement in place, these are re-served to protect the Council's interest as notices expire after one year.

The Committee agreed that they would have age of debt update as a standing item of future meetings.

The Committee noted the update report.

20 **VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR ORGANISATIONS SUMMARY OF FUNDING - UPDATE**

As part of the Committee's work programme, a report that provided Members with an overview of the grants and contracts in place with voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations over the last two financial years was considered.

The report detailed that in the period 2011/12, the total value of grants and contracts awarded by the council to the VCS was £7.16m and in 2010/11 the figure was £7.75m. Some of these funding comes from the Council's budget while the other was from external grants received such as from the Local Area Agreement Performance Reward Grant which funds the Community Chest grassroots grants programme.

The report detailed that despite the reductions in government funding, the Council had largely cushioned the voluntary sector from the impact of these cuts, with funding remaining fairly constant between 2010/11 and 2011/12, reflecting the important role these services played in the community.

The Council adopted a mixed grants and commissioning approach, depending on the nature of the service and size of the grant and aims to get maximum value for money out of all of its investments into the sector.

The Council was developing a community engagement strategy which would set out a new relationship between the council and the community and a commitment to working closely with the voluntary and community sector in Havering in delivering services for local people and improving the quality of life in Havering.

The report informed the Committee that it was anticipated that the strategy would go out for consultation in December and will be ratified by Cabinet in March 2013.

The Committee noted the report.

21 **DISUSED LAND ADJACENT TO MELVILLE ROAD ALLOTMENTS, RAINHAM – REQUISITION OF CABINET DECISION**

The following report was considered and was submitted with the agreement of the Chairman as an urgent matter pursuant to Section 100B (4) of the Local Government Act 1972.

In accordance with paragraph 17 of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee rules, a requisition signed by two Members representing more than one Group (Councillors Keith Darvill and Jeffery Tucker) had called in a decision of the Cabinet dated 7 November 2012.

Cabinet decided:

1. That the disused land adjacent to Melville Road Allotments be declared surplus and authorisation be given for a disposal of about 1.53 acres and for the creation of additional allotment plots in respect of about 0.6 acres of land in accordance with the allotment waiting list requirements for the site. The disposal will be subject to obtaining any necessary planning permissions and other consents as appropriate. The Property Strategy Manager in consultation with the Assistant Chief Executive (Legal and Democratic Services) to be authorised to deal with all matters arising and thereafter to complete the disposal of the site identified. The disposal will be subject to the approval of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.
2. To approve the principle that the land should be appropriated for planning purposes subject to the relevant statutory processes and that the Property Strategy Manager, in consultation with the Assistant Chief Executive (Legal & Democratic Services) be authorised to undertake these processes and for the Lead Member for Value to

consider any objections received and whether to confirm the appropriation.

The report that Cabinet considered detailed that:

- 1.1 At various occasions over the last few years Cabinet approval had been given to the disposal of a number of Council owned sites that had been identified as surplus either as a result of specific projects or more general property reviews carried out by Strategic Property Services.
- 1.2 As the Council had pursued a policy of selling surplus sites for many years it became more difficult to identify new sites for disposal that did not pose challenges, either technically or in terms of planning, and especially in respect of objections to disposal that arise in many cases. Nonetheless, constant and ongoing appraisal of property assets to identify disposal opportunities was a requirement on all local authorities and at Havering was essential in providing capital receipts to fund spending to support and enhance Council services.
- 1.3 The report identified a site comprising of 2.13 acres of land adjoining Melville Road allotments that had remained unused for 24 years. It was recommended that the site would be re-used in part to extend the adjoining allotment site with the remainder being sold for residential development.

Reasons for Requisition:

The decision was requisitioned for the following reasons:

- Before making the decision to appropriate land, change its use and dispose for development details of the borough wide and local/ward area demand for allotments (including current waiting lists) should be disclosed in the Cabinet report and be fully taken into account.
- Subject to consultation with local allotment societies and the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners before such land is deemed surplus and available for disposal alternative community use of the land should be considered and form part of the report to Cabinet.

The Cabinet Member for Value informed the Committee that over the last few years Cabinet had considered several reports that dealt with the results of a number of systematic property reviews and service led projects that identified surplus property assets. As a result of this consideration, approval had been given to a number of property disposals.

The Council's Asset Management Plan stated that land and property assets would only remain in Council ownership if they:

- needed to be retained in Council control for the provision of services
- were of great value to the Council, community and other stakeholders and were in need of the degree of protection from development or other uses afforded only by ownership
- were investment properties providing a financial return that could fully satisfy relevant investment criteria

Cabinet had agreed to dispose of the land in order to improve the efficiency of the Council's portfolio of land and property assets and to generate further capital receipts it was important to ensure that surplus assets continued to be identified for disposal. It was also good practise to appropriate to formally acknowledge a proposed change of use for the site.

The Cabinet Member added that the demand for allotment sites had been taken into consideration as had the length of the allotment waiting list. Twenty new plots would also be created at this site.

The Committee sought and received the following clarification on the process relating to the decision to dispose of the land:

- In response, the Property Strategy Manager informed the Committee that officers and the Hornchurch and District Allotments & Gardening Society Limited who were responsible for the existing allotments had been in discussion on the Council's plan for the site. He confirmed that there was no other alternative community use for the land.
- In reply to a Member enquiry, it was confirmed that the site to be disposed of was currently not part of the existing allotment. It was not attracting rubbish and was in fact a fenced up and over grown area of "white land"

Following this, the matter was put to a vote. The Committee voted unanimously **not** to uphold the requisition.

Chairman

