

## **Review Committee – 15 November 2011**

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Minutes of the meeting of the **Review Committee** held on **15 November 2011** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr Mrs J R Lumley  
Vice-Chairman: Mrs H L A Glynn

Cllr Mrs P Aves  
Cllr Mrs A V Hale  
Cllr J R F Mason

Cllr R D Pointer  
Cllr I H Ward

### **VISITING MEMBERS**

Cllr M Maddocks and Cllr M J Steptoe

### **ALSO PRESENT**

C Dimond	-	Regional Manager, Fountains Ltd
P Crabb	-	Contract Manager (Rochford), Fountains Ltd
D Farrey	-	Contract Manager for the South East, Fountains Ltd

### **OFFICERS PRESENT**

J Bourne	-	Head of Community Services
R Evans	-	Head of Environmental Services
M Hotten	-	Open Spaces Manager
P Gowers	-	Overview and Scrutiny Officer
M Power	-	Committee Administrator

### **264 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2011 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

### **265 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Cllr Mrs A V Hale declared a personal interest in Item 7 of the Agenda by virtue of being a member of the Rochford Housing Association Board.

### **266 FOUNTAINS LTD**

The Committee heard from Claire Dimond, P Crabb and D Farrey from Fountains Ltd on the Council's grounds maintenance contract.

In response to questions, the following was noted:-

- Fountains Ltd maintains the District's football pitches. A high percentage of available pitches are not currently rented on Saturdays, partly due to two Saturday football leagues having been disbanded this year. Swayne Park has three children's sized football pitches, none of which has been let. A football club that has expressed an interest in leasing these pitches

exclusively requires permission to erect a portacabin before terms can be agreed. The recent increase in hiring costs may have had an impact on the level of pitch hirings. If necessary it would be possible to adapt children's pitches to adults' pitches. Where possible pitches are hired to clubs within the District.

- Fountains Ltd would be involved in the Football Association requirement that the size of youth pitches be changed from 2013; there are currently none of this size in the District. Fountains confirmed that it has no contingency fund in place to deal with unexpected issues/expense relating to pitches, a situation that they would be reviewing. There is a rolling programme of improvements to pavilions as part of the Council's capital programme.
- The average age of the Fountains workforce on the Rochford contract is 40 plus, with retention of staff one of the highest in the group. As some staff are approaching retirement age, a plan had been designed that will facilitate the transfer of skills to new employees. An apprentice has recently been employed as part of the workforce. The figures showing workforce days of sickness include an employee on long-term sick leave, which adversely affects the average. Fountains are required to employ additional employees to cover sickness, at their own cost.
- Historically, the Connaught plc financial year end was September. Financial year-end reports are currently being finalised to cover the first year of the group trading as Fountains Ltd; these reports will be published to Rochford District Council.
- The District's childrens' play areas are inspected daily and reports of issues such as graffiti or broken glass are dealt with as a matter of urgency.
- The role of Operations Manager, which was currently vacant, was being examined to establish whether it should be replaced in its current form or whether it could be incorporated within another support function.
- The continuous improvement fund is reserved for service improvements or to cover unanticipated issues within the contract. The contractor pays in an amount each year; the fund currently stands at £11,000 and the Partnership Board will decide how this money should be spent.
- Fountains staff maintain the District's cemeteries and dig the graves.
- The new cemetery extension is in the process of being developed and the access road has been completed. This has yet to be handed over to Fountains to manage.
- Grass cutting in the District is undertaken in parks, open spaces and rural verges in accordance with the contract.

### 267 CHOICE BASED LETTING SCHEME

The Portfolio Holder for Council Tax Collection, Benefits and Strategic Housing Functions and the Head of Community Services provided an update on the Authority's Choice Based Letting Scheme.

In response to Member questions, the following responses were given:-

- The Government proposals for a choice-based letting scheme have now been watered down. Rochford District Council has retained a choice-based letting system as part of the new allocations policy for letting social housing and has introduced a banding system to replace the points system previously used, which will simplify the process. Residents will be contacted by phone strictly in the order that they appear on the register to ascertain whether they are interested in the property. A short list of people who are interested in being considered will then be nominated to the Housing Association. A local connection is still a primary factor in determining allocation of housing within this system.
- There are currently approximately 1200 people on the Council's housing register. Although anyone can apply to be put on the housing register, those with a high need, such as homelessness or urgent medical issues, will be considered as high priority and placed in Band A, as long as they have an appropriate connection to Rochford. Last year there were only approximately 120 nominations for housing made by the Council to Housing Associations. The void period for social housing is much shorter than it used to be and properties are allocated rapidly.
- Although figures relating to waiting lists are not currently published, applicants can telephone the Council to find out their position on the register. A request was made that the number of people in each band be published on the Council's website in an appropriate place. The system can be interrogated to show a breakdown of the turnover levels in the various bands.
- There is no access to social housing outside the District or by reciprocal arrangement. Social housing lettings are retained within the District. Bed and breakfast accommodation in the Southend area is used. The Council currently has 42 households that are being housed in temporary accommodation. This figure is higher than it has been previously. Where temporary accommodation is used, people can still remain on the housing list. The topic of homelessness will be discussed at the forthcoming Member budget awayday.
- Although there is no requirement for residents to contact the Council if their circumstances change, a letter is sent annually to each person on the housing list asking if they wish to remain on the register.
- There is no penalty if an applicant turns down the offer of housing, although if they are homeless they do not have a choice. Members

requested that a copy of the Council's Housing Allocation policy be provided to all Members of the Committee.

### **268 ROCHFORD HOUSING ASSOCIATION (RHA)**

The Portfolio Holder for Council Tax Collection, Benefits and Strategic Housing Functions and the Head of Community Services provided an update on Rochford Housing Association.

Following discussion, the following was noted:-

- The Council retains a close relationship and a system of regular partnership meetings with RHA. Targets are being met in respect of refurbishment works and satisfaction levels among tenants are good. The one element where the RHA falls short is the requirement for the provision of 50 new affordable homes each year: none has been achieved to date. However, there are some new affordable housing units in developments at Rawreth Lane and in Rectory Road, Hawkwell, which have estimated completion dates of March 2012 and October 2012 respectively. There are further sites across the District in various stages of the planning process. There are also regular meetings held between representatives from the different housing associations in the District and the property developers with Council officers.
- Assurance was sought that the social housing planned as part of the various schemes currently underway in the District would become part of the RHA stock. It was confirmed that the three allocated houses in the Rectory Road scheme and the 23 units on Rawreth Lane will be placed on the social housing register.
- The 'Your Voice' residents' annual report indicates that RHA takes considerably longer than the best performing housing associations to respond to complaints and that new complaints are higher than the group average. This issue will be raised at the next partnership meeting and reported back to this Committee. The Committee requested that they receive the quarterly meeting minutes from officer meetings with RHA.
- Although the RHA tenants' forums are no longer in existence due to their limited strategic value, there are still many outlets for tenant involvement. There are four tenant representatives on the RHA Board and a tenant liaison officer. Residents are also represented on the interview panel for front-line RHA staff.
- Jonathan Mullins, Regional Development Manager at Sanctuary Housing Association, had asked to meet with the Portfolio Holder for Council Tax Collection, Benefits and Strategic Housing Functions on a regular basis. The RHA Managing Director of RHA, Emma Keegan, has offered to attend a Review Committee in the future if requested.

**269 THE FORWARD PLAN**

The Committee reviewed the Forward Plan and noted its contents.

The meeting closed at 9.32 pm.

Chairman .....

Date .....

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