

Minutes of a Meeting of the External Partnerships Select Committee held at Council Chamber, Surrey Heath House, Knoll Road, Camberley, GU15 3HD on 5 September 2023

+ Cllr Rob Lee (Chairman)
+ Cllr Mary Glauert (Vice Chairman)

+ Cllr Louise Ashbery	+ Cllr Lewis Mears
Cllr Jonny Cope	Cllr Jacques Olmo
Cllr Julie Hoad	Cllr Murray Rowlands
Cllr Sarbie Kang	Cllr Kevin Thompson
Cllr Liz Noble	Cllr Richard Wilson
Cllr Emma-Jane McGrath	

+ Present

- Apologies for absence presented

Substitutes: Cllr David O'Mahoney (In place of Cllr Julie Hoad), Cllr Ying Perrett (In place of Cllr Richard Wilson) and Cllr Bob Raikes (In place of Cllr Liz Noble)

Members in Attendance: Eddie Scott, Cllr Cliff Betton, Cllr Shaun Garrett, Cllr Nirmal Kang, Cllr Jonathan Quin, Cllr Shaun Macdonald, Sally Kipping, Renee France and Nick Steevens

Officers Present: XXX

7/EP Chair's Announcements and Welcome to Guests

The Chair welcomed Committee Members and guests to the meeting, and invited Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing (MTVH) to provide an update in respect of the remediation works taking place in relation to North Court, Upper Church Street, Camberley.

Following building safety investigations, initiated in 2020, it was found that there were cavity barriers in the external walls and around the windows, which needed to be upgraded. In addition, it was also found that there were cavity barriers which were all-together missing in common areas and flats, and there were areas where cables were passing through walls but unsealed gaps meant there was an inability to stop the spread of fire and smoke. Furthermore, many of the fire doors were poorly fitted or had damage.

MTVH planned remedial repairs work, in a programme of over 55 weeks. Commercial negotiations had been finalised, and the internal and external plans had been signed off by the Institution of Engineers. It was planned that works would take place with residents in situ; and works were comparable in anticipated levels of disruption as having a kitchen and bathroom replaced. It was affirmed that MTVH would be managing the communications and resident liaison throughout the process, as opposed to the contractor, Liang O'Rourke.

Moving forward in the interests of quality assurance, MTVH had appointed Tenos Ltd, as fire engineer to carry out inspections at an estimated 2 per month, including unannounced visits. Furthermore, a Customer Liaison Officer would aim to attend the site at least a month in order to keep up to date with the ongoing works.

Following Members' questions, the Committee were advised that during the course of the construction management of any development, which was the size of North Court, building control would normally visit on a fairly regular basis, notionally once a week in order to ascertain whether non-compliance was being achieved. This method of inspection routine would not provide full oversight of the build, and it was the responsibility of the developer to achieve compliance with building regulations. During routine visits building control surveyors from the Council did not identify any non-compliance with building regulations which weren't rectified.

It was acknowledged, that initially North Court residents were given an initial estimate of 70 weeks for the remediation works. This estimate was provided at an initial stage before provision of the full programme of work by Lang O'Rourke. Works were intended to ensure a EWS1 certification was achieved, and would satisfy required building safety certificates. MTVH would be in touch within 2 weeks in order to arrange residents' meetings, to give further detail in respect of the programme, including scheduled levels of disruption and diagrams, as well as indicative dates for internal works on specific units. It was emphasised by MTVH that internal works would be undertaken on a unit by unit basis in order to minimise length of disruption, and there would be a concerted effort to engage with residents on an individual basis.

8/EP Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 June 2023 were confirmed and signed by the Chair.

9/EP Declarations of Interest

Councillor Mary Glauert declared a non-pecuniary interest that she was the Council's Outside body appointment on Surrey Heath Age Concern.

Councillor Murray Rowlands declared a non-pecuniary interest that he was a trustee and volunteer of Camberley and District Job Club.

Councillor Shaun Garrett declared and it was noted for the record that he had previously been the Council's Outside Body appointment on Surrey Heath Age Concern and he was shortly due to appointed a trustee of the organisation, independent from the Council.

Councillor Shaun MacDonald declared and it was noted for the record that he was a regular donator to the Hope Hub.

10/EP Revenue Grants Introductory Background Paper

The Head of HR, Performance and Communications reminded the Committee that the consideration of the Council's Revenue Grants Scheme, was a key part of the Committee's Terms of Reference. It was explained that Revenue Grant holders would provide a very short summary of their reports, before Members' had an opportunity to ask the organisations' representatives, before it made assessments on potential recommendations to the Executive in respect of Revenue Grants for 24/25.

The Committee were also made aware that in contrast to what was written on the agenda front sheet, the correct name for the organisation which was subject of agenda item 12 was 'Camberley and District Job Club'.

11/EP Surrey Heath Citizens Advice (CASH)

Members asked as to the trends which CASH was observing in relation to those who sought advice. It was noted that there were an increased amount of people with debt and money problems, who were accessing CASH services and this was anticipated to increase as a result of higher levels of inflation, and as a result of higher interest rates. Whilst previously advice was provided to those with debts, CASH observed that an average person had on average approximately £30 at the end of the month to service or repay debts, now 60% faced the challenge of having a negative income. This was now also increasingly a phenomena which faced those in work.

CASH had fortunately been able to successfully bid for project funding to employ a third money advice advisor. However, it was increasingly hard for CASH to be able to recruit and retain the people with the right skills for the organisation.

With one of the highest percentage of properties owned via mortgages, CASH had slowly started to see a number of people who sought advice in relation to financial problems as a result of higher interest rates. It was added that Citizens Advice had campaigned nationally for a higher local housing allowance, as it was noted that the allowance wasn't high enough to rent a property within the borough. In addition, following Members' queries, it was not anticipated that there would be further Central Government money which was due to be received for a continuation of the Household Support Fund.

12/EP The Hope Hub

Following Members' questions on the how the Hope Hub worked with clients who were suffering from mental health conditions, it was advised that in 2019, 19 out of 100 clients had a diagnosed mental health need. Now 83 out of 100 clients now suffered from a diagnosed mental health condition. However, although the Hope Hub worked closely with GPs, NHS mental health teams and Adult Social Care, there was no uniform route for Hope Hub Clients to receive treatment.

It was noted that there were hurdles for clients who suffered from mental health conditions but took substances, and in addition the Hope Hub sometimes came to different mental health needs assessments to the NHS and it was not uncommon that on first engaging with the organisation that clients were on the wrong medication.

Whilst it was acknowledged that the Hope Hub's building located behind Camberley Library could benefit from being renovated in the long term, the Committee were advised that the building was not currently a barrier from the services which The Hope Hub wanted to provide. Whilst roof repairs had to recently be undertaken, the building was structurally sound and the charity benefitted from 3000 square foot to provide its services.

Members congratulated the Hope Hub on the success of the recent One-Pot Cooking scheme, which had been the focus of very positive feedback. It was noted that the scheme would benefit from more funding, such as from Councillors' Ward Councillor funds.

13/EP Voluntary Support North Surrey (VSNS) and VSNS Time to Talk Project

The importance of the work of Voluntary Support North Surrey in the provision of support, the infrastructure and the offer of advice and the legal framework for the third sector was highlighted by the Committee.

Following questioning from members of the Committee, a discussion ensued which acknowledged the merits of longer-term funding, and potential ring-fenced revenue grant funding for Surrey Heath third-sector organisations. Longer-term guaranteed funding allowed VSNS and other third sector organisations to better plan and commit to staff and projects. It also allowed less time to spent on writing grant applications, which was estimated to total at roughly 16 hours per funding bid; which for VSNS was exacerbated by its operation over multiple borough and districts.

Kate Sawdy, Chief Executive, CASH, emphasised that over the whole of the third sector, long-term funding eased difficulties relating to the recruitment and retention of staff. Long-term funding, which resulted in longer contracts for key roles, meant a better calibre of staff could be recruited and benefited from. It was noted that roles, which relied on one year project funding, in reality suffered from staff being trained during the first 6 months of the role, before they looked towards new opportunities at the end of their year-long contract. It was added by further third sector representatives that secure, longer-term funding also allowed charities to invest time and money in developments to secure alternative funding streams and raise funds, instead of having to prioritise short-term matters.

14/EP Basingstoke Canal Authority

The Basingstoke Canal Authority was a partnership between Hampshire County Council, Surrey County Council, supported by 6 Borough and District Councils.

Following Members' questions and comments, it was noted that despite employing 6 rangers, 3-4 part time members of staff, and an Operations Manager, although currently a vacant post, the Canal was largely free to use. Moreover, the value of the canal was highlighted during the pandemic, where at the height of lockdown canal towpath usage trebled. Canal usage has continued to be higher than pre-pandemic levels and it was acknowledged that the effect of recreation on the canal had a positive effect on local residents' mental health.

Members enquired as to the effect of climate change on the management of the canal. It was noted that during last summer's drought, the canal became unnavigable for the first time. Furthermore, larger areas of development and high levels of surface run off meant it was becoming increasingly important for the canal to act as body for water attenuation. The canal's capacity was increased by careful management of the canal prior to high levels of rainfall by trimming water levels before forecasted high levels of precipitation.

15/EP Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership

The Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership (a partnership project between Hampshire County Council, other local authorities and community organisations) worked to improve and maintain and conserve the River Blackwater and the many open green spaces which sat alongside it.

The Partnership worked with the Council on the maintaining and the enhancement of its greenspaces. The Partnership worked alongside the Council to maintain paths, and mow grass at sites including Diamond Ridge Woods, St Catherine's Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG), Blackwater Park and Turf Hill Park.

Following Members' prompts to give some further information on the meadow and tree-planting work which the partnership had undertaken, it was stated that it had recently adopted the management of the Waters Edge SANG, which was still under developer control, but had not be maintained. Moreover the Partnership worked in close association with groups such as the Surrey Heath Tree Wardens and the Friends of Frimley Fuel Allotments.

16/EP Surrey Heath Age Concern

Surrey Heath Age Concern's mission was to prevent loneliness and isolation amongst the elderly. Surrey Heath Age Concern (SHAC), mostly supported the elderly who suffered from isolation and their spouse had either passed away or move into care.

SHAC's most notable service was a befriending service which was provided in person and via the phone. It also ran the Rainbow Café which had recently transitioned to becoming more of a community café. SHAC also provided tea parties, agility classes, in partnership with Places Leisure, and a cinema club and Fish and Chips Lunch Club. All Activities were provided with the aim of reducing social isolationism and loneliness.

At the moment SHAC's befriending service was provided by 50 volunteers and coordinated by a social prescriber who worked 2 and a half days a week and was at capacity. It was noted from the Committee's questioning that circa 45% of CASH's clients suffered from long term health conditions or a disability which meant they were housebound. This only reinforced the importance of befriending services. In addition, it was remarked and acknowledged by the Committee that SHAC's befriending service and VSNS's Time to Talk Project were never advertised, due to a lack of capacity, which would be overwhelmed by demand if the services were widely publicised.

17/EP Camberley and District Job Club

Camberley and District Job Club had the goal of helping the long and short term unemployed back to work. The Job Club aimed to achieve this by rebuilding clients' confidence and identifying market relevant skills to employers.

Following exploration of the Job Club's report, the Committee noted that since the pandemic the traditional client base of the Job Club had changed. Whilst pre-pandemic the job club's main client base was unemployed men in their 40s and 50s, the pandemic had altered the way the organisation provided its services and thereby changed its natural customer. Before the pandemic, the Job Club acted as a drop-in service in order to offer advice and help unemployed residents to return to employment. However, as a result of the pandemic the organisation pivoted to provision of an appointment-based service. This had the effect of drawing more women to the service, and more recently a younger demographic of service users.

The Job Club were also seeing a younger clientele as a result of its partnership with The Workshop which offered free careers advice for young people in The Square Shopping Centre. More recently the organisation was able to fund use of a Ukrainian translator, and the service had recently served a large volume of refugees from a variety of origin countries.

From Members' questions it was highlighted that 60% of the Job Club's funding had come from the Revenue Grant supplied from the Council. Furthermore, it was noted that the charity had relatively high ongoing costs, including venue-hire costs of £2500 per year as well as the salary of a part-time coordinator.

18/EP Committee Work Programme

Following consideration of the Revenue Grant holders' reports, the Committee noted grant holders' request and the acknowledged benefits of longer term, 3 year funding. It was acknowledged that an informal committee meeting would be set up to discuss potential recommendations to the Executive on the Revenue Grant applications for 24/25. The informal meeting would take place after the window for Revenue Grant applications were closed and it was agreed that there would be a discussion in respect of the opportunities for longer funding settlements.

The Committee considered the rest of the Committee's forward plan for the remainder of the 24/25 municipal year. It was agreed that Thames Water would present an item at the Committee's spring meeting. In addition, it was agreed that Surrey County Council Highways would be invited to attend the Committee's November meeting, with a specific focus on potholes, and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities would be invited for an item on Local Government Finance.

Chair