

Minutes of a Meeting of the External Partnerships Select Committee held at Surrey Heath House on 1 December 2020

- Cllr Robin Perry (Chairman)
- + Cllr Morgan Rise (Vice Chairman)

+ Cllr Dan Adams	+ Cllr Tim FitzGerald
+ Cllr Richard Brooks	+ Cllr Shaun Garrett
- Cllr Vivienne Chapman	+ Cllr Emma-Jane McGrath
+ Cllr Sarah Jane Croke	+ Cllr Pat Tedder
+ Cllr Paul Deach	+ Cllr Helen Whitcroft
	+ Cllr Kristian Wrenn

- + Present
- Apologies for absence presented

Members in Attendance: Cllr Victoria Wheeler

Officers Present: Jayne Boitoult and Louise Livingston

11/EP Accent Housing

The Committee received a presentation from Rob Mills, Director of Customer Experience (South), of Accent Housing updating the Committee in respect of their ongoing issues with their repair service affecting their Surrey Heath properties.

Accent's new maintenance contractor, Axis Europe, had now been appointed for approximately 12 months. Out of the 1216 repair cases which were handed back to Accent from its previous maintenance contractor, CHS, 1204 cases had been completed with 12 which were still outstanding.

Despite this the COVID-19 pandemic had severely disrupted Accent's Repair Service; and in March the housing supplier had to pause the taking-on of new maintenance cases and only fully mobilized its repair service in September. This had caused a new backlog of repairs, which were being managed by weekly review meetings, work with Axis Europe to take-on 6 additional maintenance operatives as well as sub-contractors, the provision of additional administrative support to help Axis manage its workload.

Since last presenting to the Committee, Axis had made the Accent Customer Liaison Officer role a permanent position and continued its new emphasis on monitoring satisfaction ratings which were being collected from residents via a free text service. The positive improvements were exemplified by the overall average customer satisfaction ratings which had improved from 3.84 out of 5 in February 2020 to 4.23 out of 5 in the Autumn of 2020.

Even though Accent's programme of long-term planned works was much smaller than normal in order to prioritise the repairs works backlog, Accent's planned capital works totaled at a £1.5million capital investment with some of the works

deferred to 2021/22. It was planned that all replacements which were deemed to be a priority were to be completed by March.

As a result of the pandemic many of Accent's tenants had been badly financially hit. This was illustrated by a severe upturn in the amount of Accent tenants which were on universal credit. Whilst the number of Accent tenants within Surrey Heath on Universal Credit was 96 in February 2020, this number had increased to 670 Accent tenants in December 2020. As a result of economic hardship Accent tenants had also built up larger levels of debt and many had gone into rent arrears. This issue was being proactively tackled by Accent's Income Team in their South Office who were implementing a new rent arrears policy and were aiming to establish a collaborative approach with residents when dealing with arrears.

Arising from Members' comments and questions the following points were noted:

- There was a greater positivity around Accent's maintenance service and Members had noticed a significant reduction in the amount of negative correspondence from Accent residents.
- Accent were ready for the combined negative impacts of the pandemic and Brexit. Accent had been internally modelling the impact of an economic downturn on their future rental income and the amount of their residents in rent arrears. Accent had also ready noticed struggles in obtaining materials needed for maintenance work as a result of Brexit.
- Within Surrey Heath Accent currently had a backlog of 1800 maintenance cases. This was in contrast to a normal run-rate of 600-800 outstanding cases.
- The amount of Accent residents claiming Universal Credit was in line with the 300% increase in Universal Credit applications for Surrey Heath as a whole; and it was reiterated that Accent worked with residents to tackle rent arrears and that eviction was only a last-resort. Accent also worked with organisations such as Citizens Advice Surrey Heath, Step Change, local foodbanks and BESOM in order to refer and signpost residents which were facing hardship.
- Accent had a relative level of financial resilience due to recent bonds which the company had sold and loan facilities which it could easily access.
- Accent were already in conversation with the Council in respect of a parcel of Council-owned land on Sullivan Road which could lead to expansion of its current site on Sullivan Road.

The Committee thanked Rob and Holly for their presentation and answers; and agreed that it would be positive if Accent presented to the Committee again half way through the 2021/22 municipal year.

12/EP Citizens Advice Surrey Heath

The Committee considered a presentation from Citizens Advice Surrey Heath (CASH) in respect of continued work throughout the pandemic and its future challenges.

CASH were committed to continuing to provide an independent, impartial and free service to the residents of Surrey Heath. In addition to this CASH provided governmental organisations, the Council and the third sector, with vital information about its cases, whom accessed their service and about the demographics of the area. Nationally this also allowed the Citizens Advice Bureau to work as a pressure-group lobbying Government.

CASH's core financial funding came from the Council's Revenue Grant Scheme. However the Council highly benefitted from the relationship and certified modelling showed that the public value of CASH's volunteers amounted to £290,000. Whilst CASH had always continued to help Surrey Heath residents with a wide range of issues, statistics had shown that CASH's clients had increasing amounts of issues per person. Whilst in the 2018-19 financial year there was a 3 issues per person average, in the 2019-20 financial year the average amount of issues per CASH client had risen to 4.

After the first peak of the pandemic and a lull in service-uptake in May, CASH resumed select face-to-face appointments for those clients who were unable to access their services via the telephone or internet. The top issues which CASH clients sought advice on were benefits and tax credits, universal credit, debt and housing problems. This was in turn backed up from data from CASH's website where webpages on Furlough, and 'If you can't pay your bills because of Coronavirus', were amongst the most visited pages. Moreover CASH's website saw a 24% rise in overall traffic.

The organisation faced the challenge of being unable to anticipate the demands on their service post pandemic. The pandemic had caused a noticeable reduction in CASH's volunteer advisers and 75% of those whom stayed on chose to volunteer from their homes. Going forward CASH's challenges looked to be around retention of volunteers and around human resourcing; and the organisation was trying hard to manage a constructed approach to recruitment including training and mentoring.

Arising from Members' questions and comments the following points were noted:

- The Council had the ability to raise awareness in respect of CASH's job vacancies and provide general support to CASH in respect of recruitment issues.
- There were significant numbers of residents who were accessing CASH services for the first time looking to access the benefit system and had fallen on significant hardship for the first time.
- The Council already had significant social media campaigns promoting local services which were available to those in hardship. However there was potential for the Council to provide further social media support to CASH.
- There was potential in the future for the Council and CASH to work in order to develop the organisation's outreach programme post-pandemic.
- CASH were currently able to manage their caseload, as the organisation wasn't currently picking up large amounts of in-person casework. In addition further capacity for CASH was provided by the 24 hour national Citizens

Advice Bureau helpline and CASH worked in close collaboration with Citizens Advice Woking.

The Chairman thanked Kate on behalf of the Committee and reiterated that CASH would have the backing of the Committee if the organisation required any additional support from the Council.

13/EP The Hope Hub

Mags Mercer, Chief Executive Officer, gave an update on the Hope Hub which was a charitable organisation which worked to prevent and end Homelessness within Surrey Heath.

The Hope Hub provided crisis and empowerment services for anyone who was or was at risk of becoming homeless, or whom was struggling with mental health, debt issues and unemployment. This included provision of emergency relief and items and one to one casework support, employment advice; and money and debt advice. The Hope Hub continued to be open throughout during the national lockdowns but had reduced their client-open days to two to three days a week. One to One appointments for clients continued in order to try to house them, the Hope Hub's IT services continued to be utilised and recently a gazebo had allowed refinement of the Hope Hub's hot food offering which had continued all throughout the pandemic.

The Hope Hub had seen a dramatic uptake in its services in comparison to previous financial years; and its service had been accessed 4688 times between April and October which was approximately double the number of times which the Hope Hub's services had been accessed during the same months the year before. There had also been a significant rise in new clients and the amount of clients housed, and food parcels provided.

The Hope Hub had experienced rise in numbers of domestic abuse cases, clients with mental health problems, unemployment and destitution which could be attributed to the pandemic. In addition it was found that the Hope Hub's clients with the most complex issues had regressed whilst working with the Hope Hub during the pandemic.

Despite the pandemic, the Hope Hub's employment support service had managed to get 16 clients into work. Moreover, The Hope Hub was looking to reintroduce its regular employment, living-well, cooking and employment support workshops as soon as possible post pandemic.

Looking forward to the 21-22 financial year, the Hope Hub was aiming for the opening of the emergency night stop accommodation being carried out in partnership with the Council. In addition the charity was aiming to increase its upskilling and social enterprise offering; which would lead to increased training, qualifications and employment opportunities for its clients.

The Hope Hub aimed to continue to work in close partnership with organisations such as Citizens Advice Surrey Heath and Accent Housing, as well as statutory bodies such as the Police and NHS, which had recently worked with the Hope Hub to arrange flu jab access and Hepatitis B screening for clients.

- There was potential for the Hope Hub to apply for significant funding from the Surrey County Council Community Fund for the Hope House project which had significant potential to alleviate homelessness throughout the Borough.
- Since the inception of the Hope Hub a few years ago, the organisation had made significant progress which could be attributed to the people involved.
- It was appreciated that there would be higher numbers of Surrey Heath residents needing the services of the Hope Hub in the coming years.
- The Hope Hub had plans to expand and to recruit a Head of Operations and a Project Officer to look after strategy and future fundraising.
- At present there was significant local authority and governmental funding for the charity sector. However it was suggested that this could possibly dry-up in the future. Although the Hope Hub was aiming to grow its reserves, this could hit other organisations in the charitable sector which would put strain on and lead to increased demand for the Hope Hub's services.
- Councillors were in a great position via social media to relay to their constituents what items the Hope Hub was in need of.
- At least 90% of The Hope Hub's clients were in Surrey Heath residents.

The Committee thanked Mags and her team for attending and the continued outstanding work they undertook within Surrey Heath.

14/EP Catalyst

Members received a presentation from Jane de la Rosa, Head of Communications and Business support, and Gemma Johnston, Marketing Assistant, in respect of Catalyst and in particular their mental health and well-being community football team, called The Welcome Wizards.

Catalyst was a Surrey-wide charity which provided mental health; and drug and alcohol services in a friendly, accessible and professional way. The organisation also worked in close partnership with the NHS service i-access to provide support for drug and alcohol misuse including recovery support and SMART groups. Catalyst also provided support at Mental Health safe havens which Catalyst helped to support in Aldershot and Woking.

Catalyst had always aimed to provide groups and activities as a way to allow clients to tackle mental health, substance misuse and wellbeing issues which they maybe struggling with. Recently this has included the Welcome Wizards initiative which had expanded pre-pandemic to include two teams in Surrey Heath and a separate team in Elmbridge. The Welcome Wizards was a community football team which aimed to support its players with mental health and wellbeing support.

Whilst the Welcome Wizards were unable to meet during the worst of the pandemic, they continued to meet online and risk assessments had allowed them to meet later on in the year. Whilst numbers of participants would be higher outside of the pandemic, since April the Welcome Wizards had still supported 22 people, including 16 from Surrey Heath.

During the pandemic Catalyst had continued to provide its other support services including via the telephone, online, outreach and some limited face to face work. Online support had included an online platform called the Catalyst BigBlueButton which centralised activities, counselling and family and friends support all in one place.

Arising from Members' questions and comments the following points were noted:

- Members were happy to pledge their support for catalyst and the Welcome Wizards, both in respect of endorsing their grant bids, as well as offering non-financial support.
- There were opportunities for catalyst to bolster their marketing and communications which would in turn make their self-referral routes more accessible.
- Residents did not need to be referred for Catalyst's mental health and wellbeing services by an organisation or General Practitioner. In addition Catalyst aimed for the self-referral process to be quick and simple; which was exemplified in that self-referrals via the phone were always picked up by Catalyst member of staff. During the phone conversation, an online or telephone appointment would be scheduled to allow for a prompt assessment of the client's needs.
- Catalyst always offered their clients a service relative to their need and if their services were unsuitable for a potential client, they would sign post the person in need to other services.
- Like other third-sector organisations, Catalyst experienced a lull in referrals at the start of the first lockdown.
- Catalyst foresaw major challenges in the years ahead. Catalyst had worked closely with Surrey County Council and Surrey Heath CCG who both anticipated a large spike in the demand for mental health services in Surrey Heath in the future. This was coupled with an anticipated contraction in funding in the long term which meant Catalyst was looking to instigate flexibility in its future strategies and fundraising opportunities.

The Committee thanked Jane and Gemma for their informative presentation.

15/EP External Partnerships Select Committee 20/21 Work Programme

The Committee noted its Work Programme for the remainder of the 20/21 municipal year and noted additional plans for the Enterprise M3 to present at the March meeting of the Committee.

Members requested that newly elected Police and Crime Commissioner be invited to present to the Committee during the 2021/22 municipal year and that the Council's representative on the Police and Crime Panel also be asked to attend the meeting.

Chairman