

**Minutes of a Meeting of the External Partnerships Select Committee held at Council Chamber, Surrey Heath House, Knoll Road, Camberley, GU15 3HD on 1 March 2022**

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+ Cllr Vivienne Chapman (Chairman)

+ Cllr Morgan Rise (Vice Chairman)

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| - Cllr Dan Adams        | + Cllr Josephine Hawkins |
| + Cllr Richard Brooks   | + Cllr David Lewis       |
| - Cllr Sarah Jane Croke | Cllr Emma-Jane McGrath   |
| - Cllr Paul Deach       | + Cllr Pat Tedder        |
| Cllr Tim FitzGerald     | + Cllr Helen Whitcroft * |
| - Cllr Mark Gordon      |                          |

+ Present

- Apologies for absence presented

\* In attendance virtually

Members in Attendance: Cllr Shaun Garrett, Cllr Sashi Mylvaganam,

Officers Present: Louise Livingston and Nick Steevens

#### **19/EP Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2021 were confirmed by the Committee and signed by the Chairman.

#### **20/EP Citizens Advice Surrey Heath**

The Committee received a presentation from Kate Sawdy, CEO, in respect of the work of Citizens Advice Surrey Heath.

Citizens Advice Surrey Heath (CASH) gave advice across a whole range of problems for people in Surrey Heath, including benefits, debt, housing, employment, family issues and immigration. CASH saw the 'whole person', and more than ever, clients were visiting CASH with multiple problems. CASH's service was primarily delivered by highly trained volunteers and was quality assured by the national network to the highest standards. There was an emphasis for CASH to help their clients find solutions without escalation and that their service was always impartial, confidential and free.

CASH also collected data about their clients and their issues and used this information on a national but also a more local level in order to campaign for change where needed.

In January 2022, more than 270,000 people sought one-to-one advice from Citizens Advice across England and Wales, topping a previous high of 265,000 in November 2021. 24,000 required some type of crisis support such as food bank referrals and charitable payments - the highest on record for Citizens Advice. In

addition the number of people supported with energy debts hit more than 8,000, the highest on record. The average energy debt of CASH clients with such cases now stood at £1,450, up from £1,330 in 2020.

On a local level, comparing the 21/22 financial year to 20/21, enquiries received by CASH relating to debt had increased by 56% and enquiries relating to utilities and communications bills had increased by 79%. However positively, enquiries regarding employment had fell by 22% on the previous year. Furthermore, CASH had experienced record numbers of enquiries in January including 257 enquiries in respect of the Household Support Fund.

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

- Part of CASH's plan for 2022-25 was to increase the diversity and knowledge of its team of staff and volunteers. However, it was noted that it took at least 6 months of training before a CASH volunteer made a meaningful contribution to the organisation; and this made it difficult to successfully recruit and retain younger volunteers. The Council had the opportunity to offer social media support to CASH in respect of the recruitment of volunteers through digital channels. Furthermore, whilst CASH services and volunteering opportunities were already promoted via various community magazines, there was potential to further promote volunteering opportunities with CASH in Heathscene.
- Outstanding work had been conducted in respect of promoting the Surrey Heath Hardship Fund. However, it was noted that in-need, eligible residents were still unaware of the fund, as demonstrated by recent referrals at the Old Dean Free Food Stall. It was noted that unfortunately applications for the fund closed, before the rise in the energy price cap due to take place on 1 April 2022.
- In respect of the recruitment of volunteers there were potential opportunities to engage with groups such as the University of the Third Age and the Rotary Club. CASH had recently presented to a group of NHS staff, in respect of the service and long-term volunteering opportunities.

The Committee thanked Kate and her team for their continued work supporting those in need within Surrey Heath.

## **21/EP Accent Housing**

The Committee received a presentation from Julie Wittich, Executive Director of Assets and Sustainability, and Holly Sheppard, Contracts Manager, in respect of Accent Housing's future plans, recent charges, and an update as to the ongoing maintenance issues in relation to its Surrey Heath properties.

Julie Wittich had joined the organisation in the role of Executive Director of Assets & Sustainability, which reflected Accent's new focus on asset management, and building capacity and undertaking a review of its maintenance service.

Accent had secured a significant grant from the Social Housing Decarbonisation Funds and would be investing in a pilot scheme for the use of part of the funds, including 66 properties within Surrey Heath, to a total of £40,000. Such initiatives were key to Accent's focus to make its assets more energy efficient and to tackle fuel poverty.

Following Storm Eunice, Accent had prioritised resulting repairs which mostly consisted of roofing, fencing and treework issues. Whilst recruitment and retention issues still continued in relation to the maintenance service, Accent was working with Axis Europe in order to ensure the recruitment of quality operatives and the use of additional sub-contractors in order to increase capacity. During 2021/22 (Year to date), 62.9% of repairs were completed within 15 days against a target of 95%. Furthermore, despite noting that some repairs, where prior specification work needed to be undertaken, could not be completed on the first visit, the targeted rates for first time fixes and the targeted customer satisfaction letter had also fallen below the target standard.

In total, so far this financial year, 838 planned works had been completed, which would soon include new radiators at Cranmore Court, which was due to be completed by the end of February. Customer satisfaction still continued to be lower than wished. This was partly attributable to challenges in respect of material supply which had been caused by the pandemic and Brexit.

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

- The current backlog of outstanding responsive repairs, which had failed to be dealt with outside the targeted 28 day routine period, currently stood at circa 500 within Surrey Heath. Accent regularly reviewed their 'WIP (Work in Progress)', of outstanding maintenance repairs, which required a fine balancing act between aiming to meet the 28 day routine period for newer jobs and also tackling the long-outstanding jobs.
- Accent had 100% nominations from the Council in respect of filling its homes; and Accent did not have its own allocations policy. However, there was an opportunity for Accent Housing to perhaps use tools such as its tenancy agreements and its procedures on anti-social behaviour to split apart disruptive combinations of tenants. In the case of new build estates, local lettings plans, which would be created in conjunction with the Council, could enable the creation of more socially sustainable communities and provided a mix between larger and smaller properties and between employed and unemployed tenants.
- There were multiple cases of urgent, severe repairs which hadn't been completed and had been outstanding for very long periods of more than 6 months. Furthermore, Councillors had heard horror stories from their residents in respect of inadequate repairs and terrible communication. It was felt that the cases reflected, not just the scale of the backlog, but the severity of the cases included.
- Accent Housing was terminating its maintenance contract with Axis Europe. Accent had received assurances that they wanted an amicable, demobilisation of the contract. The new contract with the future

maintenance contractor would return to the traditional method of payment, where Accent would only pay for completed jobs.

- Accent and the Council had worked in exemplary partnership in respect of the Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) Relocation Scheme.

Accent agreed to arrange a single point of contact to be arranged for Surrey Heath Borough Councillors and Members thanked Julie and Holly for their time and presentation.

## **22/EP The Hope Hub Report**

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.

Recently, the Hope Hub had reintroduced its living well programme, where it was envisaged that in the future one programme per weekday would be featured. Sessions included a 5 week affordable cookery course, shopping on a budget and understanding labelling. It was recognised that many clients had enjoyed sharing experiences and socialising during such sessions which had been missed during the height of the pandemic.

The Hope Hub's digital inclusion project called IT Connect allowed clients to borrow a tablet for up to three months. The programme also worked to train and upskill clients; and this ran alongside a programme provided by a training and employment coach. In addition a number of clients had completed a certificated volunteering programme. Overall a total of 183 individuals had attended the Hope Hub's training courses; some of whom left with accredited qualifications.

Moving forward the charity was developing a service user forum, which would be made up of individuals which reflected the Hope Hub's client base. In addition, as many of the volunteers which had lent their time during the pandemic had moved on to other opportunities, the Hope Hub was seeking to engage new volunteers and had benefited from the expertise of the Frimley Park Hospital Volunteer Coordinator.

On looking forward and on evaluation of the recent changes to the demand for the Hope Hub's services, statistics showed that Hope Hub Clients now suffered with more complex needs and were often multiple disadvantaged. This resulted in the Hope Hub's average client engaging with the service on 31 occasions. In relation to this the Hope Hub aimed to provide a wider range of services, which included social enterprise initiatives, and had longer term ambitions of a 'Hope House', and skills centre.

The Hope Hub's Emergency Accommodation Service, provided in conjunction with the Council, was due to officially open on 22 March 2022. However, the service was already providing 3 rooms with a further 3 rooms slowed down by defect and building material supply issues. The accommodation's residents would live at the house for 6 weeks in which they would work intensely with the day service offering. At the end of the period the client would move into private rental or social housing.

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

- Where a homeless person was entrenched in rough sleeping, the Hope Hub would provide them with the necessities, but would not support them in order to enable them to continue sleeping rough on a permanent basis. In such instances, the day service would help them obtain identification in order to give them access to temporary accommodation and would often add them to the 2 year SAN programme, where the Hope Hub would report on the individual's progress to Surrey Heath and Surrey County Councils.
- All of the Hope Hub's Emergency Accommodation's residents signed a declaration stating that they would not engage in substance misuse whilst at the house.
- There was potential for The Hope Hub to work in conjunction with the Man with a Pan initiative.
- Following the completion of a risk assessment, coordination between the Council's Housing team and The Hope Hub could allow for a rough-sleeping individual to be placed within the emergency accommodation within the same day.
- There was a lack of emergency accommodation within easy reach of Camberley. This problem was exacerbated by the lack of a clear emergency accommodation referral process for out of office hours. It was felt that there was an opportunity to hold easily-assessed emergency rough sleeping kits, which would include a sleeping bag, clothing and essential toiletries, at St Michaels, St Martins and St Marys Churches.

The Committee thanked Mags for her informative update and continued fantastic work in the borough.

## **23/EP Camberley Street Angels**

The Committee received a verbal update from Reverend Mike Thomason and Richard Salt, Street Angels Coordinator, in respect of Camberley Street Angels.

Camberley Street Angels was a Churches Together initiative and a group of volunteers who believed that people deserved care and love at their time of need.

The Street Angels provided emergency welfare support in Camberley Town Centre, when the nighttime economy was most active. The Street Angels currently provided support on two Fridays a month, including the monthly payday, and

worked alongside the Police and doorstaff. The initiative was reemerging, post lockdown, and currently had 13 volunteers.

Following Members' comments it was clarified that in order to volunteer as part of Camberley Street Angels individuals did not need to be a member of the church, but instead just needed to share the church's ethos and values. Members also felt that there was an opportunity to promote the Street Angels in Heathscene in order to help with the recruitment of volunteers and it was noted that various Members had volunteered with Camberley Street Angels and had found the experience enlightening.

Members thanked Mike and Richard for the update.

## **24/EP Committee Work Programme**

The Committee considered its Committee Work Programme for the 22/23 municipal year. It was noted that the work programme had a level of flexibility in order to encourage attendance from the Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner at the same meeting as the Borough Commander. Furthermore the Committee expressed its wish for Accent representatives to attend future meetings in-person, rather than virtually. In addition, it was asked by the Committee to have an update as to the status of the Surrey Heath Arts Council.

Chairman