

**Minutes of a Meeting of the External Partnerships Select Committee
29 November 2022**

Present: Councillor Vivienne Chapman (Chairman)
Councillor Richard Brooks
Councillor Tim FitzGerald
Councillor Josephine Hawkins
Councillor David Lewis
Councillor Emma-Jane McGrath
Councillor Liz Noble
Councillor Pat Tedder

In Attendance: Jayne Boitoult, Lucy Phillips, Nick Steevens, Rachel Whillis

Apologies: Councillor Dan Adams
Councillor Paul Deach
Councillor Valerie White

13/EP Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 06 September 2022 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

14/EP Collaborative Action and Forum

The Committee received a presentation from Kate Sawdy on behalf of Citizens Advice Surrey Heath (CASH). The presentation outlined the impact of the cost of living on residents. She reported that 74 percent of residents approached by CASH stated they had made changes in their spending behaviours because of the increased cost to run appliances. 56 percent of people on an energy meter had run out of energy before being able to afford more. It was noted that since September 2021 low income households had seen their monthly costs increase by £141. It was further noted that there had been a 44 percent increase in demand for food bank referrals in comparison to the previous year and a 94 percent increase in utility issues. Government support was also outlined and updates given on Cost of Living Payments, Household Support Fund, Energy Price Guarantee and Energy Bills Support Scheme. Members were advised that an uplift of 10.1 percent in Universal Credit had been announced for April 2023.

It was noted that CASH provided their own debt advice service and had dedicated officers for customers. CASH predicted an increase in foodbank referrals in January 2023 and clarified that if the household is within Besoms area they had referred to the Besom otherwise referrals were sent to Woking Foodbank.

Members were asked to share information in regard to warm hubs and other services on behalf of CASH. It was noted that there were surges in correspondence from residents following interaction with Members.

CASH advised there had been a rise in residents who struggled with Council Tax arrears. CASH clarified support had been provided through the Household Support Fund and would be supplemented by the Council's Council Tax Hardship Fund when the Household Support Fund had been exhausted.

The Committee received a verbal update from Rev. Chris Richardson on behalf of St Martins Church Camberley. He reported that numbers for the Free Food stall and free café had doubled in recent months, with over 60 households that utilised the Free Food Stall. It was recognised that St Martins Church had worked with Surrey County Council to provide energy advice and live energy talks.

Following discussions it was noted that St Martins Church received support through a partnership with the Co-operative shop, schools and a variety of grants. Public support had been tremendous, the public had given non-perishable foods, baked cakes and cooked food for the free café. Local churches were working together to support the Besom and were open to collaboration with other churches to extend the support provided.

Members received a verbal update from Karen Kendall on behalf of the Besom in Camberley. It was noted that Old Dean was the highest demanding ward for food parcels and a third of referrals received for the foodbank were sent by CASH. The number of households which had received support had risen drastically in September and October, however the numbers in November had been the same level as previous years. The majority were new cases. She reported that community support had been phenomenal, including support from Asylum Seekers who had joined the team to pack donations.

The Committee received a verbal update from Greg Scott on behalf of Camberley Besom and The Rotary Club for Christmas Hampers. It was noted there was strong coordination between the Besom and Rotary Club. Collectively Camberley and the local libraries were acting as collection points for donations. Residents must apply through an agency to ensure they receive a hamper. Local charities were welcome to collaborate to ensure households do not receive multiple hampers however would require express permission from residents to share their details.

RESOLVED to note the presentations.

NOTE 1In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct

- (i) Councillor Shaun Garrett declared a non-pecuniary interest as he was a Trustee of Old Dean Community Group;

Councillor Liz Noble declared a non-pecuniary interest as she was a Trustee of Bisley and West End Foodbank; and

- (ii) Councillor Pat Tedder declared a non-pecuniary interest as she was a Chairman of Valley End Institute Charity and WC Lees Resthouses Charity.

15/EP Accent Housing Update

The Committee received a presentation from Louise Graham-Smith on behalf of Accent Housing. It was reported that Accent Housing had implemented a new targeting support system which was the creation of a fuel poverty dashboard to identify households which may be at risk of fuel poverty and also pinpoint those who may benefit from a greater level of support, or those who had been in limited contact. Accent Housing had secured £1.25m in funding from the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund to be spent on improving the energy efficiency of 66 homes in Surrey.

A recent pro-active communication campaign had seen staff from across Accent Housing knock on approximately 600 customers' doors in one day, to which it had received responses from 200 households.

It was noted Accent Housing had decreased the amount of open orders from September by 22.5 percent. Legacy jobs had also been reduced to 721, with 75 percent of legacy electrical jobs now complete. There had been a targeted approach in strengthening teams and multiple positions had been filled, including a damp and mould contractor.

Members were informed that Accent Housing had provided a hardship fund for customers as well as provided a decarbonising fund which was in the second wave.

Concern was expressed by some Members regarding ongoing complaints from residents about the level of customer service and outstanding legacy jobs which had not been completed. Accent Housing provided clarification on a new process of customer service to be implemented whereby when additional ongoing work was due, contractors would call customer services whilst with the customer to advise that the work was not completed and would require additional visits.

RESOLVED to note the presentation.

16/EP Committee Work Programme

The Committee considered its Work Programme and, following discussion, agreed to re-prioritise items for the February 2023 meeting. It was agreed the meeting be conducted in a similar style of open forum to focus on Antisocial Behaviour, Mental Health and Domestic Abuse. Other items scheduled for that meeting would be rescheduled for a later meeting.

RESOLVED that the Committee Work Programme