

**Minutes of a Meeting of the External
Partnerships Select Committee held at
Surrey Heath House on
20 September 2016**

+ Cllr Paul Deach (Chairman)
+ Cllr Dan Adams (Vice Chairman)

+ Cllr Ian Cullen	+ Cllr Adrian Page
+ Cllr Ruth Hutchinson	+ Cllr Robin Perry
+ Cllr Rebecca Jennings-Evans	Cllr Chris Pitt
+ Cllr David Lewis	Cllr Joanne Potter
+ Cllr Katia Malcaus Cooper	+ Cllr Nic Price
+ Cllr Alan McClafferty	+ Cllr Darryl Ratiram
- Cllr Max Nelson	+ Cllr Ian Sams

+ Present
- Apologies for absence presented

Substitutes: Cllr Ian Sams for Cllr Max Nelson

In Attendance: Cllr Rodney Bates
Steve Bailey, Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership
Julian Chun, Sentinal Housing
James Pennington, Thames Valley Housing Association
Robert Mills, Accent South
Fiona Shipp, Basingstoke Canal Authority
James Taylor, Basingstoke Canal Authority

8/EP Chairman's Announcements and Welcome to Guests

The Chairman welcomed Julian Chun, Sentinal Housing, James Pennington, Thames Valley Housing Association, Robert Mills, Accent South, Steve Bailey, Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership, Fiona Shipp, Basingstoke Canal Authority and James Taylor, Basingstoke Canal Authority to the meeting.

9/EP Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the External Partnerships Select Committee held on 28 June 2016 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

10/EP Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

11/EP Housing Associations in Surrey Heath

Robert Mills, Regional Housing Director, Accent, Julian Chun, Operations Director, Sentinal, and James Pennington, Regional Land Director, Thames Valley Housing Association, gave a presentation in respect of the work the three Housing Associations in the region and the current challenges faced by the sector.

The ongoing reform of the welfare system was the most significant challenge currently faced by Housing Associations across the Country. The introduction of a number of changes including the Spare Room Subsidy, a cap on the maximum amount of benefits that working age people could claim, the introduction of Universal Credit and the introduction of Local Housing Allowances which capped the amount of Housing Benefit paid according to the size of the household instead of the size of the property were resulting in an increasing number of tenants being faced with a shortfall in funding and incurring rent arrears. Housing Associations were now doing more pre-tenancy work with potential tenants to ensure the home they were looking at was affordable and the tenancy was sustainable before a tenancy agreement was entered into. However, if rent arrears did occur then Housing Associations worked closely with tenants to manage the debt and recoup the arrears. Eviction because of rent arrears was usually considered as a last resort with eviction orders only sought if tenants failed to stick to debt management plans agreed with the Housing Association.

In cases of anti-social behaviour robust action was taken. If an eviction occurred as a result of anti-social behaviour then the tenant was usually deemed to have made themselves intentionally homeless and housing associations no longer had a duty to accommodate them. Consequently the tenant would then normally have to be housed in the private rented sector.

It was unclear how many Surrey Heath residents would be affected by the introduction of market rent for high income social tenants i.e. those tenancies where the annual household income of the two highest earners in the household was over £30,000 (Over £40,000 per annum in London). An initial survey of Sentinal's tenants had found that 15% of their current tenant base would be affected by the changes. Most housing associations only asked for information pertaining to the financial circumstances of a tenant before a tenancy was granted and tenancy agreements might have to be changed in order to force tenants to reveal their earnings on an ongoing basis.

Work was taking place to increase the number of affordable homes available in the Borough and Housing Associations were looking at different ways to increase their stock levels; for example Thames Valley Housing had recently started work on the Opal development in London. Whilst this was a commercial property development the profits from the development would be used to finance affordable housing elsewhere in the region. It was recognised that where there was a requirement for a development to provide only one or two units of affordable housing provision this could make the development unviable or the additional costs of service charges could make the affordable property unaffordable and in these cases housing associations often took commuted sums from the developers to enable them to provide the affordable housing in a larger block elsewhere.

The Committee thanked Robert Mills, Julian Chun and James Pennington for their informative briefing.

12/EP Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership

Steve Bailey, Manager, Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership, gave a presentation in respect of the work of the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership. The Partnership had been set up in 1990 to co-ordinate the work required to maintain and enhance the environment in the Blackwater Valley and its principle aims were:

- To maintain the Valley as an open gap with enhanced landscape
- To conserve wildlife
- Improve the quality of the River Blackwater
- Co-ordinate recreation and conservation initiatives across the area
- Ensure access to and use of the Valley for sustainable transport

The work undertaken by the Partnership since its inception had had a significant impact on the flora and fauna of the area with increased fish stocks and sightings of otters in the river, the restoration of wetland areas and reed beds and the establishment of seven nature reserves along the length of the Blackwater Valley area.

The Partnership received core funding of £104,000 from Borough, Parish and County Council's bordering the Blackwater Valley; additional income of £222,800 was received in return for managing and looking after sites in the vicinity of the Blackwater Valley for other agencies. A suggestion that additional income be raised by opening up flooded gravel pits to sailing clubs and other leisure companies was acknowledged however the Committee was informed that the Partnership did not own the land and whilst negotiations to secure a share of any profits from activities in addition to their management fee did take place the majority of any profits went to the landowners.

Through the utilisation of SANG payments the Partnership was in the process of completing the following projects to improve connectivity across the Blackwater Valley area:

- The improvement of pedestrian and cycle routes between the Meadows Roundabout and Sainsburys on the A331.
- The construction of a pedestrian and cycle crossing on the A331 at Riverside Way to the Blackwater Valley Car Park
- Resurfacing and widening of the off-road Blackwater Valley Path between the Blackwater Valley car park and Frimley Railway Station
- Widening and resurfacing of the Hatches between Frimley Green and North Camp Railway Station

The Blackwater Valley Trust had been set up to supplement and support the work of the Partnership however whilst there had in the past been a number of fundraising successes this resource was not currently being utilised as effectively as it might be following the deaths of a number of the trustees.

It was acknowledged that the Partnership's website needed to be revamped and work to complete this was underway.

The Partnership acknowledged that the funding of non-essential services was coming under increasing pressure across the whole of the public sector and concern was expressed that if one public sector body ceased their funding contributions whilst it might be possible to fill the gap in the short term it could set a precedent which would result in other public sector bodies withdrawing funding and the Partnership becoming unsustainable.

The Committee thanked Steven Bailey for his update.

RESOLVED that the use of Council communication channels to raise awareness of the Blackwater Valley be explored.

13/EP Basingstoke Canal Authority

Fiona Shipp, Canal Manager, and James Taylor, Strategic Manager, gave a presentation in respect of the work of the Basingstoke Canal Authority.

The Basingstoke Canal Authority had responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the 37 miles long Canal which ran from the River Wey Navigation at New Haw down towards Basingstoke. 32 of the Canal's 37 miles were now navigable and the Canal had 29 locks, 1 dry-dock, 3 aqueducts and 2 tunnels. A team of six rangers oversaw the Canal's upkeep and were in call for 24 hours a day every day of the year. A new management team had been brought in in 2010.

65% of the Authority's £750,000 a year revenue budget was raised from grants provided by town, parish, borough and county council's bordering the canal. The remaining 35% was raised through income generation from a range of activities including campsite fees, angling licences and mooring fees. Increases in mooring fees to bring them in line with national averages had resulted in a significant rise in income and with further improvements to the canal and an increased number of moorings being made available in the coming years it was expected that this income stream would increase further.

The Authority's work was supported and enhanced by the Basingstoke Canal Society. As a registered charity, the Society took the lead on fundraising activities and proactively identified and approached grant funding schemes for support. The Society's volunteers played a key role in enhancing visitor experiences through a range of activities including conservation work, running the visitor centre and organising and running regular boat trips for the public along the Canal including its immensely popular Children's Father Christmas Cruises. A leaflet detailing the range of volunteering activities had been developed to raise awareness of the Society and to encourage people to get involved in their work and the Society had taken on responsibility for raising the canal's profile across a number of social media platforms. Volunteers had also played a key role in carrying out boat audits along the length of the canal a project that had resulted in the removal of a number

of derelict boats from the canal and identified boat owners who had been avoiding paying mooring fees.

The Committee thanked Fiona Shipp and James Taylor for their update.

RESOLVED that the use of Council communication channels to raise awareness of the Basingstoke Canal be explored.

14/EP Committee Work Programme

The Committee considered a report setting out a proposed work programme for the Committee for the rest of the year.

The following agenda items were suggested for consideration:

- Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust's Sustainability and Transformation Plan.
- Actions by partners to try and reduce inequality in the Borough.

CHAIRMAN

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