

**Minutes of the Community Wellbeing and Housing Committee
28 November 2024**

Present:

Councillor S.M. Doran (Chair)
Councillor O. Rybinski (Vice-Chair)

Councillors:

M. Arnold	M. Bing Dong	A. Gale
M.M. Attewell	L.H. Brennan	R.V. Geach
C. Bateson	S.A. Dunn	K.M. Grant

Apologies: Councillors A. Mathur

38/24 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2024 were agreed as a correct record of proceedings.

39/24 Disclosures of Interest

Councillor Attewell advised that she was a Surrey County Councillor and declared an interest in relation to item 7 on the Household Support Fund. She would not participate in the debate or vote on this item.

The Deputy Chief Executive disclosed that he was a Director of Knowle Green Estates.

40/24 Questions from members of the Public

There were none.

41/24 Forward Plan

The Committee considered the Forward Plan for future committee business.

Stephen Mortimer-Cleevly updated that a formal report requesting the continuation of the 6-day a week Community Centre Saturday Opening arrangement would be presented at the next Community Wellbeing

Committee on 7 January 2024. The Committee discussed the importance of this initiative which will be discussed in further detail when considered next month.

There were no other suggested items to be added to the forward plan.

The Committee **noted** the Forward Plan.

42/24 Community Wellbeing & Housing - Budget, Fees and Charges, Revenue Growth and Savings for 2025/26

The Committee considered the Budget, Fees and Charges, Revenue Growth and Savings for 2025/26 under the Community Wellbeing and Housing Committee's remit as part of the annual budget process. The committee were asked to consider all proposals and recommend them to the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee. The report highlighted the need for a robust budget planning process to ensure financial sustainability and addressed the significant inflation in food and fuel costs impacting services which included Meals on Wheels. The Deputy Chief Executive introduced each aspect of the Committee's budget separately and invited comments on this basis. It was initially clarified that there were no capital bids received for this committee and It was explained that the particular focus was on discretionary fees, with a proposed 4% uplift, rounded to the nearest pound or five pounds.

The committee discussed the proposed 4% uplift in discretionary fees and charges, and raised concerns regarding the financial impact on vulnerable people who will be affected by the Meals on Wheels and Opal Group fee increases. They debated alternative fee structures, sourcing savings, and reallocating funds. Members also discussed statutory fees, insurance premiums costs, and the new CCTV contract renewal in 2026/27. The Committee made the suggestion for officers to explore reallocating £50k from insurance premiums of cross laminated timber in the new Eclipse Leisure Centre to potentially cover deficits in the Opal Group service.

It was proposed by Councillor Bateson, seconded by Councillor Attewell and **resolved** by the Committee to agree to deferring the decision on increasing Meals on Wheels and Opal Group fees and charges until 7 January 2025 committee in order for Officers to come back with alternative options.

Committee **resolved** to:

1. Approve the Budget, Fees and Charges, Growth and Savings proposals for Community Wellbeing & Housing Committee subject to deferring the decision on increasing Meals on Wheels and Opal Group fees and charges until 7 January 2025 committee in order for Officers to come back with alternative options.
2. Recommend to Corporate Policy & Resources Committee that they approve the proposed budget, Fees and Charges, Growth and Savings proposals for Community Wellbeing & Housing Committee

43/24 Household Support Fund Phase 6 (HSF)

The Committee considered a report from the Strategic Lead, Independent Living on the distribution of the Household Support Fund Phase 6 (HSF). The report highlighted the Government's extension of the HSF scheme with an additional £421 million to assist households with rising energy bills, food prices, and other essentials from October 1, 2024, to March 31, 2025. Surrey County Council had received £5,590,830, with £750,000 allocated to district and borough councils, including £84,091 for Spelthorne Borough Council. The report discussed various options for distributing the funds, including continuing the Phase 5 approach, subsidising meals on wheels to offer a frozen meal service for vulnerable families, and allocating funds to community groups or warm hubs. Key issues included the reduced allocation for Spelthorne and the need to support various vulnerable people.

The Committee raised concern that the preferred distribution of funding was only supporting certain vulnerable groups and that all demographics including young families should be considered. The Strategic Lead, Independent living confirmed that the use of the Household Support Fund to support the subsidisation of a meals-on-wheels service will create capacity in the overall service area to support other vulnerable groups who also experienced food insecurity and financial hardship.

The Committee **resolved** to:

- 1) Agree the proposed scheme of distribution of Household Support fund Phase 6 as set out in Option two of the report.
- 2) Agree that in the event of any funds being unallocated that they are moved to the "General Allocation Pot" at the end of March 2025.

The Committee **adjourned** at 20:41pm and **readjourned** at 20:52pm.

Councillors Gale and Geach left the meeting following the conclusion of this item.

44/24 Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

Steph Green introduced the Housing, Homelessness, and Rough Sleeping Strategy report which emphasised the need for a new strategy to be published by Spring 2025, as required by the Homelessness Act 2002. The report outlined the findings from the Homelessness Review and proposed three key strategic areas; partnership working, identifying opportunities to address housing needs, and proactive homelessness prevention with an effective service response. The committee was asked to approve the draft strategy for public consultation.

The Committee raised concern regarding A2 Dominion, who were the largest provider of social housing stock, however they had not upheld a good reputation from tenants. Members put forward the suggestion for Knowle Green Estates to become a registered provider to replace A2 Dominion as Spelthorne's main housing provider, though the Deputy Chief Executive noted this would be a lengthy process and that the Council will be considering a range of options for KGE. The Committee additionally inquired about the implementation of homelessness prevention measures, who were the most vulnerable groups, and what were the main causes of homelessness in the borough. It was revealed that there are 234 households in Spelthorne who were in emergency accommodation, with Section 21 notices and family evictions being the main causes of homelessness in Spelthorne.

The Committee reinforced the need for the Council to influence better outcomes for residents, and in particular emphasised the need to provide dedicated support to domestic abuse victims. The Assistant Strategic Lead Housing confirmed that the Council relied on available lettings from providers, and an outreach service who offered first hand support in the reduction of rough sleepers. The Sanctuary Scheme was also in place to provide additional security to victims of domestic abuse. The Group Head, Community Wellbeing agreed to explore expanding the support options for domestic abuse victims, however it was important to manage client expectations amidst the national housing crisis which the Council faced.

The Committee **resolved** to approve the draft Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for public consultation as set out in option one of the report.

45/24 Placement Policy for Emergency Accommodation

Steph Green introduced the report on the Placement Policy for Emergency Accommodation. The report highlighted the need for a clear policy to guide how homeless households are prioritised for emergency accommodation within the borough. The policy aimed to ensure a consistent approach among the Housing team, particularly when demand was high and supply was limited. It outlined how emergency accommodation offers will be made and how refusals will be handled, considering factors such as location, property size, condition, available facilities, affordability, health, education, and employment.

During the discussion, the Committee acknowledged the importance of having the Policy but queried whether the overriding reason for the policy was to provide guidance on refusals. Steph clarified that while offers and refusals were important, this information was also cited in other housing policy. The primary reason for this policy is to ensure a consistent approach in prioritising emergency accommodation.

The Committee **resolved** to approve the placement policy for emergency accommodation.

46/24 An update from the Environmental Health Department on Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

Fidelma Bahoshy, Joint Senior Environmental Health Manager presented the report on Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in Spelthorne, providing an update on the current situation and the work being undertaken by the Environmental Health (EH) department. The report highlighted an increase in HMO applications and complaints over the past few months, and the need for a clear policy to manage these effectively. The EH department was responsible for implementing the HMO licensing regime, conducting compliance visits, and investigating complaints about both licensed and unlicensed HMOs.

During the discussion, the Committee expressed concerns about the disruption caused by HMOs during the construction process and the refusal of some applicants to comply with building regulations. It was noted that applicants often used third-party regulators instead of the Council's building regulation service. Fidelma confirmed this trend and mentioned that the team was investigating these complaints. She also addressed concerns about basic sanitation and the lack of washing facilities on some HMO construction sites, assuring that the team investigated such complaints thoroughly.

The Committee highlighted the high volume of HMO applications and the shortage of staff to handle them. Fidelma acknowledged the national shortage of Environmental Health Officers and the difficulty in recruiting experienced staff. She mentioned that the team were reviewing their needs and exploring ways to expedite the licensing process. Members suggested the possibility of recruiting apprentices and considering partnership working with neighbouring Council's to address the staffing shortage. Fidelma noted that other councils faced similar challenges and mentioned our backlog of 39 HMO applications, with each taking approximately 11 hours to process, excluding site visits. The team continued to manage the HMO process and prioritise certain cases as necessary.

Committee **resolved** to note the contents of the report.

Meeting ended: 21:52pm

47/24 Actions arising from the meeting

-Officers to explore alternative fees and charges proposals for the following services: Meals on Wheels and Opal Group

-Assurance to be provided by the relevant service lead on the insurance premium for cross laminated timber in the new Eclipse Leisure Centre

-Group Head, Community Wellbeing agreed to explore further domestic abuse services which could be utilised to support victims in relation to housing.