

MINUTE of MEETING of the WHITBURN AND BLACKBURN LOCAL AREA COMMITTEE of WEST LOTHIAN COUNCIL held within WHITBURN BURGH HALLS, EAST MAIN STREET, WHITBURN, WEST LOTHIAN, on 23 FEBRUARY 2015.

Present – Councillors George Paul (Chair), Jim Dickson, Mary Dickson and Barry Robertson.

In Attendance –

Alistair Shaw, Lead Officer, West Lothian Council
Scott McKillop, Community Regeneration Officer, West Lothian Council
Inspector Gregor Forbes, Police Scotland
Alex Hume, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Gary Stoddart, Housing Manager, West Lothian Council
Nairn Pearson, BID Manager, West Lothian Council
Elaine Nisbet, Advice Shop and Adult Basic Education Manager, West Lothian Council
Grant Abbot, Head Teacher, Bathgate Academy
Alison Kerr, Blackburn Community Council
Tracy Johnston, Whitburn & Greenrigg Community Council

1. ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chair ruled that the proposed timetable of meetings for 2015-16 was urgent and would be considered at the end of the meeting as the dates required to be approved before the calendar of meetings was presented to Council Executive for agreement on 10th March 2015.

2. MINUTE

The committee confirmed the draft Minute of its Meeting held on 24th November 2014. The Minute was thereafter signed by the Chair.

3. SCHOOLS PRESENTATION – BATHGATE ACADEMY

The committee received a very informative presentation from Grant Abbot, Head Teacher of Bathgate Academy which focussed on pupils from the Blackburn area of the ward. The presentation began by providing an overview of the current school roll, the number of pupils in attendance from areas identified in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and on the positive destinations of school leavers from Blackburn for the previous year.

The presentation then provided a comparison of exam attainment levels from 2011 to 2014. It then moved on to provide an analysis of the positive destinations and to explain the work that was being done to identify and support students appropriate to their career interests and intended destination. Members heard that a risk matrix was used to identify students at risk of entering a negative destination and of the multi-agency

support that was offered to those pupils.

The Head Teacher then moved on to give members an overview of the school's key achievements and its priorities for improvement to ensure that pupils experienced a coherent, progressive and meaningful curriculum that supported their development as life-long learners.

The Head Teacher's concluded the school had a positive future ahead and finished his presentation by speaking of the opportunities to further improve the school and the ways in which the school hoped to deal with constraints without impacting on the core business, including efficiencies, parental engagement and escalating pupil numbers from 2016.

Decision

To note the terms of the interesting and informative presentation.

4. WHITBURN AND BLACKBURN MULTI-MEMBER WARD QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REPORT

The committee considered a report by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update on the activity of the Fire and Rescue Service within the ward for the period to 31st December 2014.

The report recalled that multi-member ward operational plans had been produced by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to ensure delivery of the Local Fire and Rescue Plan for West Lothian 2014-2017 which was a requirement of Section 41E of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012. Quarterly performance reports detailing activity against the key priorities of the ward operational plans were being presented to all local area committees for noting.

The report recalled the seven key priorities for the ward and the appendix provided a detailed breakdown of the performance of the service against each of the priorities.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

5. POLICE WARD REPORT

The committee considered a report by Inspector Tidy, Police Scotland (copies of which had been circulated) which summarised police activity in the ward for the period to 29th January 2015.

Inspector Gregor Forbes had been appointed to replace Inspector Tidy and was welcomed to the meeting.

The report provided information on the Police Scotland National Priorities (delivered locally), the West Lothian priorities and the ward specific

priorities. It outlined performance and solvency rates in the ward for the period to January 2015, together with comparator figures for the year to date and for the same period in December 2014.

The Inspector's report then went on to outline the various crime prevention activities that had taken place in the ward during the reporting period, information on forthcoming events and concluded with information on officer contact details.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

6. WHITBURN TOWN CENTRE UPDATE

The committee considered a report by the Head of Planning and Economic Development (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update on town centre related matters in Whitburn.

The committee noted that officers were continuing to encourage applications from the shop front improvement scheme. Members noted that since the last meeting of the committee, one application had been agreed in principle and was awaiting completion of the improvement works and one business had noted interest with a formal application form awaited.

Efforts to encourage the current owner to undertake external improvement works to the former Direct Flooring Unit were ongoing. The property was still being marketed for sale with planning permission for sub-division and change of use.

Officers were continuing to work with local groups to enhance the appearance, awareness and use of the Civic Space. New hanging basket columns had been installed which would add colour and vibrancy to the area in season. Similarly, officers were working with local community groups to plan enhancements to the soft and hard landscaping area at Market Place, adjacent to the Civic Square. It was anticipated that the landscaping works would be tendered in time for Spring 2015.

Finally, the report advised that following localised consultation, plans for significant environmental and public realm improvements at the north and south side of East Main Street had been developed. It was envisaged that complete plans would be prepared and issued for tendering early in financial year 2015/16. The cost of the works would be met through the Housing Revenue and Town Centre Improvement Funds. Members recommended that the improvement works should be progressed as soon as possible and should not be delayed whilst the additional disabled parking bays were working through the lengthy statutory notice period.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

7. HOUSING, CONSTRUCTION AND BUILDING SERVICES

The committee considered a report by the Head of Housing, Construction and Building Services (copies of which had been circulated) providing an overview of housing performance for the period October to December 2014.

The performance figures for property void and let for mainstream and temporary tenancies were detailed in the report and the committee noted that for the period October to December 2014 there was a total let of 59 properties for mainstream tenancies and a total let of 14 properties let for temporary tenancies. There were a number of policy voids in the ward due to properties requiring repairs for asbestos removal, fire damage and Health and Safety issues. One was currently being used as a decant property.

The report provided a summary of rent arrears in the ward for the period April 2013 to December 2014. For 2014-15, the Arrears Task Group had agreed, as an interim measure, to monitor against a £1m target. This would allow time for some actions from the Rent Strategy to be put in place meaning the target was subject to change later in the year. Workload priorities agreed by the task group ensured that tenants who engaged with the council were being offered support and advice in relation to applying for Housing Benefit, Scottish Welfare Fund and referrals to the Advice Shop for money advice. Articles encouraging tenants to pay their rent had been inserted into Tenants News, Applicants News, the Bulletin and on the internet to raise awareness of Welfare Reform changes and their potential impact on customers.

The Council Executive had approved a motion instructing officers to provide additional one-off time limited Discretionary Housing Payment funding to address the legacy under occupancy arrears from 2013/14 and to assess the under occupancy element net of any DHP already received for that year. The total value of under occupancy arrears for current and former tenants equated to approximately £250,000.

The report then summarised the arrears caseload for the ward at end of December 2014. A table within the report showed the level of arrears and number of tenants in arrears in the ward from September 2013 to December 2014. The task group continued to meet fortnightly to agree any targeted and specific areas of work. The group had representation from Revenues, CIS/CSC, Advice Shop, Housing Management and Housing Needs.

The report went on to provide members with an update on local area team activity, capital programme and new building housing, ward specific capital and environmental programme, new build information, tenant participation update, Scottish Social Housing Charter, homeless housing network, housing networks, street environmental improvement projects, tenants fund and information day, safer neighbourhood council officer ward information and finally, with information on the work of the council officer and the youth worker based in the safer neighbourhood team.

In response to a request, the Housing Manager undertook to include information in the next report to committee on (a) the number of tenants who moved to smaller properties when the under occupancy criteria was introduced and (b) the number of tenants eligible for Discretionary Housing Payment whose accounts would be in credit following the application of the legacy arrears funding.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

8. ADVICE SHOP AND ADULT BASIC SERVICE UPDATE - REPORT BY HEAD OF AREA SERVICES (HEREWITH).

The committee considered a report by the Head of Area Services (copies of which had been circulated) outlining the work undertaken by the Advice Shop and Adult Basic Education Services from April – December 2014.

The report recalled that the Advice Shop and Adult Basic Education delivered different services to the same targeted group of customers such as those who were vulnerable, disadvantaged or likely to be in poverty. The report provided committee with an overview of the services offered by each both services.

Appendix 1 to the report provided a visual overview of the number of people the service had worked with over the last nine months. In total, the Advice Shop had helped 1853 customers to manage their money and resolve benefit problems. As a result, customers better understood that claimants and benefits administrators had rights, obligations and constraints and were better informed to take what steps they could to sort out their own benefit queries and were able to maximise their household income.

The Adult Basic Education team had worked with 116 hard to reach adults who led complex and chaotic lifestyles. The service offered a range of short course, mainstream and English As a Second or Other Language option to help support learners to feel confident to work towards a qualification, move on to further learning, volunteering or to gain employment.

A number of priorities had been identified over the 2014/15 year; to continue to support parents to gain qualifications and financial literacy skills; to work with Whitburn Community Development Trust to offer weekly outreach advice sessions; and to development partnership work with food banks to target individuals and families in crisis. All of the priorities had been moved forward and were on track to be achieved by the end of the year.

The committee was invited to note the terms of the report and the intention to provide an annual report to the committee.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

9. PLACEMAKING IN WHITBURN - REPORT BY HEAD OF AREA SERVICES (HEREWITH).

The committee considered a report by the Head of Area Services (copies of which had been circulated) advising of progress to date with the planning for the charrette in Whitburn, as part of the placemaking exercise for the town.

The report recalled that the Scottish Government had agreed to provide funding for the council to undertake a town centre charrette (an intensive planning and community engagement exercise). The charrette recognised that an approach that looked at the planned and potential investments for the town as a whole was required.

A steering group, led by the council involving Whitburn Community Development Trust and Whitburn Community Council was leading the project. The charrette would look to integrate the various elements of planned investment and activity into a single cohesive masterplan for the area. The charrette would be carried out over a number of days, involve cycles of plan development, presentation and refinement and would be design-led with predominantly graphic outputs.

The report advised that two workshops had been held in early December 2014, facilitated by Architecture and Design Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage. The outcomes of these sessions, and deliberations with officer, had led to the outputs which were fully described in the report. A further workshop specifically for community representatives had been held on 10 February 2015, organised by the development trust and the community council, to enhance the contribution of the community prior to the charrette.

Following a competitive tendering exercise, Austin-Smith:Lord had been appointed as the lead contractor to deliver the charrette and associated outputs. The commenced work on 16th February 2015 and had met with several stakeholders. They were currently finalising the programme for the charrette which would be held during week commencing 23 March 2015 and would consist of three or four days of public, design-led workshops and drop-ins.

The report concluded with information on the next steps to be taken and explained that following the charrette, the outputs would be fully developed and finalised in April/May and fed back to stakeholders and participants.

The report recommended that the progress to date be noted and that progress reports would be provided to future meetings of the committee.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

10. COMMUNITY REGENERATION UPDATE

The committee considered a report by the Head of Area Services (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update on progress with community regeneration activity in the ward.

A summary of the various activities that had taken place since the last meeting of the committee was outlined in the report including:-

- Village Improvement Fund
- Training support to community councils
- Placemaking in Whitburn
- Regeneration plans
- Blackburn Early Years Action Group – Community Engagement
- Whitburn Community Sport Hub

It was recommended that the committee notes the progress on community regeneration activity in the ward.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

11. PROGRESS REPORT ON OUTSTANDING ISSUES RAISED AT MEETINGS OF THE LOCAL AREA COMMITTEE

The committee considered a report by the Head of Area Services (copies of which had been circulated) providing members with an update on progress of the many ward related issues that had arisen over the course of recent meetings of the committee.

The appendix to the report demonstrated that a course of action was being followed to address and resolve many of the outstanding issues. Officers would continue to respond to and monitor issues raised at meetings of the committee. The appendix to the report would be reduced in future and show progress of each action over the previous 12 months only.

The report recommended that committee notes the progress made.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.

12. WORKPLAN

The committee noted the content of the workplan to May 2015 (which had been circulated).

Decision

To note the terms of the workplan.

13. TIMETABLE OF MEETINGS 2015/16

The committee approved the proposed timetable of meetings for the period September 2015 to June 2016 (copies of which had been tabled).

Decision

To approve the terms of the report.