

Public Report
Overview and Scrutiny Management Board

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Overview and Scrutiny Management Board – 18 March 2021

Report Title

Outcomes from Scrutiny Working Group – Housing Hubs

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Jo Brown, Assistant Chief Executive

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

To report on the findings and recommendations of the recent working group examining Ward Housing Hubs.

Recommendations

1. That the briefing be noted and the following recommendations be submitted to Cabinet for approval: -
 - a) That training and guidance be provided as part of Member Induction to ensure that new Members have a working knowledge of how Ward Housing Hubs link with Neighbourhoods.
 - b) That provision be made to enable more joint-ward funding and collaboration across ward boundaries where there is mutual agreement and benefit.
 - c) That Members be provided with clear, reader-friendly criteria for HRA funding and guidance around other sources of funding if HRA funds do not apply; and that the guidance include an explanation of the 'roll over' facility for unallocated spend, from one year to the next, within the four year cycle.
 - d) That projects be procured and delivered through an appropriate and timely procurement process with a view to demonstrating value for money.

- e) That provision be made for approval of projects earlier in the municipal year to maximise the time available to deliver approved projects.
 - f) That processes be developed to enable decision-making where there are only two Ward Members, for example, in the event of a dispute or quoracy issue.
 - g) That a range of methods be adopted to promote Ward Housing Hubs and to enable residents to engage actively in a way which suits their needs and preferences.
 - h) That the Council's Employment Solutions Team liaise with RotherFed to promote the Pathways Employment Scheme across all the wards.
2. That the next update be presented to Improving Places Select Commission in 12 months' time.

List of Appendices Included

None

Background Papers

Minutes from Improving Places Select Commission – 19 December 2019

Minutes from Cabinet – 23 December 2019

Minutes from Improving Places Select Commission – 16 March 2021

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

Improving Places Select Commission – 19 December 2019

Cabinet – 23 December 2019

Improving Places Select Commission – 16 March 2021

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Outcomes from Scrutiny Working Group – Housing Hubs

1. Background

1.1 At the 19 December 2019 meeting of Improving Places, recommendations were made following a review of Area Housing Panels, followed by recommendations by Cabinet on 23 December 2019:-

1. That the existing Area Housing Panels be disestablished at the end of the 2019/20 financial year and be replaced by 25 ward Housing Hubs.
2. That from 2020/21 financial year, a base budget of £4,000 be set per ward, with the remainder of the annual budget provision then being allocated to wards, based upon the percentage of Council homes within each ward.
3. That the Assistant Director of Housing be authorised, in consultation with the Head of Finance (Adults, Public Health and Housing), to increase the ward Housing Hubs budget (on a ward by ward basis) by the value of the ward Housing Hub underspend in the preceding year within the 4 year cycle.
4. That the proposed governance arrangements, set out in 3.2.3 of the report, be approved.

1.2 Whilst the pandemic delayed the change to new ward boundaries, the IPSC examined progress in respect of the development of Ward Housing Hubs 14 months following Cabinet approval. Members viewed a presentation and a briefing which summarised the purpose, budget, achievements, challenges, plans, and learning that had been implemented, and ways for Members to feed into the redesigned Ward Housing Hubs. Case studies of feedback and examples of completed project work were provided as well as a demonstration of the redesigned webpage interface for Ward Housing Hubs.

2. Key Issues

2.1 During discussion, Members raised several concerns and suggestions.

2.2 Regarding the spending of designated Housing Revenue Account (HRA) funding, Members requested a revision of the procedure to help streamline procurement requests to achieve quicker delivery and greater value for money. Members expressed interest in greater support for scheduling projects earlier in the municipal year so as to avoid rushing to spend at the end of the municipal year. Members further requested that the rationale for rolling forward unspent funds be clarified.

2.3 Speaking from experience, Members identified the need for training and guidance as soon as possible after elections to ensure that new Members have a working knowledge of how Ward Housing Hubs link with Neighbourhoods. Members also need clear, reader-friendly criteria for HRA funding, and guidance around other sources of funding if HRA funds do not apply.

- 2.4 Members cited experiences in which inquorate meetings inhibit decision-making at the ward level. Therefore, it was requested that processes be developed to enable decision-making where there are only two Ward Members, for example, in the event of a dispute or quoracy issue.
- 2.5 Members also suggested some ways to foster an inclusive Ward Housing Hub website user experience. Based on information provided by officers in attendance, it was noted that visitors to the site could benefit from having a link to COVID-19 support, employment opportunities, and other available support such as the laptop loan scheme which helps job applicants who might not otherwise have ready access to a computer. It was further suggested that a range of interactivity modes be offered and publicised via the web sites so that residents can engage with Ward Housing Hubs in whichever way suits them. It was noted, for example, that some residents who may not be comfortable attending a meeting, virtual or conventional, might find that an email or text conversation offers a more natural way to share their views and receive responses and progress updates. Members affirmed the importance of responding to individual preferences and by providing a variety of possible ways to contribute—including ways that are not computer-mediated.
- 2.6 Members also suggested ways of bolstering partnership working with a view to enhancing engagement from residents. It was noted that tenant representative volunteers will be mentored, and it was suggested that the Housing Hubs teams liaise with Rotherfed and the Housing Income and Financial Inclusion Team to develop pathways in the work.
- 2.7 Members expressed strong desire to see more funding across ward boundaries where there is mutual agreement and benefit. Members cited examples of adjoining wards in the Borough where collaboration makes sense because residents on both sides of the boundary would benefit from the project.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 3.1 Members referenced various experiences and prior attempts to increase engagement and make use of the various types of funding available for the benefit of the wards they represent. The rationale for the recommendations is set out in the previous sections of the report.

4. Consultation on proposal

- 4.1 Members have consulted and are in regular communication with residents in their respective wards.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

- 5.1 The timetable and accountability for implementing recommendations arising from this report will sit with the Cabinet and officers. The Overview and Scrutiny Procedurals require the Cabinet to consider and respond to recommendations made by scrutiny within two months.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 There are no procurement or financial implications directly associated with this report.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 There are no Legal implications directly associated with this report.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 There are no Human Resources implications directly associated with this report.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 The implications for children and young people and vulnerable adults are set forth in the main body of the report.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 Members have had regard to equalities and human rights implications when developing recommendations.

11. Implications for Partners

11.1 The implications for partner organisations are set out in the previous sections of the report.

12. Risks and Mitigation

12.1 Members have had regard to potential risks and mitigation and undertake scrutiny in order to strengthen the probability of success of Ward Housing Hubs.

13. Accountable Officer(s)

Craig Tyler, Head of Democratic Services and Statutory Scrutiny Officer

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