

Hastings Community Network

Hastings Community Network
c/o HVA
Jackson Hall
Portland Place
Hastings

12th February 2015

Dear Cllr Birch

HCN Budget Consultation

On behalf of the Hastings Community Network we would like to thank you for attending our recent meeting to discuss with HCN members the proposed budget and Corporate Plan. It was really useful to engage directly with this process and to provide a perspective from the Voluntary and Community Sector about the proposed changes and the challenging funding climate in which HBC are forced to operate. We thought it would be helpful to write as a follow up to summarise some of the issues we raised and have circulated this to your fellow elected members so that they can be aware of our submission to the Consultation. Our views are as follows:-

The Funding Settlement: The Network are deeply concerned, as you are, about the recent settlement and the way in which Hastings – as an area of specific and long term deprivation – is being treated compared to other more affluent geographical areas. We will be writing separately to Amber Rudd MP and appropriate Government Minister about this issue. We are deeply concerned about the long term impact of public service cuts and the funding formulae which has produced this result (and also the challenging issues relating to the Policing budget because of the issues relating to the ‘precept’ formulae). We are aware that the Council set this budget in a particularly challenging context and do not envy you the task of reconciling resources with essential services to residents. Nevertheless, we hope our detailed comments may be helpful to the Council in finalising the budget.

Digital by Default: We note the Councils wish to move towards a more digital approach as the first point of entry to accessing Council services. We appreciate that this is in line with

broader changes such as the growth on internet banking and it is clearly important that the Council embrace this. However, we are concerned that the Council identify early the significant issues of digital exclusion in the area and work proactively with the voluntary sector to address them. We believe that the availability of digital access in some areas, combined with the technical and other skills required to complete benefit applications for example remain significant issues. We believe that a systematic assessment of this will need to be undertaken to avoid the dangers of exclusion. Whilst we note the CPF contribution to the REACH project this, in itself, can only scratch the surface of what we believe to be a significant challenge for the Town. We would also welcome a review of the availability of public computers in HBC buildings, libraries and other locations and an analysis the capacity which will be required in the future to meet demand.

Private Rented Sector Housing: We welcome the proposal by the Council to consider a private rented licensing scheme and note the absence of statutory protection for private sector tenants which over the last 2 decades has significantly eroded. We believe that the scheme could positively drive up standards and produce a better quality experience for tenants. However we note that the financing of the start-up costs of the scheme have not been included as a growth items in the Revenue budget. We wish to see a scheme which is proactive and has “teeth” to regulate and tackle poor (and sometimes dangerous) conditions this will require resources to be carefully considered. Information from Brighton Housing Trust has suggested that the requirement for licenses needs to be continually enforced and without regular monitoring the scheme could fall into disrepute. There is some evidence of this with the current HMO licensing scheme Hastings has had since 2011. In the last six or so months BHT have successfully defended approx. 20 cases in the County Court with landlords who did not have HMO licences. Our concern is that the capacity issues within Housing Renewal may not be sufficient to manage a ‘meaningful’ scheme. We are concerned that without appropriate resources and ongoing monitoring the scheme could just turn into something where the decent landlords get the license and the not-so-decent landlords don’t bother as there are no consequences or follow up.

Social Lettings Agency: With regard to the Social Lettings Agency the network welcome any scheme that provides opportunities for families not to have to go into B&B or small temporary accommodation but we would wish to have further detail about how this will operate in practice. A number of similar schemes have operated in the voluntary sector and they have sometimes proved problematic to manage and administer effectively. Specifically there have been issues raised about how the rent of an estimated £167 for a 2 bed property will remain affordable if the tenant is to make the transition from benefit into work – and given that the current Local Housing Allowance is capped at £115 per week. Some careful

consideration will need to be given if the scheme is to enable tenants to remain in their property as their circumstances change particularly if they move into employment.

HBC Community Facing Officers: We understand that the Council is embarking on a restructuring process and it would not be appropriate to comment on different posts until this has been settled. However we would like to explore with HBC how the relationship between the Council and key community organisations and networks can best be continued into the future. Whilst we accept that the Council may not be able to be as “hands on” as in previous years we are concerned about the infrastructure available when this reduction in the Council’s staffing is seen alongside the reduction in funding for VCS Infrastructure provided by Hastings Voluntary Action. We would welcome a follow up meeting with the appropriate Corporate Director to discuss the thinking behind the restructure - and the implications of it - in more detail.

Disabled Facilities Grants: Members of Hastings Community Network work in the areas of Health and Social Care and have been part of the ESCC Better Together Consultation. We have been regularly briefed on the demographic changes of an older population – many of whom live with long term medical conditions and the challenge this poses for service providers. As a consequence we have good reason to believe that there will be more people with disabilities who will need aids, adaptations and care in order to remain in their home. In this context we note that the Council intend to freeze its Disabled Facilities Grant budget at current 2014/2015 levels. We would like to receive further information about the impact of this and the demand on that budget particularly as it is our belief that the Council are presently having to decline applications and are not able to make any discretionary allocations at all beyond the scope of the mandatory DFG scheme.

VCS Role in Service Delivery: We note that the VCS is not specifically referred to in the Corporate plan and believe that the role of the sector could and should be given greater prominence. It is our belief that with a reduction in public services, a ratcheting up of eligibility criteria combined with the introduction of a complex welfare reform agenda, VCS frontline services are under increased pressure to fill in the gaps. They are also actively engaged in improving access to funds and support. Together this creates particular challenges for VCS organisations and we believe it is strategically important that the current level of VCS investment (via the Community Partnerships Fund) should remain at least at its present levels. Therefore the Community Network oppose the proposed 6.9% reduction in voluntary sector funding contained in the budget and ask Councillors to restore the budget to at least its previous level of investment.

Greenway: Then Network support the inclusion of a specific reference to the Greenway project in the Corporate Plan as this long standing project addresses transport, health and mobility issues as well as creating a safe network for cyclists across the Town.

Seafront Strategy: Similarly we welcome the Council's attempts to create a specific strategy for the Seafront and increase footfall along a much longer area of the promenade. The recent announcement of a programme of works to restore and repair some of the worst affected areas such as Bottle Alley is a welcome investment which can both improve a decaying area and restore some of the ground-breaking work of Sydney Little in terms of municipal design.

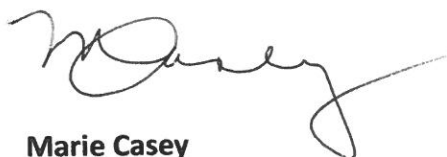
Affordability and Charges: We note that different departments have been asked to identify initiatives and measures which can mitigate the funding pressures HBC face. These have been achieved via a mixture of service cuts and fee increases. Within various parts of the budget and its appendices various fee increases are proposed. However the level of such increases has some quite wide variations. In some cases (such as the rental of chalets) proposed increases are minimal or in line with inflation but in other areas (such as the proposed increase to the Garden refuse collection service) the % increases is much higher. We invite the Council to take a corporate view where any increases are considered and review this so that there is greater consistency.

We hope that our response to the Council is a helpful contribution to the debate as Councillors consider the final budget setting phase of the process. Once again thank you for attending our meeting.

Yours Sincerely



Jacky Everard
HCN Co-Chair



Marie Casey
HCN Co-Chair