Relevant extract from the minutes of the Cabinet meeting on 23 June 2015

13. Review of Local Welfare and Crisis Support Schemes to Vulnerable Residents with options for the Local Emergency Support Service

(The Chair agreed to bring forward consideration of this item in view of the attendance of representatives of Harmony House and the Council for Voluntary Services.)

Marie Kearns, Harmony House Contract Manager for the Local Emergency Support Service (LESS), and Erica Jenkins, Barking and Dagenham Council for Voluntary Services (BDCVS), were invited to address the Cabinet on their response to the proposals contained within the report. Ms Kearns advised that she was also speaking on behalf of Pip Salvador-Jones, Director of the Barking and Dagenham Citizen’s Advice Bureau who were a delivery partner of the LESS, who was unable to attend the meeting.

Ms Kearns referred to her email to the Council of 19 June 2015 in which she highlighted a number of issues and sought clarification on several aspects of the report. She explained that over 3,000 vulnerable local people apply for support each year and the cessation of the LESS would place considerable pressures on other statutory services provided by the Council and voluntary sector partners. The roll out of further Government welfare reforms, including the Universal Credit, would bring additional pressures on many individuals and families who were already finding it extremely difficult to manage with the little money that they had. Ms Kearns stressed that resilience work was essential and the current model of delivery was founded on that.

Ms Jenkins reiterated the concerns regarding the changes to the benefits system and felt that it was crucial for the LESS to continue while the support agencies and businesses put in place additional arrangements to meet the inevitable pressures arising from those changes. Both Ms Jenkins and Ms Kearns acknowledged the difficult position that the Council had been placed in by the withdrawal of Central Government funding for the LESS and the other cuts to statutory services that support the vulnerable in the community, but suggested secondary safety nets such as the LESS were vital and should continue.

The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health introduced the report and similarly expressed her frustration at the impact that the Government’s austerity measures were having on local authorities and the voluntary sector agencies that support local communities. The Cabinet Member reminded her colleagues that the decision taken by Cabinet under Minute 101 (16 February 2015) was to extend the
current contract for a further six months from 1 April 2015, funded from the Council’s Revenue Support Grant settlement, and that the proposal in today’s report was to discontinue the project at the end of that extension in favour of alternative arrangements to support vulnerable residents and build resilience in the community.

The Cabinet Member referred to the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s Emergency Budget expected in July 2015, which was predicted to make £12 billion cuts to the welfare budget, and stressed that it was vital for the Council to retain as much flexibility as possible in the lead-up to that announcement. The funding of £300,000 that the Council was able to allocate to the LESS would not properly address the level of need, so it was necessary to look at how any available funding could be best used in the longer term. Reference was also made to the delivery costs of approximately £90,000 for the LESS.

Cabinet Members spoke in support of the need to retain as much flexibility at the present time and welcomed the further work that would be undertaken by the Council’s Strategic Welfare Reform Group which would inform a report to Cabinet towards the end of 2015.

Cabinet resolved to:

(i) Note the background information and context around welfare reform and the funds which the Council makes available to those in priority need;

(ii) Agree to cease funding a Local Emergency Support Service in Barking and Dagenham and use the remaining additional revenue support grant to develop two pilots to support identified cohorts of vulnerable residents to build self reliance; and

(iii) Request that the Strategic Welfare Reform Group complete a further, more holistic assessment of welfare support across employment, housing, and general assistance, as part of the Ambition 2020 proposals, with a 3-5 year timeline, to return to Cabinet later in the year.