

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

19 July 2018

Present: Councillor K Hastrick (Chair)
Councillor J Dhindsa (Vice-Chair)
Councillors S Bashir, S Cavinder, K Crout, I Hamid, M Hofman and
I Stotesbury

Also present: Councillor Stephen Johnson, Portfolio Holder

Officers: Head of Housing
Committee and Scrutiny Officer

15 Apologies for Absence/Committee Membership

It was noted that, as a consequence of the by-election, the political balance was updated and reported to Council on 10 July. At that meeting it was agreed that Councillor Hamid had joined Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Councillor Turmaine was no longer a member.

16 Disclosure of interests (if any)

There were no disclosures of interests.

17 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 June 2018 were submitted and signed.

18 Call-in

The scrutiny committee noted that no executive key decisions had been called in.

19 Housing - Homelessness Reduction Act

The scrutiny committee received a presentation from the Head of Housing. He explained that he would provide an introduction to the Homelessness Reduction Act and its implementation in Watford. He gave a background to the Act and how it had changed as it moved through Parliament. He explained that the Act had come into force in April 2018. The Act fundamentally changed the way Housing Authorities provided advice on housing matters. There was greater

emphasis on clients doing more for themselves and working through a Personal Housing Plan. Those seeking housing advice were able to approach the Council much earlier than had previously been the case.

In response to a question about the homelessness figures, the Head of Housing advised that the figures showed the actual totals for 2017/18 and not the projected totals as referred to on the slide. The total number of applications had decreased compared to the previous year. He considered that this was partly due to the work carried out by the team and the services provided to applicants.

The Head of Housing assured councillors that applicants could contact the council at any time as an officer was always on call. A person being made homeless needed to ring the Town Hall number and they would be transferred to the on call officer. He noted that there were very few calls outside normal office hours.

The Head of Housing advised that the legislation around who was eligible for temporary accommodation remained the same as previously, so there should not necessarily be an increase in temporary accommodation demand. The difficulty was the supply of accommodation. He explained the Choice Based Letting system and how some families would be encouraged to explore the private rented sector and the HomeLet scheme. The council would also support people who looked for property themselves in the private sector.

The Head of Housing stated that there were fewer instances of people being relocated outside the borough, due to reduced numbers in temporary accommodation and increased provision in the town. He advised that some London Boroughs were transferring people to accommodation in the Midlands and further north. It was all due to the lack of suitable accommodation required by applicants. He added that as councillors were aware nationally there was a housing crisis. The Government had recently announced £1.6 billion for social housing; however this funding was likely to take between two and three years to come through. He informed the scrutiny committee that the Croxley View scheme would be available within the next month or so. He reiterated that as the number of applications reduced the council would not have to move people outside of Watford.

Following a question about new housing schemes within the borough, the Head of Housing advised the council had no power to tell developers they could not build any more one or two bed flats. The housing service would comment on applications and try to influence the inclusion of some type of affordable housing provision.

The Portfolio Holder responsible for Housing informed the scrutiny committee that the housing service was involved at early discussion stages with developers. He reported that the Happy Hour Public House site application had included five 3-bedroom social housing units. He reminded councillors that the council was a partner in Hart Homes which was able to develop properties within the borough. The council did need to take into account the commercial viability of schemes.

The Head of Housing showed how there was a gap between actual rents and local housing allowance. Locally it was out of sync with median rents by 32%. Most people who were presenting themselves as homeless were coming out of the private sector.

In response to a question about local authorities leasing properties from the private sector for a long period, e.g. five or ten years, the Head of Housing confirmed that this was not currently done. The council was unable to take on management responsibilities as those skills were lost to the Housing Trust when the council's stock was transferred.

The Head of Housing continued his presentation and explained about the new Act. The main aim of the Act was to empower people and enable them to do more for themselves. People were able to have a fuller discussion about their personal circumstances with officers. Each person would be given their own Personal Housing Plan. This would indicate what the council would do for the client and also what they needed to do for themselves. Under the new Act the council had a duty to provide advice and the plan but not house unless the person met the strict rules under the previous homelessness legislation. Although housing clients could present themselves to any housing authority in the country which would need to provide them with housing advice and a personal housing plan, this did not mean that they would have to house them.

The Head of Housing stated that once a person was aware that they were due to be made homeless they should contact the council as soon as possible for housing advice.

Further to a question about the council borrowing funds to build its own properties, the Head of Housing reminded the councillors about Hart Homes. Without this vehicle, the council would need to manage the stock and become a social landlord again. Through Hart Homes the council was able to work with a social housing provider who could manage the property. In response to a comment about working with the voluntary sector, the Head of Housing agreed to send the scrutiny committee details of the Homelessness Strategy Group.

The Head of Housing and Portfolio Holder were thanked for their presentation and responses to the scrutiny committee's questions. It was agreed that the

officer would return in a year's time to advise how the first year of work under the new Act had progressed.

RESOLVED –

1. that a further presentation on the Homelessness Reduction Act in a year's time.
2. that councillors be provided with details of the Homelessness Strategy Group.

20

Review of recommendations: Neighbourhood Forum Task Group

The scrutiny committee received a report of the Committee and Scrutiny Officer setting out each of the recommendations, Cabinet's comments, amendments and additional decision and the actions since March 2017.

There was some discussion about the new requirement for all three ward councillors to sign off a project in order for it to proceed. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer explained that this decision had not been a recommendation from the task group but a decision by the Mayor and Cabinet. The Neighbourhood Locality Fund was an executive function and the Mayor and Cabinet could make decisions about the budget and procedures. The original scrutiny proposal had been put forward by the Mayor and the Head of Democracy and Governance. Some of the councillors agreed that they would approach the current Mayor to discuss this matter further as they felt it was unfair in those wards where more than one party was represented.

The scrutiny committee also discussed the evaluation form. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer said that the forms were important to show whether councillors had felt their projects had proceeded as originally agreed and whether they had demonstrated value for money. They would normally be attached to the annual report although this had not been the case for the recent report to Council. One councillor felt the form was a good idea as it showed how the funds had been spent.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

21

Executive Decision Progress Report

The Scrutiny Committee received the latest edition of the Executive Decision Progress Report for 2018/19.

RESOLVED –

that the updated report be noted.

22 Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Hastrick reported that the last Health Scrutiny Committee had taken place on 3 July 2018. Nascot Lawn continued to be discussed. The Chair added that the Liberal Democrat's had put forward a motion at the recent full Council meeting at the County Council which was supported by the administration, although they were not happy with the Labour motion. It was agreed that the chair would write to the Chief Executive of NHS England and copied to the Secretary of State for Health. Another topic group had been agreed. The link to the minutes for Health Scrutiny Committee and Council would be circulated to the scrutiny committee.

23 Budget Panel

It was noted that Budget Panel had not met since the last Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting in June.

24 Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel

The Chair of Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel, Councillor Cavinder, gave an update on the panel's last meeting. He said that they had received two presentations and there had been a good range of debate.

25 Community Safety Partnership Task Group

The recently appointed chair, Councillor Crout, advised that the task group's first meeting was due to take place on 24 July 2018.

26 Work Programme

The scrutiny committee received its updated work programme. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer suggested that councillors could also consider scrutiny's policy development role when considering items for future meetings.

It was agreed that the scrutiny proposal form would be sent to Councillors Crout and Hofman in order for them to put forward their suggestions. These proposals would then be considered at a future meeting.

The chair asked colleagues to forward any ideas to her and the Committee and Scrutiny Officer for consideration for later meetings. If relevant, officers would be asked to provide informative presentations to the scrutiny committee.

27

Dates of Next Meetings

- Thursday 27 September 2018
- Thursday 25 October 2018 (for call-in only)
- Thursday 29 November 2018

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 8.50 pm