

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**20 JULY 2015**

Present: Councillor K Collett (Chair)  
Councillor J Dhindsa (Vice-Chair)  
Councillors K Crout, K Hastrick, A Joynes, R Martins, A Rindl,  
L Topping and S Williams

Also present: Councillor Stephen Johnson (for minute numbers 15 to 18),  
Portfolio Holder for Housing

Officers: Head of Community and Customer Services  
Interim Housing Section Head  
Committee and Scrutiny Officer

### **15 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

There was a change of membership for this meeting: Councillor S Williams replaced Councillor Khan and Councillor Martins replaced Councillor Walford.

### **16 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)**

During the discussion on the Housing Update (minute number 18), Councillor Dhindsa advised that he was a private sector landlord. He leased his property to a person who claimed Housing Benefit.

### **17 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 June 2015 were submitted and signed.

### **18 HOUSING UPDATE**

The Interim Housing Section Head circulated a late report to the Scrutiny Committee. The report set out information on various aspects of the services provided by the Council's Housing Section.

#### **Change in Temporary Accommodation Usage**

The Interim Housing Section Head referred Members to the chart in paragraph 3.1 of the report. This showed the changes in usage of temporary accommodation since September 2012. Temporary Accommodation numbers had increased over the last year in particular. There had been a reduction in the

number of people housed in bed and breakfast accommodation since March 2015.

Councillor S Williams noted the increase shown in the chart. He asked whether this compared similarly to other districts within the county or to London.

The Interim Housing Section Head advised that he had mainly worked in London boroughs and he felt the increase in Watford could be similarly compared to that in London.

### **Bed and Breakfast and Nightly Let**

In response to a question from Councillor Martins about the types of units used, the Interim Housing Section Head explained that there was a total of 205 units used for temporary accommodation. There were 36 single units and the remainder were for families. Those units in shared accommodation would normally share bathrooms and kitchen facilities.

Following a question from Councillor Crout, the Interim Housing Section Head advised that the units outside the Borough were generally within Hertfordshire, however there were also some in Luton and Dunstable.

Councillor Dhindsa asked how officers assessed where people would be placed. Some families may have children at school or adults might work in Watford.

The Interim Housing Section Head said that officers sympathised with families but it was difficult. There were occasions when there was a lack of accommodation within the Borough. A review would be carried out to look into how the Council procured temporary accommodation and a placement policy would be developed. The service preferred not to place those with children at school or working adults outside the Borough.

Councillor Dhindsa asked whether officers had tried to secure accommodation on long term contracts, even if that meant that there were times they may be empty.

The Interim Housing Section Head stated that the service was currently exploring the opportunity to secure long-term units for the Council's sole use. The increase in demand meant that the service needed to review its policy.

The Interim Housing Section Head acknowledged that any big events in Watford, for example Premier League football matches, would cause an increased pressure if the service was looking for accommodation. This would be considered when developing the procurement process.

### **Homeless demand**

Following questions about those seeking accommodation due to domestic violence, the Interim Housing Section Head explained that the service would assist the person fleeing their home. The Council would support the victim in

obtaining an order requiring the perpetrator to move out – where it was safe to do so.

The Interim Housing Section Head informed Members that the biggest reason for homelessness was evictions from private sector accommodation.

The Chair suggested that this was a matter that could be raised with the MP when he attended the Housing Policy Advisory Group. She felt that part of the reason for the difficulties in encouraging private sector landlords to provide accommodation to the Council was due to the fact that Housing Benefit had to be paid direct to the tenant. She had heard many say that they would not let to claimants as they would not get their rent. It was necessary to speak to the Government about this matter. There was an argument that some tenants should have their Housing Benefit paid direct to the landlord.

The Interim Housing Section Head agreed that this could be an issue for the private sector. He added a landlord could request that the Housing Benefit was paid direct rather than to the tenant if there were rent arrears.

The Head of Community and Customer Services reminded Members that if someone was considered to be intentionally homeless, the Council was not obliged to find them accommodation.

Following a comment from Councillor Dhindsa, the Interim Housing Section Head explained that under the rent deposit scheme the landlord should place the deposit into a government-backed Tenancy Deposit Scheme, if the Landlord failed to do so they were acting illegally. There were a number of issues that officers would discuss with landlords.

The Head of Community and Customer Services added that generally the landlord cannot ask to have the rent paid direct to themselves as the tenant had to agree to the revised arrangement. There were a few occasions when the landlord could make a request to be paid direct.

At this point Councillor Dhindsa commented that he felt he should declare a personal interest as he was a landlord.

The Chair said that she had casework where tenants had got into arrears with their rent. She felt it was important to help them before they had large arrears.

The Interim Housing Section Head said that it was necessary to get landlords working with the Council. It was best to start prevention work early. Many tenancies were assured short-hold and landlords did not need to give reasons to evict people. Rent arrears were rarely given as a reason.

Councillor Hastrick suggested that some landlords might want to evict tenants in order to increase rental charges at a later date. She asked whether the Housing Service monitored properties.

The Interim Housing Section Head responded that the Council assessed housing applicants, but it did not track what eventually happened to the property; this would have resource implications for the service. He then explained the procedures required to evict a tenant with an assured short-hold tenancy.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Councillor Johnson, said that this was a crucial time for housing. The Nominations Policy was changing. People were being discharged to the private sector. It was important to encourage more landlords to get involved. The overall packages for landlords would be reviewed. Watford's proximity to London and its location within the M25 had a big impact.

Councillor Crout commented that houses needed to be built. Affordable housing was not the same as social housing.

### **Private Sector Rent and Housing Benefit**

The Interim Housing Section Head referred the Committee to paragraph 3.4 and the changes to the Local Housing Allowance calculation. The HomeLet scheme would need to be reviewed as to date no units had been procured in 2015/16.

### **Comparisons with other Boroughs**

The Interim Housing Section Head had provided details of homeless acceptances within the county for 2014/15. Watford had a similar percentage increase to the overall county average.

### **Rough Sleeping**

The Interim Housing Section Head explained how the number of rough sleepers had increased, in part due to the way the figure was calculated.

The Chair asked whether officers were aware of the area the rough sleepers had come from, for example London or Luton.

The Interim Housing Section Head agreed that some people were likely to have come from outside of the Borough. Many of them though had some connection to Watford. In a few cases they may have moved to Watford in connection with their work and then lost that employment which led to them losing their accommodation.

Councillor Rindl noted the comment that the number had recently reduced to 22. She asked whether officers were aware of any reasons for this change.

The Interim Housing Section Head advised that he did not have this information. He would contact New Hope for the details.

Councillor Dhindsa commented that many developments in London attracted foreign investors who bought properties and then kept them empty.

The Interim Housing Section Head agreed and said that some developments, in London boroughs, were advertised off-plan in the Far East and often kept vacant.

Councillor Johnson said that one London Borough had set aside £10 million to buy properties in the Watford area.

### **New Build**

The Interim Housing Section Head informed the Committee that the financial arrangements for new builds by registered social landlords had changed. Most rents would now be set at 80% of the market rent. There had been a marked decline in the number of new social rent properties coming forward. He considered this might be linked to the affordable rent model being introduced.

The Portfolio Holder added that the planning rules were regularly changed. Developers were able to request that they did not provide affordable housing units.

Councillor S Williams said that the decrease in social rent units was astonishing. He felt this was a national issue.

The Portfolio Holder advised that the Housing Team worked closely with the Planning Team. Officers always made recommendations for the inclusion of affordable and social housing units. Shared ownership was less favourable.

### **Emergency Budget July 2015**

The Interim Housing Section Head explained some of the relevant matters announced as part of the Chancellor's budget. Further information would be provided once the impact of the changes had been fully analysed.

The Chair thanked the Interim Housing Section Head and Head of Community and Customer Services for the clear and comprehensive update.

RESOLVED –

that the report be noted.

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### **OUTSTANDING ACTIONS AND QUESTIONS**

The Scrutiny Committee received a list of outstanding Actions and Questions. Members noted the updates. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer updated Members on several responses she had received since the publication of the report.

## **IT Update**

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer reported that she had contacted the Director of Finance, who had advised that an update would be circulated shortly.

## **ED 9 – Member involvement in the development of the Economic Development Strategy**

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that the Economic Development Manager had advised that a full consultation on the draft strategy had been carried out through the Council's website. The draft strategy was due to be considered by Cabinet in September. He had suggested that if Members wanted to have a bespoke workshop on the strategy this could be arranged for the end of July or early August.

Following a discussion it was proposed that the Committee and Scrutiny Officer should email all Councillors and find out if they were interested in a workshop being held.

## **CSP 8 – Dates and times for the Anti Social Behaviour Advisory Group**

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer reported that the Anti Social Behaviour Co-ordinator had replied to an email. He stated that the group had been changed to the Community Protection Group and still met at the same time and frequency as the Anti Social Behaviour Advisory Group. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer agreed to circulate the information and the officer's contact details to all Members.

## **CPZ 2 – Recommendation 8 wording 'under 16'**

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that she had contacted the Transport and Infrastructure Section Head regarding the Committee's suggestion that the wording to the age limit should be amended. The Parking Manager had replied and agreed that he would amend the rule to 'under 18 years old' to reflect the Members' request.

RESOLVED –

1. that the update be noted.
2. that Councillors be canvassed regarding a workshop on the draft Economic Development Strategy.
3. that all Councillors be provided with details of the Community Protection Group meetings and contact details for the Anti Social Behaviour Co-ordinator.

20           **EXECUTIVE DECISION PROGRESS REPORT**

The Scrutiny Committee received the latest edition of the Executive Decision Progress Report 2015/16.

RESOLVED –

that the report be noted.

21           **HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S HEALTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Councillor Kareen Hastrick, the Council's appointed representative to the Health Scrutiny Committee, informed Members of the range of discussions at the last meeting.

Members asked about the promotion of public health and how this would be monitored.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that the Head of Community and Customer Services was the lead officer for public health. She would contact him to discuss how expenditure of any funds would be monitored and how Members could be involved in that process. She was aware of one Hertfordshire authority that was monitoring the expenditure through a scrutiny committee.

Awareness of mental health was also discussed. The Chair suggested that a Member briefing was arranged on the subject.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

22           **BUDGET PANEL**

The Scrutiny Committee noted that Budget Panel's first meeting was held on Tuesday 7 July 2015. The Vice Chair, Councillor Joynes, updated members on the discussion at that meeting.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

23           **OUTSOURCED SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL**

The Scrutiny Committee noted that Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel's first meeting was held on Monday 6 July 2015. The Chair, Councillor Crout, informed Members that the Panel had agreed to include an ICT update request on its

agenda for October, as it had not been due for consideration until February 2016.

Councillor Martins was concerned that no scrutiny committee appeared to be responsible for the monitoring of the market contract.

Councillor Crout replied that it may depend on the contract with Town and Country markets and the remit for Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel. He would ensure that clarification was sought from the Head of Democracy and Governance.

RESOLVED –

1. that the update be noted.
2. that the Head of Democracy and Governance be asked about the scrutiny of the contract for the New Watford Market.

#### 24 **COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP TASK GROUP**

It was noted that the Community Safety Partnership's first meeting was due to take place in September.

#### 25 **SCRUTINY PROPOSAL - MANAGEMENT OF CONSERVATION AREAS**

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Committee and Scrutiny Officer setting out a suggestion for a new scrutiny proposal. The suggestion had been submitted by Councillor Martins.

Councillor Martins explained why he had suggested the topic.

Following a discussion it was agreed that the Task Group would be set up. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer would contact all non-executive councillors and seek expressions of interest. Councillors Topping and Dhindsa advised that they were interested in taking part in the review.

RESOLVED –

1. that a Task Group be established to review the management of conservation areas.
2. that the appointment of members to the Task group be delegated to the Head of Democracy and Governance in consultation with the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee.



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**VOLUNTARY SECTOR AND COMMISSIONING FRAMEWORK  
(COMMUNITY CENTRES) TASK GROUP - FINAL REPORT**

The Scrutiny Committee received the Task group's final report. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed Members that the Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services had advised that a representative from the Communications and Engagement Team would be attending the next Community Centres Forum in August. The Team would be nominating one of its officers as champion who would be the point of contact for the representatives from the community centres.

RESOLVED –

that the Voluntary Sector Commissioning Framework (Community Centres) Task Group's final report be forwarded to Cabinet as part of the Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services' report on the new Commissioning Framework.

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**DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS**

- Wednesday 29 July 2015 (For call-in only)
- Thursday 24 September 2015
- Thursday 22 October 2015 (For call-in only)

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm  
and finished at 8.50 pm