

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18 March 2021

Present: Councillor M Parker (Chair)
Councillor J Dhindsa (Vice-Chair)
Councillors D Allen-Williamson, P Jeffree, R Martins,
B Mauthoor, G Saffery and M Turmaine

Also present: Councillor Collett, Portfolio Holder

Officers: Executive Head of Corporate Strategy and Communications
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Group Head of Transformation
Executive Head of Human Resources
Group Head of Community and Environmental Services
Community Safety Co-ordinator

87 **Apologies for Absence/Committee Membership**

Apologies were received from Councillor Crout.

88 **Disclosure of interests (if any)**

There were no disclosures of interest.

89 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 February 2021 were agreed. It was noted that these would be signed once officers and members were able to return to the town hall.

Councillor Dhindsa requested that an outstanding request for information around usage figures for Arriva Click be resolved as soon as possible.

90 **Other scrutiny meetings - minutes**

The committee was advised that Finance Scrutiny Committee had met on 4 March.

In addition, it was noted that the final report and recommendations of the Responding to the impacts of Covid 19 on Watford's BAME communities and street name policy review task group had been approved by Cabinet on 1 March.

91

Community Safety Partnership

The scrutiny committee received a presentation from the Community Safety Coordinator updating progress on the 2020/21 plan and proposed objectives for 2021/22. A summary of the presentation had been sent to members in advance of the meeting.

Providing a short overview, the Community Safety Coordinator highlighted the following issues:

- Covid 19 had required a reassessment of risks and threats in Watford during the pandemic.
- Over the year, crime levels had fallen across Hertfordshire. In Watford there had been a significant 22% reduction in crime, with a 12.3% reduction in reported incidents of anti-social behaviour. By comparison, East Herts had recorded an 18.3% reduction in criminal activity and Dacorum an 8% increase in anti-social behaviour figures. Watford's statistics were largely explained by restrictions placed on the night time economy, day time economy and footfall in the town.
- 2,485 anti-social behaviour events had been recorded over the last year, down from some 6,400 15 years ago. This represented a near 60% reduction. The council's partners, including Watford Community Housing and Paradigm Housing Group, had picked up many of the complaints reflecting the successful operation of Watford's Community Protection Group. This unique model in Hertfordshire enabled issues to be tackled quickly and effectively.
- Certain crimes had seen an upturn e.g., car crime, specifically the theft of catalytic convertors by organised gangs from outside the area and opportunistic thefts from cars left unlocked.
- Although a number of community impacts had been anticipated as a result of Covid, including neighbour disputes, domestic abuse and hate crimes, these had not materialised. In particular, domestic abuse and violence was down – but now appeared to be increasing – and hate crimes had never become an issue.
- "Operation out" was focusing on the town centre coming back to life as establishments began to open up. A steady start back was planned. It was anticipated that this would result in an increase in anti-social behaviour and crime reports.
- Strategic objectives for 2021/22 had been assessed in conjunction with the police. As a highest priority, it had been decided to maintain

intervention against youth violent crime because this represented the biggest risk and was linked to a number of related crimes including the supply of drugs and the exploitation of young people. It was noted that cuckooing was now recognised at county level within the violent crimes strategy.

- Other priority issues included supporting police priorities in the immediate community e.g., misuse of drugs in public places, electric scooters, anti-social behaviour and vehicle tampering. Priorities would be monitored throughout the year to test for impact.
- Two additional emerging areas of concern were the impacts of nitrous oxide misuse and the online blackmailing of young people.

Following the presentation, the meeting discussed a number of additional issues:

- Despite early concerns about retail – particularly pharmacies – and warehouse thefts from empty premises during lockdown, this threat had not materialised.
- Cuckooing, blackmailing and revenge porn threats should be considered together since they affected similar age groups and could benefit from related education programmes.
- Ongoing work was needed in the future with schools to tackle cyber bullying amongst teenagers.
- Race hate crimes were expected to increase once the town centre reopened with associated impacts on hospital staff, particularly in the A&E department.
- Dog theft crimes were rare.
- Although doorstep fraud was generally low in the town, it was reported that a group of men purporting to be from the council were knocking on doors promoting cavity wall insulations. The Community Safety Coordinator agreed to investigate doorstep crime via trading standards to get an up to date picture on this type of offence.
- Council communications should highlight the legitimate doorstep approaches from census workers in the coming weeks.
- Lists of premises with pavement licenses could be provided to members where requested.
- E-scooters were not a legalised form of transport and were therefore not permitted on pavements or roads. It was noted that a number of e-scooter rental trials were taking place around the country.

RESOLVED –

that Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the update on the 2020/21 plan and objectives for 2021/22.

Action: Community Safety Coordinator

92

Mental Health Task Group - recommendation update

Overview and Scrutiny Committee received an update on the recommendations of the Mental Health scrutiny task group which had been published in October 2019. The Chair of the task group, Councillor Saffery, introduced the update on the six recommendations which had been directed to the council's Health and Wellbeing Forum (H&WBF).

Outlining the activities undertaken by the H&WBF to date, Councillor Saffery welcomed the council's progress in this important area of work. The task group's focus had proved prescient and it was vital that momentum continued to meet with the growing challenge of mental health issues in the local community. Watford Borough Council should continue to hold itself to the highest standards.

Councillor Collett, the Portfolio Holder for Community and chair of the H&WBF highlighted the community benefits of engaging in mental health issues, urging all members to undertake the training recommended by the task group. She hoped the H&WBF would continue to flourish assisted by the focus provided by the council's mental health champion. The efforts of the council's human resources department to tackle mental health issues amongst staff were noted and Councillor Collett welcomed the low sickness levels recorded over the past year.

Councillor Martins acknowledged the impetus provided by the task group to put in place the necessary infrastructure and support for his role as the council's mental health champion. He described the "Watford Wellness" initiative with the Watford Chamber of Commerce. Councillor Martins stated that Watford Borough Council should take credit for its lead in mental health issues amongst Hertfordshire authorities.

Echoing comments from the Portfolio Holder, the Executive Head of HR and Organisational Development outlined some of the initiatives being undertaken for staff in this area. He commended the network of staff mental health champions and first aiders who had driven this agenda to provide some of the best support in Hertfordshire.

It was noted that the council had secured £65,000 from HCC's Health Protection Board to employ a Wellbeing Coordinator. The intention was to establish an umbrella organisation similar to the council's dementia friendly steering group.

RESOLVED –

that Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the update on the Mental Health Task Group recommendations update.

93 **Executive Decision Progress Report**

The scrutiny committee was invited to review the current Executive Decision Progress Report for 2020-21 and consider whether any further information was required.

RESOLVED –

that the current 2020/21 Executive Decision Progress report be noted.

94 **Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee**

It was noted that the last meeting of Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee took place on 16 March.

The Chair advised that following discussions at the last Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding the Health Services for the Deaf scrutiny task group, the Mayor had written to West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust (WHHT) to request progress on the recommendation to add 'welcome' in a written representation of BSL to the signage outside the main entrance to Watford General Hospital.

95 **Work Programme**

Members were invited to suggest any items to be added to Overview and Scrutiny Committee's forward work programme. The chair confirmed that she would be meeting with officers to discuss scrutiny's focus in the next municipal year. Input from the vice chair would also be welcomed.

RESOLVED –

that members contact the Chair to suggest any issues to be added to the forward programme.

Action: Senior Democratic Services Officer

96 **Date of Next Meetings**

It was noted that this was the last meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the current municipal year. The chair thanked all members for their input to the council's scrutiny work over the past year. In addition, she thanked officers who had supported and advised the committee in its scrutiny work.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.05 pm
and finished at 8.20 pm