

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

22 July 2021

Present: Councillor J Dhindsa (Chair)
Councillors S Feldman, P Hannon, T Osborn, G Saffery and
M Turmaine

Also present: Councillor Johnson, Portfolio Holder

Officers: Group Head of Transformation
Business Intelligence Manager
Head of Housing
Housing Strategy Manager
Senior Democratic Services Officer

10 **Apologies for Absence/Committee Membership**

Apologies had been received from Councillors Grimston, Parker and Stanton.

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

There were no disclosures of interest.

12 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 June 2021 were submitted and signed.

13 **Other scrutiny meetings**

It was noted that Finance Scrutiny Committee had met on 28 June. Minutes of the meeting were available on the council's website.

14 **End of year 2020/21 Council Performance Report**

The scrutiny committee received the report of the Business Intelligence Manager setting out the council's End of Year 2020/21 key performance indicators (KPIs).

The Business Intelligence Manager introduced the report in which most indicators showed end of year results. In some cases, however, quarter 4 results

were shown where this information was more relevant. Previous results, targets and relative performance were presented for comparison purposes.

Drawing the scrutiny committee's attention to the continuing impacts of Covid 19 on performance, the Business Intelligence Manager discussed the highlights identified in her report.

During discussions on the report, members raised the following points requesting additional information where relevant:

- Waste and recycling: whether food waste levels had been netted off from the green recycling rates to provide an accurate understanding of overall recycling rates. It was also suggested that clarity was needed for residents about the need to separate food waste from garden waste on weeks that green bins were being collected from households.
- Housing benefit claims: whether any assessment had been made by officers about the impact of delayed housing benefit claims and subsequent waits on claimants.
- Rough sleepers: the need for better understanding around the difference between the rough sleeper target of five against a strategy citing zero. The Head of Housing clarified that whilst the council's aspiration was to have no rough sleepers on Watford's streets, many factors remained outside the authority's control. As such, the aim was to achieve a near zero number of rough sleepers, subject to the continuation of funding.
- Channel shift: no targets had been set for this area in 2020/21 however this would be amended in the current year. It was explained that current indicators did not consider the resolution of queries, only the way in which people had contacted the council. Response times to specific queries were measured in other indicators.

RESOLVED –

that Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes:

1. the key performance indicator results for 2020/21, appended at Appendix A to the report.
2. that the KPIs will continue to be reviewed as part of the Business Intelligence Strategy, and Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be kept up to date with any changes to the KPIs, or the process for collecting, analysing or presenting KPI data.

Action: Business Intelligence Manager

Homelessness strategy

The scrutiny committee received a presentation by the Head of Housing and Housing Strategy Officer on the council's current homelessness and rough sleeping strategy. Copies of the presentation had been circulated to members in advance of the meeting.

During discussions, members raised a number of issues and clarifications were provided by officers:

- Members applauded the exemplary work being undertaken in Watford to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. The success of the multi-agency, multi-disciplinary team approach provided a best practice model that should be shared with other authorities across Hertfordshire.
- Funding for the council's rough sleeping programme came from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and Hertfordshire County Council (HCC). The cost of providing someone with a room and access to a complex needs support worker was approximately £400 per week. Funding was due to end in March 2022 and officers were working now to secure continuity for the programme.
- The number of families, including children, in temporary accommodation had been significantly reduced. In November 2016, 233 families including 391 children had required accommodation. Following extensive prevention and other intervention work by officers, this had been reduced to the current 95 families including 99 children and had resulted in a considerable cost saving to the council.
- There was a distinction between non-engagers and those who relapsed and went back through the Pathway. People needed to share information e.g., about benefits they were receiving and their immigration status, in order to receive assistance. There were limits to what could be achieved where people refused to engage.
- Immigration status proved an area of intensive and time-consuming work but was necessary, particularly for individuals with no recourse to public funds. The New Hope charity currently funded seven people falling into this category.
- A small number of people had reverted back to the streets following the "Everyone In" campaign, however the vast majority remained in their accommodation. This represented a significant success story for the council. A small number struggled with issues such as substance abuse and mental health concerns which prevented them from engaging and put them back onto the streets.
- Contrary to the approach taken by other authorities, Watford Borough Council had decided to minimise the time rough sleepers spent in hotels during lockdown, seeking instead to tackle the issues which kept them on

the streets. Availability of funding and the renewed incentive to tackle homelessness had enabled the council to reduce the number of rough sleepers from 80+ (in March 2020) to three individuals today.

- Those discharged from hospital were able to go through the Single Homeless Pathway via The Sanctuary to ensure they were not on the streets. The same route was available to those leaving prison.
- The council should be proud of what had been achieved over the past four to five years. Previously the council had been criticised for housing people in temporary accommodation outside the borough. This was now no longer the case, unless they needed to be outside the borough for their own protection. In addition, families and single people were not mixed.
- A major piece of work was being undertaken to ensure that the Single Homeless Pathway was not blocked to new entrants. One of the issues preventing this was the lack of affordable housing, particularly social rented, and the difficulties of accessing the private rental sector. Private landlords wanted certainty of payment and there was potential for longer term arrangements to be put in place in the future. Landlords would need to be incentivised to bridge the gap between market rates and housing benefit levels.
- Void periods in temporary accommodation were very short, usually in larger properties. It was important to be slick about changing over families, although the council was not always able to control the extenuating circumstances of tenants to expedite this.
- Further figures were requested on the number of tenants who stayed within the Homelet scheme properties.
- Housing benefit levels were set and were insufficient for the local housing market. Capped benefits particularly impacted households with two children. This was a particular concern in Watford. Social rented properties provided the best solution in the town and work was on-going with Watford Community Housing to increase capacity.
- The local connection period to be placed on the housing register in Watford was five years. This would be reassessed during the forthcoming Nominations Policy review. Longer term affordability of accommodation for residents was key.
- Work had been undertaken to understand what was “affordable” in Watford based on average local salaries and benefit levels. This information was shared with developers as part of negotiations. The planning system was a crucial to providing a solution to housing shortages.
- Credit should be paid to the council’s successful partnership working with OneYMCA, New Hope, Grow and Emerging Futures.
- Right to buy had had minimal impact in Watford. Right to acquire was more relevant but less generous providing a discount of £16,000 on

properties. In a high cost area such as Watford this did not make a significant impact on the overall costs of buying.

- A significant proportion of people seeking accommodation tended to be families, particularly female-led households. An increase in single homelessness had also been seen within the town. The current housing stock presented difficulties for those with mobility issues and for those seeking larger properties.
- Councillors were frustrated by the planning system where developers were making a 20% profit on schemes, but stated that they would be unable to provide social housing.
- Pressure should be put on government to resolve the lack of parity between housing benefit and market rents locally. This was a problem played out across the south east.

The Chair thanked the officers for their thorough presentation and commended them for their work in this crucial area.

RESOLVED –

that Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the update on the council's homelessness strategy.

Action: Head of Housing and Housing Strategy Officer

16 **Executive Decision Progress Report**

The scrutiny committee was invited to review the current Executive Decision Progress Report for 2021-22 and consider whether any further information was required.

RESOLVED –

that the 2021/22 Executive Decision Progress report be noted.

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

Due to the absence of the Chair, who was the council's appointed representative on Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee, it was requested that an update be provided to committee members via email.

18 **Work Programme**

Members were invited to review Overview and Scrutiny Committee's draft work programme for 2021/22 and suggest any additional items for review.

RESOLVED –

that the 2021/22 work programme be noted.

19 **Date of Next Meetings**

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on Thursday 23 September.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 9.05 pm