

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

22 February 2023

Present: Councillor S Feldman (Chair)  
Councillor F Ezeifedi (Vice-Chair)  
Councillors P Kloss, R Martins, T Osborn and M Turmaine

Also present: Councillor Aga Dychton and Councillor Jennifer Pattinson  
(Minute numbers 70 to 73)

Officers: Associate Director of Planning, Infrastructure and Economy  
Senior Democratic Services Officer  
Community Safety Co-ordinator  
Director of Partnerships

### 71 **Apologies for Absence/Committee Membership**

There were two changes of membership for this meeting: Councillor Jeffree replaced Councillor Stiff and Councillor Nembhard replaced Councillor Rodrigues.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ahmed.

### 72 **Disclosure of interests (if any)**

There were no disclosures of interest.

### 73 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 February 2023 were submitted and signed.

### 74 **Watford Community Housing - maintenance**

The scrutiny committee received a presentation from Helen Town and Paul Richmond of Watford Community Housing.

During the course of the presentation, representatives of Watford Community Housing (WCH) covered:

- The establishment of the organisation, the number of homes owned and the corporate objectives.
- The structure of the governance in place, both internally and externally.

- Engagement with the Gateway structure, including its scrutiny function, as well as how tenants were engaged in decision-making more widely.
- An overview of the approach to repairs including the stock condition surveys, responsive works, compliance activities and the capital improvement programme.
- The inhouse repairs team and the active approach to recruitment and training of local employees.
- The response to the green agenda in light of environmental concerns, the cost of living and concerns around damp and mould. This had particularly focused on providing external wall insulation for the worst performing homes for energy efficiency. The goal was to have no homes rated EPC C or below by 2030.
- Other areas of focus included supporting tenants with air quality and ventilation measures and moving away from gas.
- Benchmarking data indicated that maintenance on expenditure was broadly in line with other registered providers.
- How Watford Community Housing understood its asset data including surveys.
- An understanding of tenants' satisfaction levels through engagement and monitoring complaints as well as the ways in which tenants and councillors could raise concerns.

During questions following the presentation, the following points were discussed:

- The development of the inhouse repairs team. Members were advised that this had been successful with a low vacancy rate in a competitive environment as well as the opportunity for apprenticeships and internal progression.
- Progress to improve energy efficiency ratings of the stock. It was reported that 57 of the worst performing homes had been addressed and assessors had identified a further 275 which required improvements. There was confidence that the 2030 target for EPC ratings would be reached. The focus was on improving and investing in homes to keep them in the social rented sector.
- It was noted that there had been 14,800 repairs this year but that this included both minor and more major works. There had been a backlog since Covid due to labour and supply chain delays and a team monitored the progress carefully.
- Triaging of repair needs. Members were advised that emergencies should be dealt with within 4 to 24 hours and use of the digital interface was encouraged to allow residents to track progress. There was ongoing work to ensure the data was sound and prioritised safety.

- Benchmarking of satisfaction and complaints. It was noted that this was not currently possible but that consumer regulation was coming into the sector and from 2023/24 KPIs would be collected and published. This would include hard data as well as customer perception. This would be valuable for the organisation too and enable shared learning across the sector.
- How the gateway model supported community resilience. The committee was advised that it enabled representation and the gateway tenants were supported well by the team. Part of Watford Community Housing's role was to promote community cohesion. This included engaging with residents' associations, supporting events and tenants' question time.
- The rationale behind the mix of social and market housing in WCH's development programme. WCH had a mixed tenure development programme and social rent properties featured highly. Shared ownership was being developed in some areas as there was a need to help young people join the housing ladder. The sale of market housing cross-subsidised the affordable housing priority. All new developments were assessed for viability to ensure the stability of WCH.
- The demand for shared ownership. It was noted that the inclusion of shared ownership properties in developments was data driven and was successful in blended tenure developments. Demand had outstripped supply in recent developments and WCH were working with local employers to raise awareness of the opportunities.
- How repairs were closed. Members were advised that first time fix was an important focus for the team. Residents were encouraged to send photos or videos to ensure the nature of the issue was understood. Post-repair checks were undertaken to ensure quality. The approach was also data-driven and satisfaction surveys were used to drive learning and identify training needs.
- How tenants were educated on damp and mould. The committee noted that the information for tenants was under review and all new tenants were provided with a leaflet around ventilation. Damp and mould kits were provided as well as advice about trickle vents. There had been changes since Covid with a heightened awareness of air quality and more people working from home.
- Response to antisocial behaviour (ASB). Members were advised that there was a housing officer structure where every neighbourhood had an officer who was the first point of contact. ASB was often a series of complex issues which were outside of WCH's remit but they worked with other partners to support and signpost and they could intervene if there was significant disruption.

- Ensuring residents were empowered to know their rights. WCH worked to ensure tenants were informed which was the responsibility of all landlords.

Members agreed that they would like to propose a scrutiny task group for the new municipal year looking at standards in housing to include a variety of providers. A scope would be developed with members and officers.

RESOLVED –

1. that the presentation be noted.
2. that a scrutiny task group be established to review housing standards.

75

### **Community Safety Partnership update**

The committee received a presentation from the Community Safety Manager and Chief Inspector Andy Wiseman.

The Chief Inspector made an introductory presentation to the committee. The key points from his presentation were:

- Previous roles in Watford and elsewhere had underlined the importance of partnership working and collaboration.
- Hertfordshire was one of the safest counties in the country and the police were well-trained and resourced and well-funded compared to other areas.
- Watford's policing team structure which included response teams, local crime unit, safer neighbourhood teams and community safety team. Currently based at Shady Lane, the teams would be moving to a new premises at George Street which would serve them well.
- There had been overall reductions in crime including criminal damage, theft from motor vehicle and antisocial behaviour.
- Initial areas of focus were street robbery and violence against women and girls.
- Key facets of the approach were problem solving, targeted activities and community engagement.
- Social media provided an opportunity to publicise the good work that went on. Feedback was also welcomed and the Echo portal gave residents an opportunity to set out areas to focus on.

The Community Safety Manager provided a further update to the committee on statistics and the approach taken by the partnership. Key points made were:

- Crime and antisocial behaviour (ASB) had seen a 10% reduction on 2019, the most recent comparable year. ASB had seen a huge reduction on 2012 levels from 6200 incidents to 2200 (this data was clarified following the meeting). It was anticipated that this fall would level out.
- The data had been scrutinised to ensure it was accurate. Factors identified in the fall are the work of partners, including WCH, in undertaking a prevention first approach and seeking resolutions with residents.
- Community triggers were well-used in Watford to ensure responses to issues were timely, proportionate and effective. Often the outcome was that the actions were effective but could have been more timely with better communication. Victims were given the opportunity to set out all their concerns and there had never been an appeal on the outcome of the triggers.
- One key priority remained around 'reassure and inform'. There was still a need to address perceptions of crime and community days were an important part of this.
- The crime data for the previous year was under review and would be used for the forthcoming year's planning. Violence against women and girls would remain a priority as would violent crime due to the high impact and community wellbeing.

During questions following the presentation, the following points were discussed:

- There had been 52 community triggers since they were introduced in 2014 which was higher than other areas. Undertaking 10-12 per year would be proportionate for Watford.
- How a narrative was built following a high impact incident. Members were advised that more was shared on social media than in official statements. These statements had to be carefully checked and sometimes took longer.
- The role of the council in reassure and inform. A new communications and engagement plan had been drafted and there was a focus on combatting violence against women and girls and raising awareness of the actions people could take. There would be some renewed communications around the town centre safe zone and other safety initiatives such as Ask for Angela.
- Police presence on the streets. The Chief Inspector responded that a greater presence on the streets was always desirable. However there were significant demands on the police and finite resources. Officers dealing with incidents were no longer visible. Measures to improve police presence included the use of PCSOs who were not abstracted in the same way, proactive patrols by plain clothes units, the use of volunteer police officers and targeting specific areas with short high visibility presence at regular intervals. Improving social media engagement would also provide reassurance around positive activities.

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor Dychton, added that she worked regularly with the Mayor, the Police and Crime Commissioner and others to work for a greater police presence in Watford.

The committee discussed street lighting and how to address areas where the lack of lighting made people feel unsafe. The police were able to feed back to the county council areas where there were needs for additional lighting. The police were happy to assess locations where there were concerns and to make representations. The Chief Inspector agreed to provide details for the neighbourhood teams so councillors could share any areas of concern.

The committee expressed their thanks to the Chief Inspector and Community Safety Manager for their presentation and input.

RESOLVED –

that the report be noted.

**76 Call-in**

The scrutiny committee noted that there had been no call-in.

**77 Executive Decision Progress Report**

The scrutiny committee was invited to review the current Executive Decision Progress Report for 2022/23 and consider whether any further information was required.

RESOLVED –

that the current 2022/23 Executive Decision Progress report be noted.

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

The committee noted that there had been no further meetings of the Health Scrutiny Committee.

**79 Work Programme**

The committee reviewed the latest version of the work programme. The following changes were noted:

- The update on the Report-it system would be taken in the new municipal year alongside the Customer Experience Strategy.

RESOLVED –

that the work programme be noted.

80 **Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting would take place on Wednesday 15 March 2023. This meeting would start at 7.00pm.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.35 pm  
and finished at 9.20 pm