

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 13 September 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the **Overview & Scrutiny Committee** held on **13 September 2023** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr Mrs J E McPherson
Vice-Chairman: Cllr N J Booth

Cllr Mrs D L Belton
Cllr A G Cross
Cllr J N Gooding
Cllr R Lambourne
Cllr E O K Mason
Cllr Mrs C M Mason

Cllr G W Myers
Cllr D J Sperring
Cllr I H Ward
Cllr S E Wootton

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Mrs E P Gadson and R Milne.

VISITING MEMBERS

Cllr A H Eves

OFFICERS PRESENT

E Yule	- Strategic Director
M Hotten	- Director, Environment
T Lilley	- Director, Communities & Health
N Mann	- Joint Director, People & Governance
L Stretch	- Director, Housing
T Willis	- Interim Director, Resources
A Aldridge	- Corporate Manager, Green Spaces
W Szyszka	- Democratic Services Officer
V Meanwell	- Democratic Services Officer

166 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5 July were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

167 OVERVIEW OF HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS ACROSS ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

Members considered the report of the Director, Housing setting out a general overview of Housing and Homelessness across the Rochford District.

In response to a Member question as to what support was given to individuals anticipating an eviction date and what measures were implemented to minimise stress related to such events, officers responded that in accordance with the Homelessness Reduction Act, families and individuals were given 56 days notice prior to eviction date. In such instances, the Council would contact those affected and triage all applications irrespective of the date of potential eviction;

however, Members noted that the quicker cases were assessed, the more likely that there would be a positive outcome reached. Additionally, officers advised that the sooner residents were made aware of their options, the more time the Council had to finalise arrangements, though it was not always possible to prevent all cases of homelessness.

A Member queried what obligations the Council posed on housing associations within the District to ensure that the housing supply was met.

In response, officers advised that the housing associations were businesses and organisations in their own right and were under the same financial obligations as any local authority and would have to operate within their means, so there were no official obligations that we are able to pose on them and that it would be difficult to expand in the current market.

A Member made reference to page 6.3, paragraph 1 and queried as to why the report did not contain information on void properties and whether the Council ensured that targets were being met.

Officers responded that turnaround times were low due to more rigorous health and safety regulations which resulted in a slower turnaround across the sector due to bringing up higher standards to properties. Additionally, Members noted that there was a staff shortage and building material shortage; however, conversations were being held between the Council and the appropriate representatives to ensure that properties were not left void for longer than necessary.

A Member raised a question whether the Council took action in relation to rented properties which were unoccupied.

Officers responded that the Council's actions were aligned with the Empty Home Strategy which detailed how the Council could utilise enforcement action if all other means were exhausted, e.g., via written correspondence urging landlords to bring properties back to use. It was also added that the Council would support landlords with property grants that could be used to fund works that were required to bring back properties to a habitable standard. Officers also added that it was encouraged to report empty homes to ensure these were being dealt with.

In response to a Member question, officers advised that the Council's Housing Service Plan for this fiscal year focused on two key areas of temporary accommodation that took into account strategies to move people on to permanent accommodation that was not as costly as a Bed & Breakfast. The second was to plot the future demand. It was vital for the Council to consider longer term lease accommodation that supported the Council's future demands. In light of the fact the Council did not own any purpose built accommodation. If the Council did consider building modular accommodation it would need to seek substantial borrowing to do so; however, such would demand maintenance that was currently not in place. This option would be costly on the Council and potentially negate savings.

A Member drew attention to paragraph 3.2 on page 6.4 of the report and noted that the Council was due its next full review as the last review took place 5 years ago.

In response, officers advised that the Council carried out periodic reviews of the Allocations Policy which required a thorough consultation and extensive equality impacts assessments; however, this was something that would be programmed in carefully for the Council to fulfil.

Cllr Mrs C M Mason moved a Motion, seconded by Cllr Mrs J E McPherson that an extra recommendation be added: "That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee requests that the Executive initiates a full review of the Housing Allocations Policy."

(This was unanimously agreed.)

Concerns were raised by a Member in relation to instances where individuals may be relocated outside of the District; however, their place of work remained to be within the District taking into account any travel associated costs.

Officers responded that the Council considered each homelessness application and any corresponding circumstances individually, thus instances where people may be relocated to outside of the District would mean that they would be relocated to close vicinity areas to minimise associated travel costs.

A Member sought clarity in relation to paragraph 3 on page 6.4 of the report and queried as to how the Council verified that individuals worked within the District and whether flexible and/or hybrid working would affect their eligibility. A further question was asked as to whether individuals who moved outside of the District would have to restart the 3-year residency rule.

In response, officers advised that individuals were verified upon their application through their wage slips and contracts and were not re-verified until the person was close to being successful for a property.

Officers would provide the answer in relation to the 3-year residency rule outside of the meeting.

In response to a Member question, officers responded that there was a high level of home ownership across the Rochford District which meant that there was a lower number of rented properties resulting in a significantly higher rent fee which could fall above the local allowance. This situation was not unique to the District and it was a nationwide phenomenon caused by a challenging housing market.

Resolved

- (1) To note the information contained within the appendices of this report.
- (2) That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee requests that the Executive initiates a full review of the Housing Allocations Policy.

(This was unanimously agreed.)

168 COST OF LIVING (COL) PAYMENTS

Members considered the report of the Task & Finish Group highlighting the outcome of the deliberations of the Working Group to examine options for payments to residents in light of the Cost of Living crisis.

The Chairman of the Committee thanked Cllr Mrs E P Gadsdon for ensuring that the Working Group met during the summer holiday period. Further thanks were extended to the Interim Director, Resources for composing a comprehensive report.

A query was raised regarding Recommendation 2 on page 7.1 of the Report as to whether there was an underspend and what information was accessible to access the fund.

In response, officers advised that £7k was available from the underspend. It was anticipated by officers that there would be an underspend based on the level of demand for Council Tax support as well as any other hardship funds which were often sought by residents after receiving Council Tax bills for the fiscal year. Officers added that this was not unusual for the Council and further stock takes would commence in October this year to identify the percentage of residents struggling to pay their Council Tax bill. The government allocated the Council with £95k towards the Council Tax Support Fund and the Council has approved up to £64k from the fund to be allocated to those receiving Council Tax Support.

Members also noted that the Council's website provided residents with information on how to claim Council Tax Support alongside information for the Hardship Fund and the £7k was allocated for further resident support.

A Member raised concerns over £7k being allocated towards roadshows to assist residents and expressed that they would prefer to see this fund be allocated directly to those in need.

In response, officers clarified that part of the Working Group was to carry out research including contacting other local authorities, some of which had set aside sums generated after increasing their Council Tax. This was done so that the authority could invite bids and raise awareness to those who needed the financial support. As a result, the take up was poor despite extensive advertisement and it was important for the Working Group to note that it was difficult for Councils to ensure that vital information could reach those that were eligible for support.

The Chairman added that one of the key conclusions that the Working Group reached was that it was a necessity for the Council to aid those that need the support most; however, there was also a group of people suffering from the cost of living crisis that did not meet the necessary criteria to obtain help. The Chairman also advised that residents affected by the cost of living crisis already

receive some advice and support; however, the longer term aim was to reach as many residents as possible to spread awareness of available help.

Members noted that the roadshows would be open to all residents of the District to attend and the Chairman encouraged all Ward Councillors to be present for these events.

A Member commended the work undertaken by the Working Group adding that the £7k fund assigned for the roadshows would present great value for money.

A question was raised relating to Recommendation 4 on page 7.1 of the Report whether the Council sought to mobilise additional events and if the Council was in a position to spend the £7k this Municipal Year.

In response, the Working Group sought to provide support to those that would not automatically receive it; however, it was not possible for the Working Group to achieve this due to the complexities involved in assessing individuals with varying circumstances. Furthermore, officers added that the Working Group was determined to present a report with certain, agreed funding and officers confirmed that the £7k allocated was available. Further conversations would be held between Members and officers to finalise how the recommendations would be implemented.

Resolved

- (1) That the Committee notes the findings of the Working Group.
- (2) That the Interim Director, Resources allocates £7000 from the Council Tax Hardship Fund for one-off use in the current financial year.
- (3) That the Director, Communities & Health arranges for a grant award of £7000 for roadshows to assist residents to access support to help them with the cost of living.
- (4) That Council considers, as part of the 2024/25 Budget process, the inclusion of ongoing funding of £5000 per annum for similar purposes.

(This was unanimously agreed.)

169 HIGHWAY RANGERS

Members considered the report of the Director, Environment exploring the possibility of further funding, either through savings within the Open Spaces budget, or through drawing down upon the South Essex Parking Partnership surplus funding.

In response to a Member question, officers advised that rural areas had a greater demand for the Rangers compared to more urban areas, such as Rayleigh. There were areas that required further attention and rural areas faced their own significant issues; however, it was not possible to quantify the data without having it available at the time.

A Member expressed concerns in relation to Parishes within the District maintaining their own open spaces and that it should be decided by the Parishes how the funds were allocated. A further concern was raised as to whether the Council was in a position to be able to allocate £80k towards a service which was not the Council's duty to provide.

In response, officers clarified that the report presented budget for the 2024/25 Municipal Year. There was a financial gap which the Council was required to address; however, it was for Members to decide in the longer term to make the decision. Officers added that there could be an issue to fund this, therefore there would be a review of the Open Spaces budget to identify available funds that could be assigned to this in the longer term.

A Member questioned whether there was a timeframe to Recommendations 2, 3 and 4 on page 8.1 of the Report.

In response, officers advised that a further report would be brought back to the next available Overview & Scrutiny Committee. Furthermore, Recommendation 3 required the formulation of a meaningful response and this particular recommendation should be seen as a longer-term solution.

Cllr Mrs J E McPherson moved a Motion, seconded by Cllr Mrs D L Belton that Recommendation 2 be amended as follows: "That a further report is presented to the next available Overview & Scrutiny Committee reviewing the current allocation of SEPP surplus funding, and exploring potential savings within the open spaces budget, with a view to identifying a possible budget for the continuation of the Highway Rangers service in 2024/25."

(This was unanimously agreed.)

A question was raised in relation to Appendix 1 on page 8.8 of the report as to whether the numbers were factually correct.

Officers clarified that the figures were rounded; however, they would request information as to what the £20k was going to be allocated towards. Members noted that this information was not available as this report was published sooner to the other information being available.

A further query was raised in relation to Appendix 1 seeking clarity on the sums spent on certain projects.

Officers responded that this was part of the review and not a budget that the Council was responsible for. Officers advised that this information would come back to the next Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting.

Resolved

- (1) For Members to note the report.
- (2) That a further report is presented to the next available Overview & Scrutiny Committee reviewing the current allocation of SEPP surplus

funding, and exploring potential savings within the open spaces budget, with a view to identifying a possible budget for the continuation of the Highway Rangers service in 2024/25.

(10 Members voted in favour, 2 Members voted against and 0 abstained.)

- (3) To draft a proposal that can be circulated to Parish and Town Councils seeking Expressions of Interest as set out in paragraph 1.19.

(7 Members voted in favour, 5 Members voted against and 0 abstained.)

- (4) That the Leader of the Council writes to the cabinet Member for Highways, Essex County Council, seeking clarification regarding the provision of a service with withdrawal of funding for the Highway Rangers.

(7 Members voted in favour, 5 Members voted against and 0 abstained.)

170 PARKS FOR NATURE REVIEW

Members considered the report of the Director, Environment providing a summary of the Council's progress of the Parks for Nature programme introduced in December 2021.

A Member queried whether rewilding would be more costly for the Council.

In response, officers advised that this could cover a range of measures, i.e., not cutting the grass could be viewed as rewilding; however, there were different levels to achieving rewilding with varying costs.

A question was raised whether the Council was making savings in light of the fact it was cutting less grass.

Resolved

That the Committee notes the contents of the report.

171 REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S CURRENT OUTSIDE BODIES ARRANGEMENTS

Members considered contents of the proposed scoping document to review the Council's current Outside Bodies Arrangements.

A Member made a comment in relation to the Terms of Reference (ToR) and requested that ASELA be removed from the ToR on the grounds that it was not an Outside Body but a Partnership.

Cllr Mrs C M Mason moved a Motion, seconded by Cllr S E Wootton to amend the Scoping Document's title to: "Review of the Council's Current Outside Bodies and Partnerships."

(This was unanimously agreed.)

Resolved

That the contents of the Scoping Document are noted.

172 KEY DECISIONS DOCUMENT

The Committee noted the contents of the Key Decisions Document.

A Member requested that the corresponding Lead Members should be listed under each Key Decision.

Officers advised that this would be actioned and that it was vital to track instances where Key Decisions were delayed or moved. This would be reflected on all future Key Decisions Documents.

173 WORK PLAN

The Committee noted the contents of the Work Plan.

In response to a Member question, officers advised that a report called in by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in relation to Blue Parking Badges had a number of recommendations which would be reported back to Full Council for debate. The report was therefore not expected to return to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

A Member requested that a report providing an update the Council's Planning Service Review was brought back to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 2 November 2023.

The Chairman responded that this would depend on whether the work had been completed.

The meeting closed at 9.05 pm.

Chairman

Date

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