

Overview and Scrutiny Committee
2 September 2020

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on Wednesday 2 September 2020 at 7.30 pm via Zoom.

PRESENT: Councillors S.Wrenn (Chairman)
L.Chesterman (Vice-Chairman)

M.Birleson, M.Cowan, S.Elam, B.Fitzsimon, G.Hayes,
M.Holloway, R.Lass, D.Richardson, P.Smith, S.Thusu
and P.Zukowskyj

OFFICIALS PRESENT: Corporate Director (Resources, Environment and Cultural Services) (K.Ng)
Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) (N.Long)
Head of Legal (S.Saunders)
Governance Services Manager (A.Marston)

9. SUBSTITUTION OF MEMBERS

The following substitution was made in accordance with Council Procedure Rules:

Councillor S.Elam for Councillor J.Caliskan.

10. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor J.Caliskan.

11. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 28 July 2020 (previously circulated) were approved as a correct record.

Councillor Hayes had met with the Corporate Director (Resources, Environment and Cultural Services) and F.Cantel (Client Support Services Manager) to discuss the Council Tax Support Scheme. From their discussion they were happy with how the Council Tax Support Scheme worked. An issue of the Council Tax Hardship Relief Fund came up, as the Council was putting £25,000 into the fund. Sometimes the funding can fall short and could finish as early as January and this is a long time to wait until April. Councillor Hayes asked if the Task and Finish Panel can look into this further and see if there is anything the Council can do. The Corporate Director (Resources, Environment and Cultural Services) agreed that this was a good idea.

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Councillors L.Chesterman and Wrenn had a discussion with the Head of Community and Housing Strategy about homelessness, in particular the night shelter and if it should be scrutinised or become a Task and Finish Panel. There is so much good practice to learn from this and it will help when we look at homelessness in a wider context. The committee could look at creating a Scrutiny or a Task and Finish Panel in the future for Night Shelters in the Welwyn Hatfield area.

12. DECLARATION OF INTEREST BY MEMBERS

Councillors L.Chesterman and P.Zukowskyj both declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue of them being Hertfordshire County Councillors.

13. ACTIONS UPDATE

The status of actions agreed at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 28 July 2020 in the report of the Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) was noted.

14. ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR (ASB) SCRUTINY UPDATE

Members received an update on the Anti-Social Behaviour Scrutiny, set up by the former Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The recommendations from the previous OSC meeting on Anti-Social Behaviour will be going to Cabinet on the 8 September 2020.

Councillor Cowan queried the amount of funds that would be used to refurbish the King George V Skate Park, as the Council had put aside £50,000 of reserves for the refurbishments. The Corporate Director (Resources, Environment and Cultural Services) confirmed that out of the £50,000, £25,000 will be used for the refurbishments.

15. SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH PANELS UPDATE

Members were asked to note that a Task and Finish Panel (Budget Setting and Corporate Plan) had been set up as discussed at the meeting on the 28 July 2020. The first meeting will be held on the 14 September 2020.

RESOLVED:

Members noted the update on Scrutiny Task and Finish Panels.

16. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2020/21

Members considered the Committee's work programme. The work programme enabled forward planning of items to be considered to take place. In addition, the Forward Plan was attached to assist members in considering items for scrutiny.

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Councillor Fitzsimon asked if Members could add important or urgent items to the work programme and if there is any flexibility for items. The Chairman confirmed that items could be added to the list at a later date.

Maintenance of the council's housing stock

Members discussed the motion that was carried at Council in January 2020 which concerned the number of complaints received by Members about the level of maintenance of the council's housing stock. The motion specifically called on the Executive Member to 'bring forward proposals to council to firstly identify areas of concern, and then to address them'. Members considered whether this should be taken forward as a Task and Finish panel or become a report from Officers. Members thought that a Task and Finish panel may not be the best way forward as this was not a coherent thread. Members had also received complaints from residents about housing repairs and work not being completed.

Councillor Thusu suggested that Members be selective of what items go to Task and Finish Panel as they are unsure of the timeframe of the Task and Finish process and if the committee will be able to complete the panels during the committee cycle.

Councillor L.Chesterman suggested using the Scrutiny Scoring Matrix for the issue of Housing Maintenance Repairs as Members can find out if a Task and Finish panel is the way forward.

Councillor Zukowskyj agreed with Councillor Cowan, that a Task and Finish panel might not be the best way forward. There is a systematic issue and as Overview and Scrutiny we need to be looking at the systematic issues we are finding for Housing Maintenance. The relevant Head of Service could explain to Members why they keep seeing these issues and what can be done about it. Residents from different households have complained about issues with windows, double glazing units etc. not being replaced. As an Overview and Scrutiny we should be looking at this and asking what are our policies, why are the Council not delivering in practice? What is wrong with the current process, how can we change the process so that we can fix it for the benefit of the residents.

Councillor Fitzsimon had also received complaints from residents about the timescale of repairs being carried out. This is a very important matter and affects all residents and their lives quite seriously.

Members completed the Scrutiny Scoring Matrix for Council Housing Maintenance Repairs. The results are shown below:-

Public interest	3 - (only affects residents in council houses) – Councillor P.Smith challenged how high it is in public interest as not all residents live in council housing.
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Strategic Value	3 – housing is considered the Council's most substantial asset
Risk to council	2 – This is a key service area and there is risk in failing to delivery. Could lower the Council's reputation.
Alignment to Corporate Priorities	2
Financial value	2 - value for money for Council Tax payers. Might have to do job more than once.
Issue of concern for partners	3 - Mears might be affected
Will we be able to achieve an effective outcome	3
Potential benefits	3
TOTAL	21

The outcome of the Scrutiny Scoring Matrix was a total of 21 which would be considered as High Priority.

Members suggested looking at the number of complaints the Council have had in a set period of time. Members also asked that a report should go to the next Overview and Scrutiny meeting as this had been the expected outcome of the motion from Council in January 2020.

Members agreed that the relevant Head of Service should be asked to provide a report for the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The report should specify the timescales within which repairs are carried out; which areas are considered to be the less satisfactory areas; and what can be done? Where could the service be better? What is the timeliness of responses to the repairs that need to be dealt with urgently? What is the complaint rate across the services? How long does it take to carry out repairs work; and what is the level of residents' satisfaction with the work?

The original motion from the Council meeting in January 2020 said "This council therefore asks the executive member, in consultation with officers, to bring forward proposals to council to firstly identify areas of concern, and then to address them."

Councillor Hayes asked to see the number of complaints raised and what they were for? For example gas, next to the number of repairs undertaken in that period of time.

Councillor Smith asked how many days between a repair being reported and the repair being completed and asked that these be compared to the Council's corporate targets to see where we are delivering?

Councillor Holloway suggested that complaints are a good place to start. Residents may have had repeated visits from housing maintenance but these might not have been raised as complaints. Part of the issue could be that this is being based on only the residents who have made complaints to the Council.

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Councillor L.Chesterman asked how many repeated visits or call back visits had been made? How many times have maintenance gone back to the same reported house to deal with a repair? Why was there a need for more than one visit?

Councillor Zukowskyj said that this should not just be dealt with as a complaints issue. There is an onus on residents to look at things after maintenance work and say “yes, that’s up to spec”, but residents would not necessarily know if something was substandard, they are not qualified to see these things. What are the specs the surveyors are using when they evaluate whether the jobs have been done properly? How often are we sending them out after jobs, to have a look at the repair to make sure it is up to standard? How is the Council value checking the work? How are we making sure our contractors are doing the work to a standard we should expect?

The Governance Service Manager will arrange for the Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to have a discussion about these issues with the relevant Head of Service before the next meeting with a view to finalising the scrutiny topic and method.

Queensway House Cladding –

Councillor Hayes raised Queensway House Cladding as a scrutiny item. The cladding on Queensway House went up about nine years ago. Councillor Hayes wanted to see the specs of when the cladding went up and what advice was given to the Housing Trust. This was a huge expense for the Council’s Community Housing Trust and was of public interest. If it was unsafe for nine years, where did the decision come from and where does the fault lie? Members agreed that a report should be written on Queensway House Cladding for the next Overview and Scrutiny meeting.

It was agreed that the Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will discuss the Queensway House Cladding in their meeting with the relevant Head of Service.

Lawn Cemetery in Hatfield –

Councillor Cowan informed the committee that there was a complaint from a resident in Hatfield about the Lawn Cemetery. There was a large group drinking, playing music etc. The incident had been reported but the response was that there were no rules so nothing could be enforced. Councillor Cowan was advised that the Crematorium Procurement Board could look into this and draw up a code of behaviour that would be enforceable. Councillor Holloway suggested that the Council also needs to be respectful of how other cultures mourn. The Corporate Director (Resources, Environment and Cultural Services) agreed to take this item to the Cross-Party Crematorium Procurement Board.

RESOLVED:

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- (1) Members agreed that the Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would have a meeting with the Head of Property Services (Housing) to discuss Housing Maintenance Repairs and Queensway House Cladding.
- (2) Members agreed that a report for Housing Maintenance Repairs and Queensway House should go to the next committee meeting.
- (3) Members agreed that the Cross-Party Crematorium Board should create a code of conduct for cemeteries in Welwyn Hatfield.

Meeting ended 8.35 pm
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