

Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
11 November 2020

## WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on Wednesday 11 November 2020 at 7.30pm via Zoom.

PRESENT: Councillors L.Chesterman (Vice-Chair in the Chair)  
S.Elam (Vice-Chair)

M.Birleson, M.Cowan, B.Fitzsimon, G.Hayes,  
P.Hebden (substituting for S.Wrenn), M.Holloway,  
R.Lass, D.Richardson, P.Smith, S.Thusu, P.Zukowskyj

OFFICIALS PRESENT: Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) (N.Long)  
Corporate Director (Housing and Communities) (S.Russell)  
Head of Community and Housing Strategy (S.Chambers)  
Commercial Manager (D.Murphy)  
Legal Services Manager (S.Saunders)  
Governance Services Manager (A.Marston)

---

### 17. SUBSTITUTION OF MEMBERS

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

Councillor P.Hebden for Councillor S.Wrenn.

### 18. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor S.Wrenn.

### 19. MINUTES

Councillor Zukowskyj raised an issue with the minutes of the last meeting. He felt they did not reflect comments made at the meeting on the issue of housing maintenance as they were under the title housing maintenance repairs. It was not just repairs discussed but also general maintenance and upkeep of houses.

The Minutes of the meeting held on 2 September 2020 will be examined by officers and brought back to the next meeting of the committee for approval.

### 20. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS BY MEMBERS

Councillor G.Hayes declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 7 of the agenda as a Council tenant.

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

21. ACTIONS UPDATE

The status of actions agreed at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 2 September 2020 in the report of the Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) was noted.

Councillors asked for an update on Queensway House Cladding. Officers confirmed that an update on Queensway House Cladding will be posted on the Members Information Hub and would include information on the number of tenants and leaseholders who were still living in the flats. Officers are working with tenants to find alternative accommodation prior to demolition and redevelopment of the site and are regularly updating tenants on progress.

Councillors also queried if the Budget Setting and Corporate Plan Task and Finish Group was scheduled to report back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to look at actions that had been undertaken. Councillor Hayes, chairman of the Task and Finish Group, confirmed that this was due to report back in January so that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee can make recommendations to Cabinet.

22. RESPONSIVE REPAIRS SERVICE

Following meetings between Officers and the Chair and Vice-Chairs of the Committee, a report had been prepared outlining how the service works, how performance is measured and the impact of Covid-19 on the service.

The purpose of the report was for the Committee to consider whether there are particular areas of the repairs service that they wish to scrutinise. One of the options available would be to set up a Task and Finish Panel.

The report highlighted that:

- A range of research and analytical methods were used together with the collection of data related to the service and that data was used to establish trends and measure performance against targets.
- Contractual KPIs were developed as part of the contract with Mears. These are regularly monitored and reported, and cover responsive repairs and planned works as well as perception of the service by residents.
- Impact of Covid on service delivery during Lockdown had an immediate effect on the service delivery. Staff worked from home and a few did continue to work in the office to oversee the emergency works and the management of the empty properties.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
11 November 2020

- During the lockdown, the amount of cases declined and a number of staff were furloughed by Mears.
- Between June and September, staff from Mears did return to work at different stages. It was challenging as work levels started to increase and they had to monitor the daily increase of specific trades and also meet the demands of the works being raised.
- Extra time was given to reassure customers on the process they would be following to undertake work safely. Extra time was needed before and after the job to ensure that everything is thoroughly cleaned. This meant that some of the normal success measures such as operative productivity were likely to not be at their normal level. The impact here would be that some tenants maybe waiting longer than usual for their repair. The Council have been putting messages on the website to keep customers updated on the service provision so that they are clear of what is happening with any impact on the service.
- The call statistics for April (2,976) and May (1,264) showed a decline in calls to the team compared to last year April (4,643) and May (4,069), there was pressure on the team with the increase in calls, the peak being August (5301).
- At the same time there was a decrease in jobs being raised, April (931) and May (1,065) compared to last year April (1,873) and May (1,800), again rising over the months as the service started to get back to a normal trend.
- It was noted that there were 2,976 calls in April 2020, however there were only 931 raised repairs, the calls were a mix of customers cancelling works and chasing work to be undertaken.
- The significant reduction in the number of repairs that were carried out during the pandemic, resulted in less satisfaction surveys being sent out. Therefore, customer satisfaction performance results during the past six months had been based on a far fewer number of surveys.
- Impact of COVID on repairs performance saw performance reduce, for example compared to last year the Council's performance was at 90.3.1%, currently it is at 85.4.7%. Measure have been put in place to help improve the customer experience and reduce the impact of Covid-19 on the service.

Councillors noted that the report was interesting and helpful, however, the motion was passed in January 2020; Covid-19 has played a big role in the workings of the service over the past months and the impacts and challenges of the pandemic are identified in the report. However, it was felt that little progress come out of this since.

It was highlighted that the motion was not just about repairs, it was about the whole service: the report does not reference the complaints or comments from Councillors which were the reason for the motion in January. It was queried whether there had been any liaison with the Tenants' Panel.

The following points were discussed:

- The Council has a comprehensive list defining repairs as emergency, urgent or routine. An emergency repair has an immediate health and safety risk to the tenant, their home or their neighbours. The service takes into account the tenants' vulnerability when repairs are reported.
- By law, all landlords are required to provide an electrical safety certificate. It was queried whether all our properties have up to date certificates, what items are assessed and how often. The KPI referring to gas safety certification does not cover this requirement.
- Queries raised at the previous meeting of this committee around planned maintenance have not been addressed in the report. Specifically, how the Council is value checking works that have been undertaken; what standard the Council is assessing performance against.
- Issues were raised with KPIs and how they are reported back to the council and it was commented that communication with tenants needs to be more accurate and effective.
- Specific examples raised by Councillors need to be looked at by the housing team to understand what went wrong, for example whether they were one-off incidents or bad luck; whether the tenants had reasonable expectations; whether the issues were down to negligent contractors or if supplies were affected by Covid.
- The point was made that the council's housing portfolio is its biggest asset and the asset needs to be protected. Planning of planned maintenance, regularity of surveys and electricity/gas checks and processes for roofing checks were all queried.
- Councillors felt they wanted to look in more detail at the percentage scores within the quantitative analysis on the complaints to see if there are any patterns not being assessed. There are also many examples where cases have met KPIs but there are other issues that won't be picked up just by looking at percentages.

It was suggested that a task and finish group or scrutiny sub-committee be set up to look in more detail at the KPIs and the facts behind the figures; whether the KPIs are fit for purpose or if they can be refined. The group/sub-committee should also look at analysis of complaints from councillors. It was suggested that liaison with the Tenant's panel will provide helpful insight.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
11 November 2020

It was queried and confirmed that during purdah care has to be taken regarding the publication of anything that could be seen to favour or support a particular party or candidate. Consultations may not be appropriate during this period but work that would constitute part of normal business can continue. The views of the new Returning Officer will be sought.

**RESOLVED:**  
**(12 voting FOR and 1 ABSTENTION)**

- (1) Members noted the content of the report and proposed what further scrutiny they wish to undertake.
- (2) Members agreed to create a sub-committee to look at the KPIs to see how they work and also to look at the complaints from Councillors on repairs.

**(Note:** Councillor Zukowskyj experienced technical issues and was not in the meeting when the specifics of the vote were being discussed and therefore he abstained from voting on this item.)

23. 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. Members should be thinking about what they want to see at meetings to add value to the work of the committee and to the Council.

Homelessness

Councillor L.Chesterman raised Homelessness as a scrutiny item as there were some big issues there, particularly when we had the "all in" policy in the first lockdown. Homelessness should be a current priority especially if there are people out on the streets in cold weather.

Budget Setting

Councillor Hayes confirmed that the Budget Setting and Corporate Plan Task and Finish Group would be reporting back to this committee on 13 January 2021.

Review of provision of health services in the borough

Councillor L.Chesterman confirmed that the "provision of health services" in the borough was a statutory item and that is why it is in the work programme.

Review of provision of the discharge of crime and disorder services in borough

Following a query from Councillors, Officers confirmed that these obligations are met and discharged through the Community Safety Partnership; this again is a

Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
11 November 2020

statutory item that we have as a requirement for scrutiny. It was suggested that officers could provide a broad overview of the CSP or a detailed analysis of one or two aspects of the partnership. This could help form part of the information and potential scrutiny around homelessness. DrugLink provides services to people with addiction, but it is actually a housing project and provides the Council's housing first service.

It was proposed for Officers and partner organisations (like DrugLink) to give the committee a brief overview of what they do and how we work together on homelessness: looking at what works well, what doesn't and learning for future. Bottom line costs were also requested. This is to include details on how many people have lost their private rented accommodation not just people who were living on the streets.

RESOLVED:

- (1) Members agreed that a report on Homelessness should go to the next committee meeting.
- (2) Members agreed that a report on the work of the Community Safety Partnership should go to the next committee meeting.

Meeting ended 9.04pm  
AM