

Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
6 January 2022

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on Thursday 6 January 2022 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chambers, Campus East, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE

PRESENT: Councillors B.Fitzsimon (Chairman)  
H.Quenet (Vice-Chairman) and L.Chesterman (Vice-Chairman)

G.Hayes, S.Kasumu, F.Marsh, G.Michaelides, P.Smith,  
C.Stanbury, T.Travell, J.Cragg, C Juggins and  
A Rohale

OFFICIALS Head of Resources (R. Baker)  
PRESENT: Legal Services Manager (S. Saunders)  
Principal Governance Officer (J. Anthony)

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16. SUBSTITUTION OF MEMBERS

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

Councillor Caron Juggins for Councillor Alastair Hellyer,  
Councillor Julie Cragg for Councillor Roger Trigg; and  
Councillor Ayesha Rohale for Councillor Siobhan Elam.

17. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absences were received from Councillors A. Hellyer, R. Trigg and S. Elam.

18. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 November 2021 (previously circulated) were approved as correct record. It was noted that the next steps agreed following the November meeting had been added to the minutes so they were part of the public record.

19. SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH PANELS (T&FPS) PROGRESS REPORTS AND/OR RECOMMENDATIONS

20. HOUSING MAINTENANCE AND REPAIRS TASK & FINISH PANEL

The Committee received a report from Councillor Max Holloway as Chair of the Task and Finish Panel. Councillor Holloway thanked Officers for the work they

undertook to provide the large array of information required by the Panel; and the Panel members for their contributions, especially over the festive period, which allowed for the report to be finalised.

Councillor Holloway explained that the Panel had received a picture of how the service should run and what residents should expect from it. This was followed by a series of questions and answers, which had led to the recommendations in front of the Committee. The Members noted the 13 observations and recommendations set out in the report.

The importance of the asset grading exercise the council had already commissioned was noted, as well as the recommendation that the outcome should be brought to the Cabinet Housing Panel, and that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee may wish to convene a Task and Finish Group to review the finding once the exercise is complete. The Panel also highlighted the need for Officers to resolve the backlog of long-term complaints that was outstanding and produce a more proactive communication plan to encourage tenants to engage the council on any maintenance issues as soon as they arose.

Councillor Holloway explained that the Panel commissioned and reviewed a heat map of mould issues across the borough. Based on the evidence examined, the Panel concluded that whilst there was a considerable number of residents who had encountered mould issues, there was no one prevailing cause of mould in properties in Welwyn Hatfield. The age and condition of certain properties, and a lack of a robust maintenance programme, were a contributing factor and an ongoing consideration needed to be given to the regular upkeep of properties. This included regular gutter maintenance on all properties within the housing stock and tree maintenance, as these were contributing factors to mould issues suffered by residents.

Members were informed that the instances of 'exceptional' voids by-in-large stemmed from a lack of regular maintenance on Council properties. The completion of the asset grading exercise alongside the increase in the 5-year planned maintenance programme would go some way in tackling the issues leading to longer void times.

Members were reminded that at the Full Council meeting on 17 November 2021, it was unanimously agreed that the Panel would review the "Window Repairs and Replacement" policy with specific regard to the replacement of 'priority' windows. The Panel proposed a change to the policy which would remove specifically named rooms as being a relevant consideration when it came to the replacement of blown/misty windows.

The following points were raised and noted:

- The Committee thanked Panel Members and especially Councillor Holloway for their work and efforts, and congratulated them on the report and its findings.

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- By setting high and robust standards for maintenance of council properties, it should raise the standards for residents of private landlords.
- Members noted a report which had been circulated to Group Leaders with regards to asbestos. It was agreed that Members would need to review the report before making a recommendation.
- On the issue of voids, the Panel confirmed that they did not find anything which would indicate a systemic problem with council properties being left vacant for a significant amount of time.

A motion to agree the Panel's recommendation was proposed by Councillor J. Cragg and seconded by Councillor G. Hayes.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Panel's recommendation, as set out in the report, be agreed.

## 21. BUDGET SETTING TASK AND FINISH PANEL

The Committee received a report from Councillor Glyn Hayes as Chair of the Task and Finish Panel. Councillor explained that the Panel had undertaken its work over a four-month period and there was an opportunity for Members to provide suggestion for consideration and inclusion. One proposal, which had been presented to Full Council in February 2021 by the Liberal Democrat group, was considered. The proposal was to convert garages into houses and appoint a Climate Change Officer. Members noted that the garage proposal was worked through and had now been earmarked for inclusion in the following year's budget. The Panel also concluded that the overall responsibility for Climate Change actions was held at Director level and all Officers would need to contribute to this. It was also noted that the budget setting exercise was not the appropriate forum to create new Officer positions.

Members were informed that the Panel had looked at the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, and in particular noted the difficulty in setting long term plans given the government's short term funding settlements. The budget gap was a continuing concern, and Members noted that front line services may need to be re-examined given that most options for savings have been exhausted over the last few years.

Overall, the Panel found the budget to be sound. However, there remained cause for concern when looking ahead over the next few years. There remained ongoing uncertainty over the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit. Whilst there may be political difference with the Fees and Charges set, the Panel found these proposals to be financially sound.

The following points were raised and noted:

- The Panel was chaired extremely well by Councillor Hayes
- The council was facing a number of tough challenges, but was still setting a good example of how to utilise the resources available to it

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- It was noted that charities often suffered with short term funding settlements, with the uncertainty meaning only short-term employment contracts could be offered, which in turn had an impact on services. The question was raised as to whether the council might be affected in a similar way due to Government short term settlements. It was explained that the government settlement with the council was only part of the council's income, with the bulk of funding coming from Council Tax and Business Rates, which allowed the Council to have a longer-term view.
- Members were advised that a concern with the General Fund was the fact that the rate of inflation was higher than the cap on Council Tax rises. This was not a short-term funding problem, but a structural problem which the government would need to address.
- The council was in a better position than other council's in part because of the reserves it is able to draw upon; other councils might need the government to intervene sooner rather than later

A motion was proposed by Councillor G. Hayes and seconded by Councillor C. Juggins

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Committee note the work of the Panel in scrutinising the budget proposals and to note that the Panel found the budget proposals to be financially sound, and that these observations should be shared with the Cabinet

22. RESPONSE FROM CABINET/COUNCIL TO RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH PANELS (T&FPS)

Members noted that the Affordable Housing Level issue looked at during the last meeting resulted in a number of observations and recommendations which were sent to the Cabinet for their consideration. Specifically there was a recommendation that:

*the current HRA Business Plan and associated Strategic Plan are reviewed in order to understand the financial capacity to increase the Council's current housing stock and directly deliver more affordable homes, whilst also continuing to invest appropriately in the existing housing stock. And that this review take place in good time to allow any revision to policy and plans to be incorporated into the 2023-24 budget.*

Officers confirmed that these recommendations were adopted by the Cabinet at their meeting on Tuesday 4 January.

On the issue of anti-social behaviour, noise nuisance and vermin problems, Officers had noted the Committee's recommendation for a Part II meeting to look at specific case studies Officers were looking at arranging that session.

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23. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2021/22

Members noted that the two annual statutory reviews (Review of provision of health services in the borough; and Review of provisions of the discharge of crime and disorder services in the borough) would go to the March meeting. It was suggested that the review of the new Waste and Recycling contract may need to be deferred to the next municipal year given the impact of staff and service disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Members had been keen not to distract the contractors and officers from delivering, what was recognised as a good level of service, whilst dealing with pandemic related disruptions.

Members raised the issue of staff turnover and resources available to deliver services and provide support to Councillors and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Members also expressed a desire to ensure staff wellbeing was being considered, especially given the significant increase in remote working.

It was agreed that in order for Members to assess what areas may benefit from scrutiny, and to ensure that any scrutiny exercise remained focused, Members would first consider relevant staffing information, to be circulated by Officers ahead of the next Committee meeting.

Meeting ended at 8.26 pm  
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