

Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee
6 April 2016

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the SOCIAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on Wednesday, 6th April, 2016 at 7.30 pm in the Salvation House, 2 Sterling Court, Mundells, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL7 1FT

PRESENT: Councillors N Pace (Chairman)

D Bennett, M Cook, C Juggins, H Morgan, K Pieri,
F Thomson, A Thorpe, B Rhodes, T Kingsbury and
A Chesterman

ALSO PRESENT: Co-optee B Rhodes

OFFICIALS PRESENT: S Chambers – Head of Housing and Community Services
P Underwood – Head of Policy and Culture
T Benson – Town Centre Co-ordinator
L Dobbs – Museums Manager
S Hulks – Committee Manager
M Rayner – Community Partnerships Manager
C Robertson – Youth and Sports Partnerships Officer

A Bedford – Director of Operations – Finesse Leisure
N Palmer – Director of Finance & Head of Paid Service – Finesse Leisure
M Woolman – General Manager – CW Entertainment

43. SUBSTITUTION OF MEMBERS

Councillor A Chesterman substituted for Councillor L Chesterman.

44. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors L Chesterman and A Yeowell. Also from J Parry, co-opted member.

45. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2016 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

46. ACTIONS UPDATE

Members received a report which provided them with information on the current status of the actions from previous meetings.

Mr John Hughes of BeNCH (the Probation Service for Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire) was in attendance for this item to talk about the issues raised at the last meeting in respect of the Probation Service.

He opened by saying that he felt contact should have been made to him prior to escalating the concerns felt by the Committee to the Ministry of Justice, NoMs and the local MP. He said he felt that scrutiny was about obtaining information and, in his opinion, the letter sent had not sought to do that.

John then went on to explain that it had been government policy to privatise the Probation Service. He said that the reason for outsourcing was to squeeze money out of a service. Where previously he had a team of 30 officers, he now had 7. In order to save money and meet policy, staff numbers were inevitably reduced.

Administration of the service is carried out in Huntingdon. This is very much IT based and there were some issues with the technology early on.

The work of the Probation Service was split into two areas.

John stated that BeNCH (the Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC)) predated Sodexo and that the issue of how BeNCH provides services is a separate issue.

He said that it was a myth that CRCs only dealt with offenders who were at low/medium risk of harm. 25-30% were involved in domestic abuse – how could that be considered low/medium risk? It is also the case that risk fluctuates.

Another concern was the current scheme of speedy justice. This meant that the courts would not get all of the information they needed to reach an informed decision and that therefore sentences did not reflect the issues. The aim was to sentence on the day.

John explained that morale amongst his officers was at rock bottom. He hope that there would be a more positive view in the future but he was not sure that would be the case.

Sodexo was agreed as the service provider by the Ministry of Justice and it was known that there would be a reduction in employees, an increase in IT and an increase in private sector providers.

John explained that further discussions are taking place regarding drug testing and it was hoped that it would be possible to reinstate the previous agreement

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with the County Council as the current situation was not acceptable. The links between drugs and alcohol and violence were established and an increasing trend of violence linked to drug use.

Members were advised that audit of BeNCH takes place almost every week to the point of being excessive. This despite being told that they would be free of bureaucratic constraint.

His team was looking at new and innovative ways to improve the system such as a programme working with women who were subject to domestic abuse. Another programme working with perpetrators had been piloted and, as successful, would be rolled out across the county.

Work was also ongoing on a pre-court programme for abusers and partnership work was being done on restorative projects.

Members thanked John for providing information and updating them from the perspective of the service provider.

NOTED the report.

47. NOTIFICATION OF URGENT BUSINESS TO BE CONSIDERED UNDER ITEM 22:

None.

48. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST BY MEMBERS

49. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME AND PETITIONS

None.

50. FINESSE MONITORING REPORT

Members received a report which provided them with monitoring information on Finesse Leisure.

There had been a small increase in swimming numbers, a decrease in attendance at Hatfield Leisure Centre, an increase in attendance at Panshanger Golf Complex and a slight increase in usage of the playing fields in King George V and other locations.

It was noted that attendance at Hatfield Swim Centre was down compared to the same period last year. This was due to loss of memberships to the newly opened low cost gyms in Hatfield.

Members asked whether Finesse were able to reduce their prices to be competitive in order to attract young people who might otherwise use the budget gyms, also to attract young people from the schools.

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They were advised that work was being done with the schools to allow more use of the gym and 3G pitches. There was also a 25% discount available to University students.

The aim was to try to show young people that there was more on offer at the Centre than at the budget gyms.

It was acknowledged that the opening hours were not as flexible which was due to higher staff costs. This could be considered if it were proven to be viable.

Members asked whether signs could be displayed stating when the work on the children's play area in King George V would be completed. They also asked about the status of the G4 pitches. It had been said that two of the pitches would be moved to Hatfield.

Officers advised that two of the pitches were to be moved to replace two in Hatfield that were in poor condition. It was not possible to reinstate football at King George V as there could still be an issue with noise. Methods of reducing noise had been considered, but it was not felt that these were likely to be successful.

It was agreed that information for local residents regarding the children's play area would be displayed.

Members also received a presentation on Hatfield Swim Centre which provided them with information on:

- The new "Wellbeing Spa"
- The "SwimTag" system
- "My Wellness Cloud" fitness technology
- Net Promoter Score Customer Satisfaction benchmarking
- Future capital investment plans

Members asked whether the Net Promoter Score was for the whole of the leisure industry. It was explained that comparative data could be broken down into different sectors. Information from this would be presented at future meetings.

Members asked whether there was an intention to sign up to "Bounce". Meetings had take place with the company and consideration was being given as to whether or not to sign up.

A Member commented that whilst a lot of money was obviously being spent on these projects, this should not be to the detriment of places like King George V which, whilst a community asset, would become common land if neglected.

The Portfolio Holder replied that it was intended to improve King George V using Section 106 money.

NOTED the report.

51. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Members received a report which provided them with an update on the status of performance indicators within the remit of the Committee.

Four of the indicators were showing a positive trend whilst two were negative.

The reduction in school visits to the museum had been caused by the loss of the study room to fire and it was thought that it might not be possible to encourage schools to visit again once an alternative venue was found.

The increase in households living in temporary accommodation was due to an increase in evictions from the private sector and a reduction in moving people into private sector housing to prevent homelessness, plus an increase in domestic abuse cases.

Members were advised that, whilst the authority was able to offer some of its own accommodation to other councils, it was possible to quickly reverse this should demand increase.

Members asked about the standard of the privately rented homes that were inspected. They were informed that on the first visit there were often problems but usually standards had improved by the second visit.

Members asked for data on the number and types of issues.

In respect to the PI on how safe residents felt at night, the question was asked as to whether the lack of street lighting was an issue. Officers commented that police analysis shows that there had been no increase in crime since the lights had been turned off.

Members asked why Welwyn Hatfield seemed to be better than other councils in dealing with homelessness. Officers replied that the team in that area worked well, were accessible and provided early advice. There was a lot of work done on prevention and a good working relationship with the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Consideration was being given to introducing a mandatory scheme for landlords of HMOs. However it involved a long process to introduce new licensing and there had to be evidence to show that the condition of properties would improve. Each agent could be responsible for 200/300 properties, so it was felt that focussing on working with them would be more productive than focussing on landlords.

Members commented that they thought the cameras at King George V were not very good and they wondered whether better equipment could be introduced. Officers advised that new equipment had been installed in October, including enhanced vision at night and the issue of aerial interference had been resolved.

NOTED the report.

52. CAMPUS WEST ANNUAL REPORT

Members received a report which provided an overview and summary of Campus West Entertainment.

There are five elements to the services being offered at the complex, these being Garden City Cinema, Hawthorne Theatre, RollerCity, SoftPlayCity and Humphrey's Cafe.

Details of each service area and what they offer were included in the report.

Members commented that they thought it was an amazing facility with a good atmosphere and a homely feel. They also thought that the sound quality was very good. They commended the staff for the good work that they did.

There was a concern expressed about the car park system but it was acknowledged that CWE had no control over the car park which was run by the council.

NOTED the report.

53. MUSEUM SERVICE UPDATE

Members received a report which provided information on the work of the Museum Service at its sites at Mill Green and the Roman Bath House.

Members were advised that it had been a challenging year due to inclement weather and the loss of the study area. However, on a more positive note, Roman themed educational sessions had been well received by schools, research students are making use of the archive and collections to assist in their academic studies and special events have been well attended.

It was noted that visitors expected there to be a cafe for refreshments and a pop-up kitchen had been trialled. Consideration is being given as to whether to take this forward and, if so, in what form.

Members asked whether the local bakers, Simmons, bought the flour produced at the mill. Officers replied that Simmons did buy the flour, but demand had dropped. One issue was that, where bread was produced using automation, traditionally milled stoneground flour requires more input by the baker because the flour is produced by traditional methods and so there are more inconsistencies than with plant milled flour.

There was an option to bake on site, but there was little profit in this and more could be earned teaching people how to bake their own bread.

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NOTED the report.

54. YOUTH AND SPORTS PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT 2015-2016

Members received a report which provided information on the work of the Youth and Sports Partnership team (comprising the Youth and Sports Partnership Officer with input from the Community Partnerships Manager) during the year.

Highlights of the programme of events were:

- The Dragon's Apprenticeship Challenge which had raised over £26,000 for selected charities.
- Newly formed Youth Council with all schools participating.
- Welwyn Hatfield Young Carers Group where it is intended to have a lead in every school.
- Unsaid Campaign – a mental health awareness campaign initiated by the Youth Council which aims to adopt a “whole school approach” around mental health.
- National Playday which had over 8,000 attendees and 40 different partners providing a wide programme of activities.

Members thanked Chloe and Matt for their work.

NOTED the report.

55. TOWN CENTRES REVIEW

Members received a report which provided them with information on the work of the Town Centres team during 2015. Members also received information about the work undertaken on becoming a Business Improvement District (BID) for central Welwyn Garden City.

Members also received a presentation which showed how the team were focussed on:

- Partnerships – including those for art and culture and dementia awareness
- Businesses – including business breakfasts, business newsletter and Presence Orb, a wifi based option to capture footfall.
- Community – including events, use of social media and the Look and Feel Working Group

Events had included “Give it a Go” experience day, “Here We Are”, a showcase for schools and young people, Christmas lights switch-on, a Food Festival, the Tour of Hertfordshire and a Christmas Market.

Members commented that the work being done was very positive and they applauded the inclusion of the businesses which they felt was very important.

NOTED the report.

56. SAFEGUARDING 2015-2016

Members received a report which provided details of the obligations of the council to ensure the highest possible standard of care for vulnerable people who use and have access to the services of the council or its contractors. The Safeguarding Action Plan was appended to the report.

It was noted that Safeguarding had broadened out from its original remit to now include issues such as Modern Slavery, Self-neglect, Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), FGM and Forced Marriage.

The risks to the council of not meeting its duty are low but the impact high.

Members were advised that there would be training on this topic in the new municipal year. This would be mandatory.

An updated policy would be published in June/July.

Members asked whether the borough's taxi drivers were being made aware of issues around CSE. It was confirmed that the Hackney Carriage Officer was ensuring that they had the information before they were issued with their licences.

NOTED the report.

57. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY UPDATE

Members received a report which provided detail of activities delivered on the Council's Equality and Diversity Action Plan for 2015-2016 and highlights of some of the actions planned for 2016-2017.

Actions delivered included:

- Development of an online training package
- A Teamtalk special
- A review of the Burial and Memorial policy
- A review of the Equality Impact Assessment policy
- Cultural Engagement events
- "Two Ticks" Positive about Disability accreditation maintained

Actions planned for 2016-2017 include:

- To work with Herts County Council to produce a Supported Housing Strategy
- To manage the delivery of the Welwyn Hatfield Young Carers Group

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- To run two “Safer Together” events to promote safety awareness
- To develop a protocol for the carriage of assistance dogs in taxis

The Action Plan helps to embed Equality and Diversity within services.

NOTED the report and endorsed the Delivery Plan 2016-2017.

58. COMMITTEE OVERVIEW WORK PROGRAMME 2015-2016

59. RESPONSE FROM CABINET TO RECOMMENDATIONS FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Members were advised that the report of the Scrutiny sub-committee on the topic of Sport and Physical Activity in the Borough’s Schools had been presented to Cabinet on 5 January 2016.

Cabinet had agreed the recommendations from the sub-committee.

Members commented that it had been frustrating to have so few responses to the questionnaires.

Members also said that, should the topic be revisited, the Schools’ Sports Partnership should be invited to input to the review.

NOTED the report.

60. CONSIDERATION OF ITEMS FOR SCRUTINY

None

61. COMMITTEE SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2015-2016

No further work for the Committee in 2015-2016.

62. RESPONSE FROM CABINET/COUNCIL TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS/ REPORTS

None.

63. COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION

None.

64. SUCH OTHER BUSINESS AS, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIRMAN, IS OF SUFFICIENT URGENCY TO WARRANT IMMEDIATE CONSIDERATION

None.

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65. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

66. ANY OTHER BUSINESS OF A CONFIDENTIAL OR EXEMPT NATURE AT THE DISCRETION OF THE CHAIRMAN

Meeting ended at 10pm
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