

Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
20 November 2024

## WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on Wednesday 20 November 2024 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chamber

PRESENT: Councillors D.Jones (Chairman)  
B.Sarson (Vice-Chairman) and L.Chesterman (Vice-Chairman)

G.Michaelides, L.Crofton, T.Rowse, T.Mitchinson,  
A.Nix, D.Panter, K.Gardner, S.Asare and  
A.Chesterman

OFFICIALS R.Baker, Executive Director (Finance & Transformation)  
PRESENT: S.McDaid, Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change)  
K Roberts, Assistant Director (Customer Services and Transformation)  
S.Saunders, Legal Services Manager  
B.Compton, Democratic Services Officer

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14. APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTION OF MEMBERS

Apologies of absence were received from Cllr L Musk for whom Cllr A Chesterman attended as a substitute and Cllr Cragg.

15. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2024 were approved as a correct record.

16. NOTIFICATION OF URGENT BUSINESS TO BE CONSIDERED UNDER ITEM 9

No notifications of urgent business were received.

17. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS BY MEMBERS

No notifications for urgent business were received.

18. UPDATES FROM THE TASK & FINISH PANELS

A Verbal update was received from the Chair of the Budget Task & Finish Panel.

The budget setting task and finish panel convened for its first meeting on Tuesday 19 November following the approval by the cabinet of the medium -term forecasts in October and the budget seminar presented last week.

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It gave an overview of the forecast and the anticipated budget gap for the next three years, and it was noted there is a sizable and challenging budget gap ahead of us.

The newer pressures facing the Council were discussed, in particular the pressures on homelessness and benefit subsidy losses. These pressures have arisen rapidly due to a number of factors, including increases in statutory duties, the cost of living crisis, temporary accommodation being held for redevelopment, and the reduction in accommodation available from a strategic partner due to the redevelopment

of their site. This is compounded by the continued freezing of the caps on the level of grant that can be claimed, which for temporary accommodation is still linked to rates set in 2011.

A program has been set up to oversee five key projects aimed at reducing this pressure where possible and officers explained that since September, around £700,000 have been identified to support the reduction of the budget gap.

The budget setting principles that were agreed by cabinet in October were explained.

One of these was a full review of the capital program and capital financing, which has now been completed. Officers explained that the cost of capital, which is made up of interest costs and repayment of borrowing, has now been reduced for 25 -26 and 26 -27.

Taking this update into account, the updated budget gap for 25 -26 now stands at just over £3 million.

Members discussed opportunities for savings, including income production and cost reductions, and will discuss the progress being made on income production for culture and leisure facilities in more detail at the next meeting along with any savings proposals and updates on the settlement of government policy statements.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- A Member raised the issue of Council Tax support: not everyone in receipt of the Personal Independence Payment or the Disability Living Allowance was necessarily poor and yet anyone in receipt of either of these benefits was currently exempt from paying Council Tax.

A Verbal update was received from the Chair of the Social Housing (Communal Area Maintenance) Task & Finish Panel.

The Task & Finish group have met once so far and there is another meeting in November. The Scope of the Task & Finish Group was to explore:

- Providing details around the council's cleaning and maintenance schedules and levels of service.

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- Providing an overview of service charges
- Providing details of chargeable services to leaseholders, service charges to tenants and leaseholders for such services.

So far the meeting has discussed:

- What estate services should cover.
- That we are developing quality standards for estates so that residents know what services are provided and when they take place.
- Discussion of a scrutiny review undertaken by the resident's panel.
- That new communal cleaning and window cleaning contracts will be procured as they do not currently cover all blocks on a scheduled basis.

The next meeting will cover:

- Service Charges
- Repairs and Maintenance
- Tree Maintenance

The Task & Finish Group are due to present the report to Overview and Scrutiny Meeting on 9 January 2025.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- For clarification when talking about estate management, it means the management of our estates and not the Estate Management Scheme area within which some people live.

A Verbal update was received from the Chair of the Youth ASB/Violence Task & Finish Panel.

The first meeting was on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> November and we looked at the scope of the Task and Finish Group which included understanding the definition of and the levels of youth violence in the borough, to understand what the community safety partnership is doing towards youth crime and violence, to feed into our partners and make recommendations and to consider whether there are individual activities the council can do to support the reduction of youth violence.

We had a discussion on an overview of youth ASB in the borough and among the highlights we looked at the trends in youth violence and youth ASB, both of which have decreased in the last year, which is good news, and use in possession of weapons, which unfortunately was a slight increase over the last year.

We looked at the borough's experiences of reporting higher levels of knife carrying, county lines, cuckooing, and the risk of child exploitation higher than unfortunately other councils in Hertfordshire. We looked at the responsibilities of

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the council and the County Council with regards to dealing with youth, ASB and violence.

We discussed the Community Safety Partnership Action Plan, working with police and others, and saw that it has a priority on tackling serious violence, including preventing and protecting young people from serious violence. We looked at the services available in the borough /county, to support young people involved in crime and ASB and also discussed raising awareness of the diversity of activities provided by the council and other partners to young people.

In future meetings we'll look to have a deeper examination of youth crime statistics with a presentation from the police. We'll look at the work being undertaken by the Herts County Council on youth crime and vulnerable young people. We'll also discuss or involve the Youth Council, which we thought would be very useful, getting an idea from their point of view in this area, and look at what other councils have done as good practice to try and reduce youth crime. We'll have a few more meetings before we're due to present a report to this committee, which will be on the 18th of March next year.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- Electric Scooters and what the police are doing about it. There is a plethora of these scooters being ridden on the road and pavement. When stopped and asked the riders don't appear to realise it is illegal.
- A member asked if the police could provide statistics on how many they seize and how many people they warn.
- It was suggested that some comms be sent out before Christmas regarding the Electric Scooters, saying it is illegal and to think twice before buying for someone. Also to include statistics on how many are seized and crushed but also how many deaths and serious injuries have occurred, in particular from the batteries exploding.
- A Member requested for Councillors to be invited to the police priority setting forums as they don't appear to be happening in Welwyn Hatfield. The issues raised in the report could then be shared at this meeting and residents could also express their views to Councillors. A member responded that Councillors used to meet with them, but it appears to have gone quiet over the last few years.
- The Executive Director (Resident Services & Climate Change) looked on the police website where they set priorities for particular areas. The October one mentions E-scooters on one of the lists around the High View area. They focus on specific areas on a 3-month period. It is unclear how they engage with the public and this will be picked up in the Task & Finish Group.

#### 19. GROUNDS MAINTENANCE SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH PANEL

The Chair of the Grounds Maintenance Scrutiny Task & Finish Panel introduced a report outlining eleven recommendations for Cabinet to consider.

Continental Landscapes Limited (CLL) operate the grounds maintenance contract for the Council. This involves grass cutting, hedge cutting, maintenance of seasonal beds and shrubs, weed treatment and leaf clearance. The grass cutting season during the summer of 2024 proved challenging due to the weather pattern, which was also experienced across the country. CLL were invited to meet with cabinet during the summer to discuss the issues and what improvements could be made. This resulted in many proposed improvements for the grass cutting season for 2025 which were agreed by Cabinet members, and the Executive Member for Environment in subsequent meetings with CLL. The proposed improvements have also been endorsed as recommendations by the task and finish group.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- A member asked if there was a particular order for the seven zones that move around as he envisaged that people whose zone is number seven will start complaining.
- The Chair of the Task & Finish Group responded saying that it was in planning at the moment. The whole council area will be split into seven zones, and they cannot move on to the next zone until the one being worked on has been signed off by council officers and the supervisors of CLL. The plan is to publish the schedule on the website.
- With regards the Wildflower areas, it was suggested a list is circulated to all councillors so they can suggest other areas to be considered. It is also a good idea to ensure these areas are well signposted. Another member suggested we need to choose area that will not impact on the highway.
- With regards garden maintenance, a member asked if the council could send residents a letter asking them to cut their hedge where it becomes a problem overgrowing the path.
- The Executive Director (Resident Services & Climate Change) responded that where complaints of overgrown hedges causing issues have been received, we will write to the owner and our own tenants and if it is serious we can take enforcement action.
- A member asked if there is an existing protocol that permits them to cut their grass or is it only on receiving a complaint.
- The Executive Director (Resident Services & Climate Change) responded that there's no legal requirement or protocol for any tenant or owner to cut their grass / hedge at any particular frequency but if a complaint is received and people cannot walk safely on the path then we start with a letter and it can be followed up with enforcement. We would not have the ability to set that as a protocol across the borough, there would be no legal mechanism to do that.
- A member raised the issue of complaints received regarding trees that we have a contract with County to cut. She asked if County could be contacted and asked for extra money as they trees need cutting back more often
- A member raised the issue of Leylandii hedges overrunning pavements and the recommendation being a narrow amount needed to leave for the

path width. With the increase in mobility scooters and prams it must be a very outdated recommendation.

- A member asked if the issue of uncut lawns is linked into environmental health because lawns not cut have a tendency to attract undesirable wildlife that then have a tendency to spread to neighbour's properties.
- The Executive Director (Resident Services & Climate Change) responded there are times we get complaints about untidy gardens and there may well be pest problems as well so environment will get involved.

## RESOLVED

Members noted the contents of the report and recommended to Cabinet that:

- (A) The new approach to the scheduling of grass cutting (waves/zones) for March 2025.
- (B) To reduce grass cut height to 25mm and address biodiversity with further wildflower areas.
- (C) To commence the first grass cut earlier in season (if possible)
- (D) To acknowledge CLL's investment into the contract with the purchase of 8 new mowers
- (E) For officers to consult with the Executive Cabinet Member for Environment to consider new KPIs for quality in the contract
- (F) The Communications Plan
- (G) To update the website content
- (H) Scheduling of road sweeping
- (I) Hard cut back of shrubs
- (J) Optimise mechanisms for exploration of scrutiny of the environment portfolio
- (K) To introduce further areas of wildflower areas (with signage)

## 20. ANNUAL OMBUDSMAN REPORTS (COMPLAINTS)

The Assistant Director (Customer Services & Transformation) introduced the Council's Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report for 2023-24.

The report set out the Council's annual complaints performance and service improvement for 2023-24. It also summarised key lessons learned, compliance against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and action plan to ensure improvements identified are implemented to improve complaint handling and to continue to develop a positive complaints culture across the organisation.

Following an update to the council's constitution last October, the OSC is now responsible for monitoring and assessing complaints performance and subsequent action plans. It is also a requirement of the housing ombudsman complaint handling code that a report is provided and shared also with the social housing regulator and therefore the reports have been split into two sections, 1)

housing reports and 2) non housing report, non-housing complaints which will pick up other council services.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- At 5.1 on the report, it states how much is given out in compensation. A member asked if it was known how much is spent on managing complaints.
- The Assistant Director (Customer Services & Transformation) responded it was not something that has been recorded but it could be considered in the next annual report.
- A member asked a question about compensation and if a resident is awarded compensation due to damage caused by a contractor, who pays the compensation and how quickly and mentioned a local resident who had been waiting for 2 years for compensation to be paid.
- The Executive Director (Resident Services & Climate Change) responded that if it's a fault by the council we will pay and will do so quickly within a couple of weeks and offered to look into the resident's case.
- A member asked if we have a benchmark of how we perform against other authorities?
- The Assistant Director (Customer Services & Transformation) responded that the best measurement is shown in the Ombudsman reports provided in Appendix B and C

## RESOLVED

Members noted the contents of the report in Appendix A and recommended to Cabinet to note the contents of the report and to approve the Action Plan as detailed in Section 7 of Appendix 1.

## 21. CONSULTATIONS

The Assistant Director (Customer Service & Transformation) introduced a presentation on consultations with our communities and ensuring effective community engagement.

Key Points:

- Over the last 12 months the Customer Service Project Board has been looking at key objectives, i.e. what we want to achieve and the approach and overseeing what that communication plan looks like. By reviewing consultations and surveys done over the past 18 months, what has gone well and not so well, this information has been used to develop a new community engagement toolkit for staff to use.
- Four levels of engagement defined
  - a) Inform – making sure websites are accessible, press releases, social media channels, newsletters, committee papers.

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- b) How to start to talk to our community about our services by looking at surveys, consultations, satisfaction surveys.
- c) How we empower support community action to do things. By introducing self serve, how we support our volunteers and community catch up days.
- d) Collaborating and forming partnerships with other stakeholders.
- Response rate looking for when undertake a survey. Survey design and approach will be different for each survey type.
- The new toolkit will have a clear comms and marketing plan, look and feel more aligned with the council branding. Summary documents for consulting on strategies that are quite long. Mid survey reviews looking at responses coming in and capture and target various groups.
- Improving survey feedback by working closer with service teams. Develop key stakeholder list for each survey type, promotion in social media, internal newsletter so councillors know what surveys are live and help promote them. promotional offers, ensuring the survey is easy to complete, asking simple questions and ensuring we feedback.
- Next steps – We have developed an engagement calendar overseen by the community engagement group. Develop council-wide engagement strategy, the action plan will be reviewed by the Customer Service Project Board and then go to Cabinet. The final version of the toolkit will be reviewed by the Customer Service Project Board.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- A member asked if they could have percentage rates of survey responses.
- A member suggested putting something in the magazine every quarter listing what is coming soon.
- A member asked if they could see the survey results in Core News.
- The Assistant Director (Customer Service & Transformation) responded that they have been updating the website with a one page gateway to all live consultations and surveys and you can see results of past ones.

RESOLVED

Members noted the presentation.

Meeting ended at 8.40 pm