

MINUTES
of the
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 21 June 2022 at 7pm

Present:

Councillor R.J. Poulter (Chair)

Councillors L. Ashley, M.W. Bracken, N. Chambers, W.A. Daden, R.J.E. Gisby, I.S. Grundy,
J.C.S. Lager, L.A. Mascot, M.S. Steel, C.R. Tron and S. Young

Also in attendance:

Councillors G. Pooley and S.J. Robinson

1. Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Deakin and Fuller. Cllr Mascot substituted for Cllr Deakin.

2. Election of Vice Chair

Councillor Poulter nominated Councillor Young to be elected as Vice Chair. This was seconded and agreed by the Committee.

3. Chairs Announcements

The Chair informed the Committee that they were always welcome to suggest agenda items for consideration by them and officers.

4. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held 2 February 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. Declaration of Interests

All Members were reminded to declare any Disclosable Pecuniary interests or other registerable interests where appropriate in any items of business on the meeting's agenda. None were made.

6. Public Question Time

No questions were asked or statements made.

7. Decisions Called-In

The Committee noted that no decisions taken by the Cabinet had been called-in.

8. Cabinet Portfolio Update – Leader of the Council

Councillor Robinson apologised to the Committee for the late circulation of his report, but it was noted that it was now available on the website too. The Committee were informed of the two main areas of work since the last report which were the supporting of refugees from Ukraine and Afghanistan, and the devolution/levelling up white paper and now bill. The Committee heard that there were still over 100 Afghan adults and children in a Chelmsford hotel, six months since their arrival. It was noted that the City Council's responsibility was fairly limited, but Cllr Robinson highlighted the positive work of the Strategic Housing Team. It was noted that they had worked well during Covid in terms of housing the homeless but had then moved straight onto supporting refugees and they deserved credit for their hard work. The Leader of the Council also highlighted a potential short and medium term issue where if Afghan families refused an offer of accommodation from the home office they could then be removed from hotels as a result. This would then lead to the Council having to take responsibility.

The Committee were updated on the Levelling Up White Paper which had been launched by the Government in February. It was noted that it set out goals to address disparities of outcomes for different groups and places, whilst providing a framework for devolution of powers to English Local Authorities. The Committee heard that the paper detailed various options and for the benefit of Councillors, the Leader and Chief Executive would soon be providing a presentation, potentially after the next Full Council meeting. Cllr Robinson stated that, it would be key to assess what benefits were possible for Chelmsford's residents and how issues could be tackled more effectively.

The Leader of the Council also referred to the review of the Local Plan, the recent Creamfields Festival in Hylands Park, the Community Governance Review and the report also detailed the day to day aspects of the role.

In response to questions from the Committee, Cllr Robinson informed them that;

- For refugee families, there were much wider issues than just access to housing, and the Council were supporting where they could, including free access to leisure centres for example.
- If an Afghan family refused an offer of accommodation from the Home Office, which could be anywhere in the country, then the Home Office would stop funding their hotel space, leading to them being homeless and the Council's responsibility. It was noted that with the limited availability of properties in Chelmsford this would cause major concern.
- Creamfields had been a financial boost for the Council and had achieved what had been budgeted for in terms of income. It had been run at a smaller capacity to V Festival but this had been intentional as a starting point before increasing in future years.
- It was difficult to anticipate if the review of the Local Plan would lead to a greater need for more housing at this point.

RESOLVED that;

1. the update be noted;

2. the Leader of the Council be thanked for their attendance

(7.02pm to 7.30pm)

9. Responding to Rough Sleeping

The Committee received a report on the response from the Council to Rough Sleeping. The Strategic Housing Services Manager and the Council's Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Coordinator informed the Committee of the work that had been undertaken in recent years. The Committee were informed of the key areas in which work had been taking place. One aspect that was highlighted was the joint approach with other nearby local authorities, this had led to greater funding being secured. It was also noted that it was often not just housing assistance that was required and officers regularly went outside of their statutory duties, especially during the pandemic to assist those who needed support. It was noted that important work had been taking place with the homelessness forum and even once accommodation was in place daily work still continued in certain cases.

Officers informed the Committee, that there were often many underlying issues including mental health problems, use of illegal substances and domestic abuse that could potentially lead to someone becoming homeless. Therefore, it was never as simple as putting a roof over someone's head for example and there was often a need for more specialised housing. The Committee also heard of the value of partnerships with other local agencies, something which had been focused on in recent years. It was noted that on average there were around 10-15 rough sleepers per night in Chelmsford and it had been key for staff to build degrees of trust with these individuals, to then be in the position to offer and have assistance accepted.

In terms of next steps the Committee heard that prevention services were of key importance as this would prevent many people becoming homeless in the first place. It was also noted that the need for temporary accommodation for single individuals had trebled and many had complex needs that prevented shared accommodation being utilised. It was noted that officers regularly worked with the same people and it was important to continue to work collaboratively with other local authorities. Officers informed the Committee that ideally the need to sleep rough would be eliminated, however it was understood that this was not an easy position to reach and in some cases certain individuals would still choose to sleep rough.

Councillor Chambers left the meeting at 7.45pm

In response to questions from the Committee, officers informed them that;

- The number of cases would fluctuate, for example a certain number may be housed in on year, but a similar separate number may become homeless. This could therefore lead to the number of cases not actually decreasing.
- Reports to Central Government on the number of cases were now made monthly rather than annually, this had led to a more accurate picture of the issue across Chelmsford.
- There were a very small number of individuals who consistently choose to sleep rough. It was often just one or possibly two however.

- Some lockers were available at Sanctus to store belongings, this was an area where the team would try and liaise directly to find out how similar schemes could be beneficial.
- Educating the public was difficult for officers who work continuously in the team, as they were in effect in a bubble environment. It was therefore not easy to ascertain the general public's understanding of the issue. The key takeaway for the public however was the understanding that homelessness was often caused by other issues first.
- In terms of sharing expertise with other local authorities, it was again noted that this was difficult due to some authorities working in different ways and in some cases with much less political will to tackle the issue than was the case at Chelmsford.
- There had been a slight increase both locally and nationally in the number of females sleeping rough, this was of concern but it was still the minority.
- There were examples of some individuals being housed but still choosing to sleep rough on certain nights or continuing to engage with the community they had been part of whilst homeless. This was often down to purely social reasons but in some examples it could be linked to substance abuse etc. This could lead to issues with the public's perception of rough sleeping .
- Chelmsford had a more constant flow of cases compared to other local districts, this was very much due to it being a focal point in the County and porous borders with neighbouring authorities.

The Deputy Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing also addressed the Committee and highlighted the important strategic changes that had taken place in recent years. It was also noted that new solutions were constantly being put into practice and that rather than focusing on the actual number of rough sleepers, it was also important to look at how long they were sleeping rough for. It was also noted that working with other agencies and authorities had been key for progress and this had been very beneficial.

The Committee and the Deputy Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, thanked officers for their continued hard work in this area. It was noted that in recent years there had been significant advances made and this was down to the positive work consistently being performed by the team.

RESOLVED that

1. the progress made to eliminate the need to sleep rough in Chelmsford be noted and;
2. officers be thanked for their continued hard work and attendance at the meeting.

(7.30pm to 8.30pm)

Councillor Steel left the meeting at 8.31pm

10. Reports from representatives on outside bodies

The Committee received an update, including reports from those members appointed as representatives to outside bodies. The individual reports were appended and provided an overview from each Councillor on the work the body does and how they had contributed to it.

Members of the Committee noted that a task and finish group on the topic could be of benefit. It was noted that this could look at in greater detail which bodies should continue to have appointees. Officers agreed to provide a terms of reference for such a task and finish group ahead of the next meeting.

Members of the Committee also felt that some bodies should be invited to make a presentation at a future meeting to show the work they have been undertaking. Officers agreed to consider this but also noted that some of the bodies did already meet with Councillors and Officers as part of evaluating their performance when receiving funding.

RESOLVED that

1. the report be noted and;
2. officers produce a terms of reference document ahead of the next meeting, for a task and finish group on representatives from outside bodies.

(8.31pm to 8.51pm)

11. Report on Decisions Taken Under Delegation to the Chief Executive

The Committee received information on the four decisions taken during the period 1 November 2021 to 31 May 2022 under the Chief Executives delegated authority to take urgent decisions.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

(8.52pm to 8.53pm)

12. Annual Report of the Committee

In accordance with the Local Code of Corporate Governance adopted by the Council on 23 April 2008 a report on the activity of the scrutiny function of the Council for 2021/22 had been prepared. The Code required that the Committee produce an annual report on its work for consideration by the Council and subsequent publication on the Council's website.

RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Annual Report on the Scrutiny Function for 2021/22 be approved for subsequent publication.

(8.54pm to 8.55pm)

13. Work Programme

The Committee considered a report on its work programme which had been updated following the last meeting on 7 February 2022.

Officers reminded the Committee that they were able to put forward ideas or future items, such as had been done in the meeting with the suggestion of a new task and finish group. The Committee were also reminded of the different elements that formulate the work programme, including performance reviews, task and finish groups and inform and debate sessions.

RESOLVED that

1. the report be noted and;
2. a draft terms of reference document for a task and finish group on outside bodies be circulated ahead of the next meeting.

(8.56pm to 8.59pm)

14. Urgent Business

There were no matters of urgent business brought before the Committee.

The meeting closed at 8.59pm.

Chair