

Crawley Borough Council

Minutes of Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Monday, 5 June 2023 at 8.00 pm

Councillors Present:

M L Ayling (Chair)

H Hellier (Vice-Chair)

J Charatan, K Khan, R A Lanzer, J Millar-Smith, A Pendlington, S Piggott, S Raja, J Russell and S Sivarajah

Also in Attendance:

Councillor I T Irvine and T Rana

Officers Present:

Carron Burton	HR and OD Manager
Siraj Choudhury	Head of Governance, People & Performance
Ian Duke	Deputy Chief Executive
Heather Girling	Democratic Services Officer
Nikki Hargrave	Housing Options Manager (Strategic Housing)
Diana Maughan	Head of Strategic Housing
Joe Mottershead	HR Consultant

1. Disclosures of Interest and Whipping Declarations

The following disclosures were made:

Councillor	Item and Minute	Type and Nature of Disclosure
Councillor R A Lanzer	Appointments and Membership (Minute 6)	Personal Interest – Member of WSCC
Councillor R A Lanzer	Appointments and Membership (Minute 6)	Personal Interest – WSCC Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Commission held on 6 March 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. Public Question Time

No questions from the public were asked.

4. Homelessness in Crawley

Commission Members considered report [SHAP/87](#) of the Head of Strategic Housing. In January 2023, the Commission had requested a report documenting the drivers of homelessness and how forecasts had been determined.

The Commission was informed that homelessness was a complex topic and driven by changes in personal circumstances created and impacted by many factors at both local and national level. These drivers could relate to the housing market (impacted by broader economic policy), living issues, national policy, changes to welfare benefit/taxation systems, global health and migration issues. Local housing authorities responded to these concerns depending on many factors, the most significant being the funding made available from central government and the supply of affordable housing. Demand outweighed supply, resulting in increased competition and pressure on all forms of housing, the use on temporary accommodation as well as other forms of use including hotels within the area. The Covid pandemic saw friends and family evictions escalate but also saw the local authority achieve success by liaising with many rough sleepers in a different way through the 'Everyone In' initiative. The cost of living pressures continued as households struggle with meeting accommodation expenses.

During the discussion, with the Head of Strategic Housing, Housing Options Manager, Deputy Chief Executive and the Cabinet Member for Housing the following points were expressed:

- Detailed information was provided on the modular housing scheme. Initial consultation was underway on one site and subject to Planning permission, (which would also include a consultation stage), the module units would be a rapid build. It was anticipated other modular projects would follow the same process. It was recognised that water neutrality had delayed the housing build programme, however the retrofitting scheme had allowed this to resume.
- Acknowledgement that there had been a reduction in the private landlord market due to a variety of reasons; new legislation, mortgages and disparity between local housing allowance and rents (which the council had previously lobbied against). The council worked with both landlords and tenants however it was noted that any incentivisation ultimately needed to be cost-effective.
- Noted that support was provided in relation to homelessness and cost of living in terms of the following: affordability of accommodation; funding applications; household support; multi-agency support involving Citizens Advice West Sussex providing debt advice.
- Recognition that the causes given for homelessness, both locally and nationally may differ from the drivers for homelessness.
- Clarification provided on the numbers of total households in temporary accommodation (application and associated household) and whilst some trends were apparent these tended to be for rough sleepers where the needs were of a complex nature over a slightly longer term.
- Confirmation that the percentage of properties allocated to homeless households via the housing register was not due to be increased as the system of using direct lets was being instigated.

- Clarification that in terms of providing accommodation, the term 'settled accommodation' was defined in legislation as 'a reasonable prospect of being occupied of 6 months or more'. An individual can become homeless after 6 months for a different reason.
- Recognition that the council continued to undertake comparisons with other authorities to share best practice and the challenges faced. It was noted that from discussions there appeared to be no correlation between authorities with housing stock and those without in terms of the current challenges.
- Clarification was provided on the Housing Strategies and Policies. Confirmation that there were multi-faceted reasons for homelessness within the borough and there was a need to be creative, incentivise, look at acquisition along with regeneration sites, cross-boundaries and investigate every option available. It was noted there was a need to consult but also manage expectations of everyone involved in the process. It was highlighted that homelessness was the single biggest pressure on the authority and not within its overall control.
- As this was her last attendance at OSC, the Commission took the opportunity to record its thanks and gratitude to the Housing Options Manager, Nikki Hargrave for all her hard work and support she had provided not just the Commission but the Council as a whole, throughout her years of service.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted the report, with the views expressed being acknowledged and documented by the officers.

5. Staff Health, Morale and Sickness Updates

Commission Members considered report [LDS/200](#) of the Head of Governance, People & Performance. In June 2021, Councillor Belben under the Scrutiny Procedure Rules had requested a report on staff sickness levels with Covid19 and the effects and impacts of working from home. Following this, it was subsequently recommended that the OSC receive an annual update on staff welfare, sickness and morale.

During the discussion, with the Head of Governance, People & Performance, the HR and OD Manager and HR Consultant, the following points were expressed:

- The Council continued to monitor sickness absence and during the first three quarters of 2022-2023. Covid continued to be within the top three reason for sickness absence. However, during Quarter 4 the Council had seen a decline in reported sickness relating to Covid.
- The Council had continued to see an increase from its workforce taking up the counselling service and there was slightly more office based staff using this service compared to outside workers. Many employees who took up this offer requested further sessions beyond the normal 6 sessions earmarked for an individual employee.
- The Council maintained the programme of reflective practise, the aim was to develop personal awareness, resilience, skills, and competence across professional, interpersonal, and relational domains that enhance the workplace. The initiative had supported individual teams to use a confidential reflective space in which they can reflect upon, and how they feel about what they do, particularly the impacts the pandemic has had upon them and the service providers they work with. The sessions cover many aspects including managing work boundaries, threats to resilience, coping with change and maintaining well-being. Feedback had been positive across the organisation.
- A wide range of workshop sessions were offered through the Council's Wellbeing Team:

- Starting the year- be kind to yourself in 2023. A guide to taking care of your mental health Motivation for the year ahead-kick start 2023 with healthy eating habits
- NHS Heart Health Check Food waste- top tips to reduce food waste and how to plan weekly meals
- Other initiatives offered included:
 - Workplace Savings Scheme which enables staff to transfer money into a savings account directly from their salary
 - Pension Benefits, with the recently introduced AVC scheme for participants off the local government pension scheme
 - Energy at home – top tips on ways to make energy saving.
- Staff surveys continued to be carried out and the results from December 2022 remained positive, with a good response rate (60%). In all nine topic areas there were improvements since the previous survey. However, the survey indicated that there was still work to be done in some areas.
- It was recognised that whilst there was responsibility on the Council (as employer) to ensure it exercised its duty of care to staff there was also a need for staff to take responsibility for themselves, take advantage of the support and reach out when they were struggling.

Commission Members then raised a number of queries. The issues raised and the key responses included:

- Recognition that whilst the recent staff survey had shown improvement, CMT would work on an action plan to focus on areas to identify issues of dissatisfaction and support employees moving forward.
- Acknowledged there was difficulty in recruitment to various professional roles due to a skill shortage. Work had been carried out in terms of marketing and adapting the current recruitment material. The new town hall was seen as an improved working environment and assisted in recruitment campaigns but in the interim it was acknowledged that a lack of recruitment added to existing pressures and morale in some areas.
- Explanation sought as to the details provided on the other initiatives and financial workshops offered by officers and the Wellbeing Team within the Council.
- Recognition that a high response rate was by hard copy and a review of different introductory communication methods may be beneficial prior to the next edition.
- It was noted that it would be beneficial for the Commission to analyse the baseline survey figures to scrutinise previous years. In addition it was recommended that the staff survey be conducted more frequently than every 3 years (or regular shorter spotlight reviews) in order to gauge staff views.
- Staff had previously been asked to have a presence in the office at least two days per week if full time and one day a week for part time staff in order to adapt to hybrid working coming out the pandemic. Since moving into the new town hall this hybrid approach continued with shared desks and open plan working. Each manager has been responsible for their own area and reported little resistance to the move and new ways of working.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted the report and progress, with the views expressed being acknowledged and documented by the officers.

6. Appointments and Membership

It was noted that there was an error in report OSC/310 and it should read '*Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee (HASC)*'.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted and approved the following memberships and appointments:

Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee (HASC)

It was moved by Councillor Charatan, seconded by Councillor Raja that Councillor K Khan be the Council's representative for HASC. There were no other nominations.

Councillor K Khan was appointed as the representative for the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee.

West Sussex Joint Scrutiny Steering Group (JSSG)

Councillor Ayling was appointed as Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission

7. Forthcoming Decision List - and Provisional List of Reports for the Commission's following Meetings

The Commission confirmed the following reports:

OSC 26 June 2023

Cabinet 28 June 2023

1. Financial Outturn 2022-2023 (Quarter 4)
2. Treasury Management Outturn 2022-2023
3. Metcalf Way Depot Use Intensification – provisional referral

The Commission is also due to receive an update on K2 Crawley along with a Discussion from the Cabinet Member for Leisure & Wellbeing at this meeting.

Start Time of Overview and Scrutiny Commission

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission proposed amending the start time of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission to 7.30pm for the remainder of the municipal year 2023-2024. A discussion took place on the advantages and disadvantages for 7.00pm and 7.30pm start time, together with a flexible option and following a vote, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission will remain at 7.00pm.

The Scrutiny Procedure Rules within the Constitution document the order of business for agendas of ordinary meetings of the Commission (and Scrutiny Panel meetings). The Chair may decide to amend the order at the meeting.

All Councillors should inform Democratic Services of absence or lateness.

Closure of Meeting

With the business of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission concluded, the Chair declared the meeting closed at 10.08 pm

M L Ayling (Chair)