

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 5 SEPTEMBER 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.56 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Peter Dennis (Chairman), David Cornish (Vice-Chairman), Shirley Boyt, Norman Jorgensen, Laura Blumenthal, Pauline Jorgensen and Alistair Neal, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey (Substitute) and Michael Firmager (Substitute)

Officers Present

Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist) and Ed Shaylor (Head of Enforcement and Safety)

21. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors Chris Johnson and Gregor Murray.

Councillors Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey and Michael Firmager attended the meeting as substitutes.

22. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 4 July 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair, subject to the following comments and minor amendment.

- Page 11 to be corrected as follows – “Why were enforcement penalty notices more expensive in Reading compared to ~~Reading~~ **Wokingham**?”
- It be ascertained what levels enforcement penalty notices were set at in some of our neighbouring Boroughs, and the reason for any differences.

23. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

24. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

25. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

26. ENFORCEMENT AND SAFETY SERVICE UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 15 to 22, which gave an update on the new Enforcement and Safety Service.

The report provided progress updates in a number of areas, including number of licences issues, environmental health works (inspections and service requests), private sector housing complaints, environmental protection and antisocial behaviour. A total of 611 antisocial behaviour cases had been dealt with by the new service, whilst a number of general enquiries (including advice) had also been dealt with.

Ed Shaylor, Head of Enforcement and Safety, attended the meeting to answer member queries.

During the ensuing discussion, members raised the following points and queries:

- Were figures available with regards to the number of antisocial behaviour cases dealt with prior to the service being taken in-house, and had overall satisfaction levels and response times seen an increase? Officer response – This was a difficult area to provide comparisons, however the types of behaviours being reported and dealt with could be compared. There was a desire to request the figures for previous service requests from the Public Protection Partnership, however due to time constraints this had not been undertaken yet. In general, the more a service such as this was publicised the more service requests would be generated.
- Were there plans to capture satisfaction data? Officer response – This was a definite aspiration of the service, however the specific method had not been decided. There was an option to send feedback via emails, however it was worth noting that residents who sent in antisocial behaviour service requests tended to base their feedback on the original antisocial behaviour issue rather than the service received.
- Were staff fully engaged and at capacity? Officer response – The service was very busy during the summer, whilst private sector housing issues were common during the winter. The service was experiencing additional work as they were dealing with issues within the 'grey area' between the police and the antisocial behaviour officers. It was crucial that officers had a consistent workload throughout the year, and intervened on appropriate issues.
- It was noted that where officers were engaging with issues which were not necessarily fully within their remit, they should help see the issue through to the finish rather than disengaging midway through the process. Officers were encouraged to never say that there was nothing that they could do, but instead say that there 'might' be something that could be done, even if that was just advice or signposting.
- What percentage of antisocial behaviour requests were deemed as valid? Officer response – Officers often spoke of some cases which they felt were not necessarily an issue, however it would be difficult to put a figure on this.
- Had there been improvement in the areas of car meets and residential drugs? Officer response – Officers have been in close liaison with the Police, and the number of car meets within the Borough had seen a reduction since April, although it was accepted that these may have spilt over into neighbouring Boroughs as a result. Fixed penalty notices were issued based on number plate registration details, which helped keep officers safe. With regards to drugs in residential properties, this depended on the tenure, and it was expected that Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) owned properties would have a standard line in their contract against this. It was too dangerous for officers to intervene with drug cases on the street, and these issues were reported to and dealt with by the police.
- Was the process of setting the new service up a success, and had recruitment gone to plan? Officer response – The planning stage had gone very well, with 6 project work streams each with a lead officer. In general, the planning and transition phase was very well resourced and superbly organised. In terms of recruitment, 8 staff had moved over from West Berkshire, whilst new officers had been recruited from outside the original Public Protection Partnership. Recruitment was challenging as there were not enough candidates to fill roles across the country. There had been some turnover

within the antisocial behaviour team as some staff had not found the shift rota (including shifts up to 2am on Friday and Saturday) to work for their lifestyles. Eight out of ten staff for the antisocial behaviour team were in post, subject to appointment of two new staff in the coming week where interviews had been organised.

- What was the protocol if officers found themselves in danger? Officer response – Antisocial behaviour officers tended to work in pairs during the evenings and at weekends, whilst they usually worked alone at other times. Whilst many visits involved environmental nuisance reports, some situations could prove to be very hostile. Officers were instructed to always inform others of their scheduled visit locations, whilst an app-based solution was available on their phones that sent out an SoS message and recorded sounds when the power button was pressed a number of times. Officer safety was a top priority for the service.
- What challenges could the service meet if they had additional resources? Officer response – Issues such as pest and vermin reports occurred at a high volume and were difficult to deal with, whilst fly tipping was a regular occurrence and officers did not have time to fully investigate reports where evidence of the perpetrator was unlikely to be found, and instead payment for clearance was made. With additional resources, these two areas could be more thoroughly dealt with. In addition, the Borough only had one (hard working) animal warden.
- Was there a regular cycle for food hygiene inspections? Officer response – Premises graded between 0 and 2 were inspected every 6 months, whilst those graded at 3 were inspected every 12 months. Those premises graded 4 or 5 were inspected every 18 months, or where so low risk (pre-packaged food for example) on a questionnaire basis.
- Air quality was an issue that arose regularly at Planning Committee, was data available to give a sense of the scale of this issue? Officer response - The Public Protection Partnership were commissioned to carry out monitoring, whilst regular zones including Peach Street were monitored regularly. There were air quality management areas including Wokingham Town Centre, Twyford Town Centre and the M4 corridor, whilst the M4 corridor was mostly managed by the Highways Agency. It was noted that the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee was receiving an item on air quality management in the coming months, whilst 14 schools were to receive air quality monitoring.
- How were the 14 schools identified for air quality management? Officer response – This information would come forward within the upcoming air quality item at the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee.
- Could residents receive feedback on cases that they reported, for example fly tipping reports? Officer response – Whilst this was partly a capacity issue, this was also a training and development matter whereby officers needed to remember to check if the person reporting the issue would like a progress update.
- There were still instances of car meets in the Borough which were occurring away from residential development, but were affecting businesses. What was being done to address these car meets? Officer response – Areas where there were more reports tended to attract more resourcing as it appeared to affect more people, however recurring issues which caused distress did still require intervention from WBC.

- What steps could be taken if landlords were not dealing with important issues, for example asbestos removal, in a timely manner? Officer response – During an ongoing situation, officers would inform the landlord to carry out the repairs and agree suitable timescales. If repairs were not carried out, officers could use powers under the Housing Act 2004, whereby failure to comply could involve a trail in the magistrate's court. Each case would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and if the landlord provided reasonable excuses, then allowances could be made, however the tenant paying rent was entitled to use of the property free from health hazards.
- Were any other services coming back in-house, and were improvements due to be made to the service's webpages? Officer response – No additional services were planned to be taken back in house, as services such as trading standards made sense to operate on a larger scale. The corporate WBC website was due for an upgrade in the next 12 to 18 months which would benefit the service.
- Were noise levels measured when officers visited sites where noise nuisance was reported? Officer response – Officers relied on objective assessments tests, for example could neighbours reasonably watch a television programme without having to turn the sound up excessively loud. Noise was measured at commercial premises, however for residential premises, asking residents to measure noise levels tended to raise expectations.
- What happened to dogs collected by the animal warden? Officer response – Dogs were sent to kennels where they were checked for a microchip. Where dogs did not have a microchip, they were kept for a period of time in case of a claim. Dogs that were not claimed were then transferred to rescue centres. For more exotic animals, there was an arrangement in place with the city of London who provided a very good service.
- Were the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service informed of large bonfires? Officer response – Yes, this was a joint concern and officers were in regular liaison when required.
- Were the workplace injuries and accidents mainly occurring at building sites? Officer response – These instances were more likely to occur at construction sites and on agriculture facilities within the Borough.
- With current staffing levels, what difficulties had been faced in terms of casework? Officer response – Local Authorities had many powers, and in the vast majority of cases officers could assist residents in some way when they reported an issue, it was just a matter of capacity. The antisocial behaviour team had struck a very good balance in terms of staff workload to output. Environmental health officers had proved tricky to recruit to, and in future more junior staff could be recruited and subsequently trained up. With more capacity, it was likely that more work could be undertaken within the housing sector.
- Was there a customer relationship management system in place? Officer response – The 'netcall' system for phones was very sophisticated, whilst email users had the option to leave feedback as well. More could be done to send surveys out via email, which could help identify why people may be feeling aggrieved.

- Was additional staffing in place for special events and holidays, such as Halloween? Officer response - Four officers worked over the busy bank holiday weekends, and this would likely be replicated for Halloween. Enforcement of fireworks was a police matter, where fireworks were required to cease at 11pm except for special days including New Year's Eve and Diwali.
- What could be done to tackle unoccupied homes? Officer response – Empty dwellings were a constant blight, and this was an area of work where more could be done with additional resourcing. Properties could be cleared and remedied with costs recharged back to the owner, however it could take years for costs to be recovered. The property could also be enforced if it was in arrears for Council Tax. It was requested that officers ascertain if WBC had punitive Council Tax rates for empty dwellings. Whilst compulsory purchase orders could be an option, WBC would need to demonstrate a specific need for the property and the process could take over a year.
- Did dog wardens have the power to require aggressive dogs to be muzzled? Officer response – Police had powers under the dangerous dogs' act to act if a dog had attacked a person or an assistance dog, or if a dangerous dog was out of control the owner could be charged.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Ed Shaylor be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) A further update be considered during the next municipal year;
- 3) Officers continue to explore options to capture customer feedback and service performance;
- 4) Officers explore any training and development opportunities to further keep residents informed of any action taken as a result of an issue they reported;
- 5) Officers ascertain if WBC had punitive Council Tax rates for empty dwellings.

27. PREFERRED REGISTERED PROVIDERS TASK AND FINISH GROUP UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 23 to 28, which gave an update on the initial work of the Preferred Registered Providers Task and Finish Group.

Shirley Boyt (Chair of the Task and Finish Group) gave a further verbal update. The core aim of the Task and Finish Group was to strive for a parity of quality regardless of whether residents were housed with Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) or a housing association. The contract for our preferred registered providers was up for renewal next year, which would give the group an opportunity to strengthen the requirements therein. Housemark had been invited to a meeting of the group, and it had been alluded to that some of WBC's preferred partners were not providing a fantastic level of service. A further meeting was due to be held with Steve Bowers, Chair of the Tenant Landlord Improvement Panel, whilst further outreach to residents and housing associations was also to be undertaken by the group. It was important that the task and finish group could have real input and impact into this issue.

During the ensuing discussion, members raised the following points and queries:

- It was noted that the group was hoping to report in 5 months' time.
- It was noted that the membership of the group was Shirley Boyt (Chair), Chris Johnson (Vice Chair), Laura Blumenthal, Rebecca Margetts and Andy Croy.
- It was requested that the Committee be sent copies of the notes of the task and finish group meetings;
- It was noted that WBC currently had 8 preferred partners, with some being very large companies. In addition, there were a multitude of other registered providers who were not on the preferred list. It was requested that members inform the group of housing association properties and any associated complaints within their wards;
- Would housing associations be invited to talk to the group? Response – Yes, however anecdotal evidence was first being gathered to be able to challenge the housing associations.
- It was requested that the current contract be circulated to the Committee. In addition, it was noted that the existing contract was not particularly robust.
- What outputs did the group hope to achieve? Response – A series of recommendations would be presented alongside a report to the Executive. The core aim was to improve the service received by residents regardless of who operated their social housing.
- It was requested that officers ascertain whether it was possible for Loddon Homes (WBC's housing company) to deliver the majority of new social housing with loans from the public works loan board, to be paid off by rental income.
- It was noted that the Chair of the Task and Finish Group would be writing to all members to seek feedback from social housing issues within their wards.
- The issue of property guardians was raised. This issue may be required to be looked at separately, as it was outside of the scope of this group.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The members of the task and finish group be thanked for their ongoing work on this matter;
- 2) Notes of meetings of the group be circulated to the Committee alongside the existing contract;
- 3) Officers ascertain whether it was possible for Loddon Homes (WBC's housing company) to deliver the majority of new social housing with loans from the public works loan board, to be paid off by rental income;
- 4) Members contact the group with any known social housing issues within their wards.

28. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered their work programme, set out in agenda pages 29 to 34.

It was noted that where the relevant Executive member was unable to attend a meeting of the Committee to present their item, the Chair liaise with them with a view to defer that item (if timescales allowed).

Members requested that officers include information within the upcoming item on the Local Plan Update including our current position, challenged faced, how over delivery in the past might be accounted for, interim measures to help combat legal appeals in relation to 5-year housing land supply, and the progress on lobbying for a reduction in housing numbers.

It was agreed that the Arts and Culture item be moved to the December meeting of the Committee.

It was requested that an item be considered on the issue of the pressure on the voluntary sector in relation to the cost-of-living crisis, with a particular focus on Citizen's Advice Wokingham. Officers were tasked to liaise with the Hardship Alliance on this matter.

RESOLVED That the above actions be noted.

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