

Minutes of: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 14 March 2024

Present: Councillor D Vernon (in the Chair)
Councillors R Bernstein, A Arif, N Bayley, D Green,
T Pilkington, G Marsden, E Moss, D Berry and S Haroon

Also in attendance: Councillor J Rydeheard, Councillor Cummins, Kate Waterhouse, Executive Director Strategy and Transformation, John Holman, Director of Housing, Julie Gallagher, Democratic Services.

Public Attendance: No members of the public were present at the meeting.

Apologies for Absence: Councillor C Birchmore and Councillor M Rubinstein

OSC.1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

OSC.2 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

OSC.3 MEMBER QUESTION TIME

A question from Councillor Rydeheard was submitted in advance of the meeting.

Responding Councillor Cummins reported that analysis has shown that Greater Manchester and other places in the North West have a higher proportion of dispersed accommodation currently being provided by SERCO and therefore we have a higher population of asylum seekers and refugees in Greater Manchester than in some other local authorities. This is in part due to more affordable accommodation in the North West and GM which is why we have a higher than average proportion of SERCO properties, from which asylum seekers and refugees are signposted to the nearest local authority for support with accommodation once they have received their decision on their right to remain.

All GM local authorities are facing the same pressures as Bury in relation to rough sleeping and homelessness. Trends in common are the increase in newly refugees being asked to leave SERCO and Home Office accommodation and section 21s.

We are currently being pro-active with in strengthening our Private Rental Sector offer, including accessing private rents outside of the borough (cheaper rents) and implementing lease and repair schemes with Landlords to try and increase available accommodation as quickly as possible.

OSC.4 MINUTES

That the minutes of the meeting held on 6th February be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

OSC.5 HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY UPDATE

Councillor Cummins, Cabinet Member for Housing attended the meeting supported by Council colleagues, Kate Waterhouse, Executive Director Strategy and Transformation and John Holman, Director of Housing to provide an update to Members on the Council's homelessness strategy.

An accompanying report was circulated in advance of the meeting which provided information in respect of:

- Current pressure on the service
- Migration
- Themes and prevention
- Statutory homeless response
- Support to rough sleepers
- Asylum dispersal, including refugee crisis (Afghan & Ukrainian).
- Future strategy and innovation.

The Cabinet Member reported that demand on Council housing services including statutory homelessness and rough sleeping has continued to increase since the strategy approval and since the Homeless Reduction Act 2017. Over the last 36 months demand for statutory services in Bury has increased by over 49% and expected to continue to increase further and the number of rough sleepers and non-statutory customers has more than doubled and continues to increase and is becoming more challenging to accommodate and support due to the increasing complexities and with the resources and suitable accommodation available.

In discussions that followed the following issues and concerns were raised:

In response to a Member question, the Cabinet Member reported that, different services non-Statutory will include households or individuals not eligible for priority need accommodation or deemed to be intentionally homeless or not gone through the legal application for housing. Statutory Homeless, households or individuals who are accepted by the Council as homeless. These are unintentionally homeless or in priority need, families with dependent children, pregnant women, adults who are assessed as vulnerable.

In response to a Member's question, in regards to the issues with Homeless persons presenting at the Town Hall reception, Councillor Cummins reported that these are non-statutory homeless applicants comprising of single males and one female. These people are visible but there are also a cohort of non-statutory homeless who are less visible. Whilst the Council assist in finding a resolution they have no statutory duty in these cases. In several instances accommodation in the private sector, which applicants fund (not the Council), has been found. The Council have given employment and housing advice as well as directing those to the migration officers. Those in attendance were directed to the sit-up provision however the lack of housing is of serious concern.

In a response to a Member's question in respect of Section 21 notices, the Director of Housing reported that the service is under immense pressure and it is a National problem. The problem is exacerbated by no fault evictions and Legislation in respect of this matter is currently progressing through Parliament.

Responding to a Member's question in respect of the 1000 long term voids in the Borough; the Director of Housing reported that the Council has an Empty Properties Strategy. Officers in the Council will be approaching home owners to ask them to sell/release properties. The Cabinet Member reported that four private rented properties have been purchased in the last twelve

months, under this scheme. Those that have been empty for longer than two years have been targeted first in addition those with those with building safety concerns would be prioritised.

Members discussed the data presented in the report. Table one ' Open Homeless statutory cases each month' showed a steady trend of increasing cases.

Members discussed the long term housing growth strategy and the need to stand up more capacity. Members questioned internal capacity and were advised that two additional migration workers have been recruited along with support from the voluntary and Community Sector. Members were informed that there are quick wins with regards to Void properties, looking for new properties, being proactive and working with our Greater Manchester partners.

Members held discussion with regards to building disposal. In response members were informed that the Business, Growth and Infrastructure Regeneration Housing Board Sub-Group are completing work on the cost to enhance properties verses new build homes.

Members discussed the time that is taken to bid for monies to support the service and the delay this can have on projects but were advised that there is no route around this process.

Members discussed vulnerable adults including Military Veterans, and those fleeing Domestic Violence. In response members were informed that wrap around support is offered and this is included within the Allocation Policy. Members were advised that the Council does not automatically support families with meals and transport when placed out of borough, but will review each individual family as required.

Work taking place now to reduce homelessness are closer working together across departments; opening a housing reception and making decisions quicker.

Members discussed the Care leavers strategy, the Corporate Parenting Board's key priorities and Ofsted's recommendation to have a council housing tenancy sustainment package.

Members discussed the corporate risk register with regards to asylum and immigration matters. In order to bring down the risk, short term needs to be replaced by long term funding as winter pressures monies are currently closing the gap.

It was agreed:

1. The Homeless Strategy item should be revisited in the new municipal year at the earliest opportunity.

OSC.6 SIX TOWN HOUSING UPDATE

Councillor Cummins, Cabinet Member for Housing attended the meeting supported by Council colleagues, Kate Waterhouse, Executive Director Strategy and Transformation and John Holman, Director of Housing to provide an update to Members on the transfer of former Six Town Housing staff into the Council.

An accompanying report circulated ahead of the meeting provided details of:

- Consultation and feedback following transfer
- Future options for the Company
- Post termination arrangements
- Future governance arrangements.

Councillor Cummins reported that work has commenced to undertake the necessary TUPE consultation with Six Town Housing staff and plan for the organisational activity required to

enable the transfer. Each strand of activity has been supported by a comprehensive programme management approach and has included a strong emphasis on communication and engagement with residents as well as both Six Town Housing and current Council staff. Alongside this work, the work programme to drive the improvement of core housing services in Bury has continued, led by the Interim Chief Executive of Six Town Housing.

The TUPE consultation process, led by Six Town Housing, took place between 13th November and 13th December 2023. This process has included a range of engagement opportunities for staff including virtual and physical 'drop in' sessions. Staff briefings on key topics of interest, focus groups led by relevant Council managers and weekly FAQs. Trade Union colleagues have been engaged fully throughout this process. Alongside this, directly affected Council staff (those proposed to receive new responsibilities through the transfer) have been consulted on the potential impact for them.

In discussions that followed the following issues were raised:

Responding to a Members question, the Director of Housing reported that conversations with new staff have been very positive and they have welcomed the new approach to delivery. Key areas of work include, bringing permanency to staffing teams, understanding the tenants voice, safety checks, dealing with complaints and improving the quality of the Councils correspondence with tenants.

Councillor Bernstein reported that he echoed the need to bring permanency to the staffing arrangements and that interim appointments should be time limited.

Councillor Cummins reported that the Housing Advisory Board has been established and will meet have its inaugural meeting on the 19th March 2024. The Board will include Councillors, tenant representatives as well as independent persons.

The Director of Housing reported that there are challenges facing the organisation and these will be addressed through a comprehensive service plan.

It was agreed that:

The Report be noted and oversight of the transfer will continue into the next municipal year.

OSC.7 PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SUB-GROUP HIGHLIGHT REPORT

Councillor Vernon, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee updated Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the work of the Performance and Finance Sub-Group over the last Municipal year.

It was agreed that:

1. That, the sub-group concludes.
2. That regular updates be provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the work of the performance and finance of the Council.
3. That a sub-group is established in the new municipal year to look at Council housing governance and performance.

COUNCILLOR D VERNON
Chair

(Note: The meeting started at Time Not Specified and ended at Time Not Specified)