

Meeting: COUNCIL
Date: 25 JULY 2018

ANNUAL SCRUTINY REPORT 2017/2018

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1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To report on the work undertaken by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees during the 2017/18 Municipal Year and to outline the Work Programme for the three Committees for 2018/19.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the work undertaken by Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees during 2017/18 be noted.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 Overview and Scrutiny's role is to operate as an independent function of the Council's decision making process, by having overview of the Council's decision making, holding the Executive to account, having the power to "call in" decisions for reconsideration and undertake internal and external scrutiny reviews.
- 3.2 The Council's Constitution requires that there be an annual report to Council on the scrutiny activity over the past Municipal Year (see Article 6.3 of the Constitution).
- 3.3 This report is a retrospective look at the scrutiny review work undertaken by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the two Select Committees during the 2017-18 Municipal Year.
- 3.4 In accordance with the Constitution the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was also charged with scrutinising the Executive's proposals on Budget & Policy Framework items that go before Council for decision. In addition the Committees considered updates on Scrutiny studies that had been undertaken previously, examining the progress of recommendations and where appropriate following up on matters raised.
- 3.5 The Committees have also worked with their relevant Executive Portfolio Holders on a number of separate policy development meetings developing

policies and considering reports before their submission to the Executive. This report, however, focuses on the Committees' Scrutiny role.

4. SUMMARY OF SELECT COMMITTEE REVIEWS FOR 2017/2018

4.1 Each Select Committee review made formal recommendations to the relevant Executive Member, officers and external partners. The following is a summary of the outcomes of each scrutiny review.

4.2 Community Select Committee – Review of Housing Allocations

4.2.1 In conducting this review the Community Select Committee met on 5 occasions and received written and oral evidence from the following people:

- Walter Oglina, Empty Homes Manager
- Jaine Cresser, AD for Housing
- Theo Addae, Interim Housing and Homeless Manager
- Peta Caine, Housing Operations Manager
- Jeannette Thomas, Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People
- A tenant who had recently moved from sheltered accommodation to a general needs bungalow
- Elayne Crisp, Lettings Advisor
- Denis Panter, Compliance Manager (for Gas compliance)

4.2.2 The review focused on the following issues:

- Establish whether the allocations policy is effective in housing residents according to the premise that members of each band and group are being given the opportunity of housing.
- Establish whether the letting process is dealing accordingly with housing needs – evidence should be presented to the Committee to show where the process is effective and where it is not.
- Establish whether all housing is priority need - in 2014/15, the Council promised the residents, if they remained on the list, that every section of the list should expect to be housed and anyone who wasn't going to be housed was taken off of the list. Has this happened?
- Establish whether the housing offered is fit for habitation and meets the needs of the resident (including sheltered housing – i.e. is sheltered housing being used appropriately).
- Establish whether owners have moved into council housing through the scheme which allows people to do so.
- Identify any additional problems with allocations in order to inform changes needed to the policy.
- Establish what Gas safety checks are carried out for new tenants

4.2.3 The review made 10 separate recommendations on the above themes. The Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People has provided

the Community Select Committee with a response to the review recommendations, which the Committee considered on 5 June 2018.

4.2.4 In summary the review recommended:

- Staff training to ensure consistency of service regarding advice when moving between properties, more support offered to tenants with literacy needs or language problems
- Consider the provision of shared accommodation for the under 35s who will be impacted by the Housing Benefit Cap (the proposed cap was subsequently dropped by the government)
- Priority be given to under occupiers wishing to downsize, to include co-ordination with over occupiers, and where a move is possible, a realistic timeframe be established
- A review of the local connection criteria for persons moving into areas close to the Borough whilst on the housing waiting list.
- Make alternative and improved use of hard to let sheltered accommodation to improve voids
- Establish a communications campaign to help 'myth bust' and liaise with Members and revisit the terminology used in all forms of communication with bidders to be clear and help manage expectations
- Stop the current practise of automatically informing bidders where their bid was within the top 50 bids, and that a narrative be used on the bidding website to explain the scenarios that are likely to result in multiple unsuccessful bids over a long period of time.
- An up-to-date gas check be completed for new tenancies and the gas to be approved and fully working prior to the tenant moving in. In the instances that a 'one-off' exception occurs, the tenant should be offered a suitable reduction in rent for the duration of not having a working gas supply
- That an annual statement detailing allocations per band as a percentage of total allocations be published.
- That officers consider engaging a third party energy comparison partner such as Energy Angels to help tenants get the best energy deal

4.2.5 The Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People provided the Community Select Committee with a response to the review recommendations, which the Committee considered on 5 June 2018. The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People accepted 8 of the reviews 10 recommendations but with regard to recommendation 7 the Portfolio Holder was of the view that not advising bidders of their position may lead to further suspicion over transparency so this recommendation was not agreed. With regard to recommendation 8 referring to Gas Checks this recommendation was not agreed to as it was considered that current checks were sufficient and the recommendation if accepted could lead to potentially longer periods without a gas supply in properties.

4.3 Community Select Committee sitting as the Council Statutory Crime & Disorder Committee

4.3.1 The Committee considered performance of the Responsible Authority Group, SoSafe Community Safety Partnership against the Community Safety Action Plan and the emerging priorities for 2018-19 on 27 March 2018.

4.3.2 The Committee interviewed the Chair of the Responsible Authorities Group (SBC CE) Scott Crudginton, Exec Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Cllr Jackie Hollywell, Sarah Pateman, SBC Anti-Social Behaviour & Community Safety Manager and Hertfordshire Constabulary, Chief Inspector Simon Tabert and asked questions and made comments on the following issues:

Drugs; knife crime and engagement of young males and gangs.

4.3.3 Members sought clarification on the priorities for 2018/19, cuts to funding for policing and crime statistics. Members provided further challenge regarding the following issues: details on the compilation of the crime league tables; Herts Constabulary to provide a narrative to the crime statistics to provide clarity on successes and shortcomings of local policing and Herts Constabulary to engage more young males in crime prevention programmes.

4.4 Other Scrutiny review items considered by the Community Select Committee – (i) Private Rented Sector and (ii) Rough Sleepers (iii) Update on Fire Safety in High Rise Residential Buildings (iv) Sustainable Transformation Partnership (v) Excellent Council Homes programme

4.4.1 (i) The Community Select Committee revisited the review into the local Private Rented Sector Housing to see what progress there had been with regards to the original recommendations. Members will continue to monitor progress of supporting resident involvement groups; keeping links with the National Landlords Association; new tenant advice and training; officer advice available to all tenures; support for a landlord forum and investigation into a social lettings agency. (ii) The Committee also received a presentation on Rough Sleepers where Members questioned the Council's policy and moving homeless individuals into the Haven and how they transition into independent living. (iii) The Committee also considered the steps that Housing officers had undertaken regarding fire safety procedures and checks in high rise residential buildings in line with a national response in local government to the Grenfell tower fire. (iv) The Committee met with health colleagues from the Hertfordshire and West Essex Sustainable Transformation Partnership to hear about how STPs are developing and what role district councils can play. (v) The Assistant Director Housing and Investment provided Members with an update on the Excellent Council Homes programme, which Members welcomed and would continue to monitor progress in this area.

4.5 Environment & Economy Select Committee – Review of the Indoor Market

4.5.1 In conducting this review the Environment & Economy Select Committee met on five occasions undertaking a review of the Indoor Market as well as two site visits and received written and oral evidence from the following people:

- Market Traders Association Committee Members
- Market Trader Clubman Hairdressers
- Market Trader Mandy's Café
- Market Trader Oyoyo and Zap Intelligent Solutions
- Market Trader DC Collectables
- Market Trader Lenny's Fresh Fish
- Peter Turvey, NABMA (National Association of British Market Authorities)
- Tina Benson, Stevenage Town Centre Manager
- Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd, Executive Portfolio Holder for Resources
- Tom Pike, Strategic Director
- Carlo Perricone, Garages and Markets Manager

4.5.2 The review considered the following issues:

The need for Market Research; Economic Background; Current Location; Possibility of alternative venues; Needs of Market Traders; Parking Charges; Voids; Access through Boots and Wilkinsons; Improved signage and pedestrian access to the market; Links to Town Centre events and the Town Centre Manager; Current governance arrangements and possible future options; Site visit to Luton Market and Equalities & Diversity issues.

4.5.3 The review made one principle recommendation, nine separate short term and three long term recommendations on the following themes:

Principle recommendation:

- That there be an independent external market research carried out on the needs of local people for a market

Short term recommendations:

- Lobby the two stores Boots and Wilkinson to restore the rear access of their stores
- If the long term plan is to remain at the current location upgrade the pitches and signage
- Make traders keep to the agreed operating times
- Look at further varying the parking charges to incentivise shoppers
- Link events and communications better with the Town Centre Manager
- Encourage a wider diversity of traders and from other markets, with staggered rent for new market traders
- Make uses of void spaces

Long term recommendations:

- Look for an alternative location within the town centre regeneration plans
- Acquire the freehold of a smaller unit in the town centre to create a new smaller market
- Approach an independent company to administrate the market on a commercial basis for the Council

4.5.4 The Executive Portfolio Holder for Resources provided the Environment & Economy Select Committee with a response to the review recommendations, which the Committee considered on 21 March 2017. The Portfolio Holder for Resources accepted a number of the above recommendations and would continue to seek more affordable options in respect of further market research, but expressed concern over the feasibility of long term recommendations 2 and 3 at this stage.

4.6 **Other Scrutiny review matters considered by the Environment & Economy Select Committee**

4.6.1 In addition to the above main review the Environment & Economy Select Committee also undertook scrutiny review work into the following issues which Members made comment on and are being responded to by Officers:

- Stevenage Bus Service
- Flood Risk Management
- Executive Portfolio response to Allotments review
- Hertfordshire Waste Partnership Annual Report

4.7 **Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

4.7.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 11 occasions to provide overview of the work of the Executive, specifically looking at all Key Decisions made by the Executive and all Budget and Policy Framework items. In addition to these meetings the Committee also considered the following issues:

- Sitting as a Select Committee – Complaints and Feedback Review on 28 June and 20 September 2017, where the Committee received a presentation, agreed a scoping document and interviewed witnesses. The review is not yet complete and has been included in the Committees 2018-19 Work Programme
- LGA Peer Review Feedback Consultation was considered by the Committee on 8 February and 8 March 2018. The Committee met David Holdstock, Director of Communications at the Local Government Association to interview him on the Peer Review findings and recommendations which the Committee endorsed and added their own recommendations to the Executive regarding youth engagement and improved resident engagement and consultation

5.0 2018/2019 Scrutiny Work Programmes

- 5.1 The two Select Committees have agreed their outline Scrutiny work programmes for the 2018/19 Municipal Year:

Community Select Committee:

Effectiveness of Resident Engagement by Stevenage Borough Council – This will be the main review item

Third Sector in Stevenage - to be considered as a one-off item e.g. presentation to Committee revisiting the review Members had previously undertaken

Stevenage Leisure Limited (SLL) – to be considered as a one-off item to look at the outcome of the independent consultants review into SLL

The Community Centres' Review taken as a policy development item
Neighbourhood Planning

Crime and Disorder Committee (Statutory Committee)

Public Health Meeting (Standing Item)

Environment and Economy Select Committee:

District Plan Regeneration - as a discussion item at P&D Committee

Reimagining Fairlands Valley Park

Update on refurbishment of Middle Row and other public toilets

Review on Licence to Occupy procedures - to the Committee for consideration

Cycling strategy briefing for Members

5.2. Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme:

- 5.2.1 In addition to undertaking all scrutiny of Budget & Policy Framework items and decisions of the Executive, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has the capacity to undertake a "Select Committee" style meeting during the year if it so wishes. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has agreed to sit as a select Committee to consider the following items:

Complaints/Feedback Handling continuation of the review

Scrutiny of the Scrutiny function at SBC

Sickness Management as part of a Member and Customer focus group

- 5.3 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will review the Council's Forward Plan of Key Decisions and also consider all 'Call-in' requests in accordance with the Council's Constitution as well as considering any Councillors Call for Action in relation to matters relating to Resources and any Petition appeals, in accordance with the Councils Petition Scheme, regarding matters relating to Resources or of a Corporate or Council wide nature.

5.4 Scoping reviews

5.4.1 A schedule of meetings for the two Select Committees has been arranged for the 2018-19 Municipal Year. These meetings will incorporate the scoping of the review where Members will identify the areas they wish to cover during the review, who to interview, what evidence/background information is required and which Members will lead the questioning on a specific area, as well as undertaking site visits, where appropriate. Meetings will also be arranged to revisit previous reviews to monitor actions.

5.5 The following items have been agreed for monitoring by the two Select Committees:

Community Select Committee – (i) Revisit the recommendations for the review into Decent Homes Review; and (ii) Revisit the recommendations for the review into Damp and Mould in Stevenage Homes

Environment & Economy – (i) Monitoring of the Indoor Market Review.

5.6 **New clerking arrangements for Portfolio Advisory Groups (Policy Development Meetings)**

5.6.1 The Policy Development meetings will be undertaken as and when requested by Executive Portfolio Holders in consultation with Assistant Strategic Directors and will be referred to as Portfolio Advisory Groups. These meetings will now be clerked by Constitutional Services Officers.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Financial Implications

There is a budget of £1,500 to support study activities, site visits and specialist advice and training where necessary.

6.2 Legal Implications

Any legislative changes during the 2017-18 Municipal Year, will be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the relevant Select Committee(s).

6.3 Equalities and Diversity Implications

Equalities and Diversity issues are considered at the scoping stage of each Scrutiny review with regards to questioning of witnesses and the collection of oral and written evidence. Also E&D issues are addressed in the final report for each review.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Local Government Act 2000

Individual agendas and study material for each Scrutiny review undertaken by the Select Committees as described in this report are available for inspection.

The full Executive responses to the Scrutiny Reviews are available for inspection.

APPENDICIES

None.