

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FINANCE & PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 29TH MARCH, 2023

MEMBERS: Councillors (Chair) Nawshad Ali, Sabri Ozaydin (Chief Whip), Mahym Bedekova, Guney Dogan, Alessandro Georgiou (Leader of the Opposition and the Conservative Group), Paul Pratt and Julian Sampson

Officers: James Newman (Director of Finance), Joanne Drew (Director of Housing and Regeneration), Richard Sorensen (Head of The Housing Advisory Service), Simon Pollock (Interim Executive Director of Environment and Communities), Lee Shelsher (Head of Customer Solutions), and Jane Creer (Secretary)

Also Attending: Councillor George Savva (Cabinet Member for Social Housing), local press representative

1. WELCOME & APOLOGIES

Cllr Nawshad Ali (Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited Panel Members and Officers to introduce themselves.

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Tim Leaver (Cabinet Member for Finance and Procurement), and Fay Hammond (Executive Director - Resources).

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In respect of item 4 on the agenda, Cllr Ozaydin advised that he was a Director of Housing Gateway Ltd; and Cllr Ozaydin and Cllr Bedekova advised that they each had a selective licence application in process.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2023 were agreed.

4. TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION PRESSURES AND THE HOUSING RENTAL MARKET AND REGULATION

RECEIVED the report updating the Panel on Temporary Accommodation in Enfield.

NOTED

1. Richard Sorensen (Head of the Housing Advisory Service) highlighted key issues, and the success of the Housing Advisory Service with focus on

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prevention of households moving into temporary accommodation. Shortage of supply of privately rented properties and a rise in rent levels had led to increased pressure on the service.

2. James Newman (Director of Finance) highlighted the rise in use of commercial hotels for temporary accommodation, and the competition for accommodation with other local authorities and the Home Office actively procuring accommodation in Enfield. This had subsequently driven a rebounding budget pressure of around £6m in 2022/23.
3. In response to Members' questions, it was confirmed that the Council had not block-booked Edmonton Travelodge hotel, but was using a few of the rooms there; and that the Somewhere Safe to Stay Hub was for single men and was at Claverings.
4. In response to further queries regarding the competition for accommodation, officers advised it was known that 347 households had been placed in Enfield, dispersed throughout the borough, but the Council did not have details and it was not known how much was paid to secure it.
5. In response to queries regarding the recent sale of three non-performing Council assets, it was advised that these were in high value areas and required refurbishment work: they were being put back to use in the private housing market but they were unfortunately not viable for the local housing authority cohort.
6. Officers clarified that landlords were exiting the market and their properties were being bought by first time buyers. This was having a knock-on impact on low-income households dependent on the private rented sector. The use of residential properties across Enfield had been researched. Around 3,000 privately-owned empty homes had been identified, and promotions sent to the home-owners offering support as landlords, to bring homes back into use. 41 properties had been brought back into use so far.
7. In response to further queries regarding house-building solutions, it was advised that schemes such as Meridian Water were important, but not a key part of the solution. The Council was placing 40 households per month into the private rental sector, and that was still the most successful route.
8. In response to the Chair's queries, it was advised that original aims in respect of temporary accommodation use had to be re-looked at in the present circumstances, but that use of temporary accommodation should be seen as a stop-gap and should not be long term.
9. In respect of the reference to a review of overall approach and ways of working, officers confirmed that it was estimated the Homelessness Prevention Strategy would be completed in around six months. The focus would be on how to protect the most vulnerable people. Resettlement out of London would have to consider areas away from the South-East. Encouragement of investors to property and the build to rent sector in the borough had also been looked into, but the circumstances were not favourable at the moment.
10. Officers did not consider that Enfield's landlord registration scheme had been a cause of landlords exiting the market, as the cost was low in comparison to other changes at the national level in respect of tax, rent reform, and energy efficiency requirements.
11. Officers confirmed that Housing Gateway Ltd had been a successful Council initiative, and should have been referenced in the presentation.

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12. Joanne Drew (Director of Housing and Regeneration) responded to a query regarding what may have been done differently in the past, advising that more funding of prevention may have been helpful. Before 2018 the service was crisis led and not equipped to be able to intervene earlier. It was also now made more explicit that people in temporary accommodation were unlikely to get a Council house. There was now more proactive work with the private sector, and encouragement of house building. Current developments at Bury Street West, the Alma Estate, Meridian Water, and Joyce and Snells were highlighted, though that was not a route for most people in temporary accommodation.

5. PERFORMANCE, WITH PARTICULAR FOCUS ON CUSTOMER SERVICE AND THE COUNCIL WEBSITE

RECEIVED the presentation slides on Customer Experience.

NOTED

1. Simon Pollock (Interim Director of Customer Experience) and Lee Shelsher (Head of Customer Solutions) provided a review of the past year, project updates, plans moving forward, and customer approach.
2. In respect of Libraries, the growth in online offer and activity was highlighted, and the new initiatives. The growing trend in libraries physical visits was continuing.
3. Community hubs contact with customers; the community line use; call demand and webchat volumes; and the performance of the contact centre were reported for 2022/23.
4. The new Council website had been launched one year ago and the analytics so far had been good.
5. A project update was provided on CRM/CMS, and service improvements were highlighted.
6. Simon Pollock had prepared a wider Customer Service Strategy, and promoted data driven continuous improvement of customer services. Restructure of the organisation would include a new Directorate of Environment and Communities from 3 April 2023.
7. In response to Members' queries regarding customer satisfaction monitoring, it was confirmed that 'mystery shoppers' and sampling were used. If there was a systemic issue or failure, it would be possible to put right the cause. Other issues may require better communication by the Council.
8. It was confirmed there had been work on the issue of missed bin collections. The technology in waste collection vehicles' cabs needed to correspond with the contact centre, for example on road closures, to enable a proactive answer. There was an aim that status updates be provided to residents in advance. In the new organisational structure, the refuse service was moved into the new Environment and Communities directorate for this reason. It would also cover street scene and parking which were drivers of dissatisfaction, so the customer service could be closely monitored.

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9. In response to Members' queries regarding residents' dissatisfaction with the website and complaints about difficulty getting through to the contact centre or being cut off, it was confirmed there were planned improvements to unified communications and consolidation of the telephone system. Soft testing was taking place currently. This would be a whole organisation system. Unified communications would also introduce a universal queue of all requests and monitor response times. Feedback was sought from residents who had unpleasant experiences using the website. Work continued on monitoring of the bounce rate: when customers started a website transaction but did not go on to complete it. It had shown that more people were now committing to transactions and these were going through successfully.

6. QUARTERLY MONITORING REPORTS

RECEIVED for information the quarterly monitoring reports (revenue and capital Q3 reports and performance Q2 report).

NOTED

1. James Newman (Director of Finance) responded to Members' queries in respect of gross variances and financial pressures by department, and confirmed that ongoing additional cost pressures, such as in digital services, would be built into the Medium Term Financial Plan going forward.
2. Cllr Georgiou considered the reporting to be overly optimistic, and that a worst case scenario should be strengthened in reports. Officers advised that budget reports were transparent, with appropriate economic forecasts. External experts were used. The Treasury Strategy captured risks. The cost pressures were set out in reports.
3. In response to Members' queries regarding frequency of review of reserves, it was confirmed that the S151 officer had to give a statement of adequacy of reserves every year as a statutory requirement, but reserves were looked at throughout the year during the quarterly monitoring.
4. Members asked about progress on specific management actions set out in para 34 of the revenue report. It was confirmed that accountability fell within the relevant services. There were also EMT budget meetings on a weekly basis in respect of development of the Medium Term Financial Plan. Savings trackers were used for each directorate for in-year savings plans. The monitoring reports included transparent accounts on how departments budgeted income and expenditure.
5. In respect of the Dedicated Schools Grant, it was clarified that pressure had been reduced as there had been an increase in funding and proactive management of SEN placements which led to reduced expenditure.
6. Members noted that Place Directorate had the highest risk scores. It was advised that this reflected demands.
7. Noting that James Newman was leaving LB Enfield and this would be the last panel meeting he attended, Members thanked him for his contributions and helpfulness and expressed their best wishes for his future career.

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7. WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23

This was the last meeting of the municipal year and the work programme was now completed.

It was noted that Members awaited an update to the Panel in respect of P-card payment monitoring – counter fraud report, but understood that the process was ongoing and not yet complete. The update was requested to be included in the work programme for 2023/24.

ACTION: Fay Hammond

Members were thanked for their participation on the Panel during this municipal year.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

This was the last meeting of the municipal year. Meeting dates for 2023/24 would be approved at Annual Council on 10 May.

The meeting ended at 9.07 pm.