

Overview & Scrutiny Panel

Tuesday 27 August 2019

in Council Chamber, Corby Cube, George Street, Corby

Present: Councillors Watts (Chair), Beeby, Caine, Dady, Reay and Watts
Lyn Buckingham, Neighbourhood Associations

11. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors the Business Group Representative, Gloria Ellenton, the Tenants Voice representative, Kate Booth and the Parish representative, Owen Davison.

12. Declarations of Interest

Members were asked to declare any personal interests they may have in the business to be discussed and/or indicate whether these were prejudicial or non-prejudicial, the nature of the interest, and whether they intended participating in the relevant agenda item. There were no such declarations.

13. Minutes of Previous Meeting

Members were asked to approve the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 2 July 2019, copies of which had been circulated.

RESOLVED that:-

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 2 July 2019, copies of which had been circulated to Members, be agreed as a correct record.

14. Agency Workers & Consultants

The HR Shared Service Manager presented a report on the Council's use of Agency Workers and Consultants for 2018/19. An error in the expenditure table on page 1 of the report was corrected - the total for 2017/18 should read £896,746 (not £493,949)

The report showed that overall expenditure had increased 67% on the previous year, mainly related to capital spend on consultants which had increased by over 200%. The majority of agency staff expenditure was related to Planning and Legal Services where recruiting to permanent positions had proved particularly difficult. This was partly due to the uncertainty around Local Government Reform in Northamptonshire and partly the difficult recruiting environment nationally in these areas at the present time.

The majority of the expenditure on consultants related to two large projects, ie the new Street Scene Shared Service and development of an Energy Master Plan. Capital spend on consultants was project based and related to the procurement of specialist skills not available in-house and which were only needed on a time limited basis.

Expenditure on agency workers and consultants was accommodated within existing service area budgets and was funded from project budgets, salary savings or additional income as appropriate.

Members asked if there were any plans in place to mitigate against recruitment difficulties in the run up to Local Government Reform. The HR Manager explained that the Council's policy continued to be permanent recruitment where possible. Where this failed, Agency support would continue to be utilised as necessary but further attempts to recruit would be made at regular intervals. Positive messages about the move to Unitary were being communicated to existing employees, emphasising the opportunities that this would provide. Additional training was also being offered to employees to ensure they were equipped to deal with the changes and compete for jobs.

It was also asked if there were any plans to combine services like Planning at an earlier stage due to recruitment difficulties. The HR Manager said she would seek further information.

It was asked if any comparison figures were available from the other North Northants Authorities. The Officer explained that both East Northants and Wellingborough Councils outsourced much of their operational activities and only had small in-house workforces. Kettering BC had a large workforce but it was not known if they monitored spend in the same way or would be prepared to share this information.

For future reports, it was asked if more detail could be provided of the posts that could not be recruited to.

It was asked if spend had been contained within agreed budgets or if any overspend had occurred. Finance colleagues would be asked to respond to this.

15. Lead Member/Head of Service Update - Housing

The Lead Member for Housing and the Business Transformation & Improvement Manager were present to update Members on Housing and Neighbourhood Services and a briefing paper had been circulated in advance. Apologies from the Head of Housing & Neighbourhood Services were noted.

The Lead Member highlighted the following items:

- Progress made on homelessness and rough sleepers, including successful funding bids for cold weather provision and supported accommodation.
- In partnership with the Clancy Group, the Council was hosting some of their plumbing apprentices to expand their skills.
- The Housing waiting list had increased significantly in the past 12 months and demand for social rented housing remained consistent. Initiatives with the private rented sector were continuing. 19 rough sleepers had been permanently housed since the closure of the winter night shelter earlier in the year.
- Housing related arrears currently stood at £748k and this continued to be actively managed by the Housing Finance Team. The void turnaround time was performing well at 17.4 days, significantly below the target of 24 days.
- New build projects were progressing well with 12 extra homes purchased on the former Kingswood and Beanfield school sites on top of the 50 houses and bungalows originally agreed. Wilby close modular flats were due for completion in November and Members were encouraged to look at these. The Neville House conversion had been subject to some delays, ie the erection of the scaffolding which required permission from the premises below and the removal of the reinforced cladding which had taken four weeks. Otherwise the project was progressing well and was due for completion in November 2019.
- There were plans to convert the former gym on Cannock Road into 5 residential units, one of which would be designated for specialist housing needs. Discussions were also taking place with Orbit Homes on acquiring a site with Planning Permission for a further 32 new homes.

The Business Transformation & Improvement Manager also highlighted progress on the conversion of Dorking House for use as supported housing, due to open on 31 October, and the Service Away Days held in June for all staff within the department. The training slides had been circulated for Members' information.

He also drew Members' attention to the Community Safety operation which had taken place on 15 August to tackle off-road/illegal bikes and had resulted in an arrest and seizure of a bike used in connection with crime.

Members queried the Community Safety team's involvement with PubWatch and an update on Operation Crooked (domestic burglaries) was requested. The Business Transformation & Improvement Manager explained that the Community Safety Team had supported PubWatch for many years in a number of different ways, including funding their radio system and the link to the police hand set. He was aware of work on grants and funding in the previous year and would seek and update in respect of the current year. The Ask Angela initiative was a good example of the partnership work being undertaken and it was hoped this would continue. Further information on Operation Crooked would also be sought.

Members raised concerns about the level of Housing related debt and it was confirmed that Council officers engaged with clients to explore all options, offer manageable repayment plans and to try to prevent evictions in the most serious cases.

Comment was made that Wilby Close had been more expensive than traditional build methods and had not been any quicker to construct. It was explained that this was a trial and officers would assess the outcomes and consider the viability of further schemes.

It was asked if the Council still undertook Housing Needs Surveys and had a full picture of overcrowding issues and specialist housing needs such as disability and larger families. It was confirmed that the Housing Strategy was a key document in this respect. The need for disabled adaptations to enable people to stay in their own homes where possible was recognised and support was available for this. Overcrowding was identified in a number of ways, including tenancy visits and residents raising issues themselves. The age and sex of children was relevant to how this was assessed.

The process of Direct Letting was explained. This was a regularly used mechanism to address specialist or urgent housing needs and meant that properties were allocated direct to the applicant bypassing the normal Keyways allocations route.

Comment was made that tenants were being increasingly targeted by claims companies in relation to damp and other household issues with significant compensation sums being suggested. The Business Transformation & Improvement Manager would feed this back and ask that information be included in the next tenant magazine to highlight appropriate mechanisms to report repair and maintenance issues. He also confirmed that in order for any compensation claim to be considered it would have to be proved that there had been a serious failure on the Council's part.

It was asked if the new vehicle fleet included electric vehicles (EVs) and the officer confirmed that 13 of these were EVs. There were also 9 existing EVs making a total of 22, which maximised the current capacity in terms of the charging infrastructure. For larger vehicles, there were currently no EV options available but this would continue to be reviewed and the Council remained at the forefront of utilising this technology.

The Chair outlined concerns raised by Members at another meeting in relation to homeless clients being housed outside the Borough and the suitability of the accommodation being used in some cases. She understood the two Members would be making further enquiries in respect of this but the O&S Panel had been asked to take the matter up. The Business Transformation & Improvement Manager explained that the Council's policy was always to house people within the Borough if at all possible. He was not aware of any formal complaints arising from this. The Lead Member reported that currently 22 households were in temporary accommodation, 6 of which were housed outside of the Borough where the maximum stay was 19 days. There were a further four households classified as homeless at home, eg living with relatives. In comparison, Kettering Borough Council currently had 213 households in temporary accommodation, 18 of which were housed elsewhere and Wellingborough had 44 households in temporary accommodation. It was also pointed out that homes taken out of the allocations stock for this use were not available to house waiting applicants.

In relation to the Panel's previous questions on funding for the Women's Refuge, it was confirmed that the operator, Northamptonshire Domestic Abuse Service (NDAS), was funding refuges across the County from their own reserves but had reduced capacity slightly. The

number of bed spaces was queried and it was agreed that this information would be sought and circulated to Members.

Members thanked the Lead Member and Business Transformation & Improvement Manager for their attendance and input.

16. Scrutiny Work Plan

The work plan had been circulated for Members' comments and input and the following updates were noted:

- Section 106 Update – Members were seeking assurance that available funds would be spent before deadlines expired. It was confirmed that this was being monitored by an officer working group and a lot of work had been done to get an up to date position. Regular updates were also taken to Development Control Committee. Further detail to be requested for the next Lead Member/Corporate Services update.
- Refuse & Recycling – in addition to the item already on the work plan regarding checking the final destination of household waste, details were also requested on where it was officially being transported to and the carbon cost of this. It was also asked if there were location plans for all former waste tips within the Borough and details of what they contained. Queries were also raised in respect of any potential implications of a no deal Brexit on disposal of waste currently sent overseas. Further information would be sought from the Head of Service on these issues.

17. Items from Forward Plan

The Forward Plan was updated and circulated with the agenda papers for each meeting to enable Members to select items they wished to see brought to the Panel, in addition to key policy items which were brought forward to the Panel automatically.

Cllr Eyles suggested Members may wish to take note of the Domestic Abuse Policy which would be circulated with the agenda papers for the One Corby Policy Committee meeting on 10 September 2019.

18. Close of Meeting

The meeting closed at 8.15 pm.