

MINUTES OF MEETING Overview and Scrutiny Committee HELD ON Monday, 28th November, 2022, 19:00

PRESENT:

**Councillors: John Bevan (Chair), Pippa Connor (Vice-Chair),
Makbule Gunes and Matt White**

ATTENDING Virtually: Lourdes Keever, Yvonne Denny

27. FILMING AT MEETINGS

The Chair referred Members present to item one on the agenda in respect of filming at the meeting and Members noted the information contained therein.

28. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Simmons-Safo due to illness.

29. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of Urgent Business.

30. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest

31. DEPUTATIONS/PETITIONS/PRESENTATIONS/QUESTIONS

None.

32. MINUTES

A section from the minutes of the meeting on 13th October was missing from the version contained in the published agenda pack. The Minutes of the previous meeting were deferred to 12th January meeting.

33. MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL MEETINGS

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the following Scrutiny Panels were agreed and noted and any recommendations contained within were agreed:

- Adults and Health Scrutiny Panel – 15th September 2022

- Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel – 6th September 2022
- Environment & Community Safety Scrutiny Panel – 5th September 2022
- Housing, Planning and Development Scrutiny Panel – 29th September 2022

34. CABINET MEMBER QUESTIONS - CABINET MEMBER FOR TACKLING INEQUALITY & RESIDENT SERVICES

The Panel undertook a question and answer session with Cllr Chandwani, the Cabinet Member for Tackling Inequality & Resident Services. The following arose during the discussion of this agenda item:

- a. The Panel questioned waiting times and queried what strategic performance data was collected in regard to the call centre. In response, the Cabinet Member set out that the call centre was not the only place that dealt with people's issues. The call centre was the front door for 15 key service areas but that the other 85 or so service areas were dealt with in a different way. It was noted that the time spent waiting on hold would therefore depend on what the issue or service involved was. The Committee was advised that call centre staff were trained to deal with 90% of the issues that would arise and that there would always be some complex multi-service issues that were perhaps not best responded to through a call centre setting. The Cabinet Member advised that the three service areas that received the greatest number of calls were housing repairs, council tax and parking.
- b. The Panel also sought clarification about what the average time taken on a call was and whether comparative data was known about how well Haringey did in relation to call answering in comparison to neighbouring boroughs. The Cabinet Member set out that in order to make a meaningful comparison, it would be necessary to compare like for like and that, for example, most other authorities did not deal with housing enquiries directly through the 'front door' call centre. Officers advised that in relation to call answering times, the latest performance information up to 11th November was that:
 - 40% of calls were answered within 30 seconds
 - 61% of calls were answered within 5 minutes
 - 70% of calls were answered within 10 minutes
- c. Officers commented that there was generally a single digit percentage of calls that hit an hour in terms of call waiting times. The call centre received around 8k calls a week and 70% of those were answered within 10 minutes. Officers advised that in general waiting times could vary significantly, particularly when dealing with complex multi-level issues that related to residents' welfare. Staff were encouraged to engage with these difficult complex problems, as it was recognised that there were residents with a high level of need.
- d. Officers advised that in relation to neighbouring boroughs, 92% of calls were answered and that this was broadly in line with other neighbouring local authorities.
- e. The Committee sought clarification about whether, when people were on-hold, that they were waiting for a person with specialist knowledge to become free or whether calls were handled in a more generalised manner. In response, the Committee was advised that the customer service staff had a main specialist service area, along with two other smaller areas of knowledge. This meant that calls in relation to a particular service area were dealt with by specific staff and

that there could be a high waiting time in one particular area and not in another. Staff would not necessarily be able to jump on to an area with high call volumes, as they may not have had the requisite training. Officers advised that staff were receiving regular training to allow them to develop their knowledge base. Staff received weekly training on a Wednesday morning, and this was quite varied. Some of the training was about keeping staff up to date with recent developments within the organisation, as well as more operational service based training.

- f. The Cabinet Member invited OSC members to come and visit the call centre to see first-hand how it worked. Members also commented that they would like to come and observe one of the staff training sessions, perhaps in the new year. **(Action: Clerk).**
- g. The Chair advised that he had made some test calls to the contact centre and that he was impressed by the automated verbal instructions that were received and that the options were really clear. Similarly, the information provided to a query around leaseholders was very good. Concerns were noted about receiving the option of call back on one of the numbers dialled but not on another. In response, the Cabinet Member welcomed the feedback and advised that a call back should be offered on both the old HfH number and the council number. However, if the call was made after 4pm then no call back was offered as staff may not have enough time to undertake the call back before the end of the day.
- h. The Chair queried whether there was a professional accreditation open to customer service staff. In response, officers advised that the Council was part of the institute for customers services for a couple of years but that this was stopped as it was felt that the Council did not get much out of it, particularly in light of the cost involved. Officers advised that they were continuing to explore alternative options and would examine whether a formal accreditation was worthwhile. **(Action: Elaine Prado).**
- i. The Chair noted that the Cabinet Member had challenged the Committee to take a more strategic approach in scrutinising complaints to the organisation and sought clarification about how she thought OSC could best undertake this. In response, the Cabinet Member set out that she estimated that around 40% of calls to the call centre were regular or repeat calls and that there was probably a role for scrutiny to look at how the Council could make it easier for residents to get the answers they needed without having to make repeated calls to the call centre. One example put forward was around the quality of written information provided to residents and whether this resulted in residents having to call up to seek clarification. The Cabinet Member suggested that there were 8k calls to the contact centre a week and that Scrutiny should look at what could be done to reduce repeated contacts. The Chair noted that the complaints annual report was coming to the next meeting and that there seemed to be scope to work together with the Cabinet Member to take this forward once the report had been published and the information therein digested.
- j. The Chair questioned whether the HfH mailbox could be removed altogether. In response, members were advised that officers were undertaking a review to join up the council and HfH complaints team but that the two teams operated very differently, with different SLAs. It was noted that there was certain amount work to do to implement this. Similarly, officers needed to ensure that the

- General Fund was not paying for things that were ring-fenced under the HRA. It was noted that the timescales for joining up the two services were still being worked on. In terms of the two mailboxes, the email addresses used were still active, but all emails submitted to either mailbox came through into the council's central mailbox.
- k. The Committee requested an update in due course around the project to join up HfH and Council complaints processes. **(Action: Elaine Prado)**.
 - l. Similarly, the Chair noted that there was an overlap between the financial support and guidance that HfH offered to tenants and the financial support offered by the Council. The Chair requested an update on when the two schemes would be brought together and what support would be offered. **(Action: Cllr Chandwani/Elaine Prado)**.
 - m. In response to a question around the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS), officers advised that it was a rolling process and that eligible residents could apply at any time of the year. There was no upward limit on the number of people who could apply. The Council gave a reduction in Council Tax to around 27k residents, at a cost of circa £30m. In relation to eligibility queries, the Cabinet Member advised that the most people could apply for was an 80% reduction and that eligibility could vary for those on variable incomes. The Council had brought in an extended income threshold to support those with variable incomes.
 - n. In response to questions about how the CTRS worked, officers advised that secondary eligibility criteria were used, so for example, those on Universal Credit would be automatically put on CTRS, once confirmation of the fact that they were on Universal Credit was received from DWP. The Council had a council tax calculator on the website that residents could use to calculate how much they should be paying.
 - o. Officers advised that some of the concerns that Members had raised at the meeting related to instances of historical overpayments of Housing Benefit subsidy, which the Council claimed back from the government. Previously, some issues had arisen when the accounts were audited, and any errors found by the auditor were extrapolated to one in twenty cases, as a way to calculate overpayments. There was a threshold for error above which the government would not pay out. There was a delay in the external audit of the accounts and the 2019/2020 accounts had just been finalised. No serious errors were identified in that year's accounts, and it was noted that Haringey was below the threshold for a subsidy loss.
 - p. In relation to figures for mental health support for people in libraries through the warm welcome scheme, the Cabinet Member advised that this came under Cllr Das Neves' portfolio.
 - q. In response to a question about how the CTRS was advertised, the Committee was advised that information was included in the Council Tax statement that was sent to people as well as being advertised on the website.
 - r. In relation to fraud, officers advised that CTRS was a secondary benefit and claimants had already undergone checks as part of their application for Universal Credit, so instances of fraud were low. Housing Benefit fraud was a more prevalent issue for the Council. Officers recalled the details of two recent secondary housing fraud cases in which the Council was awarded around £400k for a case involving a couple with multiple identities. In terms of officer resources to investigate suspected fraud cases, it was noted that historically a

- number of resources had been transferred to the DWP and that the Council used a single fraud team to investigate claims.
- s. In relation to the advertised two posts for benefit maximisation officers, the Cabinet Member advised that the two members of staff were in place and that they were currently working a project to identify claimants who would be better off claiming pensions credit. It was noted that the Council already had the relevant data to make this assessment. The Committee requested that a dedicated session be arranged for the Members to review the data around benefit claims and benefit maximisation in detail. **(Action: Clerk).**
 - t. The Chair sought assurances around whether there was a project in place to bring the benefit maximisation officers and the HfH staff who used to deal with rent arrears together into a combined resource. In response, the Cabinet Member advised that there was review taking place on the level of resources that were available across the borough to support people to ensure that these were not being duplicated and that there was borough wide provision in place.

RESOLVED

Noted

35. UPDATE ON INTRUSIVE FIRE SAFETY INSPECTIONS

The Committee received a report which provided an update on intrusive fire safety inspections. The report was introduced by Judith Page, Assistant Director for Property Services as set out in the second dispatch agenda pack at page 1. The following arose as part of the discussion on this report:

- a. In response to a question, officers advised that the spandrel windows in question were in the stairwell rather than the domestic areas, so a stay put strategy was assessed as being safer. Officers emphasised that a stay put strategy was based on advice that residents should only stay put as long as they felt safe. Often when there was a fire in a block, the surrounding units did not realise there was a fire due to the fire being compartmentalised through the building's design. One of the key differences between the two strategies in terms of the infrastructure works undertaken, was that there was no fire alarm alerting people to evacuate the building in a block with a stay put strategy. It was noted that Headcorn & Tenterdon had moved to an evacuation strategy and that a fire alarm system had been installed.
- b. In relation to a query about the risk of fire spreading vertically up through stairwells, officers advised that the fire risk assessments were carried out by external fire engineers and qualified fire risk assessors, and they had re-evaluated each of the high risk blocks as part of the fire safety inspection process.
- c. In response to a question about building safety, officers reassured members that there were no unsafe buildings in the borough. Stella House was deemed as being the highest risk block and work was underway to install a fire alarm system and a waking watch had been in place to ensure it was patrolled constantly by staff, since the building assessment was carried out. Officers acknowledged that there were a number of fire safety risk assessment actions that needed to be completed, as did all similar organisations, these actions were being worked through.

- d. In response to a question about the recruitment of a number of fire safety managers, officers advised that these roles were going out to recruitment shortly and that this had been delayed slightly because of insourcing.
- e. Officers advised that all blocks deemed high risk would need a building safety case in place by September 2023. These cases were incredibly detailed. Officers also advised that they had regular meetings with senior officers from the fire brigade, which took place every six weeks or so.
- f. Members sought clarification around the fact that the report identified one block as being high risk and that a number of other blocks were identified as substantial and manageable risk. In response, officers advised that 'high risk' blocks were identified under the Building Safety Act 2022 and the Fire Safety Act 2021, as being above 18 meters tall. These would always be deemed as high risk due to the specialist equipment needed by the fire brigade to tackle a fire in buildings that size. Separate to this, when the assessments were carried out about spandrel window panels, these were given varying levels of risk for the Council to prioritise when it carried out works to those blocks. Officers emphasised that these buildings were safe and that a high risk rating for fire safety in terms of spandrel windows related to that specific feature, rather than the whole building.
- g. In response to concerns about delays to Type Four fire safety inspections, officers advised that all Type Four surveys had been done. However, there were a number of actions that came out of these assessments that needed to be completed. The works identified as part of the Type Four assessments would be undertaken as part of the major works programme due to the type and cost of works involved.

RESOLVED

Noted.

36. PILOT BUILDING SAFETY CASE - UPDATE

The Committee received a verbal update from Judith Page in relation to the pilot building safety case. It was noted that:

- A pilot building safety case was underway in Kenneth Robbins House in Northumberland Park, however the implementation of this had been delayed from November to February due to IT issues.
- As part of this exercise, it has become apparent that a lot of the original plans were missing so a lot of survey work was being carried out to fill the gaps in information that was missing. The surveys were ongoing and would continue until the relevant information needed to meet the building safety case was available.
- The building safety case required a resident engagement strategy for each building and the Committee was advised that workshops had taken place with residents in Kenneth Robbins House. The building safety managers would act as champions for residents in each of the relevant blocks.

The following arose during the discussion of this agenda item:

- a. The Committee requested a report on the residents' engagement work that was taking place. In particular members were keen to understand what had changed following those resident workshops and what the building safety managers had done to improve resident engagement following the engagement work. In response officers advised that they would bring an update on the building safety case to the March meeting and would include an update on resident engagement and how this changed the Council's approach. **(Action: Judith Page/Clerk).**
- b. The Committee noted concerns with fire safety assessments being done in the east of the borough and questioned what was happening at Edgecot Grove. In response, officers advised that they had reviewed the fire safety risk assessment for Edgecot Grove prior to the meeting and that this was up to date and did not highlight any major issues. In response to a follow up question, officers set out that just because many of the doors and windows were made of composite materials, this did not make the blocks unsafe. Similarly, fire extinguishers fire buckets had been removed as residents should call the fire brigade, rather than try to tackle any fires themselves.
- c. Officers agreed to share the fire safety assessment for Edgecot Grove with the Committee and also agreed to send an officer to attend a future resident meeting to discuss fire safety. **(Action: Judith Page).**
- d. The Committee noted concerns with the fact that the link for residents to report fire safety concerns was quite long and not easily accessed on the website. The Committee set out that the Council should be making it as easy as possible for residents to report concerns about fire safety, particularly given the learning from Grenfell. The Committee requested that the link was made shorter and more prominent on the website. In response, officers advised that they would pick this up during their next meeting with Comms and would also include the link in the resident newsletter that was due to go out before Christmas. **(Action: Judith Page).**

RESOLVED

Noted.

37. WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Committee received a report which provided an update on the work plans for 2022-24 for the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the four Scrutiny Panels.

The Panel noted that there were two evidence sessions lined up for the Scrutiny Review into VAWG, one on the 9th December and one on 21st December. After a discussion Members agreed in principle to having one session in person (daytime) and one session online (evening), depending on the availability of both officers and members.

The Committee also noted that the Cabinet agenda had been published for 6th December and on this agenda was the Cabinet response to the mini Scrutiny Review on Gambling. The Chair agreed to pick up who was best place to introduce this report with scrutiny officers outside of the meeting.

RESOLVED

- I. The current work programmes for the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the four Scrutiny Panels were noted and any amendments, were agreed as appropriate.
- II. The Committee gave consideration to the agenda items and reports required for its next meeting on 12th January 2023.
- III. The scoping document for a Scrutiny Review by the Housing, Planning and Development Scrutiny Panel on Landlord Licensing and Renting in the Private Sector was agreed.

38. NEW ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

N/A

39. FUTURE MEETINGS

- 12 January 2023
- 19 January 2023
- 30 March 2023

CHAIR: Councillor John Bevan

Signed by Chair

Date