

Scrutiny Panel

Tuesday, 16 October 2018

Attendees: Councillor Kevin Bentley, Councillor Phil Coleman, Councillor Beverly Davies, Councillor Chris Hayter, Councillor Andrea Luxford Vaughan, Councillor Lee Scordis, Councillor Barbara Wood
Substitutes: No substitutes were recorded at the meeting
Also Present: Also in attendance: Councillors Bourne and King

180 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2018 and 21 August 2018 be confirmed as a correct record.

181 Decisions taken under special urgency provisions

RESOLVED that the Decision Taken Under Special Urgency Provisions – Axial Way Pumping Station be noted.

182 Have Your Say!

Ali Wilkin, Co-Founder E-Act Now UK, and one of Colchester Labour Party's Disability Officers

Ali Wilkin attended the meeting to have her say highlighting that Colchester can be a difficult place to live due for those with disabilities. Ali Wilkin highlighted the positive step of banning A boards in the Town Centre, but also stated that there were a number of businesses that were refusing to comply to the rules. Ali Wilkin welcomed the fact that the Portfolio Holder was continuing to challenge those businesses that refuse to comply to the new regulations as the A boards cause significant accessibility issues.

Ali Wilkin stated that the Town Centre is too often unwelcoming, given the state of many of the pathways. Ali Wilkins suggested that Essex County Council had been poor stewards of the Town Centres roads with cracked pavements and areas worsened by repairs. Clean streets do not necessarily mean that the streets are safe. In addition, Ali Wilkin informed the Panel that using public transport can be a lottery, with only one travel service holding conversations with Fairer access to Colchester. Ali Wilkin felt that in those areas where Colchester Borough Council does not have authority, it should look to create a collective will for change, advocating accessibility, inclusivity and strong

leadership.

Councillor Davies thanked Ali Wilkin for attending the meeting and suggested that she attend the next Cabinet meeting as her contribution would be better suited to that meeting.

183 Review of Colchester Borough Homes Performance 2017/18

Councillor Coleman (by reason of being a Director of Colchester Borough Homes) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7 (5).

Councillor Bourne, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities, Anne Grahamslaw, Chair of Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) and Gareth Mitchell, Chief Executive, Colchester Borough Homes introduced the report. The report requests that the Panel review the performance of Colchester Borough Homes during 2017/18, and to make any recommendations to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities on CBH performance management for 2018/19 and beyond.

Anne Grahamslaw highlighted the key areas of work over the past year for Colchester Borough Homes, which included the Homelessness Reduction Act, fire safety, contract performance, the Housing Futures programme and the new CBH medium term delivery plan.

Gareth Mitchell then provided the Panel with a presentation on the performance of Colchester Borough Homes, highlighting the excellent performance on rent collection and arrears as well as the reduction in households in Bed and Breakfast. Gareth Mitchell confirmed that one target was missed, which related to the number of formal complaints upheld. Colchester Borough Homes continues to provide good value for money across housing management and property services as well as benchmarking well when compared to similar organisations.

Tenants and leaseholders are surveyed every two years, with customer service and satisfaction a key focus in moving the organisation forward. Surveys are conducted by paper and now by e-mail, which has seen a 50% increase in respondents. The aim for Colchester Borough Homes is to benchmark in the top quartile for customer satisfaction.

Gareth Mitchell highlighted to the Panel the significant change in homelessness legislation, which CBH started preparing for early alongside partner organisations. Colchester Borough Homes have also carried out a significant programme of fire risk assessments which is now complete, recommendations from this included placing more signage in communal areas. Gareth Mitchell also reminded the Panel that CBC do not own any housing stock over three stories high and that there are no units with ACM

cladding on the outside.

In response to a question as to whether there was further funding available for rough sleepers, Gareth Mitchell stated that two tranches of funding had already been received and that a set of measures had been in place for a year. This funding has facilitated a rough sleeper coordinator, outreach capacity and extend winter shelter provision. Gareth Mitchell highlighted that further funding for Colchester should be confirmed soon.

Councillor Bourne stated that further information on the figures are included in the Homelessness and Rough Sleepers report.

A further question was asked about how Colchester Borough Homes bench marks itself against other arm's length management organisations (ALMO). Gareth Mitchell stated that in terms of the data included within the report, the benchmarking is with other ALMO's and Local Authority housing services. Colchester Borough Homes use the Housemark benchmark which provides a good measure against other housing organisations. Direct comparisons with Housing Associations is difficult due to the different financial environments. Gareth Mitchell also highlighted that the value for money performance of Colchester Borough Homes is amongst the best. Councillor Tina Bourne stated that in 2001 the Council took the decision to set up an ALMO to enable significant investment in the Council's housing stock. Councillor Bourne highlighted the continuing support for CBH, with the renegotiated agreement in 2013 and a vision going forward for Council homes.

Responding to a question about additional resources, whilst there have been difficulties resulting from the rent cut announced by Government in 2015 and the related reduced borrowing headroom in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), there have been other opportunities to invest. There has however been the on-going impact of losing stock through right to buy and the need to replace the houses that are lost. The national policy picture has now improved with the removal of the HRA borrowing cap, with the Council awaiting more information.

In response to a question about the different statistics included in the report for customer satisfaction, Gareth Mitchell highlighted that the Council and Colchester Borough Homes measure the overall satisfaction of tenants through an e-mail and postal survey. Tenants are also surveyed through text message regarding the quality of the repairs service.

A further question was asked regarding the percentage of non-decent homes and the target being categorised as green. In response Gareth Mitchell highlighted that Colchester Borough Homes had invested in the housing stock on behalf of the Council but the change in the financial position of the HRA meant that investment programme had needed to be reduced throughout the year and as a result has been reflected in the decent homes target. Councillor Bourne added that this was a strategic decision due to the self-financing regime, but also highlighted that homes were being upgraded to the Decent Homes plus standard.

With regard to tenancy audits, Gareth Mitchell confirmed that this was conducted and completed over a three year period covering 6,000 tenancies.

A Panel member questioned how Colchester Borough Homes would ensure residents benefit from economic growth as stated within the CBH Strategic Plan. In response Gareth Mitchell stated that CBH aims to align closely with the Council's strategic vision in this regards and is able to assist in this aim through providing housing stock, assistance in construction project management and regeneration projects.

A member of the Panel questioned whether Colchester Borough Homes work with adult community learning and work across the agencies. Gareth Mitchell stated that Colchester Borough Homes work across a variety of partner agencies with links to Essex County Council. Gareth Mitchell stated that he would look at whether Colchester Borough Homes works specifically with adult community learning after the meeting. Confirmation was also provided that Colchester Borough Homes use the apprenticeship levy, with training provided and assistance given for finding future employment either within or outside of Colchester Borough Homes.

In response to a question around CBH working with the police, Gareth Mitchell confirmed that CBH has a productive relationship with Essex Police. Colchester Borough Homes provide the anti-social behaviour team on behalf of Colchester Borough Council and the level of collaboration and co-working with Police colleagues is excellent. Colchester Borough Homes works hard to equip frontline members of staff to be able to identify any issues related to crime, vulnerability or safeguarding within communities so that they can be referred to a relevant organisation.

A further question was asked regarding the lifting of the Housing Revenue Account cap and how this changes the plan for the forthcoming year. Councillor Bourne highlighted her thanks for the work of Colchester Borough Homes and the positive relationship with Colchester Borough Council. Councillor Bourne also welcomed the recent Government announcement on the borrowing headroom of the Housing Revenue Account. This will enable the Council to invest in housing stock, including building on garage sites.

In response to a question regarding whether the targets for Colchester Borough Homes are realistic and stretching enough, Gareth Mitchell confirmed that they are set in discussion with Colchester Borough Council. In looking to set the targets they are taken into context alongside the new medium term delivery plan. With regard to homelessness and relief these targets cannot be realistically set at this early point in the implementation of the new legislation. Gareth Mitchell highlighted that with the reduced investment programme due to the impact of the rent cut there will additional pressure on customer satisfaction. Anne Grahamslaw confirmed that Colchester Borough Homes Board had reviewed the key performance indicators and highlighted that the board focuses on what the impact of not making the targets will be on the tenants.

A further question was asked regarding whether the aim for Colchester Borough Homes

to work smarter through ICT and ways of working had been successful. In response, Gareth Mitchell confirmed that feedback had been received from staff and that Colchester Borough Homes responds to this feedback. With regard to the smarter working project, CBH is working differently as an organisation, using assets and resources more flexibly. This has allowed CBH to stop using an office and also allows for housing services officers to work in different locations. Gareth Mitchell confirmed that CBH work closely with CBC Corporate ICT.

RESOLVED that;

- a) The Panel reviewed the performance of Colchester Borough Homes during 2017/18.
- b) The Panel thanked Colchester Borough Homes colleagues for attending the meeting and for providing the report.

184 Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

Councillor Davies (by reason of being a Trustee of Rough Sleepers Group) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7 (5).

Councillor Bourne (by reason of being a Trustee of Beacon House) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7 (5).

Councillor Flores (by reason of being the Project Manager of Colchester Rough Sleepers Group) declared a pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7 (5).

Councillor Flores attended the meeting and paid tribute to Colchester Borough Council and Colchester Borough Homes Officers for the appointment of a rough sleeper coordinator who has set up multi-agency meetings. This has resulted an increase in cooperation between the Council and different organisations which, in Councillor Flores opinion, has benefitted Colchester Rough Sleepers.

Colchester Rough Sleepers group is a new organisation which is trying to do everything the right way. Councillor Flores highlighted that those people the organisation have met have been nothing but supportive. Councillor Flores paid tribute to Councillor Cory and Will Quince MP who have both given the Colchester Rough Sleepers group their time and enthusiasm.

Councillor Flores acknowledged that Colchester Rough Sleepers group was a new initiative and that he appreciated the support from Colchester Borough Homes, Councillor Cory and Will Quince MP.

Councillor Flores highlighted the need to distinguish between those who were begging, street drinking and those who were rough sleepers, which is difficult to do. Councillor Flores highlighted that there was a significant amount of work being done. With the funding that has come to Colchester Borough Homes, it is making a significant difference. Colchester Rough Sleepers group have been supporting rough sleepers in maintaining their tenancies and helping to ensure that they have a bed to go to.

Due to Cllr Flores disclosable pecuniary interest, he left the room following his contribution.

Councillor Bourne

Councillor Bourne, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities, Karen Loweman, Director of Housing Colchester Borough Homes, Tina Hinson, Housing Strategy Manager and Karen Paton, Housing Strategy Officer, introduced the Homelessness and Rough Sleepers Report. The report requests that the Panel review the progress on tackling Homelessness and Rough Sleeping through the implementation of Colchester Homelessness Strategy 2014-2019.

Councillor Bourne highlighted to the Panel that this was the last year of the current Homelessness Strategy, with another strategy due next year. The report provides information on the achievements made during the last year as well as the five key priorities within the delivery plan. Councillor Bourne informed the Committee that the plan includes innovative ways to prevent homelessness and that they had covered areas which they didn't expect to. Councillor Bourne also stated that significant progress has been made following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act.

Councillor Bourne stated that the Strategy is a living document and that meetings are conducted with partners, of which Colchester Borough Homes is the largest, to shape the delivery plan.

Karen Paton, provided the Panel with a summary of the information and statistics included in the report, as well as information regarding progress on delivering the homelessness strategy.

Karen Loweman, informed the Panel that the number of families seeking help from Colchester Borough Homes had increased. This is mainly due to the difficulty in paying rent to a house in the private sector with the average rent for a three bedroom home being £900-£1000 per month. Karen Loweman stated that CBH team members work each day to try to find suitable solutions for families, however it is not always possible to provide exactly what they want. Karen Loweman provided the Panel with an example of a couple who had been in a property for six years, but had just been given two months notice to find an alternative place to live. Colchester Borough Homes try to negotiate

with landlords first to see how long tenants can stay in the property. On a number of occasions tenants come to Colchester Borough Homes on the last day, which increases the likelihood of them living in temporary accommodation as it doesn't provide enough time for Officers to find a solution. Karen Loweman highlighted that the level of temporary accommodation had improved and stated the importance of families being able to wash their clothes in the properties rather than having to use the launderette.

Karen Loweman stated that there are pressures for families in preparing to rent properties due to rent and damage deposits being required in advance and the need for guarantors. In these circumstances Colchester Borough Homes are able to pay for the deposit as this is a cheaper solution than placing families into temporary accommodation. All of those who come to see Colchester Borough Homes are given a housing plan which outlines the commitment from CBH and the requirements from the individual. These documents follow a two hour discussion with the individual and Karen Loweman had brought examples for the Panel to consider.

Going forward with new solutions, Karen Loweman stated that twice a year forums are being held with private sector landlords to improve trust and highlight that homeless families do work and pay rent.

With regard to the Homelessness Reduction Act, Karen Loweman confirmed that Colchester Borough Homes works with a variety of different agencies, including Colchester Rough Sleeper group to try and find different solutions for different people.

The Panel thanked officers for attending the meeting and providing the information. A member of the Panel questioned whether the Homelessness Reduction Act had been beneficial in delivering a service for reducing homelessness in Colchester. Karen Loweman stated that the HRA had provided CBH with more time to speak to people increasing it from 28 days to 56 days. Karen Loweman stressed the importance of speaking to people early so that it gives them more time to provide support.

A further question was asked regarding the multi-agency approach and whether this was streamlined for those asking for support. Karen Loweman highlighted that another change as a result from the Homelessness Reduction Act was the duty to refer. This links the agencies through a system and a protocol so that individuals can be directed to the correct place. The route to referral can be through a number of different organisations, however there is one route for both CBC and CBH. With regard to streamlining the service for the user, attempts are being made to improve this, however it is complicated due to the number of different systems. Karen Loweman did state that when an individual contacts the Council an officer is assigned to them to provide assistance throughout the process. The officer is also able to provide advice regarding benefits and work, as well as signposting to other community groups. Karen Loweman also highlighted that when individuals are in temporary accommodation this is used as a time to provide training and support to make their next tenancy more successful.

Councillor Bourne highlighted the Council's wellbeing duties and the link between housing and health and suggested that it may be possible to bring in health money to assist with the provision of housing. Councillor Bourne also informed the Panel of the level of cooperation between CBH and CBC, which has allowed for teams to work together on a number of issues that affect homeless individuals and families including council tax, housing benefit and debt counselling. Councillor Bourne also stated that the welfare reform had provided a benefit that a wide range of organisations had started to work closer together to provide a better understanding of the range of issues that affect the homeless.

Members of the Panel emphasised that there should not be any prejudice for those who rent or those who are in social housing.

A further point was raised around the need to prevent revenge evictions, where tenants are highlighting to landlords the need for repairs for houses in poor conditions and they get evicted and the tenant can't get a reference. Officers highlighted that it's about working closely with the private housing team and protecting vulnerable people through working with landlords. Further work could be carried out on laws that prevent landlords from acting unfairly in these circumstances.

RESOLVED that;

a) The Panel reviewed the progress on tackling Homelessness and Rough Sleeping through the implementation of Colchester's Homelessness Strategy 2014-2019.

185 Local Council Tax Support 2019-2020

Councillor King, Portfolio Holder for Resources, and Jason Granger, Customer Solutions Manager introduced the Local Council Tax Support 2019-2020. The report requests that the Panel review and comment on proposed Local Council Tax Support scheme commencing 1 April 2019. Comments from the Scrutiny Panel will be considered ahead of the Cabinet meeting on 21 November 2018 and Full Council on 6 December 2018 where approval of the scheme will be requested.

Councillor King provided the Panel with a summary of the report and the Local Council Tax support scheme. Councillor King stated that the proposal is for the scheme to be unchanged from 2018-19 and that the scheme provides help to 10,000 people, 40% of which are of pensionable age and 60% of working age.

Jason Granger, informed the Committee that the reason that the Local Council Tax Support scheme is unchanged is due to the current fluid landscape of the welfare system. In particular the launch of Universal Credit, on 4 July 2018, will require a transition period for many residents due to the significant change involved. Jason

Granger explained that the keeping the Local Council Tax scheme unchanged allows for time to assess how best to administer and distribute Local Council Tax support. This will also allow Officers to look at the impact locally and nationally and design an appropriate scheme.

Members of the Panel welcomed the report and thanked Officers for their work. A question was asked whether the potential change in local government funding through Business Rate Retention could alter the scheme going forward. Jason Granger confirmed that further information would be required from the government to establish how the full business rate retention model would work. This supports the cautious approach and the unchanged nature of the Local Council Tax support scheme.

RESOLVED that;

a) The SCRUTINY PANEL agree with the recommendations as set out in the Local Council Tax Support 2019-2020 report.

186 Work Programme 2018-19

Jonathan Baker, Democratic Services Officer, introduced the Scrutiny Panel Work Programme for 2018-19. The report requests that the Panel consider the note the contents of the Work Programme for 2018-19.

Panel members discussed the possibility of bringing back the Strategic Plan Spending Priorities to a future meeting, containing additional information. Councillor King, Portfolio Holder for resources confirmed that this is scheduled to go to Cabinet on 21 November and therefore can go to the Scrutiny Panel meeting on 27 November.

Panel members also discussed bringing a report back around Rough Sleepers in Colchester with the issue being scoped before added to the agenda.

Further suggestions for inclusion on the work programme included the Business Improvement District and the High Street Economy, the North Essex Garden Communities project, Essex Fire Plan and the Revolving Investment Fund.

RESOLVED that;

a) The Panel considered and noted the contents of the 2018-19 Scrutiny Panel Work Programme.

