

**MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON**

11 July 2023

7.30 - 10.29 pm

PRESENT

Committee Members

Councillor Tony Edwards (Chair)

Councillor Alastair Gunn (Vice-Chair)

Councillor James Griggs

Councillor Sue Livings (substitute for Councillor Eddie Johnson)

Councillor Colleen Morrison

Councillor Kay Morrison

Officers

Simon Hill, Director of Governance

Nicole Parker, Admin Assistant

Also Present

Paul Austin, Harlow District Commander, Chief Inspector

Jayne Gentry, Director of Operations for Safer Places

Christine Howard, Strategic Manager for Community Safety Youth and Engagement

Natalie Rooney, Inspector

Ranjit Sindhar, Operations Manager for Changing Pathways

Councillor John Steer

Councillor Dan Swords

63. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Eddie Johnson, Ash Malik and Matthew Saggars.

Councillor Sue Livings was in attendance as a substitute for Councillor Eddie Johnson.

64. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None.

65. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 14 March 2023 are agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

66. **MATTERS ARISING**

Housing Repairs Task and Finish Group

Councillor Tony Edwards advised members that he had attended the Housing Repairs Task and Finish Group meeting the day before to discuss the Housing Repair Review and that it had been a productive meeting.

67. **WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

None.

68. **WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

None.

69. **RESPONSES OF THE CABINET TO REPORTS OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

None.

70. **REVIEW OF DOMESTIC ABUSE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT - QUESTION AND ANSWER WITH ESSEX POLICE AND SAFER HARLOW PARTNERSHIP**

The Scrutiny Committee invited members from various organisations to the committee to review work in Harlow and Essex on domestic abuse and sexual harassment.

The Committee welcomed to the meeting, Harlow District Commander, Paul Austin, Inspector of Essex Police Service, Natalie Rooney, Christine Howard, Strategic Manager for Community Safety Youth and Engagement, Director of Operations for Safer Places, Jayne Gentry and Operations Manager for Changing Pathways, Ranjit Sindhar.

The Committee also received a supplementary agenda with a brief written summary of Changing Pathways work (around domestic abuse and sexual harassment); the issues their organisation faced and how Harlow Council could help. The supplementary agenda also included a paper copy of the PowerPoint presentation from Essex Police.

Paul Austin and Natalie Rooney gave a presentation on local statistics for Domestic Abuse, Violence against Women and Girls and Sexual Harassment to members and Christine Howard, Jayne Gentry and Ranjit Sindhar detailed the roles of their organisations. Christine Howard is the Lead Officer on the Harlow Domestic Abuse Forum which is a priority subgroup for Safer Harlow Partnership. The group work with partners, statutory and non-statutory to raise awareness and understanding of Domestic Abuse. Jayne Gentry and Ranjit Sindhar described the work of their organisations. Safer Places provide support and safe accommodation for domestic abuse victims/survivors. Changing Pathways offer an outreach service in Harlow for high-risk victims who are supported by IDVA (Independent Domestic Violence Advisors) and standard and

medium risk victims that are supported by Domestic Abuse Practitioners. They also offer a specialist service within the organisation for black and minoritized groups.

Questions

In response to questions by the Committee, Paul Austin and Natalie Rooney recognised that Harlow had the highest rate in Essex for cases of domestic violence and sexual offences. They explained this could be due to many factors including deprivation, housing strain, lack of skills or employment. They believed Essex Police had the adequate resources to cope with this challenge and that they were engaging with other agencies issues to bring this number of cases down. Harlow also has its own dedicated Domestic Abuse Investigation Team which was not shared with neighbouring towns and which was making a significant impact.

They also recognised that the reporting of Domestic Violence was falling and that 50% of reported Domestic Violence crimes were not subsequently supported by victims/survivors, as they were unwilling to give evidence.

The police did try to go forward with convictions as 'victimless crimes' but this could be difficult. Support was always offered to those victims through other channels. Police also used the Achilles heel technique.

Paul Austin advised the Committee they had received data on hot spots for issues in Harlow by Essex Police which could be shared outside of the Committee.

Paul Austin also responded to concerns from members about how victims may not be reporting crime due to the recent findings of violence against women within the Police. These findings were not specifically related to Essex Police and they were working to increase public confidence, by their professional approach, by being visible and to being seen solving crimes. He mentioned that over the past 12 months Essex achieved the top improvement nationally on convictions of rape in England and Wales

In response to members questions about how Domestic Violence and crimes against men and members of the LGBTQIA+ Community were dealt with, Jayne Gentry stated they'd had training opportunities and a specialist from whom they sought advice when dealing with such cases.

Jayne Gentry responded to members questions on the improvement of contact and availability on weekends. She explained Safer Places had a 24/7 helpline available to deal with cases out of hours, but that not all organisations offered this. Out of hours cases were dealt with by the police in the first instance until they could be referred. Not all cases were straight forward, and multiple agencies may be involved. Lack of funding also played a key part. She also mentioned that there was a further ongoing six-month re-settlement programme being introduced to manage positive outcomes for Domestic Violence victims.

Changing Pathways staff kept up to date with their Equality and Diversity Training and they had dealt with cases from different communities and minorities who had different needs to give full support.

All organisations noted that the biggest task they all faced was educating the younger generations on positive and healthy relationships. This was key to preventing these kinds of crimes in the long term and work to achieve this aim had been being implemented across by all of the organisations.

The Chair then asked the representatives whether there was one thing Harlow Council could do that could help their organisations.

Paul Austin noted Harlow Council needed to publicise more the work of the Council, and the strong relationships that exist between the organisations around Harlow they work to tackle the issues of Domestic Abuse and Sexual Harassment.

Jayne Gentry noted that continued investment in young people in Harlow would benefit this work long term.

Councillor Tony Edwards thanked those who attended. Councillor Alastair Gunn advised any suggestions or recommendations regarding Domestic Violence and Sexual Harassment that could be passed to Essex Police be circulated outside of the Committee.

The Committee unanimously agreed to continue the meeting as it had passed 9:30pm.

71. **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PLAN 2023/24**

A) DISCUSSION WITH THE LEADER

The Committee had invited Councillor Dan Swords, Leader of Harlow Council to the meeting, as it was the first meeting of the year at what the Leader had the opportunity of outlining his work for the year and for the committee to scrutinise the priorities he had set for the year.

The Committee received two supplementary agendas; a written letter to Councillor Tony Edwards from Councillor Dan Swords with his views on the committee's work plan for the year and another containing an email from Councillor Tony Edwards to the Leader, following the submission of the Leader's letter to the Committee.

Councillor Dan Swords expressed to the Committee he felt that the Committee should be focusing their time on scrutinising the work of the administration rather than outside matters.

Councillor Tony Edwards responded that he felt discussions like this evening with the Police and other organisations, were beneficial even though it was not the Council's primary responsibility.

The Leader told members he had the upmost confidence in delivering his five key priorities for Harlow Council which had been outlined for this year and that he took full responsibility in the delivery of them.

A question was raised about the number of women in senior roles within the Council, Councillor Dan Swords stated whilst there were no women currently occupying Senior Management roles, there were women in Assistant Director roles and in the Wider Leadership teams. He explained that after the report from the Local Government Association Review and from briefings with himself and the Chief Executive, Andrew Bramidge, more decision-making powers are planned to be given to those in Wider Leadership Teams and over 50% of those roles were occupied by women.

Councillor Dan Swords agreed to provide the Committee with a specific number on commercialisation profits for this year.

A question was raised regarding the use of the Councils assets specifically the accommodation review and the use of the building Councillor Swords stated progress had been poor and he believed this was due to lack of a corporate view on what the Council were asking for the review to achieve. Councillor Swords noted that the LGA report said there was a lack of clarity on the current Hybrid Working Policy, and an action plan on this was due to go to Cabinet. He understood to date progress had been poor but work was being carried out which he believed would speed up the progress on the accommodation review.

In response to a question on progress on new cycle paths, Councillor Dan Swords confirmed Harlow Council had secured funding to deliver a new cycle path route. Detailed discussions had taken place regarding this with Essex County Council.

Councillor Dan Swords responded to concerns of the committee that Harlow Council had seen a high number of staff leaving their jobs. He said that Harlow Council had a high retention rate of their staff and that the recent staff survey showed a higher than national average number of employees found the Council was a good employer and spoke positively about their workplace.

Councillor Swords agreed to provide the Committee with a copy of the implementation plan on the five priorities and objectives planned for this year.

Councillor Swords agreed to provide the Committee with a link to the monthly performance data for Key Performance Indicators.

B) AGREEMENT OF WORK PLAN

The Committee discussed the work plan for 2023/2024 and had agreed to the changes to the work plan with the removal of Online Gambling. It was agreed that the Councillor Enquiry System Topic Submission Form required additional clarification. Councillors Morrisson and Gunn agreed to discuss this further with Senior officers outside of this Committee, The topic will be reviewed at the October meeting.

Councillor Tony Edwards suggested that the topic submission form for Travel Plan for the new Princess Alexandra Hospital also currently was not a high priority to add to the work plan at this current time.

Councillor Alastair Gunn noted that this is an important topic facing Harlow but that the submission form did not define where the Committee could add value to this. Suggestions could be made to define this further to be reviewed again at a future meeting.

The Committee agreed to add the New Estate Developments to the Work Plan.

The Committee agreed to bring the Corporate Strategy and the Medium Term Financial Strategy to the October meeting.

RESOLVED that the work plan was agreed.

74. **ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2022/23**

The Committee received the annual scrutiny report for 2022/23.

RESOLVED that the report was recommended to Full Council that the report be noted.

75. **REFERENCES FROM OTHER COMMITTEES**

None.

76. **MATTERS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR OF THE COMMITTEE