

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee held at 10.00 am on
Wednesday, 8 February 2023

Present:

Members: Councillor N Akhtar (Chair)
Councillor C Miks (Deputy Chair)
Councillor M Ali
Councillor R Auluck
Councillor L Bigham
Councillor J Gardiner (substitute for Councillor P Male)
Councillor T Sawdon (substitute for Councillor G Ridley)
Councillor R Singh

Other Members: Councillor R Brown, Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance
and Resources
Councillor G Duggins, Cabinet Member for Policy and
Leadership
Councillor D Welsh, Cabinet Member for Housing and
Communities
Councillor J Blundell

Employees (by Service Area):

Interim Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer)	B Hastie
Finance	P Jennings, B Strain
Housing and Homelessness	J Crawshaw, S Hall
Law and Governance	S Bennett, G Holmes
Public Health and Wellbeing	R Chapman, V Castree, P Hargrave
Regulatory Services	A Chowns

Other present: N Bremner, Change Grow Live (for the item of business
contained in Minute 36 below)

Apologies: Councillors K Caan, G Hayre, J Innes, J McNicholas P Male,
G Ridley

Public Business

34. Declarations of Interest

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

35. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9 November, 2022 were agreed and signed as a true record, subject to minor typographical amendments in the list of attendees.

There were no matters arising.

36. Rough Sleeping Drug and Alcohol Treatment Grant

The Committee considered a Briefing Note, appended to which was a report approved by Cabinet at their meeting on 13 December, 2022, (their Minute 67 refers) which provided details of a Rough Sleeping Drug and Alcohol Treatment Grant (RSDATG) of up to £640, 361 to support rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping to engage with and access drug and alcohol treatment.

A presentation at the meeting provided information on:-

- Grant aims and objectives:-
 - Transform services
 - Access to treatment
 - Early Intervention
 - Support
 - Engagement approach
- RSDATG in Coventry:-
 - Established a RSDATG team at Change Grow Live which includes outreach workers
 - Employed a worker in the CCC housing outreach team who works closely with the CGL colleagues
 - Provides additional physical and mental health support in the form a physical health outreach nurser, non-medical prescriber and Occupational Therapist
- Drug and Alcohol Treatment:-
 - Unstructured treatment and harm reduction
 - Structured treatment
 - Residential rehab
- Impact of the funding:-
 - Improves access to services by being responsive the individuals needs and providing additional support
 - Offers individuals easier and more timely access to structured into drug and alcohol treatment
 - Helps stabilise individuals housing and move then forward on their housing and benefits journey

- Success for this funding is moving the service user into mainstream drug and alcohol treatment services and maintaining/gaining appropriate accommodation.
- Facts and Figures, including engagement numbers and gender/age/profile of clients
- A case study

The Committee asked questions and made comments on a number of issues including:-

- Why Coventry had been identified as a priority for the grant funding
- Details of the posts identified to support the delivery of the grant
- The amount of support/cost required for each client, including health economic information
- Grants available to support this work from other sources including Police and Probation sources
- Concerns that the Council has to constantly bid for grants rather than the funding being part of the core funding. In particular, the resource/time intensive nature of bidding for grants and the time limited aspect of the grants which impacts on recruitment was noted
- The national shortage of trained and experienced staff and work being undertaken in this regard
- The costs associated with the use of agency staff (it was noted that this information would be circulated to the Committee after the meeting)
- The timing of the grant funding and work being undertaken to ensure the grant is spent during the timescale
- The importance of monitor and evaluating the grant funding and how this will be undertaken and measured
- Levels of engagement and outreach work with clients and how this will differ depending on the individual needs
- Work undertaken with other agencies, including the Police, in this regard
- The designation of a key worker for each client and activities being provided during the day
- Work being undertaken with the Job Shop in terms of employment and education
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The Committee welcomed all of the work being undertaken in this regard and thanked officers for the comprehensive presentation.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee:-

- 1) Notes the information provided in the Briefing Note and presentation**
- 2) Requests that a further report on progress be considered at an appropriate time, to include evaluation data and information regarding the logic modelling/framework**

37. **Exempt Supported Accommodation**

The Committee considered a Briefing Note which provided background information regarding the definition of Exempted Supported Accommodation and the situation in Coventry. An appendix to the Briefing Note detailed a number of current issues, what the current position is in respect to interventions; and the funding the Council has secured to seek to improve the sector in Coventry.

Exempt accommodation is supported housing which is exempt from certain Housing Benefit provisions. It is a sector which often houses more marginalised groups with support needs, such as prison leavers; care leavers; those fleeing domestic violence; and homeless people with substance dependence or mental health issues. The accommodation is provided alongside support, supervision or care to help people live as independently as possible in the community.

There is also a small element of care, support and supervision provided to clients, which means it is exempt from Local Housing Allowance (LHA) caps, hence the use of the term 'exempt'. These exemptions enable organisations providing this type of housing to charge higher rates, when compared with general LHA rates, to clients living in their properties. Where the accommodation is provided by an organisation other than a registered provider, Local Authorities bear the additional costs of the provision beyond the LHA rate. In 2022/23 the cost to the Council is approximately £3.4 million resulting in a net subsidy loss of £2.7 million.

As securing permanent accommodation has become more difficult, the Supported Exempt Sector has grown significantly both locally and nationally. This type of accommodation is often the only option for groups of people who don't meet the statutory priority need threshold, particularly if their homelessness is unplanned. Case law states that there only needs to be a "more than minimal" level of care and support to qualify as 'exempt', meaning some providers secure high rental levels while providing a small amount of support. Exempt accommodation clients are usually housed in houses in multiple occupation (HMOs), which are often large properties that have been converted. Due to the complicated nature of defining a building as a HMO not all exempt accommodation can be classified as such and therefore would not fall under the provision of the citywide HMO licensing scheme. Furthermore, in some cases if they are operated by or under the umbrella of a registered social landlord (RSL) then they are afforded an exemption from licensing under the Housing Act 2004.

Whilst there are many good examples of exempt accommodation providers, there have been instances where the quality of accommodation has not been up to standard, and the support being provided has been found to be inadequate. Due to a number of issues being raised regarding specific properties/providers over the last 12 months the Council has collectively across all key departments developed a joined-up approach to deal with issues working alongside the Police. This has resulted in some provision no longer being available in the City and a small number of providers enhancing their service. This work will be enhanced significantly during 2023/24 and 24/25 following the successful bid for funding through the Governments Supported Housing Improvement Programme (SHIP)

The Committee expressed their concern regarding the lack of regulatory framework and minimum standards and noted that, following national concern regarding poor-quality accommodation, a Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Private Members Bill is currently going through the House of Commons with cross party support. Additionally, a cross-party Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee in a recently published report indicated that “exempt housing and support services are a complete mess”

The Committee asked questions, made comments and sought assurances on a number of issues including:-

- Enforcement issues
- The use of HMO's
- Checks undertaken on providers and the grounds under which the Council can refuse providers
- Concerns regarding the lack of clarification in relation to the level of service and minimum standards to be provided
- The vulnerability of people who need supported accommodation and how their needs are not being met
- Comparisons with other Local Authorities, particularly Birmingham
- The current provision of available beds in Coventry
- The impact on neighbouring properties where there is inadequate provision/supervision
- Information in relation to a breakdown of the three types of accommodation being provided in Coventry and an indication of the quality of provision (It was noted that this information will be circulated to Members of the Committee)
- What powers City Council officers have in relation to taking action against poor providers and work being undertaken with partners in this regard
- The appointment of a new team which will allow the Council to take a more “One Coventry” proactive approach to this matter
- Continuing lobbying being undertaken in relation to this matter

The Committee thanked officers for their comprehensive presentation.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee:-

- 1) Notes the current position and funding**
- 2) Supports and welcomes the co-ordinated response to managing Exempt Accommodation in the City**
- 3) Requests that this matter be included on the Work Programme for 2023/24 to enable the Committee to receive a 6 month update on progress and outcomes achieved through the Supported Housing Improvement Programme**
- 4) Request that any consultation in relation to a National Housing Standard for Supported Accommodation be considered by Scrutiny**

5) Request that all Elected Members be advised to report any incidents relating to Exempt Supported Accommodation to appropriate officers

38. Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023-2026

The Committee considered a report, which would be considered by Cabinet at their meeting to be held on 14 February, 2023, and which presented a Medium term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for adoption by the City Council. All Members of the Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1) had been invited to attend for consideration of this item.

The national funding background has been set out in the Autumn Statement published by the Government in November 2022 with further detail included in the 2023/24 Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement on 19th December 2022. This confirmed the position that there will be no structural changes to the funding arrangements in the coming financial year.

The Council's existing financial position has been characterised by several fundamental financial challenges including a long period which saw the real value of Government financial settlements reduce, an increase in the demand for services such as social care and the emergence of inflationary pressure on a wide range of costs. In response the Council has been able to balance its budget through the receipt of significant time-limited Government grant allocations and approval of maximum permitted Council Tax rises. The Council still faces significant budget gaps in the medium-term and one of the purposes of the MTFS is to set out the Council's approach to managing this position. Notwithstanding, the Council will need to maintain dynamic financial models that take account of changes in its medium-term budget position and ongoing re-evaluation of its Capital Programme. These will be set out fully at the point of decision making.

The Strategy has at its heart the need to deliver the priorities set out in the One Coventry Council Plan with a paramount need to protect the most vulnerable people in the city and deliver expectations on the Council to maintain service levels and standards across a wide range of core services.

Taken together, these factors represent a combination of limited resources, challenging underlying economic and demographic conditions, increased demand, pressure to sustain the quality of services and new challenges represented by government reform and local structural and governance relationships. In these circumstances it is crucial that the Council's financial strategy is both robust and flexible. This will provide the financial foundations required to ensure that Council services are fit for purpose to protect the most vulnerable as well as providing good quality core services for every citizen in the city in line with the Council's aspiration to deliver its One Coventry Plan.

The Committee asked questions, made comments and sought clarification on a number of issues including:-

- The uncertainty of the continuation of the Adult Social Care precept long term
- The potential for grant funding and the prudential decisions made based on uncertainty over grant income.
- How risk on capital projects and business concerns are managed
- Concerns about the increased costs of placements within Children's Services and increased pressures generally.
- Reserves allocated for Transformation projects.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee:-

- 1) Supports the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023-2026 and recommends that the Cabinet recommends that Council approves the Strategy as the basis of its medium-term financial planning process**
- 2) Refers the budget pressures being felt by Children's Services to the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board for further scrutiny.**

39. Outstanding Issues and Work Programme for 2022/23

The Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee noted their Work Programme for 2022/23.

40. Any Other Items of Urgent Public Business

There were no other items of urgent public business.

(Meeting closed at 1.15pm)