

Scrutiny Committee - 16 October 2018

Present: Councillor S Coles (Chairman)

Councillors F Smith-Roberts, N Cavill, E Gaines, A Gunner, T Hall, R Henley, R Lees, L Lisgo, S Martin-Scott, N Townsend, D Webber, J Gage (In place of T Davies) and R Ryan (In place of J Blatchford)

Officers: Stephen Boland and Heather Stewart

Also Present: Councillors T Aldridge, H Farbahi, R Habgood, J Warmington, Inspector Andy Pritchard and Chief Inspector Lisa Simpson

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

18. **Apologies.**

Apologies were received from Councillors J Blatchford, B Coombes and T Davies.

19. **Minutes of the previous meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.**

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 18 September 2018 were taken as read and were signed.

20. **Public Question Time.**

Agenda Item 6 – Homelessness Strategy

Mr Nick Magnum spoke on behalf of the charity he works for called People in Need South West. They operate homeless rehabilitation centres across the country. His role was to evaluate the south west area with the idea of setting up one of their centres on the outskirts of Taunton to help those that were homeless, had drug or alcohol problems, victims of abuse and generally those that were in need. Most of their centres took approximately a hundred residents at any one time and had on-site medical and mental health staff. They wanted to set up a centre in the area to help deal with the three prong homeless problem that included the following:-

- Basic homeless person that was living on the streets and needed a home;
- Homeless people that had been executed from their home because landlords had increased their rent; and
- People that had a roof over their head and who took part in criminal activity.

They had new ways of tackling homeless issues that had not been seen in the South West before. He wanted to network with the relevant agencies and collate information to be included in a report to gain funding from the Government so that the charity would be able to operate a centre in the Taunton area.

21. **Declarations of Interest.**

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Member of a County, Parish or Town Council:

Name	Item	Member of	Action Taken
Councillor S Coles	All	SCC	Spoke and voted
Councillor N Cavill	All	Parish	Spoke and voted
Councillor E Gaines	All	Parish	Spoke and voted
Councillor R Henley	All	Parish	Spoke and voted
Councillor J Hunt	All	SCC and Town	Spoke and voted
Councillor N Townsend	All	Parish	Spoke and voted
Councillor D Webber	All	Parish	Spoke and voted
Councillor J Warmington	All	Parish	Spoke

22. **Update on Crime and Policing in Taunton Deane.**

The Chief Inspector greeted the Committee and introduced Inspector Andy Pritchard to the Members. Previously she had prepared reports for the Committee, however, she thought the time would be better spent if she answered any questions raised by the Committee Members that were important to them and their constituents, instead of presenting information that might not be relevant to what the Committee wished to discuss. She advised Members if there were any subjects that they wanted further details on, she was happy to take the requests away and respond to Members with the details.

The Chief Inspector then detailed the neighbourhood policing proposal that had been discussed previously and had now been restructured by the Chief Constable and Police and Crime Commissioner, who had invested in neighbourhood policing and believed it was the root to keeping our communities safe and engaged. They had invested heavily in maintaining neighbourhood resource and had been asked to submit plans for what they thought was the best way to use the resources available to cover the geographical area of Somerset West. The plan was agreed and had gone live as a Pilot scheme. The area had been split into 19 zones and each had Police Community Support Officers (PCSO) who were responsible for all the problem solving and engagement in their area. There were also 35 Police Constables who would then support the PCSO's and assist them with their warrant powers. The new plan meant that there was cover at all times to support the community. The Police Officers (PO) had also been issued with new pieces of kit and lightweight laptops to enable them to carry out their work in the communities.

The Chief Inspector was aware of the issues being faced within Taunton town centre with the increased amounts of anti-social behaviour (ASB) and homelessness and that business owners and residents were concerned.

During the discussion of this item, Members made comments and statements and asked questions which included:-

- Members praised the hard work that the PCSO's carried out in the communities. They agreed that the new laptops enabled the officers to carry out their work in an agile manner and that they were making use of their bicycles to travel around their local area.
The Inspector thanked the Member for their comment and advised that due to the efficiencies created, PCSO's should have more time to carry out their duties.
- Members raised concern on the skateboarders in Castle Green and mentioned that when they had tackled them, they had responded by saying they had not caused any damage and that the Police had said it was ok to use the area. A further concern was raised on cyclist's behaviour and queried how cyclists could be encouraged to use the Highway Code.
There was a time that PO's could deal with the lower level ASB concerns, but she was aware that there were opportunities to improve efficiencies in processes which could spare up PO's time to deal with ASB concerns. She suggested that the signage in the town could be improved.
- Members queried how the public found out which Facebook page the PO's used and suggested that the use of social media should be promoted.
The Police website gave information about the local PO's and their contact details. It also gave the details of what the Police priorities in the local area were. Not all PCSO's had Facebook pages, it was up to the individual whether they wanted to use social media or not.
- Members queried how the recruitment for the Special Constables was progressing.
There were 58 full time equivalent PCSO positions available, but currently there were 50 in post. They were recruiting for PCSO's at present and welcomed any applications and if the Members knew of anybody that was interested, that they could be signposted.
- Members requested details on the crime trends, but understood that it was missing due to the lack of administrative support.
The crime statistics were stored centrally and were accessible to PO's to distribute to Members. If there were any specific figures that Members wanted, the Chief Inspector could obtain them and report back.
- Members requested that the Police reported to the Committee every six months to gain some continuity in the information being reported.
- Concern was raised on the delay or lack of response from PO's to members of the public when they contacted them.
Historically if there was a community issue that was not urgent, the beat manager would have taken ownership of it, however, if they then had four rest days, it wouldn't be addressed until they returned to work, which caused the delay. There were more PCSO's available now, so they could deal with the non-urgent issues quicker for the members of the public. The shift pattern had also changed for PCSO's and meant they had less rest days, which was an improvement from a service point of view and allowed them more time to take ownership of issues rather than passing them to their senior officers. The Inspector wanted to keep and improve

on continuity of service in the local area, so they tried to keep PCSO's in post for about two to three years.

- Members had previously asked about the service called Lighthouse that provided support to people who had been a victim of hate crime. Concern was raised that there was a six week waiting list for assistance and they requested an update.

The Lighthouse service had lost staff in line with the efficiency savings so they had implemented a different structure now. There were more PO's and Detectives who were reviewing cases, as there were less frontline staff. They had a good business plan which appeared to be progressing well and they had received positive reports on their performance.

- Concern was raised that members of the public were reporting crimes on social media and not directly to the Police because they perceived that nothing would happen. Members suggested that the Police should post regular updates on their social media sites to inform the public of what had been achieved in the area which would improve the perception in the service provided by the Police.

PO's were trying to improve the use of social media and were trying to free up officers time to enable them to do this. PCSO's had been prompted to contact local community hubs and other local agencies to find out where the communication gaps were and ask how they would like information to be fed back. A survey had gone out to the Parish Councils and asked what they would like and what they thought of the service in their local area.

- Concern was raised that if a survey had gone to Parish Councils, a large section of Taunton town centre was unparished and so therefore they would not have had the survey. Members requested a copy of the survey so they could circulate it to the unparished areas.

- Members queried how they could help combat ASB and homelessness issues in the area.

Sadly there was potential for the issues to get worse before they got better due to funding cuts. However, these were multi-agency problems and it involved collaborative working to resolve them. Each agency were doing their best with the resources they had available.

- Concern was raised about phishing schemes and loan sharks and suggested that there should be a central portal to report such incidents.

The local PCSO's could support vulnerable residents to help prevent them being subjected to crime, however, cyber-crime has become very sophisticated and had been passed over to a central agency to tackle the issues rather than local Police forces.

- Members queried why cautions were not issued to more people to act as a precaution and prevent further crime, for example young people skateboarding at Castle Green.

The Police were minded not to criminalise young people because this could affect their opportunities for the future with job prospects and further education. The skateboarders could be told to move to a more suitable area rather than being issued a caution.

- Concern was raised about the policing standard in some of the rural areas. Some Members had not seen any PO's in their rural villages and

highlighted that crime still occurred in those areas and not just in the town centres.

The Chief Inspector was aware that there were issues within the rural villages and was keen to address them and was happy to take any suggestions from Members on how to improve the situation. In West Somerset, cluster meetings were held, where the Chairs of the local Parish and Town Councils attended along with the Police, Highways and other agencies to discuss local concerns.

- Concern was raised that there was a perception that the public did not feel safe walking around the town due to ASB issues and what could be done to rectify that.

The PO's had ensured that CCTV had been installed in key areas and business forums had been used to address some of the concerns. She advised the Committee that the Somerset West area was one of the safest places to live in the country and had some of the lowest crime figures and lowest amount of serious violent crime reported.

- Members highlighted that there were additional resources available out in the communities that could assist with investigations, which included the use of CCTV footage from residential dwellings.
- Concern was raised on the public perception of crime and highlighted that there was a big difference between actual crime figures and perceived crime figures. Members suggested that work needed to be carried out on tackling crime perception.
- Members queried what could be done to improve community policing.
The Chief Inspector was aware that the Council was going through Transformation and advised that the Police had just been through a similar project which had impacted on the service delivery. She advised that partnership working needed to be improved which would take some time due to the loss of the designated Community Safety Officer role within the Council.
- Members queried whether more could be done with premise licence holders and the enforcement of the rule that prevented the sale of alcohol to people that were intoxicated and whether that could help alleviate some of the ASB pressures within the town centre.
The Police had worked with Licensing Groups to try and tackle those sorts of issues.
- The Portfolio Holder for Community Leadership thanked the PO's for their attendance and was pleased that they had given a brief verbal update which then allowed for a longer question and answer session for Members.

Resolved: that the Committee noted the update report.

23. **Homelessness Strategy.**

Considered report previously circulated, which provided a detailed account of the results of the Homelessness Review that had been undertaken by the five Districts and proposed an Action Plan that covered four priorities which included:-

- Supporting the transition in services required by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017;

- Supporting clients to remain in their existing accommodation;
- Supporting clients to access suitable and affordable accommodation; and
- Building and maintaining strong working relationships across partnerships.

During the discussion of this item, Members made comments and statements and asked questions which included:-

- Members were disappointed that the Housing Portfolio Holder was not present at the meeting.
- Members suggested that the public speaker approached the Somerset County Foundation, who were organising a day for people to attend with ideas for projects that could tap into Hinkley Point funds and could help with funding issues, it would also help promote partnership working and networking.
- Members thanked the Housing Officer for their hard work on the strategy.
- Concern was raised about the amount of people that TDBC currently had lodged in the Travelodge due to the lack of accommodation available to them. Members requested an update in three months' time.
- The Chairman agreed and requested regular reviews.
The strategy was a countywide strategy and would not be able to be reviewed every three months, however, the Housing Officer could produce figures for the local cases and update Members on that. Currently the amount of cases being lodged in temporary accommodation was abnormally high. There were a number of issues that had caused the high figures, lack of social housing, landlords not willing to take on tenants on benefits, were just a couple of examples. Staff were trying to help customers find accommodation and had accompanied them when they had gone to an estate agents to offer assistance.
- Members praised the methods being adopted by the Housing Team and the support they were offering to customers. They suggested that the Council should be advertising the success stories which would help promote the help available to customers.
- Members queried whether officers had access to a database of private landlords located in the area who they could approach for homeless customers.
Yes, the Homeless Team had access to a list of local landlords.
- Members raised concern that when customers had been given rent money to pay the landlord themselves, there had sometimes been issues with managing their money.
The Housing Officer shared their concern because it had been historically proved that certain tenants struggled with their finances and would get themselves into rent arrears. Direct payments to landlords had been used previously to tackle this issue. However, Central Government had introduced regulations that benefit payments should be paid direct to the tenant to give them the opportunity to manage their own money.
- Members requested an update on the housing project that had been set up to assist ex-servicemen.
The project had identified that there was a need for ex-servicemen accommodation in the area. The Housing Officer advised the Committee that once the customer's service history was known, they were directed to the project.

- Members queried whether there was capacity if all the rough sleepers were taken off the streets tonight.
There were currently twenty-two rough sleepers known to the Housing Department. Four of which had been long term rough sleepers and were not visible and did not want to use Council accommodation. Officers still offered help and would liaise with other agencies who would visit them. There was capacity to accommodate all of the rough sleepers but the choice to use it was down to the customer.
- Members queried whether the Homeless Team liaised with the Housing Options Team because they had experienced cases where the customer had been let down by the service provided.
The Housing Officers confirmed that all the Housing Teams worked together, however, some decisions were difficult because housing and homelessness was governed by strict regulations set in law. Homelessness legislation instructed officers on what they could and couldn't do. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 had widened the regulations on how many types of people could be helped. The use of private rented accommodation was promoted due to the fact that there was not enough social housing in the area and it wasn't fair on tenants to be temporary accommodation for long lengths of time.
- Members queried how much money was being spent on temporary accommodation.
The figures were not available at the meeting, but the Housing Officer would distribute the answer to Members. Some of the cost was covered by housing benefit and housing grants available from Government.
- Members had experienced problems with poverty through their work and knew there had been an increase in use of local food banks and temporary accommodation. They were concerned because the problem would only get worse due to the lack of funding.
- Members were disappointed that the Government had made the decision to pay Universal Credit direct to tenants.
- Concern was raised on customers that had fled domestic abuse who had ended up homeless. They were aware that there were charities that issued grants to assist victims of domestic abuse.
The Housing Officer highlighted that paragraph 2.6 of the Strategy gave details of what help was available for victims of domestic abuse.
- Members queried how many homeless applications had been received this year compared to the previous year.
Last year 470 homeless approaches were recorded. From April to September 2018, 520 applications had been reported and the Housing Officer believed it was due to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Resolved that the Scrutiny Committee:-

- a) Provided 'in principle' support to the draft Somerset Homelessness Review and Strategy;
- b) Challenged and scrutinised the detail and identified content that may require further clarity or amendment and provided a view on whether Scrutiny considered some aims and priorities were more important than others; and

- c) Challenged the content of the draft Equalities Impact Assessment and suggested any further additions or amendments.

24. **Time Extension**

The Chairman proposed a 30 minute time extension which was carried.

25. **Formation of a Task and Finish Review to investigate Crime and Disorder and Anti Social Behaviour Issues within The Deane.**

Full Council had requested that a Task and Finish Group be set up to investigate Crime and Disorder and Anti-Social Behaviour Issues within The Deane.

The Chairman read out the motion as follows:-

On the 2 October 2018 at the meeting of Full Council, a motion was brought forward by Councillor Farbahi around tackling crime and anti-social behaviour in the Deane. Two motions were passed.

- To set up a Task and Finish Group to look into the issues; and
- To engage with all the businesses in the town centre to fully understand their challenges and see if contributions via the radio link system could help support their businesses.

Taunton Deane and the New Authority had to come together with the business community to ensure a safe environment for them to operate so they could survive in these difficult times.

The Chairman requested support from the Committee to set up the group and suggested that it include between five and seven Members and that it be politically balanced.

The Scrutiny Officer suggested a spotlight review rather than holding many meetings over the next six months. The Scrutiny Officer would send an invite to all Councillors asking for volunteers to be involved in the group.

(The Meeting ended at 9.25 pm)