

## Scrutiny & Overview Committee

Meeting held on Monday, 30 January 2023 at 6.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

### MINUTES

**Present:** Councillors Rowenna Davis (Chair), Richard Chatterjee (Vice Chair), Leila Ben Hassel (Deputy-Chair), Jade Appleton, Sean Fitzsimons and Simon Fox.

**Also Present** Councillors Jason Cummings (Cabinet Member for Finance), Patsy Cummings, Maria Gatland (Cabinet Member for Children & Young People), Andy Stranack (Cabinet Member for Communities & Culture) and Alasdair Stewart (Deputy Cabinet Member for Finance)

### PART A

#### 9/22 **Disclosure of Interests**

Councillor Jade Appleton disclosed an interest relating to item 4 as an employee of London Councils, who had been negotiating with Home Office and Clearsprings Ready Homes over Pan-London Scheme for asylum seekers.

#### 10/22 **Urgent Business (if any)**

The Vice Chair of the Committee, Councillor Richard Chatterjee addressed the meeting to put on record that a statement given to the press by the Chair following the previous meeting held on 23 January 2023 was not necessarily reflective of his recollection of the meeting concerning the discussion of the Committee on the Whitgift Indemnity and Land Transfer Agreement (ILTA) Remedy report.

#### 11/22 **Support provided by the Council to asylum seekers, those seeking refuge under the Homes for Ukraine scheme and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children**

The Committee considered a report set out on pages 5 to 16 of the agenda which provided an overview of the support provided by the Council to asylum seekers, those seeking refuge under the Homes for Ukraine scheme and unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The report had been included on

the agenda to provide the Committee with an understanding of the support provided by the Council.

The Cabinet Member for Children & Young People, Councillor Maria Gatland, Corporate Director for Children, Young People & Education, Debbie Jones, Director of Quality, Commissioning & Procurement, Kerry Crichlow, Public Health Programme Manager, Jason D'Silva-Williams, the Operations Director from Clearsprings Ready Homes, Tina Rea, Service Delivery Lead from the Home Office, Chris Hennigan and Ian McMeeken, a host for the Homes for Ukraine scheme, were in attendance at the meeting for this item.

Before the Committee commenced its questioning of the information provided, the Chair put on record the thanks of the Committee for the clearly written, informative report.

The initial focus of the Committee was on the Homes for Ukraine scheme, with the first question asking what would happen if a placement did not work and how the risk of homelessness was mitigated against. In response it was confirmed that the Council was not involved in the original matching of guests from Ukraine with hosts, but when they arrived in Croydon the Council had to make sure the housing needs were appropriate. If there was a breakdown in the relationship between guests and their host, the Government maintained a list of others who had expressed an interest in acting as a host. Although the Council did not have the ability to create a matching service locally, it did try to keep the networks alive in the borough. The Council also worked with other boroughs to find suitable opportunities.

Regarding mitigating against the risk of homelessness, it was advised that there was little the Council could do to mitigate against the risk of a breakdown in the relationship between a guest and their host. Schemes to help people move on to their own accommodation in the private rental sector were being looked at, but this could be a challenge without references and was also linked to the provision of universal credit support from the Government.

In response to a question about whether more could be done to signpost the support available for Ukrainians in London, it was acknowledged that the team were conscious of the need to put out information on the Council's website as it became available. It was agreed that the frequently asked questions of the website would be reviewed to ensure there was sufficient advice on managing breakdowns and the provision of new opportunities.

It was questioned whether there was support available for Ukrainians who did not arrive in the country via the Homes for Ukraine scheme. It was explained that there were three different visa routes and there had been instances where people had thought they were included in the Homes for Ukraine scheme but were not entitled to the support available under that scheme because they used a different visa route.

It was highlighted that the Government was reducing the grant funding available to councils for supporting new arrivals from £10,500 to £5900 per person and that it would be supplemented by a new £500m scheme to support the acquisition of new housing stock and topping up the Homelessness Prevention Grant. As such further information was requested on the new scheme and the potential impact it may have on the borough, particularly from other local authorities looking to house people in Croydon. It was advised that since the new scheme had first been announced in December, no further information had been forthcoming and until this detail was available it was not possible to provide a definitive answer. The Committee agreed that it would like to be updated on the scheme once this information was available.

It was questioned whether there had been a significant increase in workload for the safeguarding teams from new arrivals and how this was being managed. It was advised that safeguarding had been flagged as a risk early on, so team had worked with families to gain assurance that there were no safeguarding issues. There had been significant lobbying, both politically by the Mayor and through officers, to flag the additional strain placed upon the already stretched system.

Regarding the support available to help Ukrainians arriving in the borough to find employment, it was advised that the Council worked closely with the Department for Work and Pensions and Croydon Works to find both education and employment opportunities. People were also encouraged to actively engage with the range of services on offer.

Michael McMeekan attended the meeting to provide his own insight as a host under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. This highlighted the issue that local schools did not seem to be aware of the funding available to support children placed in their schools after arriving in the borough under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. In response, it was advised that the Council had been required to go through a long process to match up each child and their location. This was then followed by a second process to filter all the

Ukrainians in schools to identify which are eligible for the scheme. This work had now been completed and payment would be provided in February 2023.

The discussion moved on to asylum seeking adults and families placed in Croydon, with the Vice-Chair providing feedback on a visit with the Chair to a hotel in the north of the borough used as initial accommodation for asylum seekers while their claims are processed. During this report, the following was noted: -

- The hotel opened as accommodation for asylum seekers in September 2021.
- The hotel tried to place single women near the reception so they felt safer.
- Following reports about the behaviour of security guards towards residents, Clearspring Ready Homes had replaced the original contractor with a different security contractor.
- Food was prepared for the residents by an external catering company. It was heard that the previous catering company had supplied food that was unappetising for the residents, with a lot of waste and many left hungry. An anecdotal example was given of a pregnant resident becoming malnourished to such an extent that her labour was induced.
- Each resident was provided with £8.24 on pre-paid cards each week for living expenses and as expenses were not provided for residents travelling 3 miles or less, they tended to walk everywhere. Although schoolchildren could get free travel, this could be problematic for parents who needed to accompany children to and from school.
- One resident family reported accumulating several issues over a nine month period, including a mouse and mould behind a wardrobe, but having complained about these on a single occasion were moved.
- The hotel rooms were designed for occupation by visitors for a limited period, typically guests on holiday or on business, rather than by families for an open-ended period (the current longest resident occupants had been at the hotel for 14 months).

- The rooms did not have sufficient space for larger items such as buggies or bikes, although there was a common area near reception where the buggies could be stored, and bikes could be stored outside.
- There was concern about the use of underground rooms as accommodation for any length of time given the lack of natural light and the cramped living conditions in these rooms.
- There was no external on-site amenity space for children, as the only open space was the car park at the front of the hotel. However, there was a park nearby that was used by residents.
- The two key issues raised by the visit were the fact that these hotels were not designed for long-term occupation, and that the length of stay was the result of the time taken by the Home Office to process asylum seeking applications.

Following this summary, the Committee continued to question the information provided in the report. The next question asked whether there was an issue with missing children in the accommodation provided by Clearsprings Ready Homes and whether the front of house staff were trained to deal with vulnerable children. It was outlined that the hotel procurement was engaged on a back to back contract basis and although Clearsprings provided retained an overview, the contractors were expected to provide services to the agreed specification. Very few children went missing and when case had occurred it was often the case of the child being lost and then quickly found again. When any child was identified as missing it would be reported to the safeguarding team and the Home Office Safeguarding Hub as a priority. Clearsprings had a high profile notification system in place which required accommodation providers to report on a range of different issues from low level maintenance problems to more serious concerns. Fourteen courses were provided on a range of issues including one on handling the cases of vulnerable children and people. The sub-contractors were required to evidence where staff had received training, which was tested by Clearspring to verify.

It was questioned how the issue raised on the behaviour of former security staff had been handled. It was advised that the incident had been addressed as soon as Clearsprings had been notified. This included the security team being removed from the site and the contract. It was acknowledged that there was sometimes a breakdown in reporting such as when service users did not want to make a formal report.

It was highlighted that residents could log any concerns 24 hours a day via the Migrant Help service, which was a Home Office contractor engaged for issue resolution. Once an issue was logged, the accommodation providers had to report on the issue and meet contracted time scales to rectify.

There was concern raised about the level of service provided by Migrant Help, with anecdotal feedback indicating that it could be difficult to contact the service. It was acknowledged that feedback had been received from service users on the challenges of contacting Migrant Help. Waiting times had come down, but there were still issues to be addressed. There were a series of key performance indicators that were mostly met by the provider which were scrutinised monthly by a Contract Management Group.

As the report highlighted that representatives from the Home Office and Clearsprings had not always attend the monthly monitoring and the monthly safeguarding meetings, this was raised as a concern. It was acknowledged that there had been instances where they had not been able to attend forums and it was hoped that apologies had been forthcoming. The Committee agreed that given the vulnerability of the residents it was important that the partners make every effort to attend these meetings

It was acknowledged that the use of windowless rooms was not acceptable and it was confirmed there was an intention to reduce the usage of these rooms for longer term accommodation, but this was dependent on the level of capacity available within the system to move residents to more suitable rooms.

There was also concern raised about having a mixed cohort sharing the accommodation with both single men accommodated in the same hotel as women and families. This was recognised as an issue, and the Home Office looked for as much separation as possible, with some hotels allocated specifically for single men, families, or single females respectively. However, at present, capacity across the estate was at a premium which resulted in a mixed cohort. The Committee suggested that in these instances steps should be taken to provide as much separation as possible within the accommodation.

In response to a question about engagement with ward councillors, it was advised that there was a series of multi-agency forums in the areas where asylum seekers are housed, which ward councillors were often welcomed to attend. If councillors had a concern about a specific site, these should be

raised directly with officers. The Committee agreed that it would be useful to formally invite ward councillors to the multi-agency forum meetings.

Further information on the healthcare support available for residents was requested. It was advised that residents were able to access local GPs, but this presented its own issues as local GP services could become overwhelmed. This had resulted in a focus on priority areas, such as pregnant women, young mothers, children, and adults with pre-existing conditions. It was acknowledged that health partners were not able to provide the level of care they would like to be able to due to the stretch in the system. Another issue for residents was having to travel to access healthcare, as if it was under three miles, they had to make own way, which could be a challenge. The Committee agreed that this may be an area for the Health & Social Care Sub-Committee to investigate in further detail.

Given there was a surplus of places in Croydon schools, it was questioned why there was an issue with children accessing education. It was explained that the main issues related to children aged 15 to 16 in Key Stage 4. As the curriculum for this age group was set at the start of the year, it could present a challenge for a child entering mid-year. The Education team were looking at creative opportunities and hoped to have a solution in place shortly. The Committee agreed that this may be an issue for the Children & Young People Sub-Committee to investigate in further details.

At the conclusion of this item the Chair thanked those present for their attendance at the meeting and their engagement with the questions of the Committee.

### **Actions arising from the meeting**

Following the discussion of the Asylum Seeker item at the meeting, the Committee agreed the following actions that would be followed up after the meeting.

1. That a response is sent to the Home Office and Clearsprings Ready Homes to advise of:
  - a. The Committee's concern about the potential risk of having a mixed cohort sharing initial accommodation and would recommend that every effort is made to ensure that in the first

instance hotels are allocated to a specific cohort and if not possible due to capacity issues that all options are explored for providing clear separation to safeguard potentially vulnerable people and children.

- b. The concern raised from anecdotal feedback about the level of service provided by Migrant Help and request that this is investigated and a response provided to the Committee on the outcome.
  - c. A request for local Ward Councillors to be formally invited to the multi-agency forum meetings on a regular basis.
2. That a further report is provided, when appropriate, for the Scrutiny & Overview Committee on the full implications of the new scheme introduced by the Government to cover reduced funding under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. This report should also include an assessment of the risks from other council's housing people in borough when they moved on from the Homes for Ukraine scheme, as well as the extra pressures on an already overly stretched private rented sector, and the work to mitigate this risk.
  3. It was agreed that the Children & Young People Sub-Committee would schedule in its work programme a report on the support available for children arriving in the borough on asylum schemes, particularly for those who were not in full-time education. This will include making sure there is proper access to education, particularly KS4 where the Council has sometimes struggled to find school places for children. This will include follow up work to make sure that schools are being properly funded for taking in Ukrainian refugees as per national government support schemes.
  4. It was agreed that the Health & Social Care Sub-Committee would schedule in its work programme a report on the healthcare support for asylum seekers staying in the borough, given concerns raised about the lack of provision in the report.



## Conclusions

Following its discussion of the Asylum Seeker report, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee reached the following conclusions: -

1. The Committee welcomed the quality of the report provided for its meeting and thanked officers for all their work in supporting those staying in the borough under asylum schemes.
2. The Committee agreed that the delay in processing asylum applications which resulted in people staying for months in hotels not intended for long term habitation was putting unsustainable and unacceptable pressure on vulnerable people and impacting upon the Council's resources.
3. The Committee put on record their disappointment that representatives from the partners involved had missed the monthly monitoring and monthly safeguarding meetings, given their importance in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the people staying in the initial accommodation across the borough.
4. It was disappointing that Government guidance on the new funding arrangements for the Homes for Ukraine scheme had not yet been provided to Council officers despite being announced in December 2022 as they do not currently know how the new funding will work or if it will be sufficient. There is a real risk of increased homelessness if this is not properly planned and provided for.
5. The Committee welcomed confirmation that the Mayor was picking up many of the concerns raised at the meeting with the Home Office and other partners.
6. The Committee agreed that that the Council webpage for the Homes for Ukraine scheme needed to be regularly updated with signposting to other support for Ukrainians and wider networks.

**Budget Scrutiny****a Voluntary Community & Faith Sector Support**

The Committee considered a report set out on pages 17 to 26 of the agenda which gave an overview of the support provided to the voluntary, community and faith sector from the Council. This report was included on the agenda as part of the Committee's Budget Scrutiny workstream to allow the Committee to seek reassurance on the Council's relationship with the voluntary sector following confirmation that the Community Fund would expire on 31 March 2022.

Cabinet Members for Community & Culture, Councillor Andy Stranack, Corporate Director for Resources, Jane West, Assistant Chief Executive, Elaine Jackson, Corporate Director for Adult Social Care & Health, Annette McPartland, Director of Policies, Programmes & Performance, Gavin Handford and the Chief Executive of Croydon Voluntary Action, Steve Phaure attended the meeting for this item.

During the introduction to the report from the Cabinet Member for Communities & Culture it was noted that due to the significant financial challenges facing the Council, it was not possible to continue the Community Fund once it expired in March 2023. Even so, the Council would continue to be the largest supporter of the community & voluntary sector (CVS) in the borough.

Those organisations directly affected by the discontinuation of the Community Fund had been informed in November and this had been followed up with a series of one to one meetings, the outcomes from which had helped to inform the new ways of working. These ideas included increasing the number of contracts available for local providers to bid for, the Council partnering with CVS providers on government contracts, venue hire, supporting CVS organisation to access health funding and looking at where CVS organisations could provide Council services. Thanks was given to all the groups for their positive ideas and challenge and to the thousands of volunteers in the borough.

Steve Phaure, the Chief Executive from Croydon Voluntary Action had been invited to the meeting to provide insight on behalf of the CVS, during which it was noted that there was widespread buy-in to resetting the sector's

relationship with the Council. There was a good basis upon which to build in the borough and the consultation had resulted in a positive list of actions. However, there was a need to firm up these proposals with a robust plan for delivery as there was an immediate crisis from the reduction in funding available that needed a short term response.

Issues for the sector included the need to find a way of supporting preventative work in the borough and being clear on what funds were being raised for which would accompany a fundraising strategy. Fundraising should have a focus on both internal commissioning and attracting funding from outside of the borough. Social value commissioning should also be revisited to find a mechanism by which it can work. Above all, it was important to ensure that the support provided for vulnerable residents remained at the heart of the conversation going forward.

Following the introduction and the feedback from Croydon Voluntary Action, the Committee had the opportunity to ask questions on the information provided. The first question related to the end of the Community Fund and whether the new arrangements would be in place to support organisations from the end of March. CVA confirmed that they did not expect the Council to have its new ways of working to be in place within that timeframe, but it was hoped that an action plan would be in place to move forward at pace.

This was followed up with a question about what the plan was for the immediate future. As previously noted, it was confirmed that all 31 groups impacted by the end of the Community Fund had been invited to attend a one to one meeting to discuss the way forward. Two groups had indicated that they were unlikely to survive without Community Fund, so the Council was helping them to access different funding sources. Going forward, it would be important to hold regular meetings with community groups and to ensure that any new funding routes were directed towards the local CVS.

In response to a request for practical examples of support that had been given, it was highlighted that the Council had assisted the New Addington Pathfinders group with identifying funding available from the Great London Authority (GLA) and written a letter of support for their bid.

There was a question about whether the local meaningful proportion of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) could be used to provide ongoing grant funding for local organisations. This was raised as the current funding

provided through CIL was ending. It was agreed that this would be followed up outside of the meeting to clarify.

As it had been previously noted that one target under the new ways of working was to increase the level of grant funding locally, it was questioned whether there would be an increase in the level of local grant funding over the next twelve months. It was advised that it would not be possible to provide a definitive target at the current time as it was reliant on contractual and procurement changes being introduced. There was a commitment to delivering change in this area, but it was likely take place over several year and include a focus on social value.

It was questioned whether there had been feedback sought from local groups about the potential impact from the discontinuation of rent subsidies and rate relief. It was confirmed that it would be difficult for some groups, but it was about being creative on sources of funding. The Council had consulted with all affected groups on a one to one basis and was looking at the different types of support it could provide including options such as community asset transfers and shared spaces. Given the financial challenges facing the Council it was important to look at options such as maximising the use of council assets.

It was highlighted that should the Council stop funding services; it may lead to unforeseen costs in the future and as such it was questioned whether there had been any analysis of the potential impact. It was advised that it had become clear that if the Council stopped commissioning advice services, they could be difficult to restart, so alternative funding for these services was being explored. Groups that provided care and support services were also being looked at and reassurance was given that any shortfall in provision was being met.

At the conclusion of this item the Chair thanked those present for their attendance at the meeting and their engagement with the questions of the Committee.

### **Actions arising from the meeting**

Following the discussion of the Voluntary, Community & Faith Sector Support item at the meeting, the Committee agreed the following actions that would be followed up after the meeting.

1. The Committee requests that feedback is provided on the key outcomes from the Mayor's meeting with representatives from the voluntary, community and faith sector on Friday, 3 February 2023.
2. That clarification is provided on the Council's ability to allocate part of the local meaningful proportion of the Community Infrastructure Levy for grant funding of local voluntary, community and faith organisations.
3. It was agreed that the Council relationship with the voluntary, community and sector would be scheduled for review by the Committee to evaluate the success of the Council's new approach to its relationship with the sector.

## **Conclusions**

Following its discussion of the Voluntary, Community & Faith Sector support report, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee reached the following conclusions:

1. The Committee welcomed confirmation from both the Council and Croydon Voluntary Action of their commitment to building a deeper relationship between the Council and the important voluntary, community and faith sector in our borough.
2. There were serious concerns flagged about the risk that the new ways of working with the voluntary, community and faith sector would be in place in time to support some of the organisations with the transition away from the funding provided by the Community Fund when it ended in March 2023. Given the risk that some community groups may not be able to adapt to the new arrangements in time, the need to implement tangible support plans needed to be a priority and treated with urgency to prevent the risk to services and activities being lost.
3. The Committee welcomed the commitment to looking at creative ways of providing support to the sector, particularly reviewing the use of social value in contract arrangements.

**b Transformation Project Deep Dives**

The Committee considered a report set out on pages 27 to 30 of the agenda which provided a further information on two of the transformation projects listed in the Cabinet Budget report considered by the Committee at its 6 December 2022 meeting. The report had been requested to allow the Committee to review in further detail two of the projects listed, namely the Income & Debt Review and Commercial and Income Opportunities.

Cabinet Members for Finance, Councillor Jason Cummings, Corporate Director for Resources, Jane West, Assistant Chief Executive, Elaine Jackson, Corporate Director for Adult Social Care & Health, Annette McPartland, attended the meeting for this item.

The first question on this item asked whether the aim of the fees and charges review was to improve governance or to improve income streams. It was confirmed that it would be both, as it was aimed at ensuring that fees and charges were updated annually on an incremental basis rather than larger increases every few years.

Regarding the £500,000 estimated increased income from the fees and charges review, it was confirmed that this equated to a small proportion of the uncollected debt to the Council. The viability of sharing debt collection services with other local authorities would also be explored as a means of reducing costs and increasing income. Reassurance was given that although the figure of £500,000 increased income was realistic, it had not been built into 2023-24 as further work was needed to gain a greater level of certainty on its delivery before it could be considered for inclusion in the budget.

It was confirmed that there was a National Fraud Initiative which cross referenced information across the Council, with it highlighted that improved correlation of data would increase the instances of fraud identified. As the use of data had not been as good as expected, it was likely that initially there would be several quick wins once improvement work started, before levelling out.

A question was asked about the potential income from digital bus shelters, as an agreement for the delivery of this project had first been agreed in November 2021. It was confirmed that the project was currently under discussion and an update would be provided for Members in the near future, as soon as it was possible to do so.

In response to a question about the value that could be generated from contractors who provided services to different directorates, it was advised that this was still being mapped, so it was not possible to provide an exact figure at this stage. This work would be prioritised towards the areas that provided the biggest opportunity, but it would help to improve contract management processes across the Council.

Regarding the Premier Supply Programme, it was questioned how the projected £200,000 income would be achieved. It was explained that this would be achieved by getting more suppliers into the programme and that there were a few areas of the Council that still had to introduce their suppliers to the programme.

It was confirmed that no figures had been included in the report for the Commercial Income project as it was still being worked through and the opportunities needed to be properly scoped before any potential targets could be confirmed. It was important to have a degree of rigour in the process to identify figures as this would help to ensure people could be held to account on delivery.

At the conclusion of this item the Chair thanked those present for their attendance at the meeting and their engagement with the questions of the Committee.

### **Actions arising from the meeting**

Following the discussion of the Transformation Projects Deep Dives item at the meeting, the Committee agreed the following actions that would be followed up after the meeting.

1. The Committee asks that confirmation is provided on the estimated timelines and key milestones for each transformations project once defined, to assist with planning the scrutiny work programme.

## **Conclusions**

Following its discussion of the Transformation Projects Deep Dive report, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee reached the following conclusions: -

1. It was accepted that the two projects reviewed by the Committee were still in their infancy and in the process of being mapped out. This meant that any assurance on these projects would need to be reserved until further information was available.
2. The Committee would like to see further evidence of the transformation programmes being mapped out with key milestones and time lines, once available. This will provide reassurance that processes are being followed and enable the Committee to hold people to account through timetabling further scrutiny at the appropriate time.
3. The Committee welcomed confirmation that work was underway to map out the Council's contracts, as this was an area of work that had previously been flagged as a concern by Scrutiny.
4. Confirmation that that the Programme Management Office was leading a project to introduce a new project management system was welcomed, as improved reporting was essential to ensuring there was a robust monitoring system in place.
5. Confirmation was welcomed that the savings targets attributed to the transformation projects in the 30 November 2022 Cabinet report had not been included the 2023-24 budget unless it was clear how it would be delivered.
6. It was agreed that a range of intended outcomes for the transformation projects, beyond purely financial savings, needed to be set out during the mapping phase of each project to ensure clarity of purpose.

## **13/22 Budget Engagement**

The Chair advised the Committee that due to the large number of responses submitted on the Budget engagement it had not been possible to analysis the



results in time for a report to be prepared for this meeting. Instead, the report would be available for the next Committee meeting on 16 February 2023.

As the item was not available, the Committee took the opportunity to outline the areas for further scrutiny when the Budget was considered at its next meeting on 16 February. The areas outlined were: -

- The biggest risks to the delivery of the budget
- The level of reserves held and the justification for this.
- An explanation of the implications for different levels of Council Tax increase.
- An explanation of any final assumptions included in the Budget.
- An equalities impact assessment.
- A summary of the budget engagement feedback
- Analysis of the main options discounted for inclusion in the Budget.

14/22     **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

This motion was not required.

The meeting ended at 9.10 pm

**Signed:**

**Date:**

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