

Climate Change, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 27 June 2023

Attendance

Members of the Climate Change, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Greg Brackenridge
Cllr Wendy Dalton (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Sally Green
Cllr Stephanie Haynes
Cllr Jeszemma Howl
Cllr Linda Leach
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN
Cllr Andrew McNeil
Cllr Rohit Mistry
Cllr Anwen Muston (Chair)
Cllr John Reynolds

In Attendance

Cllr Steve Evans

Cabinet Member for City Housing

Employees

William Humphries
James Turner
Emma Caddick
Hannah Pawley
Anthony Walker

Service Manager – Private Sector Housing
Environmental Health Team Leader
Service Manager - Environmental Health
Head of Communities
Homelessness Strategy and External
Relationships Manager

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Introduction and Welcome**
Cllr Anwen Muston, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised it was also being live streamed to the press and public.
- 2 **Meeting procedures to be followed**
Cllr Muston explained the process to be followed during the meeting for asking questions.
- 3 **Apologies**
The following apologies were received for the meeting:

Chris Howell, Commercial Regulation Manager

4 **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 **Minutes of the previous meeting (16. 2.23)**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 February 2023 be approved as a correct record.

6 **Rough Sleeper Update**

The Chair invited Anthony Walker, Head of Homelessness and Migration, to give the presentation.

The Head of Homelessness gave the Government's definition of the phrase 'rough sleepers' which refers specifically to people either sleeping or about to bed down in the open air or public spaces which would not be deemed as accommodation.

The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that people do habitually rough sleep despite having secure accommodation and reassured members that the outreach service offers every individual help to access support services and housing.

The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that the Rough Sleeper Annual Count took place on Thursday 10 November 2022 between 11:45pm to 2:30am across five locations in the City.

The Head of Homelessness commented that there has been a slow reduction in the numbers of rough sleepers over the last few months after an increase in numbers during autumn 2022.

The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that an organisation P3 have been commissioned to provide rough sleeper services for the City until April 2025. The service is delivered in partnership with other voluntary and community sector organisations.

The Head of Homelessness advised that the life expectancy for people sleeping rough is considerably lower than the national average, 43 years for women and 47 years for men, in comparison to 82 years women and 79 years for men in the UK. In addition, people with a history of rough sleeping experience severe mental health inequalities when compared to the general population.

The Head of Homelessness commented on trends highlighted in the survey, some of which are more challenging to address due to additional factors, for example, personal choice or complex immigration status or substance misuse. The Head of Homelessness added that most individuals sleeping rough in Wolverhampton are not homeless and have accommodation options, but issues such as mental health or substance misuse is a barrier to them using their settled accommodation.

The Head of Homelessness commented on the findings from monthly survey count detailing the numbers of people regularly sleeping rough in Wolverhampton. The monitoring findings are submitted to the DLUHC. The monthly figures have remained low since November 2022.

John Denley, Director of Public Health, commented on the improvements in reducing the number of people sleeping rough when compared to the situation four years ago where 35 people were recorded as sleeping rough.

The Director highlighted the challenges facing the professional service, for example, providing support to people with dual diagnosis – a very significant substance misuse and acute mental health issues in terms of them being able to access appropriate support services.

The Director added that in this example, unless you can stabilise a person's mental health situation it will be a challenge to address their substance misuse issues and vice versa. The Director commented on the efforts of the service and the wider partnership to reduce the numbers of people rough sleeping to single figures, despite the current economic challenges.

The Head of Homelessness outlined the details of ongoing and upcoming projects and key dates to note and highlighted the success of the 'peer mentors' project which has helped someone get full time employment.

The Head of Homelessness commented on the success of Peter Bilson House and advised the panel that 22 people are in settled rooms and 11 residents on site. The home will be fully occupied by the end of July 2023. The panel were invited to visit the building to see the work being done to provide settled and emergency accommodation for people with a history of rough sleeping.

The Head of Homelessness commented on the work being done to respond to the increase in street and aggressive begging at traffic lights along the main routes into the City. The Head of Homelessness outlined the range of enforcement action options to deal with the issue of street and aggressive begging. The aim, however, is to use enforcement powers in limited circumstances and to encourage positive alternatives to begging, such as selling the Big Issue.

The Head of Homelessness welcomed suggestions from the panel about how to address the issue of rough sleeping.

The panel were invited to comment and endorse the approach to rough sleeping as set out in the presentation.

A panel asked for advice to members of the public about what they should do when approached by a beggar and further details about the reasons for the increase in May 2023 of the numbers counted as regularly sleeping rough compared to the April 2023 count.

The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that the purpose of the count is not simply to identify people but to offer support and working with them to find accommodation. Most people included in the count have since been accommodated with the support of local organisations. The Head of Homelessness commented that if the individual does not want to work with the service, then continued efforts will be made to try and engage with them and offer support.

The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that the service wants to work with public in encouraging people rather than give money but to having a conversation with them and advising them to contact the organisation P3 for information and

support. The Head of Homelessness offered to give panel members cards for the organisation that can be given to the public.

The panel discussed the issue of begging in specific areas and concerns of residents feeling intimidated when approached in cars at traffic lights and that the situation was likely to increase in response to the financial crisis.

The Head of Homelessness referred the panel to the presentation slide which outlined the three elements of the strategy to respond to street and aggressive begging.

The Head of Homelessness commented about concerns about increase in homelessness and advised the panel that a new homeless strategy is being developed. The review will not just focus on rough sleepers but wider issues such as how do we get more affordable accommodation? How do we get the private sector to work for us? How do we support people to stay in their properties? The Head of Homelessness offered to present the strategy for comment to a future meeting of the panel.

The Director of Public Health commented in response to concerns about increase in the number of people begging about the changing pattern of street begging pre and post covid and the shift from the city centre to begging at busy street junctions.

The Director added that the key message to the public is that they should not give people begging for money, but if they did then the option of alternative giving option and the importance of giving people the P3 cards. The importance of reinforcing this message to the public in helping to break the cycle of sleeping was highlighted.

The panel shared individual experiences when trying to work or engage with people sleeping rough or begging in their wards and the challenges it presents. The Director commented on the change in the reasons for people begging and the importance of encouraging them to contact appropriate services rather than the public give money which reinforces the behaviour.

A panel member queried the reference in the presentation to two people being released from prison who had been included in the rough sleeper annual account as they would need an address before they would be released.

The Head of Homelessness commented on the case of people being released from prison referred to in the rough sleeping survey who become homeless, and this was not unusual. A person may have an address before they leave prison where they stay, but the person offering the accommodation can later change their mind, and the ex-offender is then asked to leave.

The Head of Homelessness reassured the panel about work of joint project with the probation service to provide accommodation for ex-offenders where they can be supported. The importance of getting someone into accommodation with appropriate support asap was highlighted in helping to reduce the risk of reoffending.

A panel queried the definition of the phrase 'regularly sleeping rough' referred to in the presentation slide on single night figures. The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that the count would include a count on one night, and the approach of the service is that a person should not have to spend a second night. The service will work with the homeless person to find alternative accommodation to prevent this.

A panel member expressed concerns about the increasing numbers of people experiencing homelessness as result of the housing financial crisis and queried the plans of the City to prepare for this. A panel member also queried the reference in the rough sleeper annual count which listed two people undergoing an immigration process and wanted assurance about plans to prevent a repeat of this.

The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that reason for people undergoing an immigration process referred to in the count was due to issues relating to their visa application which led to them being homeless. The panel were reassured that the situation was quickly resolved as was considered to be an exception.

The Head of Homelessness commented that in terms about the level of preparation for possible increased in homelessness that the focus of current work is securing as much affordable accommodation as possible. There are discussions ongoing with colleagues in housing to identify what is needed and how to make accommodation as affordable as possible across the City, the work includes the conversion of office blocks into apartments.

A panel member queried the work done to check the suitability of accommodation for ex-offenders to determine if the is still available.

The Head of Homelessness commented on the emotional impact when a family member or partner decides that a person can no longer stay at the property and advised the panel about discussions with Probation Service to think about alternatives. The Head of Homelessness commented on the importance of having early conversations to get a realistic view of how long an ex-offender could stay at the property. The Head of Homelessness added that the number of people leaving prison without an address is very small but accepted that there is more work to be done with colleagues in Probation Service to prevent this situation.

A panel member queried what more could be done to encourage members of the public not to give money to people who are begging. The Head of Homelessness advised the panel recognised the difficulty the situation creates for people responding to someone in distress and this was also a challenge for the service. The Head of Homelessness encouraged people to donate to alternative giving rather give the person money for the reasons given earlier by the Director.

A panel member queried the effectiveness of the publicity about P3 Cards and the alternative giving scheme and wanted to better understand the ideas being considered to promote their use with the wider public. The panel member also queried the process for reporting incidents of aggressive begging or people sleeping rough.

The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that rough sleepers can be referred using the <https://www.streetlink.org.uk/> website and the information will be shared with linked organisations that can offer support. The work is supported by a rough sleeper's coordinator who can deal with any concerns from the public.

A panel member welcomed the opening of Peter Bilson House and praised the quality of the facilities but queried the reason for the delay in not achieving full occupancy till July 2023. The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that each person referred will have to be interviewed which has caused a delay, but the building is scheduled to be fully occupied by July 2023.

A panel member queried the length of time a person could stay in an emergency bed before being moved to alternative accommodation. The panel member also queried the causes of homelessness and the support offered to young people in this situation to give them the skills needed to manage independent living.

The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that the causes leading to homelessness are varied and complex and reassured the panel that it is rare for a former care leaver in Wolverhampton to become a rough sleeper due to the level of support offered, which is very commendable for the service.

The Head of Homelessness advised the panel that a person can stay in emergency accommodation for a week before being moved to different supported accommodation or their own property. The aim is to move people as soon as possible from emergency beds due to the level of demand.

A panel member shared examples of residents building relationships with people sleeping rough and the help given to them. The panel member commented on the difficulty for residents when trying to make referrals to streetlink website which asks questions about the person which they cannot answer, for example, have you physically seen this person sleeping rough?

The Head of Homelessness commented that getting access to support and advice should be made as easy as possible. The information requested when making a referral is needed before starting work with the individual to have a better understanding of the situation if the person is not known to the service.

The Head of Homelessness welcomed the comments and acknowledged the important role of residents in building trust with people sleeping rough in helping them to engage with the service.

The Head of Homelessness agreed to review the current arrangements in response to the point raised and would support changes that will help reduce delays in people accessing support needed.

A panel member queried if the service had all the resources needed and if there were any gaps in provision.

The Director commented that the service would always welcome extra resources and highlighted the important work of the current partnership working arrangements and the benefits of this for the City.

The Director commented that the service would benefit from a stabilised public health grant allocations to local authorities and a move away from yearly awards. The Director commented on the pride in the partnership work between the Council and partner agencies to support people sleeping rough.

The panel thanked the presenters for the report.

Resolved:

1. The panel endorse the approach to rough sleeping as outlined in the presentation.
2. The panel support opportunities for a one Council and city-wide approach to street and aggressive begging.
3. The Head of Homelessness to note the comments of the panel.
4. The Head of Homelessness to arrange dates for a visit to Peter Bilson House.

7 **Community Safety Strategy Consultation**

The Chair invited Hannah Pawley, Community Safety Manager, to present the report

The Community Safety Manager presented the draft Community Safety Strategy consultation document for comment. The Community Safety Manager explained that the strategy was informed following a workshop session in March 2023 with members of Safer Wolverhampton Partnership (SWP) Board to agree the priorities.

The Safer Wolverhampton Partnership is a statutory board which was established under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. A key responsibility of the partnership board is to develop a strategic plan around how the City is going to address crime and disorder issues. The current strategy is due to expire in 2023.

The document was now being presented to share with panel members about the proposed direction of travel for the strategy.

The Community Safety Manager advised the panel that the document is a multi-agency strategy

The Community Safety Manager commented that a decision was made to widen the board membership. There are resident representatives and voluntary sector and regional bodies on the SWP Board. There is an understanding that the priorities of the partnership need to be flexible to be able to respond to emerging crime trends or legislative changes.

The Community Safety Manager gave a summary of the six SWP strategic priorities and commented on the expected achievements and how success will be measured.

The Community Safety Manager commented on the key considerations or challenges to achieving the priorities, for example, a challenge was how to measure the effectiveness of a strategy which is centred around prevention, how to align the priorities with other strategic priorities to avoid the risk of duplication.

The Community Safety Manager commented on the responsibilities of Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together, Safer Wolverhampton Partnership Board and the Health and Wellbeing Together Board and their responsibilities for the local delivery proposals outlined in the presentation.

The Community Safety Manager commented on the key partners, stakeholders, and communities to be consulted with about the draft strategy and the proposed timeline for endorsing the document. A report will be presented to Cabinet in October 2023 for approval of the community safety strategy.

The Community Safety Manager commented on the role of local communities to influence the delivery of the strategic priorities. A series of community online consultation meetings planned which will also be promoted amongst key partners.

The Community Safety Manager advised the panel that there has been a review of the Partners and Communities Together (PACT) and commented that the groups were not considered to be effective everywhere. The role of PACT was considered to have a key role in supporting and delivering the priorities in the strategy

The Community Safety Manager added that there was also the issue of inconsistency in terms of members of the public and partner organisation representative at PACT meetings.

The proposed changes are aimed at increasing attendance while accepting that there is not a one size fits all approach for each of the PACT areas.

The Community Safety Manager advised the panel that starting in July 2023 there are plans to consult with ward councillors to get initial thoughts and the responses would then be used to produce a draft strategy. The aim was to bring the issue to the scrutiny panel first to give members the opportunity to comment on the plans at an early stage.

The Community Safety Manager was open to comments and that the structure could be very different once the strategy has been developed.

The Community Safety Manager advised the panel that there are plans for a period of three to four months of public consultation. The panel were asked to comment on the strategic priorities and any thoughts on further engagement with the public to help inform the development of the strategy.

The Community Safety Manager suggested a further report on the outcome of the consultation be presented to a future meeting.

The panel were asked to comment on the draft Community Safety Strategy.

The Chair thanked the presenter for the report.

A panel expressed concerns about the effectiveness of the plan to use online consultation and suggested that traders' markets days would be a good opportunity to consult with public about the plans. The issue of low attendance at PACT meetings was also highlighted as a concern and the need to improve communication with the public.

A panel member suggested that Councillors could be involved in distributing leaflets in the wards or using local libraries to help encourage people to contribute to the ideas for replacing PACT meeting during the consultation.

The panel highlighted the important role on Councillors in making a success of replacement for PACT meetings in the future.

The Community Safety Manager welcomed the feedback on PACT and accepted the need to review how it is promoted online as many people who attend meetings may not access services online.

The Community Safety Manager added that the service is trying to engage more with local businesses to display leaflets to promote PACT meetings with the aim of increasing attendance.

A panel members expressed concern about the decision to cancel PACT meetings at short notice to which residents had been invited and stressed the need to try and re-engage them. A panel member suggested dates for the year should be sent in advance to residents and new ideas considered to engage them.

A panel expressed concern about the decision to cancel planned PACT meetings which were then re-started for a start time of 2pm which was difficult for people

working to attend. The low attendance by police at PACT meetings was highlighted as an issue.

A panel member asked for details about preventative work aimed at improving the safety of women and girls outlined in the presentation.

The Community Safety Manager outlined the work being done in schools which is being delivered by specialist providers. A current programme being run in schools is Men at Work which is aimed at boys and young men and focuses on addressing problematic views on masculinity and misogyny. There is also a parallel programme called Expect Respect, aimed at young women and girls, which discusses how to manage a range of situations, for example, consent and the right to say no if they are not feeling comfortable. The plan is to increase the number of programmes so more people can access it both within schools and in non-education settings.

A panel member commented on the challenges facing residents when making a complaint about incidents of ASB who are expected to record incident diaries for three to four months and that it was very unlikely at the end that this would lead to an eviction due to the threshold for Court action. The panel member wanted further action to address the issue of ASB in the strategy and expressed concern about the lack of reference in the strategy to actively involving the fire service, given its powers to enter a property for safety checks and a positive public image.

A panel member commented on the recent announcement at the National Fire Chiefs Council that that every fire station will be a place of sanctuary which can be used when someone is worried about their safety at night by ringing the fire station door and help will be provided. There is a phone on the outside of every fire station that will go direct to fire control for help.

The Community Safety Manager agreed with the comments about the important role of the fire service and agreed to take the issues highlighted back to the SWP Board for discussion.

A panel member queried the use of percentages in slides for number of cases involving public place violence and suggested the actual numbers are a better indicator of the change over time.

The panel member also queried the lack in the presentation of any reference to KPIs and suggested this should be included to understand and assess the impact of the strategy in making progress to achieving the SWP strategic priorities. The panel member asked for details of performance measures to be shared.

A panel member expressed concern about the lack of information about a recent stabbing incident in the ward and asked that to better support residents such reports should be shared. The member expressed similar concerns that Wolverhampton Homes do not regularly share such information with Councillors in a more consistent and concise way.

The Community Safety Manager advised the panel that there are specific KPIs in the strategy as the aim was to add them when the strategy has been further developed. There will be a specific action plan and performance framework with an accountable owner who will be reporting regularly on progress.

The Community Safety Manager agreed to check this as her understanding was that monthly crime reports were being shared with Councillors and would also query with Wolverhampton Homes about the sharing of their crime and community safety data with Councillors.

A panel member commented on the impact of drugs misuse and the sale of drugs on streets and complaints about the police not responding to calls from the public. The issue of a fear of retribution for reporting drug matters to the police was highlighted and suggested that the public need more support and encouragement to do so. The panel member commented on the importance of good police communication about the work they are doing and assurance that they will act on reports.

The Community Safety Manager agreed with the importance of good communication which is a central theme across all the SWP strategic priorities.

The panel agreed that a revised draft of the consultation document should be shared with the panel to comment before it is presented to the SWP Board.

The panel thanked the presenter for the report.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to endorse the proposed consultation process.
2. The Community Safety Manager to note the comments changes to PACT meetings to be noted.
3. The Community Safety Manager to note the comments on the panel on the draft Community Safety Strategy and provide information requested.
4. The Community Safety Manager to present a final draft of the consultation document before it presented to the SWP Board for approval.

8 **Climate Change, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel - Draft Work Programme 2023-2024**

The Chair invited Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, to present the report.

The Scrutiny Officer advised the panel that the report outlines the agenda items for the remainder of the municipal year. The work programme will be updated to reflect the previous discussions on the agenda.

The Scrutiny Officer advised the panel that suggestions were welcome on specific areas that members would like reports to cover and any new topics that they would like to be added.

A panel member suggested a report on the future of PACT meetings be added to the panel work programme for November 2023.

A panel member suggested a report on aids and home adaptations as there was concern about 220 estimated people waiting for an occupational health assessment and the impact that this is having on the health and wellbeing of people, affected by the delay. The panel highlighted the issue of people living in a property which cannot be adapted and who are finding it difficult to get a transfer to a suitable property where this work could be done. As a result, they are having to wait several years to find a suitable property through the housing transfer system.

A panel member suggested adding an extra meeting to the panel work programme in October 2023.

The panel thanked the presenter for the report.

Resolved:

1. The Scrutiny Officer to update the draft work programme.
2. The panel agreed to add an extra date to the panel work programme to be held in October 2023.

9 **Improvement of Housing Standards through Licensing**

The Chair advised the panel that the agenda was exempt. The Panel agreed the following resolution

That in accordance with Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business as they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information on the grounds shown below

This report is exempt from publication under Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), Part 1, Paragraph 6a.

The Chair invited William Humphries, Service Manager Private Sector Housing and James Turner, Environmental Health Team Leader, to present the report.

Steve Evans, Cabinet Member for City Housing, outlined the background to the proposals and expressed support for the plan to improve housing standards in the private sector.

The panel discussed the proposal to introduce a housing licensing scheme.

The panel discussed the risks and benefits about the introduction of the scheme.

The panel thanked the presenters for the report.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to support the proposals outlined in the presentation to introduce a housing licensing scheme in Wolverhampton.
2. The Service Manager Private Sector Housing to consider the panel comments on the proposal.
3. The panel agreed to receive a further report on plans to a meeting in February 2024.
4. The Service Manager Private Sector Housing to present an update six months after any proposed housing licensing scheme has been implemented.