

Scrutiny & Overview Committee

Meeting held on Tuesday, 6 September 2022 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall,
Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Rowenna Davis (Chair), Leila Ben-Hassel (Deputy Chair),
Sean Fitzsimons and Simon Fox

Also Present: Councillors Jason Cummings and Ola Kolade

Apologies: Councillor Richard Chatterjee and Jade Appleton

PART A

44/22 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 July 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

45/22 **Disclosure of Interests**

There were no disclosures of interest made at the meeting.

46/22 **Urgent Business (if any)**

There were no items of urgent business.

47/22 **Safer Croydon Partnership**

The Committee considered a report set out on pages 13 – 116 of the agenda which provided an overview of the performance of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) and included a draft version of the 2022 Strategic Assessment. The report had been scheduled for consideration by the Committee to allow reassurance to be sought on the performance of the partnership.

The Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Councillor Ola Kolade, and members of the Partnership, including the local Chief Superintendent from the

Metropolitan Police, Dave Stringer, and the Director of Culture & Community Safety, Kristian Aspinall, were in attendance for this item.

The first question on this item asked why 50% of women in a recent survey had indicated that they felt unsafe in the borough? It was advised that of the 1,200 women surveyed, the findings indicated that key areas where people felt unsafe were public transport and bus stops. As such it will be essential to have intervention in place to tackle these concerns. Two key issues for Croydon were public safety and domestic abuse with over 5,000 cases in the past year. The Mayor would be releasing a statement at the next Cabinet meeting to announce a three year plan targeted towards tackling violence against women and girls. The focus of the Violence Against Women and Girl delivery plan would range from tackling low level issues such as cat calling to serious domestic violence.

Although there was high level data available, it was acknowledged that further work was needed to gather detailed data about why people felt unsafe in the borough. The Police had launched a Walk and Talk scheme with female police officers to meet people in specific areas of concern, which would start to help understand the problems.

As domestic violence was an existing strategic priority for the CSP and the level of domestic violence had increased year on year for the past five year, it was questioned how the new strategy could make a difference. It was advised that reporting incidents of domestic violence should be encouraged and the partnership work between the Family Justice Centre (FJC) and the Police had led to increased levels of reporting. The potential number of unreported incidents was of greater concern and required further work to understand the scale of the problem.

It was questioned whether there was sufficient capacity within the FJC to cope with the demand for its services. It was confirmed that the FJC worked with high risk cases, and medium and low risk cases were passed to third sector organisations to manage capacity. It was a challenge to manage the capacity of the service, but it had been successful at drawing additional resource from the Home Office and other sources because of its good reputation.

It was advised that the FJC provided support for high risk cases to help reduce the risk to the point that they could be passed to other organisations to continue the support. Although the service managed high risk cases, it also managed the exit programme for people leaving abusive relationships and provided training for other teams and services.

There was a concern that the cost of living crisis could lead to a further surge in domestic violence and as such it was questioned whether the service was prepared for this. It was advised that there was a lot of work underway across

the Council on the cost of living crisis, but at this stage it was too early to say whether it would lead to increased levels of domestic violence. Current data demonstrated that the level of domestic abuse in the borough was already high and would continue to be managed through the FJC and its partner organisations.

It was questioned whether there was a risk that people would be reluctant to report on-street harassment because they did not want to be seen to be wasting Police time. It was highlighted that there was a recent public meeting in the borough to discuss the issue of on-street harassment which would help the partnership to learn from lived experience. It was also highlighted that people did not need to ring the 999 emergency number to report on-street harassment, as there were other methods of reporting such incidents.

Regarding methods of combating on-street harassment, it was questioned whether this would include going into schools to talk to pupils. It was agreed that early intervention on behaviours was a key part of how this type of crime could be tackled as part of a wider strategy. It was noted that the FJC ran regular training sessions for the safeguarding leads in schools and learning about healthy relationships was part of the curriculum, with the FJC consulted on delivery. There was always more that could be done and this work was ongoing.

Further information on what would be included in the statement of intent due to be considered at the next Cabinet meeting was requested. It was advised that following a public meeting on the response to a recent high profile case in the borough, the Mayor decided to bring forward a statement to note that the Council was aware of the issues in the borough. There were areas such as public safety and antisocial behaviour that were being worked on and there were additional sources of income that could be used to help address some of this behaviour. In summary, the statement would acknowledge the current situation and make a commitment on what the Council would do in advance of the full plan.

It was questioned whether the domestic abuse services available in the borough were able to engage with harder to reach communities. Although the FJC worked with local BME Forums and Violence Against Women and Girls Forums, it was acknowledged that further work was needed to reach black, minority ethnic and foreign women. It was sometimes the case that disclosure of domestic violence may be less likely culturally, so it was important to explore different ways of engaging on this issue including attending grassroot community groups to start discussions.

In response to a question about how the boundaries of the Public Space Protection Orders (PSPO) had been set, it was advised that they had been based on data indicating areas of antisocial behaviour. Before introducing a

PSPO there needed to be a sufficient evidence base to justify why it was needed and the consultation on the boundaries for the new schemes was still open at the time of the meeting. The new PSPOs would be reviewed after the first two months of delivery to check whether there had been any displacement activity and whether the boundary needed to be adjusted.

It was understood that the previous PSPO in the borough had lapsed due to a lack of resources available to ensure it could be successfully delivered. As such it was questioned whether the new schemes would be different. In response it was highlighted that there had been an increase in Police resources and there would be a greater level of coordination with the Council on the use of the powers granted by a PSPO. Concurrently there would also be workstreams in place to provide people with wraparound support through outreach teams to address the root causes of anti-social behaviour. The key action in delivering a PSPO was to ensure the correct reporting was in place to provide the evidence required to renew it once the initial period elapsed.

It was questioned whether the CCTV system in the borough was sufficient to support the PSPO. It was confirmed that the CCTV was being upgraded and data had been used to ensure it provided good coverage of anti-social behaviour hotspots. Mobile cameras were also available to be deployed as needed.

It was suggested that there needed to be data analysis undertaken to establish whether there was a particular issue with anti-social behaviour in neighbourhoods with a high proportion of private rented properties. It was highlighted that residents living in the private rented accommodation often tended to be more transient and as such could be difficult to track, which may lead to a lack of understanding of the challenges faced by these residents. In response it was advised that a Landlord Licensing Scheme could help in this area with a scheme currently being developed for Croydon, which was due to come forward in 2023. It was also advised that Community Protection Orders could be issued against landlords in certain circumstances which would lead to enforcement if not complied with. There remained concern that tenants living in the private rented sector did not receive the same level of support that might be provided to tenants living in either council or housing association properties and that further research was needed to understand the needs of residents in private rented accommodation.

Further information was requested about how crime reduction work was coordinated across borough boundaries. It was advised that many criminals tended to work within small areas but depending on the location the police would work with other forces, such as in Crystal Palace which was coordinated with forces in Lambeth and Bromley. The main area of focus for the Police was in the north of the borough, which involve lots of information sharing amongst the Cross Borough Command Units. There was also

cooperation with Surrey Police to share information on issues affecting the south of the borough.

As the Community Safety Partnership was due to be reviewed, it was questioned whether there were plans to involve local communities and residents in this review. It was advised that the review process would start with the partners as this was a legal duty. Community meetings to inform the process had started and opportunities for residents to be involved in specific strands of work were being built into the process. It was recognised that unless residents were made part of the solution it would not be successful.

In response to a question about what the Partnership was doing to address the disproportional impact of crime on young black people, it was advised that tackling disproportionality was something to be tackled across the criminal justice system. As such it needed to be embedded in every aspect of the work of the Partnership. The Criminal Justice system was often the last service to get involved with others like schools and social care involved normally involved at an earlier stage. The job for the Police was to ensure they did not aggravate the existing disproportionality. Issues such as the use of stop and search, developing a greater understanding of the borough and working with parents and carers to support young people on the edge of crime were areas of specific focus.

At the conclusion of the item the Chair thanks the Cabinet Member and the representatives from the Community Safety Partnership for their engagement with the questions of the Committee.

Conclusions

Following its discussion of this item, the members of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee reached the following conclusions: -

1. Following its review of the Community Safety Partnership, the Committee agreed that it would be supportive of a campaign to de-normalise low level sexual harassment against women, such as 'cat-calling', but recognised that any such campaign would be dependent on further resources being identified.
2. The Committee welcomed confirmation that there would be an emphasis on recording offences in the town centre to provide evidence on the need for the Public Space Protection Order. The Committee also welcomed the proposed review of this scheme in two months to make sure that anti-social behaviour doesn't simply shift to neighbouring areas.

3. There was a concern about whether there was sufficient coordination of information between the Police and Council, but it was also acknowledged that the attendance of councillors at their local Ward Panel meetings may help to provide reassurance on this concern.
4. The Committee agreed that the following information would be requested following the meeting: -
 - a. Information on the support available for women with no recourse to public funds.
 - b. Clarification on the Council's policy on Police presence in schools and the use of searches.
 - c. Clarification on processes for moving children across borough boundaries.
 - d. The statistics on the number of children subject to managed moves and placements in pupil referral units.

Recommendations: -

The Scrutiny & Overview Committee agreed to make the following recommendations for the consideration of the Executive Mayor at the next available Cabinet meeting:

1. The Committee would recommend that the evaluation criteria for the Violence against Women and Girls Strategy should include space for victims' voices and exit questioning.
2. The Committee urges the Council and the mayor to publicly recognise and celebrate frontline workers who work so hard to help with violence against women during the pandemic and beyond, particularly the independent domestic violence workers at the Family Justice Centre.
3. The Committee welcomed the extra attention given to 'high priority areas' that suffer the vast majority of crime harm and recommends the creation of bespoke community plans to be created for these areas that involve their own unique community partners.

4. The Committee recommends the Police and the Council seek to partner with the voluntary sector on campaigns to de-normalise low level sexual harassment against women such as 'cat-calling'.
5. As it was heard that it would increase the powers available to the Council to tackle antisocial behaviour in the private rented accommodation, the Committee recommends the development of a Landlord Licensing Scheme for Croydon being treated as a priority.
6. There was a recognition that at present there had been insufficient analysis to understand the links between the private rented sector and crime. As such the Committee would recommend that a workstream on this is created to ensure that an understanding is developed.
7. The Committee would recommend that an emphasis is placed upon community engagement in informing the review of the Community Safety Partnership, with engagement being as extensive as possible within available resources. This should include community, voluntary, faith and resident groups.
8. The Committee was supportive of the proposed youth engagement work outlined at the meeting and would recommend that work aimed at preventing crime was well embedded in future strategies.

48/22 Council Tax Collection, Recovery & Enforcement

The Committee agreed that this report would be deferred until its next meeting on 18 October 2022 to allow further time to for feedback from residents and voluntary sector groups.

Resolved: That the item is deferred.

49/22 Budget Monitoring - Period 4

The Committee considered a report set out in the supplementary agenda which provided an overview of the latest budget position up to the end of July 2022. This report was included on the agenda to give the Committee the opportunity to scrutinise the delivery of 2022-23 budget.

The Cabinet Member for Finance, Councillor Jason Cummings and members of the Corporate Management Team were in attendance at the meeting for this item.

At the outset of this item the Chair expressed the Committee's disappointment that the report for this item had not been received until 5pm on the day before the meeting. Although Members had agreed to go ahead with this item, the Committee wanted to formally record its disappointment about the late report. The disappointment of the Committee was accepted, with assurance given that the lateness was an issue of timing and ensuring the report reflected the latest budget position, rather than any reflection of past issues concern financial reporting.

Further clarity was requested on the implications for the Council's reserves from the current projected overspend. It was advised that it was possible the amount in both the general fund reserve and earmarked reserves may be higher than originally estimated once the outturn process had been completed on the 2021-22 accounts, although this could not be confirmed at the time of the meeting. Although there had been no decision taken, the allocation of £6.9m to reserves in the 2022-23 budget may be reviewed to take account of the current budget position. It was requested that further commentary on the Council's reserves be added to future budget monitoring reports.

From the report, it was noted that the current projected income from car parking was significantly below what had originally been forecasted in the budget agreed in March 2022. As such it was questioned how the Council's forecasting was being improved to reduce the likelihood of similar instances of overestimating happening again. In response it was highlighted that there were several elements agreed within the budget in March that would not be achieved, which totalled £19m. As well as car parking income, an overspend in the Housing Benefit budget was also a significant contributor to the £19m. At present the budget was projecting a £9m overspend which if not for the unrealised elements totalling £19m would be an underspend.

To prevent a repeat of this happening again, CIPFA was delivering budget training to managers across the Council, along with the Council's own in-house training. The Chief Executive and the Section 151 Officer held monthly budget assurance meetings, which helped to ensure that there was a firm understanding of the Council's budget situation. As part of the work on 2023-24 budget, additional resource was being invested into programme management to support the transformation work and the delivery of savings.

As it was advised that the implementation of robust financial reporting processes was still a work in progress, it was questioned how long it was likely to be before budget data could be produced at the touch of a button. It was confirmed that it could be up to two years before an instantaneous budget summary could be produced at the touch of a button. Although the Oracle Fusion finance software used by the Council was a good system, it was recognised that it had not been implemented in the way it should have been. As such additional capacity had been allocated to engage the supplier to review the system with a view to optimising its potential.

In response to a follow up question about why the system had not been rolled out fully when installed, it was highlighted that at the time of installation the Council was having to rebuild its finances following the first Report in the Public Interest and as such resources had to be focussed on ensuring the key basics were in place.

It was questioned how the starting position for setting the budget could be identified with any degree of certainty when the accounts for the past three years were still awaiting closure. It was advised that in the current circumstances, budget setting was based upon the preliminary year end position. Modelling was undertaken to gain a better understanding of potential issues that might be realised during the year. The 'Opening the Books' exercise (discussed at the previous Committee meeting on 21 July 2022) was aimed at clarifying the potential risks to the budget.

It was suggested that the work to reduce the in-year deficit could be perceived as taking a piecemeal approach and as such it was questioned whether there were any plans for more substantive, transformation work to achieve future savings. It was acknowledged that the short term approach to reducing the deficit could be seen as piecemeal, as there was a need to work across the Council to find savings that would reduce the budget gap. Longer term savings would mainly be achieved through the transformation of services, with proposals for this to be brought forward in the autumn.

Concern was raised about the £8.5m deficit in the Housing Benefit budget as this report was the first time it had been raised as an issue. It was questioned why it had not been an issue in previous years. It was advised that the issue related to the Council not being able to reclaim from the Government housing benefits paid out on certain types of accommodation. The issue had only been brought to light during the process to close the 2021-22 accounts, which was why it was only now being reported. Work was underway to understand the impact of removing benefits from certain providers and the impact it would have on individuals, but it would be a complex project to resolve.

As a follow up, it was questioned whether there was a risk that any changes made could result in homelessness for individuals? It was advised that given other local authorities also placed people in Croydon, the issue had been raised with the Improvement and Assurance Panel to try to identify a solution with the Government.

Given the meeting had heard that the current projected overspend had been caused by undeliverable savings being included in the budget when it was agreed in March 2022, it was questioned how the process would be different this year to prevent any repetition. It was advised that the training being provided for both Members and officers would help to ensure that there was a greater understanding of the budget setting process and how to deliver robust

savings proposals. As part of the work to change the culture of the Council, there was an increased expectation that savings proposals brought forward from services would be supported by data that would be subject to robust challenge.

Conclusions

Following its discussion of this item, the members of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee reached the following conclusions: -

1. The Committee was frustrated that it had only received the report for this item after 6pm the night before the meeting, inhibiting Members' ability to scrutinise the paper with the attention that it deserves.
2. The Committee was frustrated that significant work was still required before the Council's financial reporting processes could be considered to be at an expected standard. The Cabinet Member for Finance's confirmation that it was likely to be 'two years' before an acceptable standard could be met was concerning. However, confirmation that additional resource had been allocated to embedding the Fusion Oracle system was welcomed.
3. The Committee welcomed confirmation from the Cabinet Member for Finance that there would be a greater emphasis on transformational projects to deliver the savings required in the 2023-24 and looked forward to reviewing these proposals once they were published in October.
4. The Committee was supportive of the principle of using capital funds for 'invest to save' schemes that would benefit the revenue budget in the longer term.
5. The Committee agreed that a report would be added to the Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee work programme to provide further explanation on the Housing Benefit Budget deficit.
6. The Committee welcomed confirmation that training on the budget scrutiny process would be commissioned for later in the autumn for both officers and scrutiny members.

Recommendations: -

The Scrutiny & Overview Committee agreed to make the following recommendations for the consideration of the Executive Mayor at the next available Cabinet meeting:

1. The Committee would request that a meeting is arranged with the Improvement and Assurance Panel, as part of the Budget Scrutiny process, to allow the Panel to share its insight on the Council's budget.
2. The Committee requests that future Cabinet Budget Monitoring reports include: -
 - a. An explanation of potential changes to the Council's reserves
 - b. The use of a dashboard in the Executive Summary to provide an easily digestible overview of the budget position.
 - c. The estimated financial value when outline risks and other issues in the budget (see para 2.12 in Month 4 report for example).
 - d. When income projections are included, actual income figures from previous years should be included for comparison.
 - e. In light of being told it will possibly take 'two years' to get the Council's financial reporting systems up to standard, the Committee feels it would be beneficial to monitor how this is progressing through the inclusion of milestone targets that can be tracked.

50/22 **Scrutiny Work Programme 2022-23**

The Committee considered a report set out on pages 169 to 182 of the agenda which outlined the work programme for the Scrutiny & Overview Committee and its three sub-committee. The Committee was asked to note the current position of the work programme and consider if there were any items arising from the meeting that should be scheduled for further scrutiny at a later date.

It was confirmed that working was progressing on establishing a Homes Sub-Committee, with a report due to be brought to the next meeting for sign off.

Resolved: The Committee resolved: -

1. To note the most recent version of the Scrutiny Work Programme presented in the report.
2. That no further items would be added to the Work Programme as a result of the meeting.

51/22 **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

This motion was not required.

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm

Signed:

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Date:

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