

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES,
LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on TUESDAY, 24
SEPTEMBER 2024 at 7.00 pm**

Present: Councillor N Gregory (Chair)
Councillors G Bagnall (Vice-Chair), B Donald, R Gooding,
R Haynes and A Reeve

Officers in attendance: R Auty (Director of Corporate Services), B Burton (Interim
Director of Property), C Claydon (Communities Partnership
Manager), C Edwards (Democratic Services Officer) and
S Russell (Interim Director - Housing, Health and Communities).

Also in attendance: Councillor A Coote (Portfolio Holder for Housing and Equalities),
J Evans (Portfolio Holder for Planning) and M Sutton (Portfolio
Holder for Communities and Local Partnerships).

Public Speaker: Mr B Deane-Bowers

SC19 PUBLIC SPEAKING

Mr Ben Deane-Bowers gave a statement to the meeting, he made the following comments regarding the Manor Road properties:-

- There had been a suggestion made by Councillor Dean that the five Manor Road properties should be demolished and regenerated. He understood that funding might not be available within the Council, but due to a change in government policy he said that this option should be considered, using either internal or central government funding, even if it was later rejected.
- The last time he had spoken he had requested that a section 21 was carried out to look into the historic issues of Manor Road. Mr Deane-Bowers had not received a reply from Councillor Coote within the timeframe set out at the meeting and he had made it personal. Mr Deane-Bowers had therefore submitted his own report with a detailed history.
- He had discovered that there had been a health issue identified in 2014 by an Officer and the option of demolishing and rebuilding had been raised then but had not been pursued further.
- At the last meeting he had asked for some related reports but had been told that they could not be provided due to data protection. He said that these were not sensitive and without them the Council committees could not make informed decisions.
- The mould policy should be changed so that the survey came first to properly understand the level of the mould problem before the mould washes took place. He said that this was important as there had been deaths related to mould and it needed to be dealt with properly.

The Chair thanked Mr Deane-Bowers for his statement and said that he had raised a number of technical points that would need to be considered and looked into by Officers. He said he understood that an extensive programme of works were being carried out and were largely complete.

Mr Deane-Bowers said that some works had started but no internal works had been carried out yet, he said that this was not satisfactory.

SC20 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ahmed, Moran and Sell.

There were no declarations of interest.

SC21 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 22nd July 2024 were approved as an accurate record.

The Chair asked for and received confirmation that all replies had now been made to Mr Deane-Bowers as there had been a delay as noted under SC13.

Following questions from the Chair, the Director of Corporate Services confirmed that:-

- The review into the postal vote issue would be discussed at the Audit and Standards meeting on Thursday 26th September 2024.
- An Investment Board meeting would be set up as soon as possible.

SC22 **CABINET FORWARD PLAN**

The Cabinet forward plan was noted.

The Chair said that the forward plan was well documented, detailed and covered issues that were well known. He noted that the most significant item was the award of the contract for mechanical and electrical aspects of the Housing portfolio.

SC23 **SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The Scrutiny Work Programme was noted.

The following comments were made:-

The Chair said that the only item missing was a further report relating to the Community Safety Partnership, for the meeting in January, when the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) attended. The Community Partnership Manager said that they were awaiting final confirmation of their attendance.

The Director of Corporate Services said that there were three items at the bottom of the Scrutiny work programme that would be heard by Scrutiny but dates had not been finalised yet. He said that one of the items was the Community Safety Partnership annual report which would include representations from the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.

The Director of Corporate Services said that the Operational Resilience Task and Finish Group would be meeting on the 16th October, Councillor Donald said that a final report would be produced after the meeting.

The Director of Corporate Services apologised that the detail of the Local Plan items had not been added this month. The Portfolio Holder for Planning said that the position remained the same as minuted at the last meeting, (SC15). He said that the December Scrutiny meeting would be an update on the progress of Regulation 19, and the plan was for the completed submission to be sent to the Planning Inspectorate by the end of December 2024.

SC24 **COMMUNITY SAFETY UPDATE**

The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Local Partnerships introduced the Community Safety Partnership. She said that there was a statutory requirement to reduce crime, disorder and drug use for the benefit of the Community. She introduced the Community Partnership Manager and the Interim Director of Housing, Health and Communities who gave a presentation, which has been appended to the agenda.

In response to questions from Members the following comments were made:-

- There were discussions with the police regarding shoplifting and operational information was shared and brought to the attention of businesses if a problem was identified. The Community Partnership Manager agreed to raise shoplifting at the next meeting with the police.
- The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Local Partnerships said that there was a good relationship between the police and businesses.
- There was an awareness of a rise in children not attending school, this was for various reasons and was looked at on an individual basis.
- The PFCC provided a fund called the Safer Streets Fund which local Councils could apply to. It was match funded and could be used for anything that related to keeping people safe, for example, youth group provision, CCTV cameras.
- The focus on domestic violence against women and girls came about after the murder of Sarah Everard but had been expanded to include all forms of violence against any person.

- The local priorities were informed by data from resident surveys, crime data and information from the SOS hubs. The Parish and Town Councils were involved when a priority in their area was identified.
- The response to the surveys was limited and other ways of collecting the data were being looked into.
- The surveys to residents were anonymous but respondents were asked where they lived.
- The Community Partnership Manager agreed to look into what initiatives there were to reach home-schooled children.
- The SOS hubs were a new initiative. They were drop-in hubs that would be advertised in various ways as well as the relevant agencies inviting clients to attend.
- Although it would be difficult to measure how the Council had specifically affected any change, the basis for success would be through crime data and speaking to residents about their experiences and what improvements they had seen.

Councillor Gooding said that there was an Essex County Council domestic abuse helpline which was confidential. Councillor Donald said that if someone was in danger there was a duty to inform relevant authorities, however details would not be in the public domain.

The Chair said that within the discussion there had been concerns raised about confidence in the police statistics and the reliance on surveys that might not reach the most vulnerable residents or those affected by crime. He asked how the Council could make sure that what matters most to people was being dealt with by the police.

The Community Partnership Manager said that when the Uttlesford Strategic Partnership meetings began it would bring to the attention of the senior leadership team within the police what needed their focus, as well as what issues residents were feeding into the Council. She agreed that it would be a good idea before the meetings to contact Members asking what their residents were telling them about crime and what needed to be targeted. She said as part of regular meetings with Parish and Town Councils this could also be raised.

The Community Partnership Manager said that this would ensure that the strategy was being reviewed, the police would be focusing their time on what residents were concerned about and it would identify any patterns of crime.

Councillor Coote said it was important for Members to take responsibility for reporting to the police as well as Officers.

The Community Partnership Manager agreed to set up a briefing session for Members to discuss policing and crime and to gather information about what residents were feeding back to their Councillors.

FIRE SAFETY AND BUILDING COMPLIANCE

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Equalities thanked the Officers for their brilliant report.

The Interim Director of Property presented the report, he made the following comments:-

- The report was further to fire safety and building compliance issues that had been identified.
- The issues were on going.
- The issues raised related to non-compliant fire doors and their incorrect installation and insufficient fire sounder alarm audibility.
- The sub-contractor, Ventro, had caused delays by less than adequate responses.
- There was currently a waking watch in place that Uttlesford Norse Services Limited (UNSL) wanted to remove as they felt they had provided all the necessary answers, however, this would remain in place until the Council were satisfied with the responses.
- There was no relationship between the Council and the third party, Ventro. The relationship was with UNSL and therefore they were accountable.
- The Interim Director of Property was meeting with UNSL the following day.
- The alarm audibility had been completed and tested and there was no further action needed.
- On the basis of what had been found there would be an independent fire risk assessment carried out this week and further health and safety checks on the whole sheltered estate to ensure residents were safe.

The Interim Director of Property asked that Members followed the recommendations in the report to:-

- Review and provide feedback on the technical issues outlined in this report, including the proposed remediation strategies.
- Note the continuation of the waking watch measures until we can demonstrate Compartmentation and Means of Escape compliance through accredited testing regimes.
- To note the commissioning of further fire risk assessments.

In response to Members questions the Interim Director of Property made the following comments:-

- Testing included the whole door and its component parts, called the door set. Proof was still required that the door was fire resistant and currently the information was not robust enough to give that level of confidence.
- The independent risk assessment would cover fire stopping which included smoke control and protection for escape routes.
- The Grenfell Tower inquiry was very likely to bring about changes to the legislation regarding fire and fire evacuation which would affect the Council. Councillor Gooding said that there needed to be a regime in place for a proper reporting process relating to fire safety.

- The liability for the failure or removal of the waking watch was not completely clear. It had been deferred to the joint venture to undertake assessments by qualified fire risk assessors to understand any problems.
- A third party was being used to undertake further checks to the fire safety doors rather than relying on the current sub-contractor. This was because the sub-contractor had been employed as a competent compliant company to carry out the installation of fire doors and yet the doors had been found to be incorrectly fitted and not up to fire safety standards.
- A decision would need to be made whether the contractor was competent to carry out the remediation works, or if a different root needed to be taken to replace all the fire doors, however this raised contractual issues. The Council needed to understand where they stood legally and their duty to residents.
- The waking watch would not be removed until after the upcoming meeting with UNSL and a review of their responses.
- There was no reason for a delay in the sub-contractors response if they were confident in their product and the work they had carried out.
- The cost of the waking watch would be borne within the UNSL budget and the Council contributed to that as a partner. It was not possible to know if extra funds would be requested.
- In the new contract it would be the Council's management team that ensured that the fire doors were correctly installed and that the relevant certificates were kept by the Council.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Equalities said that it was important to remember that the Council were tied into Norse and had entered into the Contract, which had proved to be the wrong decision, and as 50/50 partners it was hard to resolve the on-going problems. He said that legislation was constantly changing and he did not know how the Council and other Councils across the country could bring properties up to the specification required, with the current constraints on spending.

The Vice-Chair said that the money would have to be found regardless of the cost as there was no other option and he suggested there would need to be a full Council debate at some point.

The Interim Director of Property said that there was an investment plan being developed with a 5 to 10 year programme of works and within that there would be funds set aside for high profile items. He said that there would be challenges around funding however the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) would need to be looked at to see how with careful management the monies could be better used. The Interim Director of Housing, Health and Communities said that they were in the process of producing an HRA asset appraisal across the entirety of the housing estate. She said that this was different to a stock condition survey, as it looked at the viability and opportunities for properties to be regenerated and redeveloped.

In response to questions from the Chair, the Interim Director of Property said:-

- The UNSL contract had been an arm's length arrangement that meant that UNSL was both the contractor and client and the Council did not have the knowledge or information about any problems.

- In the new contract to avoid this situation there would be a robust client team, rigorous targets and goals and regular meetings would ultimately hold the Contractors to account and not let any issues slip.
- There would possibly be four separate contractors to work with, but they would be closely managed and what had been missing in the last contract was the robust client element.
- The amount of money put aside for the management team was sufficient to ensure delivery of a robust client team and would include four quality inspectors to set the tone and expectations of the Contract.

The Interim Director of Property gave an update on Reynolds Court, he said that the forensic audit would be completed in the next three weeks and this would show where money had been spent and where it could be challenged. A robust discussion could then take place with the contractors.

Further to a question from the Vice-Chair the Interim Director of Property said that there were prescribed qualifications, skills and experience required for the property management team within Uttlesford. He said that there was the potential for UNSL employees to be TUPE'd to that team and they would be given the relevant training to ensure that there was an efficient trained workforce.

The Chair said it had been a well-rounded debate.

Councillor Coote said that the Council probably did not have the money to bring the housing stock up to the correct standard, but he said there was no alternative except to sell the Council Housing which he did not think was an option. He said that the Council had to make sure that it served tenants and future tenants correctly. He said the ultimate decision would come from Full Council.

The meeting ended at 9.00pm