

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MONDAY, 18 NOVEMBER 2013

PRESENT:- Councillors Kevin Small (Chair), John Ballman, Michael Dickinson (Vice-Chair), Brian Ford, Mary Friend, Cindy Matthews, Des Moffatt, Maureen Penny, Stan Pajak, Robert Wright, Vera Tomlinson and Oliver Donachie.

Councillors David Renard, Leader of the Council and Chair of Cabinet, and Richard Hurley, Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Housing and Streetsmart (Delivery), were also in attendance.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Andrew Bennett and Emma Faramarzi.

35. Declarations of Interest

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting.

36. Public Question Time

Mr Brian Cockbill advised that he had not yet received written responses to questions he had put to the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 14th October. He asked what action the Committee might take to ensure that, where promised, written responses to public questions at meetings were dealt with promptly. Councillor David Renard, the Leader of the Council, apologised to Mr Cockbill for the oversight and agreed to pursue the matter with the officers concerned and provide Mr Cockbill with the requested information. The Chair advised that, to try and avoid any future recurrence of this situation, as soon as possible after each meeting, the Committee Clerk would ensure that the Cabinet Office was advised of the details of public questions where written answers were promised. The Director of Law and Democratic Services also apologised to Mr Cockbill for the delay in responding to his questions and agreed to speak to the Cabinet Office to ensure that written answers were provided as soon as possible and that, where a substantive answer cannot be given quickly, the receipt of the question was acknowledged.

Mr Cockbill asked a further question, regarding the timeframe for the Council's budget setting process and the implications for setting parish precepts. The Chair, with the Director of Law and Democratic Services, responded to Mr Cockbill's question.

37. Minutes

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 6th September 2013 (adjourned until 20th September 2013), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

38. Harm caused from alcohol misuse

The Committee received a report on the topic of the harm caused by alcohol in Swindon and the work the Council and its partners have undertaken to reduce the harm caused by alcohol misuse.

Mr Phil Thomas, the Council's Head of Public Protection and Streetsmart, introduced the report, placing it in the context of the vital role alcohol plays in economic prospect, particularly the night-time economy, and the basic premise that most people do, in fact, consume alcohol quite safely. However, it had to be recognised that the misuse of alcohol had major negative impacts on the health, the well-being and the economy of the town.

Mr Thomas advised that it was fact that alcohol misuse was a contributory factor in night time violence, domestic violence, anti-social behaviour, hospital admissions and Accident & Emergency admissions. He added that alcohol related problems affect people from all social groups but that, whilst there was no single factor that might account for the variation in individual risk of developing alcohol-use disorders, the evidence was clear that people from areas of deprivation would suffer greater from health and social inequalities as a result of problematic drinking.

Mr Thomas explained that the report and, indeed, the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for Swindon 2011-2014 (appended to the report), were, primarily, concerned with reducing the negative impact or harm caused by alcohol misuse. He advised that the origins of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for Swindon 2011-2014 were in the review undertaken by the Safer and Stronger Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2009 and that the report now before the Committee expanded on those findings and set out how the Council and its partners have worked, and would continue to work, to reduce the harm caused by alcohol misuse. He emphasised the significant role played by the Police and the Treatment Services in developing the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for Swindon and of the importance of continued partnership working if the Strategy's ambitions are to be fully realised.

Mr Thomas briefly outlined the national picture in relation to harm caused by alcohol misuse and provided the Committee with comparative local data. The Committee noted the following main areas of concern for Swindon, where local figures were above the national average and which had been the main focus of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy:

- alcohol specific alcohol admissions – under 18 year olds
- alcohol related recorded crime
- alcohol related violent crime.

Mr Thomas concluded his presentation of the report by taking the Committee through the following key themes of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy, highlighting the partnership work undertaken to date in relation to each theme, proposals for future delivery of objectives and the particular challenges still to be met in relation to each of the four themes.

Theme One: Better prevention through education

- To raise awareness of the impact of alcohol misuse on health, crime and well-being across all age groups and all Swindon's diverse communities, through a broad-based programme of information, education and support using social

marketing techniques.

Theme Two: Identification and treatment

- To improve partners' capacity to identify individuals who are misusing alcohol and to ensure support and treatment is targeted effectively and is appropriate to users' needs.

Theme Three: Crime and disorder

- To reduce alcohol related crime and disorder in Swindon

Theme Four: Working with the licensed trade

- To actively engage on and off licensees in developing a consistent standard of responsible retailing and the promotion of responsible drinking.

Following his presentation of the report, Mr Thomas, supported by Mr Chris Stickler (Manager SWADS), Cherry Jones (Acting Director of Public Health), Frances Mays (Public Health Manager), Jennifer Laibach (Substance Misuse Commissioner), and Superintendent Gavin Williams (Wiltshire Police), responded to members' questions and observations regarding the following issues:

- monitoring of the delivery plan and the success criteria for the various initiatives set out in the Strategy and its associated delivery plan
- the success criteria for drinkers not classified as hazardous and harmful and dependent drinkers
 - LAPF (Local Alcohol Profile for England) data
- the stringency of the current passcard application process
- awareness of "pre-loading" as a major problem and measures to address this issue
- the contributory factors to problematic drinking and the recognition that alcohol problems affect people from all social groups
- the extent of the local drinking problem and the estimated number and type of drinkers in Swindon
- the specific causes behind admissions to hospital with alcohol related illnesses and conditions
- the level of alcohol dependency in Swindon and the number of adults in alcohol treatment
- the Council's licensing function and its role in working with the licensed trade to address alcohol related disorder problems
 - the enhancement of CCTV coverage in the town centre
 - the effectiveness of the relaxation of licensing laws
 - the issue of late night crowd dispersal
- binge drinking and the low cost of alcohol
 - unsafe drinking promotions in licensed premises
- measures to combat the adverse effects of problematic drinking on families and the wider community
- the significant and detrimental effect of the deregulation of alcohol sales
- the localities engagement with families affected by problematic drinking

- the reasons behind the steady rise in the number of alcohol related admissions to hospital
- the work of the Public Notice Disorder (PND) Group with individuals guilty of alcohol related disorder
- the status of the Swindon Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy Action Plan outcomes
- the number of alcohol specific hospital admissions for under-18 year olds
- prevention through education and working with schools to raise awareness of harm from alcohol misuse
- the effectiveness of the community detox service
- the availability of data relating to the victims of alcohol fuelled crime and disorder offences
- issues around the stated variance of alcohol use by ethnic minority and faith communities
- issues around the use of Neighbourhood Justice Panels
- the requirement for supermarkets to intervene in alcohol sales at self-service checkouts
- the suggestion of an apparent localisation of alcohol related disorder problems around only a few premises in the town centre
- licensing principles and measures that can be taken in relation to unsafe price promotions in supermarkets and licensed venues
- the promotion of sensible drinking and the responsible sale of alcohol in Council owned licensed premises
- the accuracy and current relevancy of the information set out in the local alcohol profile set out in Appendix 1 to the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy, in terms of presenting an up to date assessment of the problem and the effectiveness of the strategy in relation to each indicator
- the budget provision for alcohol outreach programmes and related services
- the provision of auricular acupuncture services
- crime and disorder offences as contraventions of the licensing principles
- alternatives to passcards and passports as proof of age
- the implications of the pending changes to legislation relating to the security of licensed premises

Resolved – (1) That Mr Thomas and the other support officers and representatives of external partner agencies be thanked for attending the meeting and for their comprehensive and informative presentation of the report and the detail of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for Swindon.

(2) That the report and the on-going work of the Council and its partner agencies to tackle harm caused by alcohol abuse be noted.

(3) That the Licensing Committee be recommended to receive a report from the Director of Law and Democratic Services on the possibility of introducing a bye-law aimed at reducing alcohol misuse through the introduction of a local minimum pricing policy for alcohol.

(4) That the Council seeks to promote that responsible sale of alcohol in all licensed premises under its ownership and/or control.

39. Cabinet Member Question and Answer

Councillor Richard Hurley, Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Housing and Streetsmart, was in attendance and presented a detailed report summarising

progress and performance in respect of each of the following service areas within his portfolio of responsibility:

- Police Authority/Police and Crime Commissioner Liaison
- Community Safety Partnership
- Environmental and Public Protection Services
- Gypsies, Travellers and Unauthorised Encampments
- Reducing Drugs, Alcohol and Substance Abuse
- Lead Member for Reducing Domestic Violence
- Allocations and Advice Services
- Empty Homes
- Estate and Tenancy Management
- Housing Enabling and Strategic Services
- Homeline and Telecare Services
- Homelessness
- Housing Right to Buy/Sales Services
- Neighbourhood Wardens
- Private Sector Housing Renovation Grants
- Repair and Improvements to Council Housing Stock
- Sheltered Accommodation
- Streetsmart (delivery)
- Public Toilets,
- Waste Disposal / Waste Minimisation
- Recycling
- Refuse Collection – Domestic & Trade
- Cemeteries & Crematoria.
- Ground & Tree Maintenance and open spaces
- Removal of graffiti and abandoned vehicles
- Parks
- Playgrounds, including those that are not presently utilised

At the request of the Chair, Councillor Hurley, in his presentation of the report, commented specifically on those elements of his portfolio which he felt had been most successful, those where a different approach might have produced better results and the lessons that might have been learned as a consequence, and the challenges he expected to be faced by the Council relation to these service areas in the coming year and beyond.

Following his presentation of the report, Councillor Hurley, supported by the Council's Board Director Service Delivery, the Head of Public Protection and Streetsmart, and the Head of Housing, responded to members' specific questions and observations on the following issues:

- the additional works to improve the Radnor Street cemetery and the commemoration in 2014 of the Great War
- the current extent of the housing waiting list
- the self-financing of the Housing Revenue Account and the detail of the reference in the report to risk associated with running a housing business with an annual turnover of £46m and debts of over £150m
- tenant satisfaction with the Council's day-to-day repairs service
- the turnaround time for re-letting void properties

- fuel poverty and the Government's Green Deal
- the Council's long-term housing regeneration plans
- the delegation of housing functions to the Localities teams
- raising the awareness of domestic violence
- the promotion of the Buy With Confidence scheme
- food safety and the Eat With Confidence scheme
 - the identification of the very best food businesses
- the effect of landscaping on the efficient and effective operation of town centre CCTV cameras
- the re-integration of Swindon Commercial Services
- the reference in the report to the seizure of legal highs and the control of the internet sale of these products
- the level and adequacy of the research undertaken in support of the Council's proposed changes to its green waste collection and disposal policy
- the frequency of the Cabinet Member's meetings with the Police and Crime Commissioner
- delays to the resolution of infrastructure problems at the council owned and managed gypsy and traveller permanent caravan site at Hay Lane
- the cost of the necessary replacement of new heating systems in developments in Walcot and Park North and the likelihood that costs might be recovered
- the quality of "first visit" repairs
- the reduction of neighbourhood warden services and street cleaning services in rural areas
- the incidence of fly tipping and the use of the regular refuse collection fleet to remove this refuse
- the success of the Streetwatch pilot scheme and the future expansion of this project
- the Food Hygiene rating scheme and efforts to improve the rating of premises achieving less than a "3" rating
- welfare reform and the continuation of discretionary housing payments
- resource shortages in Environmental Services and the current necessity for managers to carry out fieldwork
- members' own perceptions of the likely outcome of consultation on the green waste service
- the likelihood that the re-integration of SCS will produce any significant improvement in the quality cost of the services provided or the cost to the Council of commissioning those services
- the validation of the decision to pursue the self-financing of the Housing Revenue Account
- homelessness and the maintenance of partnership working arrangements in support of the Council's work to tackle problems of homelessness
- the continuation of the wardens service in existing and new Council-managed sheltered facilities
- proposed measures to reduce the incidence of domestic violence
- the Buy with Confidence scheme and the sale of illicit goods
- the management by the Council or partner agencies, of Neighbourhood Watch schemes
- the Council's existing housing allocations policy and the issue of overcrowding

Resolved – (1) That Councillor Hurley be thanked for attending the meeting to present this report and for his full and open responses to members' questions and observations.

(2) That information requested by members during the course of the Committee's consideration of this item be forwarded to members via the Committee Clerk.

40.

Chair's Announcements

The Chair advised the meeting that, following discussion with the Chief Executive and the Scrutiny Officers, proposals had been formulated regarding requisite training for members of the Scrutiny Committee and that this was expected to be commenced in Spring 2014.

The Chair also advised that a special meeting of the Scrutiny Committee was to be convened in January 2014 to receive the final report of its Digital City (UK) Task Group. Members would be advised of the precise arrangements in due course.