

# Cabinet Member Question and Answer Session

**Scrutiny Committee**

**Date: 15<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

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Author: Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety  
Wards: All  
Locality Affected: All  
Parishes Affected: All

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## **1. Purpose and Reasons**

- 1.1 This report sets out details of the portfolio for the Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety.
- 1.2 A key purpose of the Scrutiny Committee function is to hold the Cabinet to account and ensure that Council priorities and performance are being delivered. The Scrutiny Committee partly fulfils this requirement through the use of Question and Answer sessions with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety.
- 1.3 The purpose of the Question and Answer session is to ensure that the Cabinet Member provides the Scrutiny Committee with performance information relative to their portfolio responsibilities. It also requires the Cabinet Member to provide budget information for their portfolio responsibilities and provides an opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to ask questions on the portfolio responsibilities.
- 1.4 The remit of the Committee includes the review, scrutiny, and development of policy recommendations and the monitoring of performance of corporate priorities including One Swindon and the Corporate Strategy.

## **2. Recommendations**

Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- 2.1 Take note of the report by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety
- 2.2 Put appropriate questions to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety
- 2.3 Decide if any further action is required.

## **3. Detail**

- 3.1 The Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety is Councillor Emma Faramarzi. The portfolio responsibilities for this Cabinet position are as follows:

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Allocations and Advice Services

Empty Homes

Estate and Tenancy Management

Housing Enabling and Strategic Services

Homeline Services

Homelessness

Housing Right to Buy/Sales Services

Neighbourhood Wardens

Private Sector Housing Renovation Grants

Repair and Improvements to Council Housing Stock

Sheltered Accommodation

Police Authority/Police and Crime Commissioner liaison

Community Safety Partnership including young offenders and reducing anti-social behaviour

Environmental and Public Protection Services (including Licensing)

Gypsies, Travellers and Unauthorised Encampments

Reducing Drugs, Alcohol and Substance Abuse

Control Room Operations

**What have you done well?**

## **Licensing**

- 3.2 Recent high profile cases around criminal exploitative activity in other parts of the UK provided a catalyst for reviewing our own processes and procedures. An audit of our taxi licensing service requested by new management in April 2014 revealed a number of actions required to bring the service up to date and to reduce potential risk in areas of protection, process resilience and support infrastructure. Following the audit we have undertaken significant work to ensure that all our licensed taxi and private hire drivers now have an up to date DBS (formerly CRB) check and have been sent information on protection and safeguarding issues. Applicants for licenses now have to sit not only the Knowledge test, but also a safeguarding module. Relations between the Council and taxi licence holders have also been strengthened with the Taxi Forum now

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re-invigorated and proving a useful means of early engagement with the trade. The recent fee increases, introduced to ensure that the service is able to sustain the demands upon it, also mean that the Council is not subsidising taxi operators or licence holders.

- 3.3 We now have a Police licensing officer embedded within the Licensing team and this integrated working has helped us to ensure that licensed premises are operating lawfully. Agreement to consult on a potential Cumulative Impact Zone covering the Broad Green area was recently approved by Licensing Committee. The Zone will limit the proliferation of additional licensed premises in areas where they give rise to adverse amenity and public health issues. The Event Safety Advisory Group (ESAG) continues to provide a holistic service to those planning major events in Swindon. Chaired by the Licensing Manager, with the other statutory partners in attendance, ESAG has proved valuable in ensuring that events in Swindon, such as summer festivals, firework displays and Christmas parties take place safely. ESAG is a real success story within the Council and helps facilitate activities that strengthen local communities and raise the town's profile.

## Public Protection

- 3.4 The wide ranging work of the Public Protection Team has continued to be effective in protecting the health and wellbeing of those living, working and visiting Swindon. Most of this work is statutory in nature but wherever possible resources have been focussed on areas of highest risk and to support those individuals or groups considered to be most vulnerable.
- 3.5 There are currently 1959 registered food businesses in Swindon and generally standards of food safety have been maintained through a regime of inspection, advice and support. The numbers of premises rated 4 and 5 star under the national Food Hygiene Rating (FHR) system has increased but some businesses remain rated at zero stars despite the considerable support and assistance given to them. In these cases it has been appropriate to take formal enforcement action such as enforced closure, seizure of unsafe food stuffs or prosecution. Priorities for the food safety service reflect those set by the Government's Food Standards Agency (FSA). The Council continues to work closely with the Agency to tackle the serious issue of meat fraud and are participating in a regional initiative to ensure the traceability of animal feedstuffs entering the food supply chain.
- 3.6 The Council has continued to offer quality and affordable food hygiene and aligned training to support local businesses. This has included a training programme to help them meet recently introduced requirements regarding allergens in food. There is support for the Government's proposal to make the display of FHR (Food Hygiene Rating) scores mandatory for food businesses.

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- 3.7 Health & Safety in the workplace remains an area of concern particularly given the high number of workplace accidents reported to the Council. In 2014/15, 208 such accidents required formal investigation by enforcement officers. Advice to businesses and any enforcement is being targeted through a regional programme focussing on areas of highest risk. In conjunction with the Health and Safety Executive and other South West councils, activity is being focussed on current priorities such as: Legionnaires disease; Gas Safety; Distribution and Warehousing and Safety at Temporary events.
- 3.8 The number of service requests received relating to noise nuisance, has reduced by 31% compared to the same time last year, dealing effectively with these by offering advice, support and mediation. In the worst cases enforcement has been necessary, including prosecution, seizure or through close working with the Community Safety Team, Housing Officers and Police colleagues. The Public Protection 'Out of Hours' service remains key to being able to resolve the most difficult incidents of nuisance. Levels of Air Pollution around Swindon continue to be monitored routinely and in most areas these are satisfactory. In a few locations excessive levels of traffic pollution have been identified, an Air Quality Strategy is being developed to identify key improvements. The Strategy will inform future development planning and changes to our transport infrastructure with the aim of reducing local areas of poor air quality. Similar work is being undertaken to ensure that future developments do not increase levels of noise from traffic or other environmental sources.
- 3.9 Industrial sources of pollution continue to be regulated through a comprehensive regime of environmental permitting and restrictions on known contaminated sites, this activity has increased in 2014/15. Other sources of pollution are controlled by the Council through statutory Environmental permitting, Contaminated land restrictions and through pre development planning consultations.
- 3.10 Reports of 'Door-Step' crime, scams and other activities of 'Rogue Traders' are increasing and this is most likely reflecting growing consumer awareness. However, it remains important that older and other vulnerable households are warned about and protected from being victims of such crimes wherever possible. Trading Standards Officers have carried out a number of high profile activities to raise awareness of Rogue Traders operating in Swindon and a number of high profile cases have been successfully prosecuted.
- 3.11 Other priorities for the Trading Standards service continue to be the detection and seizure of illicit tobacco and alcohol products, preventing inappropriate sales of age restricted or unsafe products and the control of so called 'Legal Highs' or 'Novel Psycho-active Substances' (NPS) in the market place. NPS's have proven to be difficult for the Council and the Police to control because of their legal status, but new legislation is being proposed which will make these illegal in the future.
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- 3.12 The growth of the private rented housing market in Swindon reflects national trends and whilst most of this housing is of a good standard, some is not. High demand and high rents are attracting new landlords, unfortunately there are a minority of who care little about the safety or welfare of their tenants. An increasing number of properties are being converted into Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO). 47 new HMOs were identified and dealt with during 2015 and there are now 675 known HMOs in Swindon. The actual number is estimated to be around 850. All known HMOs are inspected routinely to ensure that proper standards of safety, amenity and management are achieved and maintained by landlords. Enforcement action is taken against landlords or agents where Council advice and encouragement is ignored.
- 3.13 Currently 97 HMOs in Swindon are licensed under the national Mandatory licensing scheme. This scheme only applies to larger properties and although supplementary 'Additional Licensing' to extend the scope of the current licensing scheme in Swindon has been considered, this is not considered appropriate or justified at the present time. The Government has recently consulted on a proposal to extend the current mandatory scheme by removing the current 'three or more storey' criteria. I welcome this proposal along with other suggested measures to strengthen Council powers to deal with poor housing conditions and so called 'Rogue landlords.'
- 3.14 Demand for disabled adaptations is increasing and this reflects demographic changes and health improvements enabling more households with disabilities to remain living independently at home. Over the past 4 years the number of enquiries has increased by 61%. Corresponding demand for Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) has only been able to be met through effective assessment and targeting of funds in conjunction with SEQOL and Children's Services Occupational Therapy teams. A review of the DFG service is currently being carried out as part of a wider Housing and Adult Social Care work programme given the challenge of meeting this growing demand (see 3.19).

## Housing

- 3.15 **Homelessness.** The Council continues to manage its homelessness services well. In comparison to its family group of authorities acceptances are low, highlighting the work of officers in preventing homelessness. At the time of writing 163 households had been accepted during the current year, this is an increase on 2013/14 (116) reflecting a national rise in homelessness. A new Homelessness Strategy was recently agreed by the Health and Wellbeing Board, this supports measures to strengthen preventative measures particularly in respect of domestic abuse, supporting those with complex needs, those with care needs and making best use of the social housing stock to alleviate homelessness.

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- 3.16 **Tenancy Management.** By far the greatest challenge continues to be rent collection. The income of the Housing Revenue Account to meet tenants' service aspirations depends on a high rate of collection. The collection rate currently stands at 97.39% a remarkable achievement given the on-going changes to the Welfare system. Evictions also remain low at 19 at the time of writing, a reflection that eviction is only used as an absolute last resort.
- 3.17 **Tenant Engagement.** The service continues to explore new ways to take on the views of our tenants. "The Housing Sounding Board" has grown to over 1000 active participants as well as over 800 facebook and over 700 twitter account followers. The service area also runs a fortnightly radio show on Swindon 105.5 FM.
- 3.18 **Repairs and Improvements.** The Council continues to meet the *Decent Homes Standard* for all of its tenanted property with over 2000 of its properties benefiting from major improvement works in 2014/15. Gas Safety checks remain a priority and the service is on target to once again complete this on every property. Urgent Repairs targets (within 1 day) are challenging given the nature of these callouts, however the workforce are currently meeting their target of 80% completions on first response. Void repair times (time to turn around an empty property, complete repairs and let it) are also on track, returning properties back into use on average within 25 days.
- 3.19 **Housing and Adult Social Care.** Housing Officers increasingly work with some of the most vulnerable individuals in our neighbourhoods. This traditionally has been seen through the work on homelessness, sheltered and supported housing, as well as the growth of Homeline (Community Alarm system). The Head of Housing now chairs a cross service area work programme that covers a number of activities to make best use of Council resources and add to the savings already made in Adult Social Care. This includes developing and refurbishing new affordable homes to meet complex needs, the increased use of Assistive Technology within the home, speeding up hospital discharges and creating dementia friendly housing.
- 3.20 **New Affordable Housing.** It is particularly pleasing to see the progress at Sussex Place (the former Sussex Square), the retail units are already in operation with the last residential block due for demolition by the end of January 2016. The wider development programme of 100 additional affordable homes will be completed by March 2018 and this includes homes on the former Hawthorns Centre in Gorse Hill as well as returning Townsend House in Old Town back into use.

## Community Safety

- 3.21 **Domestic Abuse.** The Council and its partners commissioned a new Domestic Abuse Strategy in 2015. The work has been completed and Cabinet recently



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agreed the new strategy. Priorities include, support for perpetrators, reducing the impact on children within the family and working with victims and survivors. This is timely given that monthly returns show the reporting of Domestic Abuse increasing by just over 30% in the first 6 months of 2015/16.

- 3.22 **Anti- Social Behaviour.** The Community Safety Team is now located in the Town Centre Hub and work alongside Police operational staff. Early success has been seen through the development of the first Public Space Protection Order. This is now in place for the town centre and prohibits actions such as unauthorised street trading, begging and skate boarding. 2016 sees Police, Community Safety staff and the *inSwindon* Team promoting a “Love Your Swindon” campaign to encourage better behaviour in the town centre.

## Reducing Drugs, Alcohol and Substance Abuse

- 3.23 **Treatment.** Adult drug and alcohol, and young peoples’ treatment services are all performing well. The adult drug service in particular is out performing its contract targets with 777 clients being effectively treated over the past 12 months (Target 600). 9% of opiate users and 47% of non-opiate users in Swindon successfully completed their drug treatment in 2014/15, above the national average. Public Health England reported that levels of performance in Swindon that were in the bottom quartile of comparator local authorities at the end of 2013/14 are now in the upper quartile for opiate and non-opiate successful completions, and showing significant improvements in opiate re-presentations.
- 3.24 **Prevention.** Several campaigns have been launched in the past few months including Alcohol Awareness Week, Dry January and a young people’s cannabis awareness campaign. All of these have been driven by treatment services with support from the Council’s drugs and alcohol team. The ASAP (alcohol peer support and advice) project has been particularly effective in linking with major employers, such as Honda, and large supermarket chains to embed prevention work within the community using a peer mentor approach.

## What would you do differently?

### Public Protection

- 3.25 The service will continue to review its structure to ensure that it is best placed to deliver on the challenges it faces. In particular it will need to respond to anticipated legislative changes giving additional control, for example in areas such as Food hygiene standards, HMOs, Novel Psycho-active Substances and Air Pollution control.

### Housing

- 3.26 Over the coming year given the considerable budget challenges facing the Council I will accelerate the housing led initiatives that will increasingly assist

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spend in the areas of both learning disability and older persons adult social care. The development programme is already assisting but there are other measures I am aware of such as assistive technology and dementia friendly designs that will make a positive impact to those in our care.

## **Community Safety**

- 3.27 Given the success in terms of feedback and support for the Town Centre Public Space Protection Order I would hope to accelerate our work on other Orders, notably those at Lydiard Park and the Borough wide Public Space Protection Order and hope to see these operative as early in 2016 as possible.

## **Reducing Drugs, Alcohol and Substance Abuse**

- 3.28 In order to achieve the savings required by reductions in local authority grants we will be reviewing all our commissioned drug and alcohol services to ensure that we are delivering best value. In order to drive this process we will be undertaking joint strategic needs assessments and developing a new substance misuse strategy for Swindon. This will inform our commissioning processes in order to deliver a more integrated and efficient model of service that will deliver a high quality, evidence based service to our identified vulnerable groups.

## **What are the Challenges facing your Portfolio?**

### **Public Protection**

- 3.29 Given current and future budgetary pressures prioritisation of service provision will need to focus on its statutory responsibilities and those areas which are most able to deliver the needs of our community as recognised through the Council's Vision and priorities and in particular by protecting those who are most vulnerable or at risk.

### **Licencing**

- 3.30 The taxi licensing service goes from strength to strength but challenges lie ahead. UBER (a private hire app-based company) now hold an operator's licence in Swindon bringing with it potential challenges around not only performance but also regulation. The Taxi tariff also requires review. We will be working closely with UBER and the Taxi Forum on these issues. As part of the Council's drive to facilitate services in a different way, charging regimes for licensing visits and licensing enforcement activities will be investigated.

### **Housing**

- 3.31 Within its Summer Budget statement the Government introduced three significant policy announcements of particular relevance to local authority housing services. These included a social housing rent reduction, a requirement for local authorities to make payments to the government in respect of high value void



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sales and a requirement for high income tenants to pay higher rents ("Pay to Stay"). Legislative provision for the rent reduction is included within the Welfare Reform and Work Bill and a separate consultation is underway with tenants on the impact of this proposed reform. The Housing and Planning Bill was introduced to the House of Commons on 13 October 2015, the Bill now includes provision for High Value Void Sales and the "Pay to Stay" proposal. The greatest challenge is the rent reduction, the impact of which is within Cabinet rent setting papers for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for 2016/17 and beyond. Over the next 4 years a rent reduction of 1% per year will result in a reduction to the amount available for planned improvements to the council housing stock of over £13m. This would be far greater without substantial efficiency savings to HRA services totalling over £8m.

## Community Safety

- 3.32 Domestic Abuse continues to be a challenge particularly with the increased reporting of incidents as identified earlier in the report. The new Strategy and Action Plan will help to address this. One example is improving the work agencies deliver at Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs). Here we have seen an increase in repeat referrals with 45% of cases being referred back again due to repeat incidents.

The Council has a relatively new statutory duty preventing people from becoming radicalised. This is an important local response to wider national Counter Terrorism priorities. The Council chairs a multi-agency *Prevent Board* and follows up on case management through respective multi-agency *Channel Panels* which are also chaired by the Council.

## Reducing Drugs, Alcohol and Substance Abuse

- 3.37 We are experiencing an increasing number of service users presenting for treatment into all our commissioned services. This is particularly notable for the opiate using adult group. The complexity of our client group is also increasing with heightened concerns about dangerous drug networks, associated gang activity and increased sex working activity in Swindon. Delivering an integrated multi-agency response to these complex problems, within a context of reduced resource, is a challenge requiring a response of sound analysis of need, multi-agency strategic planning and an evidence based delivery of services. We will also prioritize working with the service provider to improve the uptake of Blood Borne Virus testing and immunisation.

## 4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 The Committee can choose not to operate a Cabinet Portfolio Question and Answer session system.

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## 5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

### Financial and Procurement Implications

- 5.1 There are no direct financial or procurement implications arising from this report. Associated budgets are attached as Appendix 1

### Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.2 Section 21 of the Local Government Act requires every local authority to establish an overview and scrutiny function to hold the Executive to account, undertake policy development and review, monitor, and improve performance.

### All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

- 5.3 There are no other direct implications arising from this report. Any further implications will be identified when a topic is reviewed by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and in any recommendations made by it.

### Diversity Impact Assessment

- 5.4 No Diversity Impact Assessment is required at this stage. Any DIA that is required during review of topics included within the work programme will be identified at the appropriate stage.

### Risk Management

- 5.5 No risk management issues have been identified at this stage. Any risk management issues will be identified at the appropriate time when a topic is under review by the Overview Scrutiny Committee and if it makes any recommendations.

## 6. Consultees

- 6.1 The Board Director, Resources (Section 151 Officer) and Director of Law and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

## 7. Background Papers

- 7.1 None

## 8. Appendices

- 8.1 Service Budgets – to follow.