

## **Place and External Relations Scrutiny Panel**

**10 March 2020**

**Commenced:** 6.00pm

**Terminated:** 7.45pm

**Present:** Councillors Glover (Chair), Mills (Deputy Chair), Alam, Billington, Bowden, J Fitzpatrick, P Fitzpatrick, A Holland, Hollinshead, Lewis, Naylor, Pearce, Robinson, Sharif, Sweeton.

**Apologies for absence:** Councillors Bowerman, Chadwick, Choksi.

### **37. MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of the Place and External Relations Scrutiny Panel held on 7 January 2020 were approved as a correct record.

### **38. RESPONSE TO OMBUDSMAN FOCUS REPORT – HOUSING BENEFIT**

The Panel welcomed Ilys Cookson, Assistant Director, Exchequer Services; and Tracey Watkin, Service Unit Manager, to provide a service response to a Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) focus report that provides shared learning and insight from complaints related to Housing Benefit.

The response provided information on the Council's role in administering Housing Benefit on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Ms Cookson informed members that a total of £73 million was paid to claimants in 2018/19, with over 43,000 determinations (decisions) made in respect of new and existing claims. A total of 245 appeals were made in 2018/19, with none resulting in a complaint to the ombudsman.

The focus report identified a number of common issues with regards to the processing of Housing Benefit claims. Information was provided on work of the service to reflect on each of the identified issues.

- Failing to identify appeals
- Failing to process appeals
- Delays in processing appeals
- Failure to act on new evidence or change of circumstances
- Overpayment recovery while an appeal is outstanding

It was reported that the workload for all Exchequer Services is closely monitored on a daily basis, which ensures that appeals are considered and managed within the appropriate time limits.

Ms Cookson informed members that the Council currently administers the recovery of overpayments in line with Housing Benefit regulations. In view of recommendations made by the ombudsman to delay recovery until a time limit for appeal has elapsed or an appeal is determined, the current process will be reviewed on a case by case basis as the decision could result in some claimants having to repay significant arrears.

The focus report included a number of suitable questions to encourage local accountability. A separate service response was provided against a number of key questions.

The Chair thanked officers for the comprehensive overview and self-assessment. It was encouraging to hear that the service has developed a number of internal processes to identify

issues at the earliest opportunity and that positive steps are taken to support claimants to prevent overpayments and arrears. Panel members were pleased to hear that the authority has had no recent cases found against it by the ombudsman.

**Resolved:** That Ms Cookson and Ms Watkin be thanked for attending the meeting.

### 39. HOUSING STRATEGY

The Panel welcomed Gregg Stott, Interim Assistant Director, Development and Investment; and Patrick Nolan, Head of Major Programmes, to receive information on the development of a Housing Strategy for Tameside.

The presentation provided an update on proposals to develop and deliver a comprehensive Tameside Housing Strategy 2020-2025. The strategy will also need to align itself with wider priorities to deliver the Corporate Plan. As a strategic provider the Council has statutory duties that include social care and reducing homelessness.

Mr Stott advised that the authority will take the strategic lead on development to unlock inclusive growth, with a long-term view to support sustainable housing solutions to meet the future needs of residents by promote effective neighbourhood management and place-based programmes.

The Panel heard how a previous housing needs assessment and Greater Manchester priorities will feed into a new 5 year strategy informed by local need, affordability, facilities and structured growth. The strategy will also take stock of future requirements across directorates such as Children's and Adult Services.

Future development will require a focus on long-term sustainability, integrated decision making as a Strategic Commission and investment to unlock opportunities for social and economic growth. Detail was provided against a list of priorities.

- New housing supply to meet population growth
- Delivering for an ageing population
- A range of affordable housing
- Specialist and supported housing
- Improving standards in the private rented sector
- Reducing homelessness and rough sleeping

It was reported that the Council has significant land assets which have the capacity to deliver a significant number of new homes over the next 5 years. Examples were provided of recent housing projects that highlight the Council's role as a strategic enabler and the future need to create dedicated plans for place making and town centres.

The Panel asked about the Council's ability to improve land availability and options to release sites for more strategic development.

Mr Stott advised that this is currently a work in progress with efforts to deliver a broader strategic asset management plan. This includes an assessment and review of the Council's land assets. The strategy will strengthen existing partnerships and provide opportunities to engage the market and developers to test the appetite of delivery plans.

Questions were asked about the link with the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework and development of a Local Plan.

Mr Stott advised that future arrangements can be made to ensure the Scrutiny Panel remains best placed and suitably informed to feed into associated projects.

**Resolved:** That Mr Stott and Mr Nolan be thanked for attending the meeting.

#### **40. CORPORATE PLAN SCORECARD**

The Panel received headline indicators as a quarterly update on the Corporate Plan Performance Scorecard. The Chair advised members that information and data detailed within the scorecard will be reviewed on a regular basis and where necessary used to inform future work priorities for the Panel.

#### **41. SCRUTINY ACTIVITY 2019/20**

The Chair presented a summary of Scrutiny activity and oversight undertaken during the 2019/20 municipal year. Detail was provided on the updates received, in-depth reviews, budget briefing sessions, consultation responses and the shared learning from reports of the ombudsman.

#### **42. GREATER MANCHESTER SCRUTINY**

The Chair provided a verbal update on recent activity of the Greater Manchester Housing, Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The most recent meeting was held on 13 February 2020, with the following topics discussed:

- Greater Manchester Housing Strategy Implementation Plan
- Town Centre Update
- Five Year Environment Plan

Regular Scrutiny update emails will continue to include a link to all public papers for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority Scrutiny Committees.

#### **43. CHAIR'S UPDATE**

The Chair reported that a further progress meeting on Improving Quality and Standards in the Private Rented Sector was held on 13 January 2020. The working group met with Gary Mongan, Regulatory Services Manager and Jack Gould, Project Manager for Housing Growth to receive information specific to future development stages and timescales.

**Resolved:** That the Scrutiny Panel will remain suitably informed to review future scheme proposals and consultation.

#### **44. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

To note that this is the last meeting of the Place and External Relations Scrutiny Panel for the 2019/20 municipal year.

#### **45. URGENT ITEMS**

The Chair reported that there were no urgent items for consideration at this meeting.

**CHAIR**