

PLACE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of this Committee held on
8 January 2024

(Present) **Councillor Hattersley (Chair)**
Councillors Dickinson, Hodkinson, Laird, McCormack,
O'Connor and Pearl and Superintendent S Brizell,
Merseyside Police

(Not Present) **Councillors Case, Richards and Stevenson**

17 APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Case.

18 MINUTES

* **Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 9 October 2023 be approved and signed.**

19 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS

No Declarations of Interest from Members were made.

20 DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP

No Declarations of Party Whip were made.

21 QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT – 2023-24

The Director of Communities provided an overview of the Quarter 2 Performance Report with focus on Priorities 3, 4 and 5 as set out in the agenda. Overall, for the three priorities, there were nice targets that had not been met during the second quarter of 2023/24. The Chair invited the Committee to ask questions in priority order.

In relation to Priority 3, the following points arose from questioning:

- In relation to HS-002A, quarter 2 covers the period from July to September so the figures did not relate to those who were currently rough sleeping during the cold weather in January. During cold weather the Council had a severe weather protocol to provide additional support to rough sleepers through service providers such as TearDrops.
- Although the net increase in dwelling stock target (G&P-011) was not being met the number of affordable homes was growing and above target (G&P-012). There were a number of new housing developments due to be built during 2024 which was expected to improve performance against the target. It was expected that 30% of new homes built on green belt land as identified in the Local Plan should be affordable.
- The Empty Home Officer post was currently unoccupied and the decision had been taken not to cover the post due to the recruitment freeze the Council had put

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in place. As such the target for performance indicator HS-003 had been revised down for the year from 70 dwellings to 15 to reflect the capacity of the service at the time; the revised down target was expected to be met by the end of the year based on progress to the end of quarter 2.

In relation to Priority 4, the following points arose from questioning:

- Action to improve performance in relation to performance indicator G&P-007 required a holistic approach involving both Place Services, Health Services (including Public Health) and Adult Social Care due to the health-related nature of the issue. The Ways to Work Service was set up to support people into work and had centres in St Helens and Earlestown for the public to access. The focus of the service was being moved more towards those who are economically inactive due to long term sickness to try to improve performance in this area.
- The numbers of residents affected by long-term sickness had increased following the covid-19 pandemic and was a national issue that could not be fully solved locally. Physical and mental health issues both contributed towards reasons why residents were economically inactive due to long-term sickness.
- Whilst the Ways to Work Service was not able to support residents with their mental and physical health issues to help them back into work directly, they were able to signpost residents to relevant health professionals.

In relation to Priority 5, the following points arose from questioning:

- It was hoped that following the roll out of new recycling receptacles in Autumn 2023 figures in relation to performance indicator ENV-004A, ENV-004B and ENV-005 would show improvement in Quarter 3.
- It was suggested that the roll out of new recycling receptacles had been a success as the Council had received very few complaints from the public. Residents now had twice the capacity for recycling than what would be provided by the comingle bins that were provided by some other local authorities. It was also reiterated that recycling sorted into separate containers was easier to process and had a lower contamination rate than comingle recycling.
- It was suggested that communication by the recycling and waste collection service with residents was good and that messages regarding the importance of recycling and minimising waste were getting through. Members had been encouraged by seeing residents sharing the Council's messaging with their neighbours and supporting the Council's approach.
- The Government had made some minor changes to rules relating to recycling and waste, notably that from April 2026 all local authorities will be required to collect food waste in the way that St Helens already does. It was unknown at this stage what other changes may be forthcoming that would impact the Council's operations.
- It was suggested that there were some issues with the collection of recycling and waste from some flats in the Borough. This linked to changes to the way these buildings were managed meaning the initial design of waste management was no longer working. The Council made weekly, rather than fortnightly, collections at locations where large amounts of waste were an issue.

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- In relation to performance indicator CC-002 the Committee was due to commence a spotlight review as part of its work programme.

It was agreed that officers would provide additional information in relation to questions about performance measures HS-002A, HS-002B, HS-003 and G&P-012 via email following the meeting.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the performance position at Quarter 2 be noted;**
- (2) the actions planned by the Place Services Directorate and services to address specific areas of performance improvement in relation to Priority 3, 4 & 5 be noted; and**
- (3) officers be requested to provide additional information in response to questions from the Committee via email as agreed.**

22 REVIEW OF BUSINESS SUPPORT PROVISION

The Head of Economy provided an overview of the report. The report provided detail on ways in which businesses were supported, how this was funded and changes to funding over time including into the future. It was explained that whilst this report focused on services with a specific business support role funded publicly, there were a number of forms of business support which meant there were a large number of services and other businesses that provided both direct and indirect support to businesses (e.g. planning, recycling and waste collection, accounting and legal services, supplies etc).

The Council was one of several organisations that provided direct business support with public funding with St Helens Chamber and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority being two major providers. The chamber of commerce in St Helens was one of the largest in the country with 25% of business in the Borough being members. The Liverpool City Region Growth Platform was the main conduit into the region for Government grants related to business support the Council supports local businesses to access. Due to budget reductions during austerity, there wasn't currently a specific business support post within the Council and any work undertaken was currently being done by officers in addition to other roles. The Council used to access the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) however, following the UK's exit from the European Union the fund was no longer available in the UK. In April 2022 the UK Government released the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) to replace ERDF for UK organisations however the level of funding was much reduced from what was available through ERDF. The Council had won funding via UKSPF that would fund business support provision from the Council until March 2025 however there was uncertainty about how business support would be funded beyond this.

Members of the Committee asked questions and the following points were raised:

- Work hadn't yet commenced on the low carbon target because the Economy Team did not currently have the resources to support this work. Whilst the Council was committed to this target, due to the Council's current financial situation, there were insufficient resources to commit to this initiative.

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- It was hoped that the Parkside development would help to bring jobs for local residents and boost the economy in St Helens therefore helping local businesses. There were a number of other economic developments planned or in development that would support local businesses to grow.
- The Council worked with local partners, in particular the Liverpool City Region, to lobby Government on the provision or additional funding to provide more support to local businesses over a longer period of time.
- UK Shared Prosperity Funding was to be used to procure a temporary business support service until March 2025, with options for provision after that point dependent on available funding. It was expected that it would take two to three months to complete the process of setting up the service.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the report be noted;**
- (2) the review of the current business support provision in the Borough be endorsed;**
- (3) the potential gap in business support provision be acknowledged by the Committee; and**
- (4) a report on the current state and future of business support provision be submitted to the Committee when funding from the UKSPF had ceased in March 2025.**

Councillor Hodkinson here left the meeting.

23 SCHOOLS CATERING SERVICE

The Committee received a presentation about the Council's Schools Catering Service. The Head of Traded Services for Schools informed the Committee that the Schools Catering Service provided 97% of Primary Schools, five Secondary School and five Special Schools in the Borough with their catering service which was a significantly higher proportion of schools than other local authorities. As well as providing school lunches the Catering Service supported school breakfast clubs, ad hoc events and parents evening as well as operating some commercial ventures such as Willowbees, Taylor Park Café and events at the Town Hall. The Catering Service employed over 300 people, which equated to 15% of the Council's workforce, and most were local residents. The Catering Service's Menu was National School Food Standards Compliant and used regional supplies providing 100% UK produce. The special diets procedure enabled the Catering Service to tailor special diet menus to individual pupils when required. The Catering Service did require some modernisation, particularly through the introduction of digital administration to replace the paper-based approach currently used; efforts were underway with a trail of "SchoolGrid" currently being undertaken. Recent food inflation issues nationally had impacted on the service and were causing cost pressures within budgets for both schools and the Council. A full service review was planned that would look at ways to improve cost recovery, introduce digital systems and increase customer engagement and commercial development.

Members of the Committee asked questions and the following points were raised:

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- Free School Meals uptake based on eligibility was currently below the national average. Detailed figures weren't available during the meeting, but it was suggested that uptake might be lower than the national average due to historical perceptions of school meals and reluctance on the part of some families to apply. During the whole service review the Catering Service would work with each school individually to develop different strategies in each school for increasing uptake of school meals and applications for Free School Meals.
- To date there had not been a dietary requirement of any pupil that the Catering Service could not meet. The Service engaged directly with parents and pupils where an need for a specific menu was identified.
- There was a concern about whether budget pressures would impact on the quality of the service and the food provided. It was a difficult balancing act to try to maintain quality standards whilst dealing with budget pressures such as rising food prices and the need for the Council to reduce spending overall. The Government contributions towards Free School Meals had not increased while food prices had been rising. Catering Service Employees had received a pay rise however they were still among the lowest paid in the Council.
- It was hoped that further success in commercial ventures would help the Catering Service to reduce budget pressures.
- The Catering Service employed 'Planet Friendly Terminology' to promote efforts to reduce the carbon footprint of menus and encourage pupils to engage with different types of meals (e.g. not mentioning that meals were meat free or calling them vegan/vegetarian).
- Members were interested in how the Committee could contribute towards the Catering Service review; the Chair agreed to discuss the idea during the next meeting with Scrutiny Link Officers.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the presentation be noted;**
- (2) officers be requested to provide the additional information regarding Free School Meals via email; and**
- (3) the Chair be requested to discuss the potential involvement of the Committee in the whole service review during the next Chair and Scrutiny Link Officer meeting.**

24 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24

The place services scrutiny work programme was provided to the committee for consideration.

Members were informed that the Housing Voids – Registered Providers Spotlight Review that had been due to report to this Committee meeting had held additional meeting as part of the review which meant the report could not be provided in time. The Chair informed the Committee that the review had been concluded and the report would be presented to the Committee at its next meeting.

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The Scrutiny Support Officer explained that a meeting would be arranged between Scrutiny Chairs and Link Officers to discuss the next Scrutiny cycle of work.

- * **Resolved that the report be noted and the Work Programme agreed.**

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