

PLACE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of this Committee held on
15 April 2024

(Present) **Councillor Hattersley (Chair)**
Councillors Dickinson, Hodkinson, Laird, McCormack, and
O'Connor.

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

25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence was received from Councillor Case and Councillor Pearl

26 MINUTES

* **Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 8 January 2024 be approved and signed.**

27 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS

No Declarations of Interest from Members were made.

28 DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP

No Declarations of Party Whip were made.

29 QUARTER 3 PERFORMANCE REPORT – 2023-24

The Director of Communities, Director of Strategic Growth, and the Assistant Director of Environment and Operations provided an overview of the Quarter 3 Performance Report with focus on Priorities 3, 4 and 5 respectively, as set out in the agenda. Overall, for the three priorities, there were a number of targets that had not been met during the third 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 indicator G&P-011- Number of net increases in dwelling stock, it was highlighted that the target figures in the quarterly performance reports were an annualised breakdown of the total number of homes planned for over the period of the Local Plan and not year on year targets. It was noted that in some years the net increase in dwellings would be below the target figure, and in others it was expected to be above, with the ultimate aim being to achieve the target figure within the Local Plan by the end of the Local Plan period. Furthermore, it was explained that the “cost of living crisis”, and “credit crunch” had impacted on

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delivery, with housing developers choosing to only build sufficient dwellings to meet demand in the near future. It was also noted that some issues with supply of building materials had also caused delays.

Net demolitions has also increased which had impacted on the net figure. It was suggested that the Council was expecting to receive a significant number of applications through the planning process, and progress was being made towards achieving the net increase in dwelling stock target. For example, an application to build 400 new dwellings was to be considered by the Planning Committee the day after this meeting.

- Officers reassured Members that meetings with Registered Providers took place on a quarterly basis and the authority was kept up to date on progress and delays in relation to building new developments.
- A point of concern was raised regarding developments which had been given planning permission but hadn't been progressed leaving sites looking unsightly. Officers noted that the council have maintained contact between Council and developers.
- Members asked questions on SC 001 & SC 002 Number of serious violence offences per 1,000 population & the Percentage rate in repeat victimisation for that domestic violence. Cases were being managed by a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC.) This was a positive development, there had been fewer incidents since the safer streets funding and the subsequent programmes of work. Officers indicated that a full evaluation could be brought to a future meeting of the Committee. There were fewer repeats incidents of domestic violence than during the same quarter of the previous year. Work continued in encouraging domestic abuse victims out of abuse cycles they may have been in and services were working effectively with the individuals concerned.

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

- Concerns regarding the closure of the St Helens Chamber were discussed. Disappointment was expressed for the business community and the Chamber staff affected. In relation to high numbers of residents economically inactive due to long-term sickness (G&P-007) Officers suggested that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) money the Council had access to needed to be focused on more one-to-one support, out in the communities with individuals who were the most hard to reach.
- In absence of the Chamber, the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority had taken the Local Enterprise Partnerships into its remit and provided a business support function. Also, some businesses were meeting to together try to fill the void of the Chamber's function and the Council was working to provide some support to soften the impact.
- The Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Committee had also looked at the long-term sickness concerns in relation to G&P 007 and questioned the work going on with Place and People in work together on helping people back into work. It was suggested that further information about activity in this area can be brought to a future meeting. It was further noted that the People's Board and Place Based ICB Board will receive an update on Ways to Work in May 2024 to try to bring the two conversations together. The St Helens Growth Board, with a focus on the Inclusive Growth Strategy, was considering how to tackle long-term sickness, its impact on

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productivity and on the overall prosperity of the Borough, particularly in relation to mental health. Public Health was a key partner on the Growth Board, which helped to provide expertise in relation to health related issues for businesses and the economy.

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

- It was confirmed that all households had now received the new recycling receptacles. In terms of feedback from residents , a small section of residents were persistently asking for a co-mingle wheely bin for the recycling. The Council had been pleased to see however that a lot of residents were using social media to support the Council's approach to recycling collection and the benefits of it.. However, the Council had not seen a significant increase in in recycling rates so far following the distribution of the new recycling recepticles. It was noted that recycling rates across Merseyside and nationally had stalled or were falling so the Council was performing relatively well. Garden waste collection subscriptions had fallen from previous years and this would have an impact on the levels of residual waste collected. It was suggested that as a discretionary cost residents saw this as a saving when the cost of living had risen. Communications continued and was focused on keeping the messages about importance of recycling going.
- To date there was still no national guidance on waste collection from Government. Officers reassured members that the Local Government Association and relevant trade bodies had been pushing for the guidance to be published so that agencies could plan for the future and be able to update their communications with residents.
- It was not felt that chargeable services such as bulky rubbish and garden waste resulted in increased fly tipping. Charing for garden waste hadn't resulted in increased fly tipping when it was introduced. The vast majority of local authorities do charge now. An increase from 2000 incidents to 3000 incidents a year was recorded but officers did not think there was a correlation with the charging of fees. A significant number of fly tipping incidents were related to household items being dumped in alley ways was mostly connected to households or landlords emptying into contents alleyways. It was further noted that it is not always our residents that were committing fly tipping offenses with examples shared of out of borough offenders being identified and fined.
- There were some flytipping hotspots that officers were aware of, however some incidents were on private land which the Council did not have right to access. With a higher proportion of the Council's land being in certain wards the figures showed higher reports in those areas but these weren't necessarily hotspots for dumping rubbish.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the performance position at Quarter 3 be noted, and**
- (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**

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- (3) **officers be requested to provide information in response to G&P-007, Place and People to work together on helping people back into work, and the evaluation of the Safe Street Programme at a future meeting.**

30 CLIMATE COMMISSION PRESENTATION

The Assistant Director for Environment and Operations provided an update Presentation on progress made by the Climate Commission.

Council emissions had dropped over the last 10 years, with decarbonisation of the national grid identified as a significant contribution to that. Decarbonising vehicles used by the Council also reduced emissions.

Net zero by 2040 was an ambitious target however the action in place since 2021 and progress had been made including outlining the responsibility for the borough and for the Council. Some ambitious targets have been developed, some which the Council had control over, and some that the Council didn't control but could influence.

A number of actions were on track, however some were not. The 2023/24 municipal year was the first year of having specific actions to monitor. Whilst some targets were not being met, good progress was being made across all areas.

Successes identified in the presentation included:

- Gaining access to the Swimming Pool Support Fund.
- Installed 20+ EV charging points and most small vans within the Council's fleet are electric.
- 9 of the Council's most polluting building were being refurbished using £7.5m funding plus 11% of match funding from the Council.
- CYCLOPS cycle scheme completed near Lea Green Train Station.
- Local electric charging infrastructure had been increased.

It was highlighted, that currently the Council did not collect food waste from 80,000 properties. Funding had been obtained to increase food waste collection with bespoke solutions needed to enable residents living in flats to recycle food waste.

Improving insulation in homes and all services are looking at what the effects on the environment are. This was extended to the town centre regeneration and other developments that were being designed to reduce carbon use. Between 30-40 businesses were working with the climate commission to share what they were doing for the environment.

Challenges in relation to achieving the aims of the Climate Commission included, the high capital costs of making modifications to a number of buildings to improve their energy efficiency, staffing shortages with the Climate Officer post being vacant since December 2023 – a new officer was due to start in the post from June 2024, and ongoing engagement with businesses and residents in the Borough regarding their contribution to reducing emissions as the Council was only responsible for 2% of emissions.

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

- The St Helens Heat Network and Carrington Shaw Heat Network would both be separate networks however would not compete with one another. Officers

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confirmed that the two networks could be linked, however they were not required to link were established on standalone business cases.

- The biodiversity net gain project was not a finalised project yet with ongoing work with operation, planning and the Legal requirement of planning as well as the key themes of how the Council supported developments with what they must do and what they could also do. October 2024 the Authority will have clearer idea of what this will look like. It was suggested that this is to be raised at the 2024/25 Place Scrutiny work programming workshop.
- Due to the Council's freeze on further capital expenditure beyond projects already committed to, projects within the Climate Commission required bidding for external funding and being looking for innovative solutions to issues. Officers suggested that neighbouring authorities had received more funding than St Helens and officers were lobbying for St Helens' share of funding to be more equitable.
- Business communities were working together sharing their best practices with each other. NSG (Pilkington Glass) and Knauf, were given as examples of larger businesses within the Borough that were engaged in reducing their carbon emissions and promoting positive impacts. Smaller businesses were also engaged to in efforts to reduce emissions by, for example, fitting solar panels to premises.
- Glass Futures was working to develop cleaner methods of glass manufacture with a move from the use of natural gas.
- Officers highlighted the example of a company in Haydock (EFG UK) which had achieved the B Corp certification for social environmental impact. EFG was commended for its commitment to the Climate Commission and to helping other local businesses with their social and environmental impact.

* **Resolved that the Presentation be noted.**

31 HOUSING VOIDS SPOTLIGHT REVIEW

The Committee Chair presented the report and gave an overview of the Task Group's work and thanked officers and Members for their involvement in the review.

The report presented the evidence submitted to and the findings of the 'Housing Voids' Place Services Scrutiny Committee Spotlight Review, held between 2 October 2023 and 20 November 2023.

The principal purpose of the review was to:

- Engage with a variety of housing partners in the Borough.
- Understand the challenges facing the housing sector.
- Understand the turnover of properties and the number of void properties that exist in the Borough.
- Investigate the work underway to reduce void turnaround times.
- Explore the impact voids have on the Council's statutory housing function.
- Scrutinise the actions undertaken by the Council and partner agencies to address the issues.

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

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- Cabinet Members welcomed the report and noted that the average days void had increased since the review leading to longer delays for tenants entering a property.
- Comments were made on the different approaches between different Registered Providers with regards to void standards and processes. Some providers chose to complete all works before a tenant goes in rather than get a property liveable, with further works completed after tenants had moved in. The Committee agreed that while there was a desire to have nice properties for residents to live in extra work increased waiting times. A comparison was made to how private home owners make refurbishments to homes once they have moved in and this could be done in the rented sector too.
- The Private rented sector also had a responsibility to provide good quality housing and avoid leaving homes empty for long periods between tenants. Members wished to consider how private landlords could be encouraged to engage in a similar piece of work to this one.
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- The national trend was challenging but Members did not want to be complacent in St Helens and continue pushing for residents to get good housing in a timely way.
- The Council had positive operational relationships with all Registered Providers, including those that did not engage with the Task Group's Review. Members were reassured that the Registered Providers forum attendance is good. Some Registered Providers were new to the borough, and the Council encouraged them to engage with services. A number of Registered Providers had a lot of stock in other areas so St Helens may not have been a priority focus.
- In relation to issues raised in the Task Group Report regarding antisocial behaviour within sheltered accommodation it was explained that the anti-social behaviour was related to increased alcohol consumption among some tenants. Officers confirmed that Registered Providers had recognised that the mix of people living in sheltered accommodation needed to be considered and the model of allocating people to sheltered accommodation would be reviewed.

* **Resolved that:**

(1) The Task Group Report and its recommendations as set out in Appendix 1 is approved; and

(2) The recommendations be submitted to Cabinet for response.

32 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS TASK GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS UPDATE

An update report was delivered by the Assistant Director for Housing and Communities which informed Members on the progress made on implementation of the eleven recommendations made by the Violence Against Women and Girls Task Group. Overall, positive progress had been made in the implementation of the recommendations.

The findings of the Task Group directly shaped the Safer Streets Programme for the St Helens nighttime economy and further engagement with schools to ensure that this issue was highlighted in an age-appropriate way with children and young people.

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It was proposed that the Place Services Scrutiny Committee receives a final report on the delivery and impact of the Safer Streets Programme in July 2024 following its conclusion.

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

- Members were Impressed with the number of responses to the survey suggested in recommendation 2 of the Task Group report and Members requested that the findings report be shared with the Committee.
- The Safer Streets 5 funding concluded on 31st March 2024 and provided an opportunity to learn with some new initiatives. Funding to continue work in this area was a challenge. An evaluation exercise to capture feedback from police, owners of bars and customers would be carried out and training for employees in nighttime economy would continue. Officers also stated that safety improvements such as improved street lighting in the town centre had been carried out.
- Officers noted that some data shared with the Council by Merseyside Police (November 2023 March 2024) indicated a 19% reduction in serious violent crimes in St Helens Town Centre.

* **Resolved that:**

(1) the Report be noted, and

(2) The Violence Against Women and Girls Education Staff Survey (June 2023) be shared with the Committee via Email.

33 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24

The Committee considered its work programme.

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.

The Scrutiny officer thanked Members and Officers for their work in what had been a varied and extensive Work Programme during the municipal year.

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

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