

DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 15 September 2020 at 5.50 pm.

PRESENT: Councillor Sacha Gosine (Chairman)
Councillor Brian Garden (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor David J Mote (Substitute)
Councillor Tom Oliver
Councillor Julie A Ozog (Substitute)
Councillor Lucas J Reynolds
Councillor Drew Swinerd (Substitute)

ABSENT: Councillor Sue Butterfill
Councillor Danny Nicklen
Councillor Victoria Oguntope
Councillor Denzil J Reynolds
Councillor Avtar Sandhu MBE

Dartford Borough Council Officers:-

Sher Green	– Strategic Director, External Services
Peter Dosad	– Head of Housing Services

CABINET MEMBERS: Councillor Jeremy Kite MBE Leader of the Council

37. CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed Members and Officers to the second virtual meeting of the Scrutiny Committee in its reduced membership format, to conform to government working guidelines to combat COVID-19, and apologised for the delay in opening the meeting whilst a YouTube connection was secured, to enable the public to observe the proceedings.

He expressed the hope that, following consideration by all Members at the next General Assembly of the Council (GAC) in October, it would be agreed that Council Committees could resume meeting in full going forward, either virtually or in person.

38. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors; Butterfill, Nicklen, Oguntope, D J Reynolds and Sandhu. Councillors Mote, Ozog and Swinerd attended as Substitutes.

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39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

40. CONFIRMATION OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 14 JULY 2020

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 14 July 2020 be confirmed as accurate.

41. URGENT ITEMS

The Chairman confirmed that there were no urgent items for Members to consider.

42. TO CONSIDER REFERENCES FROM OTHER COMMITTEES (IF ANY)

None.

43. REGULATION 9 NOTICE (FORWARD PLAN)

RESOLVED:

That Members note the contents of the Regulation 9 Notice [Forward Plan] for the period 14 August 2020 to 31 December 2020.

44. OPERATION OF THE SEVERE WEATHER EMERGENCY PROTOCOL (SWEP) [DRAW-DOWN]

The report from the Head of Housing Services set out the Council's arrangements for homeless persons, specifically rough sleepers living on the streets during periods of severe weather, utilising the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) operated by all Kent local authorities.

The Chairman advised Members that he had drawn-down the topic on behalf of his Group as a specific follow-up to the Committee's wider discussion of Homelessness in the Borough at its previous meeting in July 2020 [Min. No. 31 refers]. He proposed that debate proceed on the basis that Members had read the report, and that the Head of Housing Services respond to any questions or concerns Members had.

The Head of Housing Services advised the Committee that the Council had a positive record in responding to the needs of rough sleepers in the Borough on a year round basis; not just in winter when SWEP was triggered during times of extreme weather conditions; and included an out-of-hours service to help meet all requests with respect and dignity.

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The report advised Members that the Protocol had been developed in response to the Government's 2011 Plan - 'Vision to End Rough Sleeping: No Second Night Out', primarily to address the growing number of rough sleepers in London, rough sleeper numbers in Dartford were extremely low in comparison. The Council's year round measures, deployed together with partner organisations, more than met the need of the small core rough sleeper cohort in the Borough. In addition to the Council's year round measures, SWEP had been formally activated 9 times in the last 3 year period, to provide emergency accommodation for a total of 6 rough sleepers [report paras 4.1 and 4.2 refer].

In response to specific questions from Members, the Head of Housing Services confirmed the following points:

- On a reactive basis the Council maintained an emergency accommodation help-line, via a duty officer on a 24/7 basis with calls relayed through the Housing Solutions call centre. The DCWS (Dartford Churches Winter Shelter) and Porchlight, had details of the Council's out-of-hours arrangements. Housing Services also issued a press release when SWEP was formally activated [following 3 consecutive days of severe weather];
- The Council's *proactive* measures included searching out Dartford's small but entrenched cadre of rough sleepers in times of severe weather. Detailed arrangements for Winter 2020 were set out in paragraph 6 of the report, and the Council's Housing Solutions Team and Private Sector Manager were already in touch with the DCWS team and Porchlight colleagues to pursue all options;
- The Council had provided financial support to the DCWA scheme for some 5 years including Winter 2019, but the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent Government distancing regulations, meant that the DCWA scheme would not operate in Winter 2020. New measures to accommodate rough sleepers were being pursued, with the possibility of financial support from a Government scheme announced in June 2020. The Council had submitted a funding bid to Government, including an element for Porchlight to support rough sleepers, and the DCWS scheme to continue to employ a support worker [from November 2020 to March 2021] dedicated to the needs of rough sleepers [report para 6.4 refers]. The Council was committed to providing temporary accommodation for rough sleepers throughout the winter months, irrespective of Government funding, and believed that the majority of the cohort in Dartford had already been accommodated under the Government's COVID-19 lock-down measures to assist rough sleepers off the streets.

The Leader of the Council, in attendance as Cabinet Chairman to respond to Members' questions, commended the report to the Committee. It highlighted in detail, the Council's year round measures to accommodate rough sleepers and the homeless in Dartford, not just in winter when SWEP was triggered by severe weather conditions.

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He advised that in terms of SWEP, the Council employed its own enhanced local criteria, which triggered the Protocol after only 1 day of severe weather, rather than the 3 consecutive days required by the Protocol. The Council's proactive policy to meet the needs of rough sleepers in Dartford year round, and in advance of winter, had been bolstered in 2020 by Government funding to combat the effects of COVID-19. This had enabled the Council to accommodate rough sleepers in Dartford safely and securely well in advance of winter. The Council's financial support of the DCWS scheme in the past, had facilitated the employment of a dedicated support worker, to help guide and assist entrenched 'rough sleepers' to achieve a permanent 'housing solution' and positive life-style change going forward, and it was hoped this would continue into 2021.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Housing Services for his comprehensive report and for responding to Members' questions, and the Leader of the Council for his comments.

He said that he was re-assured with the Council's implementation of SWEP, which went above and beyond the terms required under the Protocol, and noted the Council's year round efforts to assist rough sleepers and the homeless. He asked whether SWEP could be invoked to address all weather conditions e.g. heatwaves, torrential rain not just severe cold.

The Leader of the Council advised that SWEP was primarily invoked in times of severe cold weather, when the lives of rough sleepers on the streets were at direct risk. He understood that the Protocol could be invoked in response to any severe weather conditions, but in the UK context, severe heat or torrential rain were rarely if ever life-threatening: the threat to life was the key to invoking SWEP. It would be for central government to invoke SWEP on a regional basis in response to e.g. a storm or severe flooding, and the Council would follow that guidance as required/necessary.

In response to a follow-up question from the Chairman, the Leader clarified for the record, that the Council would always invoke SWEP proactively in circumstances that posed clear and present danger to the health of its known rough sleeper cohort. It would also act in accordance with any subsequent measures central government might advocate for all/any weather conditions, as appropriate.

The Head of Housing Services advised Members that his staff were fully aware of the needs of Dartford's resident rough sleeper cohort, and endeavoured to meet those needs on a daily basis throughout the year, given the underlying health issues suffered by many rough sleepers.

In the Dartford context, SWEP addressed a need that was already being met by the Council through its day to day measures, had only been deployed twice recently, and never to his recollection, for 3 consecutive days. The Coronavirus pandemic, and the subsequent Government funding initiative to safeguard rough sleepers, had enabled the Council to provide temporary

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accommodate to the cohort well in advance of winter, and provided a once in a life-time opportunity to eradicate rough sleeping in Dartford.

RESOLVED:

That Members note the report.

45. WORK PLAN UPDATE

RESOLVED:

That Members note the updated Work Plan for the remainder of the 2020-21 municipal cycle, attached as Appendix A to the report.

The meeting closed at 6.20 pm

Councillor S N Gosine
CHAIRMAN