

Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board

Council Chamber, County Hall, Worcester

Wednesday, 29 March 2023, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Tom Wells (Chairman), Cllr Alan Amos (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Alastair Adams, Cllr Brandon Clayton, Cllr Steve Mackay and
Cllr Emma Stokes

Also attended:

Hannah Perrott, Assistant Director for Communities
Sharon Caldwell, Registration and Coroners Services Manager
Samantha Morris, Overview and Scrutiny Manager
Emma James, Overview and Scrutiny Officer

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 30 January and 27 February 2023 (previously circulated).

(Copies of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes).

1307 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Councillors Dormer and Webb, the Council Leader Simon Geraghty and Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities, Marcus Hart.

1308 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

1309 Public Participation

None.

1310 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 30 January and 27 February 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

1311 Update on the Worcestershire Response to the Homes for Ukraine Scheme - One Year On

The Assistant Director for Communities introduced the update and reminded the Board that it was now over a year since the launch of the Homes for Ukraine Scheme for those fleeing the war in Ukraine. She added that Worcestershire was absolutely punching above its weight in supporting the Scheme.

Further to the information set out in the report, there would now be some additional funding to support English as a Second Language (ESOL) learning, in recognition that this would be a big step in helping Ukrainians into employment.

The Head of Registration, Coroners and the Resettlement Service made the following additional points:

- The Scheme was based on a 'One Worcestershire' approach, with the Council's role centered around initial support and ongoing assistance, and District Councils being the front facing part in looking after Ukrainian guests and hosts.
- Hosts had made a huge leap of faith in welcoming Ukrainians into their homes.
- The experience had presented challenges to the District Councils, being a new experience to them, therefore the move to consolidate the workforce involved in the Scheme had worked very well.
- The local data recording system created to fill the gaps in the national system had been a very important tool in co-ordinating support and awareness of any issues for guests or hosts.
- Every child had been offered a primary or secondary school place and the Council was working with the District Councils to offer post-16 education.
- The main challenges related to education, mental health and housing.
- Guests may choose to move to their own accommodation for a variety of reasons, including wanting to settle permanently.

The Chairman invited questions, which were grouped as follows:

Funding

- The question was asked about the number of Ukrainian refugees who had arrived this year, which the Officers would confirm (believed to be around 150). The Officers pointed out that from January 2023 the amount provided to Local Authorities per person had reduced from

£10,500 to £5,900, however there was now funding specifically for housing, including a pot of £150m to provide support in general as well as a £500m Local Authority Housing Fund.

- The Officers would verify whether the tax-free thankyou payment to host families was declarable as part of income declared to the Inland Revenue.
- In response to a question about the reasons for the dramatic reduction in funding per refugee from January 2023, the Officers advised that no formal explanation had been given, although separate funding was now available for housing, as referred to.
- In response to further concern about a potential shortfall in funding in the absence of any guarantees on the amounts which would be allocated to Worcestershire from the separate funding pots, the Officers clarified that District Councils were invited to bid for the £500m fund, however it was not yet known how the further £150m fund would be apportioned.
- The Officers would confirm which District Councils had been successful in bidding for the Local Authority Housing Fund and what the pooled funding of £10,500 per person had been spent on – examples included home to school transport, bus passes, DBS checks and adult learning.
- The Assistant Director explained that the Council had taken a cautious approach to using the funding, recognising that refugees' needs would go beyond the first year and that the Council was expected to manage allocation of the one-off amount of money over the three years of the Scheme. It was confirmed that just short of a third of funding received was as yet unallocated
- The Officers confirmed that a refugee's status and any benefits for themselves or their children would not be affected by any permanent relationships formed whilst in the country. Whilst the Scheme was being viewed as a three year programme, it was true that some refugees were looking to make the United Kingdom their permanent home, and would have the option to apply for indefinite residency.
- It was confirmed that some Ukrainian settlers had been recruited to help new people settle, on a fixed term basis, which may lead to permanent opportunities for some.

Education

- Whilst praising success with school offers, the Chairman sought further detail about the proportion of Ukrainian children in school as well as any being home educated. The Officers were not aware of any significant issues with accessing education. There had been 2 or 3 issues with placing children with special educational needs in specialist provision but these had since been resolved. The figure of 352 referred to places offered and children now in school, and while there was a small gap between this and the 389 children who had arrived, places were being offered all the time and the figure may have since increased – the number who had arrived through the Scheme who had not been offered a school place/were not in school since the Report was drafted in

February would be verified. Officers were unaware of any children being home educated place but would check.

- In terms of knowing the number of Ukrainian school age children in Worcestershire, it was explained that when families passed through border control to enter the country, a national system alerted the Council. The Assistant Director acknowledged that some people may have entered the area via other means, however the risk of children not being known was managed with partners in the same way as for other children including the gypsy and traveller community, as part of safeguarding responsibilities.
- The Chairman expressed concern that there was not more clarity about a possible cohort of unknown refugees who may have arrived, however the Assistant Director believed figures would be low, based on earlier analysis – the Council could not proactively contact people which is why it was part of wider partnerships to promote the importance of school applications, GP registration etc; it was about how the Council influenced rather than controlled.
- A Panel member commented that it was unlikely that families would come to the country and not want their children to access schools.
- Allocation of funding to schools was explained - funds allocated to the Council, once claimed from the Department for Education, would then be passported to schools, using a sliding scale across the academic year.
- A Panel member asked about feedback from schools about the sufficiency of funding and any particular issues, for example to support any identified special educational needs and the Officers would check with Worcestershire Children First (WCF). Education funding was often debated in Worcestershire, however the funding under the Scheme was comparable to other refugee programmes. Anecdotal feedback suggested that some of the support put in place for example to help with trauma would also benefit other pupils and the main area of need had been around English Language support.
- The Officers would confirm schools with especially high numbers of Ukrainian pupils, which would likely be in the Malvern and Wychavon districts, which had the highest numbers of Ukrainian families.
- There was no difference in funding for local authority or academy schools.

Housing

- A Panel member raised the issue of the scarcity of available housing in Worcester City Council area (of which he was a member) since he was not aware of additional capacity as a result of Scheme funding. Housing was so important for the Scheme, which he strongly supported and he sought assurance that Ukrainian guests would have priority for what was a very limited amount of housing in Worcester, and under pressure from other groups. The Officers acknowledged the acute issues with housing stock but did not have knowledge about operational processes around housing, which was a District Council responsibility. It was important to work to try and find a way and there were schemes

designed for to help. The £500m Local Authority Housing Fund was to support homes for refugees from both Ukraine and Afghanistan.

- It was agreed that District Council housing officer/s should be invited to any future update.

The Role of the District Councils

- The Chairman asked for assurances about welfare and safeguarding for guests and the Officers explained that the District Councils welcomed Ukrainian guests on arrival, gave them their initial payment and provided ongoing support either through a visit or by phone, dependent on need. Hosts did a fantastic job in helping guests to settle in all sorts of ways and a balanced approach was taken, with appropriate signposting about local services, benefits and the community, without overloading guests with information. Hosts or guests would highlight any concerns about safeguarding etc which, if appropriate, would go through the normal County Council procedures.
- The number of guests who had arrived at the time of writing the report was 1104, although this figure was likely to have changed since then.
- In response to a question about data on the number of Ukrainian guests who had been victims or perpetrators of crime, the Officers were not aware of any instances, however the Council did not collect this type of data, and another Panel member suggested this would likely be held by the Police.
- The reasons for the high numbers of hosts in Malvern and Wychavon was not known but was applauded.

The Role of the Council

- The Officers were not aware of any problems where language barriers had prevented safeguarding issues being resolved and there was access to language support.
- The Officers acknowledged a point made that any allocation of additional funding to the NHS to support additional mental health needs specifically for the Scheme would not necessarily increase the availability of this service, and they could only encourage NHS colleagues.

Other

- Commenting that there was no indication as to the length of the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, yet processes and strategies needed to move ahead in order to respond, the Chairman asked the Officers about their main concerns. The Assistant Director reiterated that Worcestershire was absolutely punching above its weight in terms of support for the Scheme, yet it was a worry to know how support would continue including that to address the trauma experienced by guests and to support education – a massive thank you was due to hosts, and she encouraged education colleagues to fly the flag for education funding for Worcestershire. A sliding scale to the funding for the Scheme would help with planning, which was the case with other resettlement funding.

Everyone agreed that Worcestershire hosts had shown huge generosity in taking Ukrainian people into their homes, and that the County's offer as highest in the West Midlands was to be commended. Cllr Stokes also praised the work and contribution carried out by volunteers.

The Chairman thanked the Officers for attending, and while it was hoped that a further update would not be required, this would be reviewed if the war continued.

1312 Refresh of the Scrutiny Work Programme 2023/24

The Board considered the draft 2023/24 Work Programme as part of the overall refresh of Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Work Programmes, and agreed the following actions:

Update on the relocation of Redditch Library – timing was important, to enable pre-scrutiny of proposals prior to Cabinet's consideration in May, therefore the update would be scheduled for either the OSPB or the Corporate and Communities O&S Panel, whichever meeting date fitted the timescale.

Draft Scrutiny Report: Developer-funded Highways Infrastructure and Section 278 Technical Approval – the Lead Member of the Task Group, Cllr Adams requested a new date for the OSPB 27 April meeting, so that he would be able to attend. The Scrutiny Officers would confirm the date, provisionally agreed for 28 April.

Annual Crime and Disorder Meeting – the Lead Member, Cllr Udall would give consideration to invitees.

Royal Mail Service – would be added to the Work Programme.

1313 Scrutiny Chairmen (and Lead Member) Update and Cabinet Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Panel Chairmen/Lead Members provided an update on recent Scrutiny meetings and activities.

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Cllr Emma Stokes)

The Panel's recent meeting had been very good and had included trialling use of Power-Bi.

Following discussion of residential roadshows, the Panel had recommended a greater councillor presence and more effective use of future roadshows as a marketing tool. Discussion of income generation on green spaces had shown that an aspirational approach was desired.

An outcome of the In-year Budget Monitoring update was a question about the difference between gross and net income and the fact that the Panel was in effect unable to scrutinise operational costs which related to capitalisation. The

Council's Section 151 Officer was looking into this, which may also be relevant to the other Scrutiny Panels.

The Councillor Portal had been added to the Work Programme.

Environment Overview and Scrutiny Meeting (Cllr Alastair Adams)

The Panel's recent meeting had been very positive and had included an update on flooding with representatives from Severn Trent, the Environment Agency, and District Council officers. The number of alleviation schemes and improvements was pleasing.

Services related to the Environment were below budget, which was good. Regarding performance, progress was being made in many areas including technical approval of Section 278 infrastructure schemes – the Task Group Report on this topic was almost finalised and it was pleasing to see improvements being made.

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Cllr Brandon Clayton)

The Committee's last meeting had sought assurances on the Hillcrest Mental Health Ward following concerns about safety and staffing raised by the Care Quality Commission, and the inspection report would be considered at a future meeting.

The Chief Executive of Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust (Acute Trust) had provided an update about elective surgery. 7 Further operating theatres at the Alexandra Hospital would mean that all types of elective surgery would now take place there, which was fantastic news for Worcestershire residents. It was unfortunate that the Chief Executive was leaving and would be important to recruit the right person as his successor.

The adoption of monthly meetings would continue for the foreseeable future.

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Cllr Steve Mackay)

Home to school transport had been discussed at the Panel's recent meeting, which had raised attention to this area. The Service was demand led and there had been a particular increase in numbers of children with special educational needs, with the county's rural nature and driver recruitment being further issues – factors which could create 'the perfect storm'. The Council was carrying out a holistic review of this statutory service, and the Panel had requested a further update. The Chairman of the Environment O&S Panel had also attended and raised points about managing the ongoing situation. Board members were pleased that this important area involving a significant budget, was being looked at.

The Panel had also looked at 2022 educational outcomes and key stage attainment, and these showed a fall at key stage 2 (15% compared to 18% nationally), especially for disadvantaged children, however for looked after

children it appeared that targeted intervention following the Covid-19 pandemic had worked.

Regarding OFSTED school inspections, 83% of primary and secondary schools were rated as outstanding or good, which was just below the national average of 86%. Board members queried why performance for Worcestershire was below the national average, and the Chairman believed that school leaders and engagement in Worcestershire was exceptional. The Board also discussed the possibility that the OFSTED regime may be at fault or lack consistency, and that the regime may be reviewed following recent national media attention.

Crime and Disorder (Cllr Richard Udall) – nothing to report.

The Chairman referred to the imminent retirement of Sheena Jones, Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager and sought approval to place on record the Board’s appreciation and recognition of her support to the Council and in particular her championing of Scrutiny, which was agreed by all Board members.

The meeting ended at 12.00 pm

Chairman