

Cheltenham Borough Council Overview & Scrutiny Committee Minutes

Meeting date: 20 November 2023

Meeting time: 6.00 pm - 7.50 pm

In attendance:

Councillors:

Tabi Joy (Chair), Graham Beale, Nigel Britter, Jackie Chelin, Stephan Fifield, Emma Nelson, Julian Tooke and Suzanne Williams

Also in attendance:

Claire Hughes (Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer), Martin Stacy (Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager), Nigel Potter (Housing Enabling Officer), Paul Tuckey (Housing Enabling Officer) and Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive), Councillor Rowena Hay, Chris Nelson (PCC, Gloucestershire), DI Gav Morgan, Andrew Roughan (Chief Executive of Plexal), Bruce Gregory (Founder and MD of Hub8)

1 Apologies

Councillor Smith sent his apologies.

2 Declarations of interest

Councillor Nelson declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7.

Councillor Fifield confirmed with the Monitoring Officer that working in the area of housing and homelessness in his role at Gloucestershire County Council does not constitute a prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 8.

3 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 October were approved and signed as a true record.

4 Public and Member questions, calls for actions and petitions

None had been received on this occasion.

5 Cabinet Briefing

The Leader was delighted to share the good news that the council has just been awarded in principle £20m from the Levelling Up Fund, towards the Golden Valley Development, after an earlier bid was unsuccessful due to not fully fitting the criteria. She said this was down to the council's commitment to the project, hard work from Members and officers, lobbying, and the support of the local MP to put the bid in. Not only does it de-risk the borrowing and whole project, but it secures GCHQ going into Golden Valley, which in turn secures Plexall going in and all the other organisations which have expressed interest.

Regarding CBH, she confirmed that the process was continuing, with the main focus on consultation with tenants and leaseholders. Officers are hoping to appoint an independent supplier with expertise in housing to undertake the tenant consultation in the next few weeks, starting before Christmas but allowing extended time to respond. GE has met with all service heads at CBH to hear their views.

The Chief Executive said that his first job is to listen to CBH colleagues, and he has met and had positive and in-depth discussions with the various heads of service, using the opportunity to provide reassurance and answer all questions across the different service areas. He confirmed that the independent consultation provider will be appointed before Christmas and make allowance for the busy period. He said that his message to CBH colleagues was in reality not to expect the TUPE process to begin until early 2024, but he has asked CBC heads of service to be available to talk to CBH teams and colleagues when invited to do so, and provide reassurance to employees about the transfer. They should be clear that this isn't necessarily about expecting CBH to adopt CBC's culture, but about shaping a new culture together for a new joint organisation. There will be more to update when the consultation dates are in place.

He finished by saying that the 2021 and 2023 Campbell Tickell reports highlighted a number of areas where the council was advised to strengthen partnership work between CBC and CBH to make efficiencies; this work continues and will be ongoing while the consultation is underway.

6 Matters referred to committee

There were none.

7 Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) / Operational Policing

The Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) commented that he had received and responded to eight written questions, adding that it would be useful to have received these more in advance to allow more time to answer. The Chair said that the

committee is testing out a new system of sending questions in advance and thanked him for his feedback.

He highlighted the following issues:

- getting out of special measures imposed by HM Inspectorate, in record time and faster than any other force. This was significant, as the force had had to work hard to address six inadequate ratings;
- the one outstanding issue, concerning the control room and answer times for 999 and 101 calls, will hopefully be sorted by January;
- the adoption of a new enhanced operating model (EOM) in June this year. It is not yet up the full strength but will result in all sorts of improvements across the force – better arrest rates, more investigations, crimes dealt within half the time, response to Grade 2 emergencies 30% faster. It is a continuous improvement model, and won't be fully working until next June, but there is a lot to feel good about;
- as an example, the solved rate of crime in Cheltenham and Tewkesbury is over 30% in neighbourhood policing, the area of most concern to residents, including anti-social behaviour and household burglaries. This is a great credit to the local teams and a major achievement - the best in the county - and compares very favourably with an average solved crime rate of 10-15% around the country.

Chief Inspector Gav Morgan (GM) confirmed that the EOM has meant a restructure of how daily business is carried out, and while it has taken a while to find the right level and resulted in a few struggles for neighbourhood policing, with the help of the PCC and other departments, it is beginning to show real results, including a 38% detection rate in Cheltenham last month.

He confirmed that:

- the terms of reference of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) have been reviewed with Tracey Birkinshaw (Director of Community and Economic Development), resulting in more focussed, multi-agency, problem-solving meetings feeding into the CSP, and a sub-group led by Inspector Mike Yates working with partners and stakeholders. This will progress in the new year;
- there has been a lot more work around plain clothes policing, as a result of concerns around the night-time economy and the vulnerability of young females. With the help of Safer Streets funding, an operation is being developed to help target the perpetrators intent on causing harm;
- work has been carried out around the 'Clear, Hold, Build' initiative with the council, in The Moors and St Peter's areas, with a second meeting scheduled to start developing and pushing that forward;
- a lot of work on bike thefts is underway, with Safer Streets funding used for better signage and QR codes resulting in better recovery of bikes. Marking bikes makes it easier to return them to their owners.

Member questions

Members thanked CN and GM for doing a great job in difficult circumstances.

A Member asked about the ONS crime survey of England and Wales, which includes reported and unreported crime to give the most accurate and authoritative national crime figures. He had been unable to find the figures for Gloucestershire, and with reported wait times of up to six hours on 101 calls, felt that this must result in many crimes going unrecorded.

GM had not seen the report, and could not provide these figures for Gloucestershire or comment on the trend in crime overall in the county based on such data. He said the solved rate only relates to reported crime, and in particular neighbourhood crime. As part of the new operating model, neighbourhood teams are listening to communities to learn what causes the issues; they are taking ownership of individual investigations and solving crimes more quickly.

The Member was particularly worried about 101 calls, particularly for hate crime and other sorts of crime which were less likely to be reported, and felt it would be good to know the full figures of both reported and unreported crime, as a benchmark against which Gloucestershire can measure itself. CN confirmed that the crime survey for England and Wales was the gold standard, and people will talk to the ONS about crimes which they won't necessarily report to the police. While providing an accurate national representation, it is problematic to extract county-level data from the survey, which is why he has initiated a 'Perceptions of Crime' survey, focussed on Gloucestershire. The first one has just been carried out, and after a few years, it will be possible to cross reference with the ONS survey and see any trends.

Regarding 101 calls, he conceded that there is still some work to do, but made the following points:

- the Force Control Room (FCR) handles 999 and 101 calls, and now responds to 999 calls in 6-7 seconds (national target is 10 seconds), which is three times better than a year ago. The target for a response to 101 calls is two minutes, and although it is currently twice that, significant improvements are being made;
- 20 new call handlers are joining the FCR in January, which will improve matters;
- a call-back facility is going to be added to the automatic answer machine - which gives different options but sometimes keeps people waiting a very long time in busy periods. Callers can leave their number and be called back when wait times are shorter;
- an ASB portal was introduced a couple of months ago for people to report ASB, and this seems to be going well;
- a digital desk will be introduced to the FCR in the new year, offering live chats on the website which is currently constrained by the national model and not the easiest to use. He feels that talking to a human will be a much better way to engage with the public, but made the point that by making it easier to report crimes on 101, the crime figures will go up. ASB is under-recorded by 50%, male violence to females by 80%, as well as rural crime, shop lifting, scams and fraud – many of these crimes are currently unreported;
- various procedures are in place to make it easier to report crime and to cope with the subsequent surge in calls, including a triage group and the offer of

overtime for officers – with the added bonus that they will bring huge experience and be able to advise other police officers and call handlers who aren't as familiar with the crime world as warranted officers.

A Member spoke about a recent outbreak of ASB in Warden Hill, and residents' concern about the length of time it took to report it on 101 or the website. Some of the offences – such as speeding vehicles and e-bikes and scooters being ridden dangerously on pavements – are gone in seconds, and the length of time it takes to report them via 101 makes the information useless. He understood improvements were underway and the force operates within the national framework, but the service wasn't good enough at the moment.

CN said he recognises the problem with 101 response times, despite adding 30% resource at the beginning of the year, and made the following points in response:

- retention and replacement of staff has been an issue – a lot of call-handlers move to other areas of police staffing or become officers or PCRs themselves. Courses for 20 new recruits rather than 10 have been introduced, and with the additional 20 starting in January, answering times should improve;
- there has been a big national increase in 999 calls this year – the post-Covid world is more needy and vulnerable, there are more people with complex mental health needs, and issues such as truancy, self-harm and suicide on the increase. This places additional pressure on the force control room;
- a switchboard will be introduced so that calls are answered more quickly initially; the caller may have another wait depending on who they need to speak to, but hopefully it will result in greater encouragement to stay on the line. The current abandonment rate on 101 calls is 30-40%; it should be 10-15%, and will hopefully be driven down after January;
- regarding Warden Hill, it's clear that difficulties in reporting ASB discourage people from trying – there are not many actual reports despite a significant number of concerned residents – but with the introduction of improved systems and the 38% solved crime rates, the trajectory of improvement is good.

GM added the following comments:

- the problem with e-scooters has escalated in the last year or so, and people should be encouraged to reach out to their neighbourhood policing team or PCSO as soon as possible if they cannot get through on 101. If there are no figures to indicate a hotspot, resources won't be directed to where the problem is, and even reporting the following day will enable information to be gathered and hotspots identified;
- regarding dangerous driving and e-scooters, an operation is being put together with extra measures to tackle the problem, including plain clothes patrols and smart water;
- the road policing team is getting an uplift of over 10 constables and three sergeants already recruited to start in the new year, giving greater capacity to patrol hotspot areas;
- officers are also going into schools to educate young people, and plain clothes operations are targeting individuals.

CN added that a mail drop will shortly be sent to every house in the county, with clear, concise, easy-to-read advice on the best way to contact the police. He also advised that £1m will be spent next year on reinforcing neighbourhood policing, with an additional 25-30 PCSO officers, working in tight teams to tackle ASB hotspots, maybe for 3-4 months at a time to really sort the problem out. This will be more effective than spreading the additional officers across the county, give people the reassurance of seeing more officers in uniform, and hopefully reduce long-term demand by preventing crime from happening in the first place.

The Chair thanked CN and GM for their updates, and looked forward to seeing the outcomes next year.

8 Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

Martin Stacy (MS) thanked the committee for the opportunity to speak, and began by saying that everything his team does has its roots in the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. This was reviewed last year, with homelessness and rough sleeping highlighted as two separate priorities, rather than a single priority as was previously the case. This was because although there is an overlap, both require a distinct focus. Rough sleeping has its own set of challenges, and a different range of commissioned services is required to get people off the street, to engage with support services, and ultimately to live independently. Both priorities are complex areas requiring a range of solutions and approaches and a significant amount of collaborative work across partnerships – the briefing paper gives assurance of that.

He went on to say that all priorities in the Housing Strategy – including increased provision of affordable housing, making the best use of existing stock, and creating cohesive and sustainable communities – support the efforts to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping, and although Members are only focussing on those two priorities here, it is worth noting the wider housing strategy. It is accompanied by an action plan, setting out key indicators across the priority areas, which will be updated each year and reported to Cabinet as an opportunity to reflect on the key achievements of the previous 12 months.

Paul Tuckey (PT) also welcomed the opportunity to share what is happening in housing options which covers homelessness and preventative techniques, taking both a proactive and reactive approach when people are threatened with homelessness. He highlighted the following aspects of his team's work:

- the journey which began five years ago when the Homelessness Reduction Act widened the service within homelessness, enabling a more preventative approach. Since then, 6-7 colleagues have joined the team, various initiatives have been undertaken, including early intervention for rough sleepers and additional assistance to prevent people from being evicted from their homes;
- they also manage the Homeseeker Plus Housing Register for people seeking social housing, to help them get the most suitable accommodation;
- the report covers the last two years, but emerging issues this year are the rise in the number of homeless applications and rough sleepers due to loss of private rented accommodation; more people needing additional support for mental health and

addiction issues; pressures on other services, such as rising numbers of people no longer able to stay in mental health accommodation, prison releases and the rise in people with refugee status following the closure of hotels.

Member questions

A Member was aware of the number of complex issues causing the increase in homelessness, many of which aren't the responsibility of CBC. He understood that people were falling through the gaps with adult social care, and wondered how CBC is working with Gloucestershire County Council to prevent further homelessness on account of this.

PT said from an operational point of view, a lot of work with statutory and non-statutory agencies was being undertaken, and a duty to refer system was in place, whereby statutory agencies are required to refer people to the council prior to them becoming homeless. His team is doing what it can at the earliest stage to fill the gaps, but other agencies are under pressure with resources. Working groups across the county, housing teams, mental health services, social care and other bodies are all working together on this.

MS added that CBC has a number of partnerships across the county. GCC recognises that solutions are multi-faceted, and has a new multi-disciplinary team focussing on mental health and adult social care – the most difficult areas to reach group. Work is also ongoing in hubs and Housing First - small steps but heading in the right direction in an extremely challenging area with limited resources.

In response to a further Member question, PT said the Homes for Ukraine scheme is still open for people already on the scheme and staying with host families, but not for new families. CBC and CBH have purchased 21 properties under the Local Authority Housing Fund Scheme, which can be let to people in the most precarious situations. The Homes for Ukraine fund is administered by the county council to help people with incentives, helping hosts to continue to provide accommodation, helping with private rented accommodation, enhanced payments and additional assistance if needed.

Regarding other refugees, recent hotel closures and the increase in the number of people receiving positive decisions on their asylum claims has led to more people seeking assistance. The council is doing what it can and exploring all options to provide accommodation and prevent people from becoming homeless.

In response to a Member question about winter weather plans, PT confirmed that a severe weather protocol is in place from 01 November to the end of March, ensuring that suitable, local accommodation is available to assist people. The council works with a number of local support providers, and last week facilitated a benefit housing event hosted by the YMCA, to engage with people from different communities and faith groups who may be able to help with accommodation or time.

He ended by saying that the council has a successful housing-led programme in conjunction with CBH, which tries to ensure people with complex mental health and addiction needs get the wraparound support they need, to try and ensure any tenancy is long term and sustainable, and prevent them from getting caught up in a cycle of losing the tenancy and being back on the streets.

The Leader added that she attended a meeting of leaders from around the county last week, with all areas facing rising homelessness as a result of the speed-up of visa approvals. It

was a call to arms from all county districts to identify any spare capacity of land, buildings, or land for modular builds, to help the situation.

The Cabinet Member for Housing gave heartfelt thanks to colleagues at CBC and CBH, saying the increase in homelessness in the last 12 months is a huge problem, and is giving rise to serious worries about how local councils will manage. Cheltenham is coping at present, but is already exploring options going forward. The Faith in Housing event was a call-out to the Cheltenham community, including anyone with a second home which they might make available for desperate people. She said there are many reasons why someone might lose their home, and the local housing allowance is £200 short of rental of the most basic accommodation in Cheltenham. She was able to confirm that an outbound communications channel is being set up across Cheltenham for all types of community and faith groups, to provide more access to more people about what is needed and how people can support it and get more information.

The Chair asked for information about this to be shared with Members, and thanked officers for all they were doing.

9 Feedback from other scrutiny meetings attended

Councillor McCloskey's feedback from the Gloucestershire Economic Growth O&S Committee (31 October 2023) had been circulated and was taken as read.

10 Updates from scrutiny task groups

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that the CBH Scrutiny Task Group met earlier in the day and had made some additions to the one-page strategy included in the agenda pack: clarification of membership of the group, establishing an end date, and consideration of co-opting tenants, other stakeholders and Cabinet Members onto the group to discuss matters.

Members and officers made further suggestions which were added. The Monitoring Officer and Chair confirmed that communication channel would be kept open, with the task group updating when they had anything to share, and the Leader giving regular updates to the Committee.

11 Review of scrutiny workplan

The Chair confirmed that accessibility would be considered in the new year, and encouraged Members to suggest items for the workplan at any time.

12 Any other item that the Chair determines to be urgent

There was no other business.

13 Date of next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for 15 January 2024.

14 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 - EXEMPT INFORMATION

The committee voted unanimously on the recommendation to approve the following resolution:-

That in accordance with Section 100A(4) Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining agenda items as it is likely that, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, if members of the public are present there will be disclosed to them exempt information as defined in paragraph 3, Part (1) Schedule (12A) Local Government Act 1972, namely:

Paragraph 3: Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information

15 Minster Exchange

The Chair introduced the item, saying Members had been on a very interesting tour that afternoon, and invited the speakers to introduce themselves.

Andrew Roughan (AR), Chief Executive of Plexal, said he acquired a majority share in Workshop Group in January 2023. Building clusters round science and technology, Plexal inspires and provides fuel for growth and employment across seven sites in the UK (London, Cheltenham, Manchester). He is happy to share the scale and competence of Plexal to support Hub8, and said that 2024 promises to be an exciting year, not only because of where and what MX is in itself, but because it creates a town-based bridge to the Golden Valley Cyber Park.

Bruce Gregory (BG) introduced himself as the founder and MD of Hub8 and Director of CyNam. He said Hub8 launched a co-working space at the Brewery Quarter in 2019 to support cyber-tech in Cheltenham, and was followed by a second site at Gloscol's Cheltenham campus in 2021. With Plexal, the National Cyber Security Centre Innovation Centre has opened in Cheltenham town centre, resulting in Hub8 currently running three very successful sites across the town. These contribute to the town's economic growth, and MX offers huge opportunity for continued growth, embedded in the fabric of the town. It is a great way to celebrate some amazing companies, and bring together the creative and cultural activities for which the town is known.

The Chair thanked AR and BG. Several Member questions and responses had been circulated, and she invited further questions.

A Member began by saying he uses Hub8 a lot in his business life, and it provides an excellent place to work – well resourced, fantastic staff and amenities. He congratulated AR and BG, adding that he'd expected there to be challenges at the Gloscol site but in fact it works well and businesses enjoy using the site.

Member questions

The Chair said she enjoyed the visit earlier in the day, having attended a planning event earlier in the summer, and wondered if it was worth inviting other Members to visit the site to see how it is progressing. BG said he would be delighted and welcomed the opportunity to show Members round. In relation to the Gloscol site, he said this location is pioneering – there are not many other further education colleges in the UK with industry embedded as here. The positive impact on the students is something to celebrate and he would be happy for Members to visit that site too.

A Member asked what lessons have been learnt, how relationships with clients are developing, and how the buildings are being used to suit clients' needs. BG confirmed that his company had been on a huge learning curve since 2019, about what the community needs and how best to serve that need. MX allows companies to grow, an important component, and Hub8 is taking time to build relationships, get to know the community and understand its needs, to create a safe and trusted environment.

He said that the place itself is the easy part, bringing the community together, stimulating conversations, offering a great programme of events, and making sure there is good tea and coffee – every little detail makes a difference. They have applied what they have learnt, resulting in a nice mix of different spaces in MX not achieved at other co-working sites – open plan space, private meeting rooms, phone booths, private offices. By understanding the high demands of companies and the way they work – they may have 50 employees but only need office space for 6-10 on a regular basis – this results in high and sustainable utilisation of the space.

He said they also understand how to position the different areas of MX and use 'engineered serendipity' to ensure members experience it in the best way, such as having the highest volume of hot-desking on the top floor, which drives vibrancy and movement within the building.

AR said his experience at the Olympic Park had demonstrated the ripple effect, how jobs and productivity grow and thrive in this type of environment, and how under the NCSC banner 71 companies have started their journey in Cheltenham. The unique opportunity offered by MX and the evolution of Hub8's team there is a dress rehearsal for the Golden Valley development.

BG added that the first member Hub8 welcomed through NCSC opened in September 2019 with two desks in the Brewery Quarter, with the intention of trying it out for a year. One year later, they had 20 employees, and now have 50, with many new recruits from Gloscol. There are other great examples of how businesses have grown from this platform, to provide great opportunities for the next generation.

GE pointed out that in addition to its many other benefits, MX's activity also forms a connection between the High Street and one of the oldest parts of the town, largely hidden away and with a reputation for ASB. MX is having a positive impact by activating and shining a spotlight on this part of town.

A Member thanked BG and AR for the excellent tour of MX, and was very encouraged and hugely reassured by all that is going on there. She welcomed their passion for the project, and comprehensive answers to all questions.

The Leader talked about the link between the old and new, saying she had recently met with a lecturer at the University who had tasked his first-year architecture students with creating designs to bring the two elements together. She said their designs were conceptual but amazing, and indicative of what could be done here, as has already been done in London and other big cities.