

Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of meeting held remotely on 24 March 2021 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Tony Freebody (Chair).

Councillors Peter Diplock (Deputy-Chair), Helen Burton, Jane Lamb, Robin Maxted, Pat Rodohan and Robert Smart.

Visiting Members:

Councillor Shuttleworth and Councillor Holt

Officers in attendance:

Philip Brown (Property Lawyer), Katie Dawkins (Housing Needs and Standards Lead), Gary Hall (Head of Homes First), Rebecca Jackson (Rough Sleeping Initiative Coordinator East Sussex) and Tim Whelan (Director of Service Delivery).

Also in attendance: Rachel Sharpe, Brighton and Hove City Council, Executive Director of Housing, Communities and Neighbourhoods, Martin Reid, Brighton and Hove City Council, Executive Director of Housing,

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37 Minutes of the meeting held on 8 February 2021

It was agreed that the minutes of the previous meeting and proposed amendments would be dealt with at the Committee's next scheduled meeting on 12 July.

38 Apologies for absence / declaration of substitute members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Morris. Councillor Lamb was welcomed back to the Committee as a full member, replacing Councillor Di Cara.

39 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs) by members as required under Section 31 of the Localism Act and of other interests as required by the Code of Conduct

Visiting member, Councillor Holt declared personal interests for transparency in the following item as he was employed by Your Eastbourne BID (Business Improvement District):

Item 7. Homelessness Placements into Eastbourne by Brighton and Hove City Council.

40 Questions by members of the public

There were none.

41 Right to address the meeting/order of business

The following members of the public attended the meeting and addressed the Committee:

Christine Ewbank (Chief Executive, Eastbourne Chamber of Commerce) and Luke Johnson (Operations Manager, Your Eastbourne Business Improvement District).

Representations from Kristian Hayter (Vice Chair, Eastbourne Hospitality Association) and Jane Cook (Health and Homelessness Adviser, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) were read out at the meeting.

Visiting Members, Councillors Shuttleworth and Holt also addressed the Committee.

42 Homelessness placements into Eastbourne by Brighton and Hove City Council

The Chair provided a background to the reason for this item being called to Committee, he thanked all those who were in attendance, and outlined the format for the meeting and the order in which he would call those present to speak.

He invited the members of the public who attended as public speakers to speak first.

Christina Ewbank, (Chief Executive, Eastbourne Chamber of Commerce) addressed the Committee and expressed the following concerns:

- The impact from use of hotels. For example, a hotel in Eastbourne town centre had increased its accommodation capacity and was operating more as a house of multiple occupation. Incidents of drug misuse, criminality and anti-social behaviour had increased locally to the hotel unchecked, which had impacted on Chamber of Commerce members, residents and businesses. Employment was also at risk.
- There was concern that the level of support being provided by Brighton and Hove City Council was insufficient to those in temporary accommodation with complex needs.

Luke Johnson, Your Eastbourne Business Improvement District (BID), addressed the Committee and raised the following points:

- Many of the individuals placed in Eastbourne had high, complex needs and were in hotels that were not dedicated to emergency accommodation. The

number of placements had escalated and a number of those placed in Eastbourne had been identified with previous criminality and anti-social behaviour in Brighton and Hove.

- The number of placements had escalated and there had been a direct impact on the members of Your Eastbourne BID. The level of support provided by BHCC for many of the people being placed was not sufficient and the need was having being met by Eastbourne's Rough Sleeper initiative and local emergency services.

Kristian Hayter (Vice- Chair, Eastbourne Hospitality Association (EHA)) had provided a representation which was read out by the Committee Officer and which raised the following points:

- Many EHA members had been closed for almost a year and were only able to open for short period in 2020. Others did not open at all as it was considered unviable. The placement of people in Eastbourne by BHCC was causing reputational damage.
- Online reviews posted by visitors during the brief reopening and more recently referenced safety as an issue. The effect of the placements had driven cheaper room rates down further.
- BHCC had been provided with greater resources to deal with the situation. The hospitality sector in Eastbourne formed a large part of many business's revenue and suppliers to the hospitality sector in Eastbourne were struggling. An urgent solution was needed to avoid permanent damage to the industry.

Jane Cook (Health and Homelessness Adviser, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) also provided a statement which was were read out by the Committee Officer. The points raised were:

- The housing of people from Brighton in Eastbourne had an impact on local services.
- Funding from the Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) for East Sussex was based on figures for rough sleepers who are housed, and were the responsibility of Councils in East Sussex, especially rough sleepers placed by Eastbourne Council.
- Those placed in Eastbourne by BHCC who present with multiple and complex health, housing and care needs do not have the accompanying support which increases their vulnerability, risk of harm and of death. A thematic review should be undertaken.

The Chair then invited visiting Members, Councillors Shuttleworth and Holt to address the Committee.

Councillor Shuttleworth made the following points:

- A meeting with members from BHCC had taken place earlier in the day and it was noted that communication had improved and it was acknowledged that the number of placements had recently reduced.
- A strategic plan and an agreement between the two authorities was needed to address the key issue of supporting people with multiple needs who had been moved away from familiar areas.

Councillor Holt, also addressed the Committee and highlighted the following points:

- Several of the hotels being used to provide accommodation were in close proximity to each other, increasing the impact of incidents. There was concern over the perception of Eastbourne Town as a safe place to stay and visit, and the public and visitors were to be assured that the Town remained a safe destination.
- A reduction in the number of placements to pre-COVID-19 levels was being sought by all those concerned. It was felt that people whose anti-social behaviour and acts of criminality were not being tolerated in Brighton and Hove, should not be tolerated in Eastbourne.

Rachel Sharpe (Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC)) Executive Director of Housing, Neighbourhoods and Communities), Martin Reid (BHCC Assistant Director of Housing) and Councillor David Gibson (BHCC Housing Committee Joint Chair) then addressed the Committee. During the presentation and the resulting Committee discussion the following points were highlighted:

- BHCC was attempting to respond to its own homelessness crisis and every effort was being made to update Eastbourne Borough Council Officers and liaise with other agencies and those services involved in providing support for homelessness.
- BHCC had historically used Eastbourne to house people. However the COVID-19 pandemic had created an increased uncertainty around homelessness and levels for BHCC had increased from 500 to 800 people. However, the number of people placed in Eastbourne had reduced in recent weeks. The placement of vulnerable people in Eastbourne remained a concern and it was key that all those involved worked together to return those people back to Brighton and Hove – this could be explored at an officer level. Prevention services were not yet fully operational but there was a date by which it was expected that they would be fully operational.
- BHCC had plans within its Housing First programme to support people with complex needs and would take them out of emergency accommodation. The number of people currently housed in emergency accommodation was unsustainable, both from a welfare and financial perspective. BHCC was aiming to reduce its numbers experiencing homelessness to pre-COVID-19 levels.

- Many hotels in Brighton and Hove had closed at the start of the Pandemic. BHCC had approached large hotel groups to secure accommodation in the city but the hotels had either been closed, or were unavailable to BHCC due to being open for normal business. 200 units of emergency accommodation had been secured in one of the university's halls of residence. BHCC had attempted to secure as much accommodation as possible in the City. 90 units had been secured in the previous month in a hotel in Brighton and Hove, and Eastbourne Borough Council had been included in this offer. BHCC was looking at procuring its own accommodation for rough sleepers with multiple- complex needs and 38 units had been procured for emergency accommodation.
- BHCC had invested in a welfare officer service to support people in accommodation and work to avoid eviction. The Service included weekly drop-ins at an Eastbourne hotel that included signposting to further support such as GP services and mental health professionals.
- A report to the March meeting of BHCC Housing Committee set out a route-map with the aim of phasing out the risk of rough-sleeping by 21 June 2021. There would be a further report to the June meeting of the Housing Committee and future reports could include updates on out-of-city placements.
- BHCC had used a Care and Protect model at the start of the Pandemic to support high-need clients. The majority high-need cases had been retained in the City and where a social care need was identified, Adult Social Care services would become involved. There were cases where people had been housed out of the City and where their conditions and circumstances had then deteriorated to point where they became high need. It was a negative outcome for BHCC to place people with complex needs outside of the City.
- BHCC had made a £2.9 million investment in hotels in the City and they were being used for emergency accommodation. The use of Eastbourne accommodation was not a cost-benefit to BHCC as it created several issues. The decision had been taken as a last resort. Although it was preferable to not use emergency accommodation, it was recognised that it would be required to some degree.
- BHCC's understanding was that Eastbourne Borough Council had been provided with regular updates on placements in Eastbourne. It was confirmed that this was the case and that there was dialogue between officers from both authorities. The welfare officer support was not specialist support and was provided for all those in emergency accommodation and in certain cases, rough-sleepers, and would be subject to review. For those with high or complex needs, they had liaised with health commissioners outside of Brighton and Hove, to ensure that there was no breakdown in substance misuse and mental health support.
- Members noted that BHCC had medium and long-term plans in place and

they were welcomed. However, concern remained that people with complex needs, who had lost their placements and were sleeping rough, were not being supported and there was an immediate need for this support.

- BHCC recognised the 21 June as a significant date, when a degree of societal normality was anticipated to return with the planned end of lockdown, and although certainty on numbers and timelines could not be provided, the number of placements had reduced by 70 in the previous six weeks. It was hoped that a similar trajectory could be maintained with the additional support of all services being re-opened by 21 June, including teams working on interventions and use of the usual homeless prevention options approach. Various mechanisms were in place to assess need and identify those with complex needs. The details of the mechanisms and associated policies could be provided to the Committee. BHCC would be bidding for further Government funding and any funding received would be focused solely on placements in the City with an emphasis on support for rough sleepers and those with complex needs.
- Although the Pandemic had had a significant impact on Eastbourne, along with surrounding towns, communications had improved and there was cross-border work to identify anti-social behaviour, drug related criminality and offenders.
- The homelessness issue was not necessarily linked to local authority boundaries and impacted on the South Coast region. A number of people experiencing homelessness did not have a fixed area.
- BHCC had a minimal amount of block-booking in place in Eastbourne going forward and when used, it was for emergency accommodation. People evicted, who then became rough-sleepers, needed to be looked at on a case-by-case basis. People identified with complex needs were assessed prior to being placed out of the City and where necessary, East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Adult Social Care was involved.

Chief Inspector Di Lewis, Sussex Police, addressed the Committee and highlighted the following:

- Through increased communication, Sussex Police was now being made aware of the movement of offenders, which made the impact easier to manage. The need for hotels to generate an income through being available for temporary accommodation and the desire for those accommodated to return to their previous areas also needed management.
- Cross-border work was in place to ensure that offenders were identified and those with complex needs provided with support.

A suggestion was made for a further update on this issue to come back to the Committee at its next meeting. The Chair suggested that how updates would be reported back could be discussed going forward, as part of the development of the Committee's work programme.

The Chair, Councillor Freebody, thanked all those who had attended the meeting and took part in this valuable discussion.

RESOLVED to note the report and verbal updates provided at the meeting.

43 Date of the next meeting

RESOLVED: to note that the date of the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee is scheduled for Monday, 12 July 2021.

The meeting ended at 8.35 pm

Councillor Tony Freebody (Chair)