

COMMUNITY & ADULT SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

12 DECEMBER 2022

Present: Councillor Molik(Chairperson)
Councillors Ahmed, Ahmed, Ash-Edwards, Boes, Lent, Lewis,
Littlechild and McGarry

28 : APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies were received.

29 : DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Ash-Edwards and Littlechild declared personal interests in Item 4.

30 : MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings on 17th October 2022 and 14th November 2022 were approved.

31 : CARDIFF COUNCIL'S SUPPORT FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS & REFUGEES

The Chair welcomed Councillor Julie Sangani, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Equalities; Sian Sanders, Head of Community Safety and Cohesion, Performance and Partnership Directorate; Tom Dodsworth, Migration Policy and Service Manager, Performance and Partnership Directorate; and Richard Eynon, Deputy CEO of Oasis Cardiff.

The Chair invited Cllr Sangani to provide a statement, during which she gave an outline of the national and international context in which the Council's work in supporting refugees and asylum seekers takes place.

Sian Sanders, Head of Community Safety and Cohesion, Performance and Partnership Directorate, provided a presentation which included an overview of migration schemes; the Council's response to the Ukraine war; the Afghan Resettlement Scheme; the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme; asylum seeker dispersal; support themes; and strengths and areas for future development.

Richard Eynon, Deputy CEO of Oasis Cardiff, gave a statement in which he summarised the work of Oasis Cardiff in supporting asylum seekers and refugees.

Members were invited to make comments and observations, which are summarised as follows:

- Members discussed the lower employability among women refugees and asylum seekers and wished to know whether this was due to a lack of educational opportunities in their countries of origin, and what was being done to address this. Officers advised that there were educational and employment deficits among Afghan women due to their being occupied with childcare, both

in Afghanistan and in resettlement centres. Attempts are being made to redress this with Into Work sessions, including female-only ones.

- Members noted the pressure under which Council services operate and sought information on the capacity of Cardiff Council to cope with the growing number of asylum seekers and refugees. Officers advised that finding affordable housing was particularly challenging. The Council has primarily worked with private sector landlords, but this has become more difficult with the increasing number of arrivals. There is also pressure around secondary school places. Additional resources have been put into the School Admissions team to assist with applications. Health has also faced growing pressures and the Council has worked with health partners to assist with GP registrations. A number of referrals have also been made to Adult and Children's social services.
- Members were advised that the asylum system was approaching breaking point. The Home Office is building up its capacity to fast-track applications, but there is currently a large backlog of undecided claims. There is a heavy reliance on contingency accommodation, often in hotels. The Council is committed to looking at solutions with the Home Office.
- Members sought clarification on the meaning of 'breaking point' from a Cardiff perspective. Officers advised that the pressure in Cardiff was not as great as in southeast England. However, Cardiff has for many years been at the limit of its capacity for asylum seekers. There is a significant number of asylum properties in the city, in addition to contingency accommodation. There is pressure on established services when numbers peak and increase significantly.
- Members sought clarification on how refugee accommodation requirements were dealt with in the context of the overall pressure on social and affordable housing. Officers advised that the problem of finding affordable housing could not be overstated. The Afghan and Ukrainian Resettlement schemes are competing with each other in accessing a dwindling stock of affordable accommodation. Most LA's are keen to avoid using social housing because of the impact on local communities and social cohesion. Some families spend an extended period in hostel accommodation. The Afghan scheme is a national one and there is a reliance on other LA's helping Cardiff.
- Members enquired about the working relationship between Oasis and Cardiff Council. Members were advised that the joint working was very successful. Oasis was able to use its experience of working with refugees and asylum seekers on a daily basis. The issues of colliding client groups and families spending extended periods in inappropriate accommodation were problematic. An all-Wales approach is important as there are areas outside Cardiff that are able to accommodate asylum seekers and refugees. Discussions have taken place with other LA's regarding accommodation and commuting. There are issues in areas such as access to English language lessons and mental health services, which needs to be tackled on a preventative rather than intervention basis. There is a need to support people in being embedded in and contributing to the community.

- Members were interested in how long it was that refugees and asylum seekers sought Council support. Officers advised that it depended on the pathway taken. In schemes that the Council is responsible for administering, such as the Afghan and Ukrainian Resettlement schemes, support is provided from the outset. With asylum seekers, it can be months or years before they receive a decision on their case and make their first approach to the Council. There is a reliance on national support contracts and the voluntary sector. People coming through the asylum system may not present themselves to Council services until they are in the move-on phase after a decision.
- Members sought information on how well the Council was prepared for providing support to asylum seekers. Officers advised that people often approach the Council for support in relation to housing. There has been focus for many years on getting the Move-on pathway right. There is a dedicated pathway with the Welsh Refugee Council for getting people into accommodation, and a well-developed pathway for people who have had a negative decision to access legal advice. There are limits on the support the Council can provide.
- Members were advised that an increasing number of asylum seekers were receiving negative decisions and becoming homeless. This has coincided with the end of the Everyone In policy.
- Members were advised that the Council only uses private sector housing in relation to the resettlement schemes. Identifying affordable rental accommodation has become increasingly challenging. It relies on personal relationships with landlords who respond to pleas for assistance. There was a groundswell of support in the aftermath of the Afghan evacuation and Ukrainian war.
- Members were advised that the Council was committed to supporting the resettlement schemes. There are challenges in particular in regard to homelessness. There are particular challenges where there are large families and complex medical needs. Officers work very hard to meet these difficulties.
- Members discussed the importance of support being sustained into the future. Officers advised that the Council had participated in a research project looking at local solutions for asylum seekers who had no recourse to public funds. The Council is keen to explore different models of housing that would be legally permissible. There are solutions that have been developed by other cities. The solution for people with no recourse to public funds is to seek legal advice. There are issues in relation to accessing good quality legal advice. The Council supported Asylum Justice in securing finance to ensure additional capacity.
- Members enquired about the impact of the length of time taken in deciding asylum cases. Officers advised that there were issues regarding casework capacity in the Home Office. This has implications in relation to the number of applicants in the asylum system and the length of time they spend unable to

work or access public funds. The asylum system is heavily centralised and the solution to casework capacity rests with the UK Government.

- Members sought further information on how the Council would dovetail the housing needs of asylum seekers and existing residents. Officers advised that the Council was keen to avoid aggravating delays for people already on the social housing waiting list. The Council only works with private landlords in resettling asylum seekers and refugees. The Council does not prioritise migrant groups over existing residents.
- Members were interested in hearing about the capacity of other public and third sector organisations in contributing to Cardiff's response. Officers advised that the established refugee and asylum sector provides substantial support to asylum seekers and refugees. The Council endeavours to supplement existing support within the sector. Additional commissions have been made for Afghan and Ukrainian refugee support in areas such as English language, wellbeing and youth provision. Members were advised that there was concern about capacity in the sector. There are questions around the best use of services in the context of inadequate funding, and around issues such as professionalism in the workforce, training in trauma, and numbers of English language instructors. Further collaboration and partnership working in the sector would support the work of the LA.
- Members sought information on whether there was proactive work done to prepare for the end of the move-on phase for asylum seekers, in the context of reductions in the private rental market. Officers advised that the Council does not have prior notification of decisions on asylum claims. The Council receives notification of positive decisions which enables it to engage with applicants with the assistance of the Welsh Refugee Council. There is a 28-day window for seeking accommodation, but applicants sometimes delay in seeking assistance. A capital programme running alongside the Ukrainian Resettlement scheme has allowed the Council to identify potential new developments and bring empty properties back into use.
- Members enquired about the degree to which the people supporting asylum seekers and refugees have access to mental health and trauma-informed training. Members were advised that Oasis Cardiff has been working on a Lottery-funded project to work with 18–25-year-olds on mental health programmes, predominantly for asylum seekers. There is growing understanding about professionalising the team, with trauma-informed working and collaboration with mental health services. Mother tongue sessions have been successful in helping people articulate their feelings about being here. This facilitates working on integration. The Council's understanding of the needs of resettled individuals has grown considerably over recent years. Group sessions and community-led engagement are important in meeting the needs of individuals and supporting the work of services.
- Members sought information on the level of trauma-informed training among Council staff. Officers advised that the team had gone through an unprecedented expansion due to the Afghan and Ukraine crises, despite recruitment pressures. Safeguarding training was prioritised and there are

good relationships with Adult Services. Multi-agency working and trauma-informed training will be further developed in the coming months.

RESOLVED:

To note the report.

32 : CORPORATE SAFEGUARDING POLICY 2022-25

The Committee was advised that the item allowed Members to consider the proposed Policy and how it will be put into practice.

The Chair welcomed Cllr Weaver, Cabinet Member for Finance, Modernisation and Performance; Cllr Mackie, Cabinet Member for Social Services (Adults); Gareth Newell, Head of Performance and Partnerships; Rebecca Brockway, Project Support Officer, Children's Services; and David Murray-Dickson, Social Worker in Social Services, Adult Services.

The Chair invited Cllr Weaver to make a statement, during which he outlined the purpose of the revised Policy. Members were advised that the overall responsibility for the Policy rests with the Council's Corporate Safeguarding Board, whose membership includes the Cabinet Member for Finance, Modernisation and Performance, the Chief Executive and senior manager team.

The Policy has been revised in the light of progress made over the last 3 years and recent Welsh Government guidance, and incorporates the five priority areas identified by the Board: safe governance including self-assessment by directorates; safe employment; safe workforce; safe practice; and safe partnerships.

Members were invited to make comments and observations, which are summarised as follows:

- Members sought clarification on the changes from the previous policy. Officers advised that there was a new link from the directorates' self-assessment to the corporate performance management arrangements, reported to the Corporate Safeguarding Board, and to mid-year and end of year assessments. There is more awareness of who has completed training, with the percentage who have completed increased from 65% to 80%. The focus now is on frontline teams. Members were advised that the Policy reflects a greater linkage between the Corporate and Regional Safeguarding Boards and contextual safeguarding.
- Members expressed pleasure at the increase in training, but enquired about how the continued effectiveness of training was assessed. Officers advised that the training consisted of some basic key messages around understanding the signs of exploitation and responsibility for acting upon it and knowing what to do. The communications strategy is focused on reinforcing the training. The effectiveness could be measured by assessing any increase in referrals from departments, and Members were advised that there had been a significant increase in referrals to Adult Safeguarding over the last 18 months, with

referrals coming from a wider diversity of sources. There have been many more referrals post-Covid.

- Members enquired about the effectiveness of the Council's whistleblowing policy. Officers advised that this was a matter for HR and they were not able to advise.
- Members sought clarification on the relationship with Regional Safeguarding. Officers advised that the various organisations involved in Regional Safeguarding have similar arrangements and issues arising for the Council can be escalated for discussion in Regional Safeguarding. The regional Safeguarding Board has policy development responsibilities and sets the context for corporate, contextual and individual safeguarding.
- Members were advised that the Regional Safeguarding Board is a statutory requirement under the Wellbeing Act and sits under the National Safeguarding Board. The Regional Safeguarding Board sets strategic priorities for Cardiff and the Vale annually, and the Council's strategy is developed around them. The priority of the Regional Safeguarding Board over the last 12 months has been safeguarding fundamentals and getting out the key message about safeguarding being everyone's responsibility.
- Members wished to know about the extent to which safeguarding features in operational decision making. Members were advised that it would be reflected in directorate self-assessments, action plans and actions in directorate delivery plans. While some directorates such as Social Services will have a large body of work relating to safeguarding, in other directorates the focus would be on ensuring that staff have been trained and are aware of correct H&S and HR policies.
- Members sought information on the number of safeguarding reports received last year and how that compared to previous years. Officers advised that approximately 111 referrals per week are received into Adult Safeguarding. There was an approximately 30% increase year on year over the last 2 years.
- Members discussed how safeguarding could be sustained as a priority in the face of workforce pressures. Officers advised that where safeguarding was previously based on Department of Health guidance it was now a legislative requirement, and is now at the forefront of people's minds as the business of the whole LA. There have been a number of high-profile operations that have informed adult practice and have attracted significant attention. It is important the people are mindful of this across the Authority.
- Members enquired about DBS checks for Councillors. Members were advised that it was not a requirement. There was mandatory training on corporate safeguarding for newly Elected members. It was suggested that deeper training for Elected Members on dealing with people experiencing specific problems around violence and exploitation could be considered through the Democratic Services Committee.

- Members expressed concern that an Elected Member could potentially be put in a position of responsibility relating to safeguarding without having ever been checked. Members were advised that this was something that could be looked at.
- Members sought information on whether Third Sector organisations experienced in the field were involved in providing safeguarding training and awareness. Members were advised that the corporate safeguarding training, which covers the basics and is aimed at all Council staff, had been developed by the Council and can be delivered in various ways, online and in-person. Some specific training such as on violence against women and girls is carried out in partnership with outside organisations.
- Members were advised that there is some inhouse capacity to deliver training on violence against women. Group training for management team is primarily done inhouse.
- Members were advised that part of Social Services' remit was to look at working with wider partners in terms of safeguarding young people and vulnerable adults. The training package is available in different formats which can be shared with partners in order to train staff in their organisations. Members expressed the view that training could be strengthened through sharing with organisations that have daily experience of safeguarding.
- Members sought clarification on how many frontline staff had accessed training. Officers advised that those who had accessed training were able to do so online, and the focus was now on those who had difficulty doing so. A series of proposals has been developed to assist them and these are being trialled with parks and cleaning staff. Officers will report the results back to Corporate Safeguarding Boards in March. Different material is appropriate for different settings.

RESOLVED:

To note the report.

33 : COUNCIL HOUSE RENT & SERVICE CHARGE SETTING

Members were advised that this item provided an opportunity to consider the proposed Council house rent and service charges rates.

The Chair welcomed Cllr Linda Thorne, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities; Jane Thomas, Director Adults, Housing and Communities; and Helen Evans, Operational Manager, Advice and Benefits.

The Chair invited Cllr Thorne to provide a statement. Members were advised that the Housing Revenue account is ringfenced and that the main source of income is from rent and service charges. Rental income allows the service to invest in maintenance and improvement of existing homes, provide tenant support, and build new homes.

The Welsh Government has set a maximum rent increase of 6.5% for next year. The Council is proposing a rent increase of 6.5%, and an increase in service charges of 6.5%, or costs where known. Members were advised that 85% of Council tenants receive benefits and most will have the full increase covered.

Members were advised that, even with the increase, there is expected to be a £2.2 million deficit in the HRA. Officers have identified efficiencies to cover the shortfall. A more detailed analysis will be provided in the Budget report in February, and when the HRA business plan is presented for approval in March.

Members were invited to make comments and observations, which are summarised as follows:

- Members sought further clarification on the reasons for the estimated shortfall. Officers advised that the business plan is done in advance. The inflation rate has been very high in the current year, and the Council has added the additional costs above the business plan prediction into next year's budget. The additional costs exceed the additional revenue from the rent increase, leading to a £2.2 million shortfall.
- Members wished to know what support was available for tenants who were working and whose rent was not covered by housing benefit or Universal Credit. Officers advised that a range of funding streams were available for people in work, including the Cost of Living Discretionary Scheme. The Welfare Liaison team works with the Money Advice team to provide additional support to Council tenants, including advice on budgeting, debt, income maximisation, grants, discounts and additional benefits. People are often unaware of the support they are entitled to while working. Officers will be targeting support to individuals not in receipt of housing benefit and struggling.
- Members sought information on what would happen if a tenant was unable to afford the rent and was not entitled to benefit or financial support. Officers advised that it would be possible to provide assistance through the discretionary schemes. Affordable repayment plans can help towards rent arrears that have accrued. The rent arrears pathway allows help to be provided to people struggling with rent arrears, through Homeless Prevention fund, Cost of Living Discretionary Scheme, or discretionary housing payments. Members were advised that there were many examples where people had fallen into arrears, and where the Into Work service helped to find them work or a better paid job. Arrears have been written off to help people newly starting in work.
- Members wished to know whether the Council had any plans to deal with the expected deficit in the HRA. Officers advised that savings of £2.2 million had been identified. However, the shortfall could be larger, and officers were investigating other potential savings through digitisation and review of services.
- Members sought clarification on plans for staff reduction through deletion of vacant posts and voluntary severance, wishing to know the numbers involved and what effect it would have on services. Officers advised that approximately

7 FTE posts of various grades were involved. Services are being reviewed to identify how an improved, more joined-up service can be delivered at a lower cost.

- Members sought clarification on how tenants in community living schemes would be affected by the increase in the personal heating charge. Officers advised that residents in community living schemes, or sheltered housing schemes, have heating provided through a communal heating system. The charge varies across schemes, but has increased due to the increase in energy costs. Dedicated support is being made available to residents to ensure they receive any assistance they are entitled to. Members were advised that the charge is relatively low.
- Members enquired as to whether a new survey would be undertaken to capture more data and provide a more robust analysis than the previous one, which had a very low response. Officers advised that letters had been sent to 2,771 tenants, events held at hubs and front-facing staff asked to promote the survey. The majority of tenants were not keen to engage as they had their rent paid through benefits and saw little benefit from completing the survey. There were lessons to learn in lengthening the time for a consultation. However, the Minister's decision had come through very late, which made it difficult to consult earlier. Members were advised that the Council was legally required to consult within a certain timescale. At the time of the consultation the Council was not able to say what the maximum increase permitted by Welsh Government would be. Although respondents were in favour of increasing up to the maximum permitted amount, there were only 100 responses from 15,000 Council house tenants.
- Members enquired about plans to ensure tenants submit claims for increases in benefits in time to cover the increase in rent and service charge, to avoid getting into arrears. Officers advised that early intervention and prevention support is provided at the first sign of potential arrears. The Welfare Liaison team and Money Advice team assist tenants with completion of application forms. Home visits are conducted with tenants unable to leave their homes or unwilling to use the telephone. Members were advised that the Council does not take action against tenants where benefit payments are late.

RESOLVED:

To note the report.

34 : URGENT ITEMS (IF ANY)

None were received.

35 : DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be on Monday, 16th January at 2pm.

The meeting terminated at 4.20 pm