

# **MINUTES OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**3 JULY 2025**

## **PRESENT:**

### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors Timms (Chair), Freeman, Hassell, Lawrence, New, Parker and Srivastava

### **Officers:**

Dan Green (Acting Chief Executive), Michelle Dickson (Chief Officer for Communities and Homes), Jon Illingworth (Chief Officer for Finance and Performance), Daniel Khan (Housing Advice and Benefits Manager), Matthew Fletcher (Economic Development Manager), Isabel De Veer (Business Growth and Inward Investment Officer) and Linn Ashmore (Democratic Services Officer)

### **Also Present:**

Councillor C Edwards (Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homes) and Councillor Robinson (Portfolio Holder for Growth and Investment)

## **4. MINUTES**

The minutes of the meetings held on 7 May and 15 May 2025 were approved and signed by the Chair.

## **5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **6. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillors S Edwards and Sayani.

## **7. DRAFT HOUSING STRATEGY**

The Committee received a report (Part 1 – agenda item 4) regarding the draft Housing Strategy.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homes, the Chief Officer for Communities and Homes and the Housing Advice and Benefits Manager attended the meeting and answered questions from the Committee.

The draft Housing Strategy was complex but remained a work in progress and would evolve as more data and feedback became available. While there was no statutory requirement to produce a Housing Strategy it was considered to be good practice. Four strategic priorities were agreed in March to form the basis of this document:

1. Help to reduce inequalities by understanding the housing needs of the borough so that we can align our efforts and work with partners to meet those needs

2. Create healthier and inclusive communities and meet housing needs by supporting quality housing delivery in targeted areas
3. Enhance partnerships by investing in joint solutions that unlock opportunity, meet the broad range of housing needs and help build positive futures
4. Enhance housing standards across all housing tenures to create safer, green homes that support resident wellbeing

The Committee raised a number of questions on the topics of alignment with the Local Plan and other council strategies, meeting housing demand, housing for people with special needs, housing data and reallocation of housing stock, future goals for partnership working, the management of temporary housing and the Rounds Gardens site.

A question was asked about independent living and how special needs housing would be delivered, including properties that require additional fittings to suit people with special requirements, the reallocation of council owned housing and the supply of one-bedroom properties.

Work was carried out at a county level with heads of Warwickshire housing, health partners and commissioners for support services. The Council works collaboratively with partners such as extra care providers based on evidence of need in the Borough. The Local Plan has the high-level requirements of what sites can deliver and the strategy provides the detail around what the data is showing from various sources.

There were a range of other council strategies that were all linked. The main aim was to facilitate for people to continue living in their own homes and avoid the need for care in residential accommodation. The local housing stock is out of alignment with the national picture. The level of older persons housing stock in Rugby is much higher than other areas. Housing for under 35s was under the most pressure but the integrity of housing for older people needs to be maintained.

The Corporate Strategy was the umbrella strategy but different council strategies and workstreams would interweave or overlap.

Stock condition surveys provide data to support planning for future housing needs.

There was a national increase in demand for housing and a growing housing list in Rugby. The vision was to produce and procure more affordable housing to meet that demand. A comprehensive evidence base of the support needs of the community was being built and would link to the workstreams within the new strategy.

Officers undertook to provide further data on housing numbers for partner agencies.

A key element of the strategy was that people were needing to use a greater proportion of their salary on living costs. This evidenced the need for more affordable housing based on increases in private rent and the greater amount of salary needed to rent privately. Government had announced some additional funding through the Spending Review.

A concern was raised about the redesignation of sheltered housing. There were two types of independent living housing. There were no plans to designate sheltered housing built around a community room and facilities. However, there was an imbalance of supply, and the aim was to look at the more dispersed housing units that were prescribed as homes for older people.

This clarification would be useful in the strategy.

Concerns were raised that there was a lack of data on tenants income, ethnicity and personal circumstances such as whether they were in work, and tenancies that had been bequeathed.

Tenancy health checks were carried out to understand the change in people's personal circumstances. Often it was more likely that people became more vulnerable.

A secure tenancy was a lifetime tenancy. However, the new Allocations Policy approved by Council earlier this year, set out that larger family homes and those that were adapted to meet disability need would be let on a flexible basis. This would enable homes to be re-allocated if they were no longer needed.

The Housing Strategy included a chart of the Ukrainian families and the number of asylum seekers being housed. Rugby has a greater number than other neighbouring authorities. A point was raised there was no detailed data, and the number of asylum seekers was unknown.

Those hosted in contingency and dispersal accommodation were transient and awaiting the outcome of their application for asylum. The Government had stated that this accommodation would close within the next two years. The figures were controlled by the Home Office, and they were not living in council accommodation. The numbers were constantly changing.

As asylum seekers, this cohort is specifically excluded from accessing social housing as they have no recourse to public funds over and above the basic provision made by the Home Office to avoid destitution.

Examples were given of good existing partnerships, such as district nurses. Health and housing were intrinsically linked, and joint working and addressing the health needs of the Borough were key elements of the new strategy to be developed further.

A question was raised about temporary accommodation and urgent housing for those fleeing domestic abuse. The council has a statutory duty to ensure safe and suitable accommodation for homeless applications and generally this was met from council owned stock. The council rarely used hotel style accommodation. The numbers of applications were reviewed on a regular basis and work was carried out to forecast and project future need. Customers made their own decisions on which district or borough to be permanently housed in.

Regarding the potential impact of the dispersal of asylum seekers by the Home Office a question was raised about the possible statistics. This was unknown but it was important to be prepared for a discreet number.

The West Midlands Strategic Dispersal Partnership is the conduit for working with all the agencies across the West Midlands on a model for dispersal taking the impact on local markets into account. Serco had reported that cheaper housing market areas were seeing more interest but it was being reviewed on a sub regional basis and would be brought back to Members.

The impact of the Local Government Review on housing strategies was unknown and work would continue as planned.

The Portfolio Holder undertook to report back on progress of the benefit of the spending on green homes.

Rounds Gardens was a challenging site and the plans were being worked on. More information would be available later in the year. A comment was made that the site was not included in the Local Plan.

The committee requested that information on the Armed Forces Covenant be referenced in the strategy, particularly in relation to understanding the needs of veterans. It was noted that the Armed Forces Covenant was included in the Allocations Policy and was also part of the council's equalities action planning.

It was important to ensure there were safeguards in place to avoid any loss of appropriate housing for older people. The market had changed and also the demand for social housing. Further information would be included in the strategy to tell that story about accommodating people's needs.

A comment was made that more financial information and trends analysis were needed in the document

It was acknowledged that this was a very good piece of highly detailed work. Some further comments were made about presentation, condensing the information and greater use of infographics would improve the document.

Added note – not for minutes – density of HMOs and not reduce HMOs.

**RESOLVED THAT** – the recommendations of the Committee be included in the draft Housing Strategy prior to submission to Cabinet.

## **8. ECONOMIC STRATEGY ACTION PLAN**

The Committee received a report (Part 1 – agenda item 5) regarding the draft Economic Strategy Action Plan.

The Portfolio Holder for Growth and Investment, the Economic Development Manager and the Business Growth and Inward Investment Officer were present and answered questions from the committee.

This was an opportunity for the Committee to discuss the methodology for the creation of the action plan for the recently adopted Economic Strategy over a period of six months and for this to be in place at the start of the next financial year.

The Economic Strategy was comprised of three key themes around people, business and growth with 59 objectives as “we will” statements. This was an ambitious target covering the next ten years.

Economic growth is a broad concept that reflects the need for involvement and delivery by partners and stakeholders.

The action plan will incorporate work that was already underway, or planned for, and also identified as new.

The next stage was for the specific actions to be built around the objectives. There were around 45 objectives that sat within the Growth and Investment service area and the remaining sit within other service areas where there were cross cutting themes.

Similar to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund's governance structure it was proposed there would be a Governance Board that would meet every six months. The Board would be made up of a variety of stakeholders.

The Committee raised a number of questions and comments.

A question was asked about quick wins. An analysis was being carried out to identify short- medium and long-term actions which would be incorporated into the next version and those that were already underway. Work was being carried out across the organisation. Supporting independent retailers was a piece of work already in motion and this could be one quick win.

The Local Government Review was a consideration, but it was imperative that there was an ambitious vision for the borough. It was important that cross party work agrees ambitious plans and visions and to get the best deal for the borough as the review goes ahead.

A question was raised about input from young people. It was important to include young people within the new Board and to ensure different ages and diversity groups were also considered.

There were workstreams planned around the raising the profile of businesses in the local economy and providing support to businesses with the skills provisions available to meet their needs. These would be at the forefront as the actions were being developed. Attracting new business into the borough and high skill jobs was already incorporated into the Economic Strategy. When formulating the action plan and the methodology for reporting it would be helpful to look at sub sections of the population and how these impact on the specific questions and challenges within our local demographics.

Is our Economic Strategy robust to take account of the future changes in industry? The way in which the action plan will be developed allows for regular review and tailoring to meet the needs at the time. Officers were confident there was flexibility to adapt.

Good quality jobs were needed, and the word “job” should be used in the Action Plan.

The Committee suggested that the outcomes be recorded on PowerBI as the end goal.

**RESOLVED THAT –**

- (1) the recommendations of the Committee be included in the draft Economic Strategy Action Plan; and
- (2) the draft Economic Strategy Action Plan and outcomes of the Governance Board meetings be included on the work programme.

## **9. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW UPDATE**

The Committee received a report (Part 1 – agenda item 6) regarding the new Local Government Review Update.

Following the meeting of Council in March 2025 the council submitted a shared Interim Plan to the Home Office along with the four district/borough councils. There were two models that were being investigated, one single Warwickshire wide unitary and the formation of two unitary councils, one northern and one southern.

Warwickshire County Council submitted an Interim Plan based on a preference for one Warwickshire Unitary Council.

A cross party working group was established and has met monthly to debate the key issues relating to the submission of a formal plan in November 2025.

The development of town and parish councils was a key element for the future plans for local government in Warwickshire and what they could look like in the future. A lot of work has been carried out with the Warwickshire Association of Local Councils (WALC) on this.

Work had begun with WCC on their proposals for town and parish councils. The themes included:

- Establishing new town/parish councils where they do not exist.
- Strengthen the roles of existing parish councils.
- Creating the conditions to support those town/parish councils to thrive.

Further work was being carried out with WALC and the outcomes would be reported to Members in due course.

Other key elements included maintaining a local presence for Rugby in any future unitary council and strengthening local engagement and democracy. An example of a council that had been through unitarisation was Buckinghamshire Council which strengthened local engagement through establishing local neighbourhood panels.

The Government had clarified this would be a key part of any submission that comes forward in November.

It was important to understand the evidence and the key issues for Rugby and the best way of addressing those before putting the mechanisms in place around the preferred model. The aim was to ensure there is strong community engagement, to establish town and parish councils and create a local presence while providing the services that reflect the needs of the residents.

The Acting Chief Executive undertook to keep Members informed and provide updates as appropriate.

The Government and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) were keen to engage equally with district/boroughs and county councils and collectively meet on a semi regular basis. The MHCLG will be coming to each council on a two monthly basis to have direct discussions with Chief Executives.

The final decision for the eventual model for Warwickshire lies with the Government and their request is for a single submission for the area which could include numerous proposals. They will use the criteria as set out in the original letter from Government to determine the best option for Warwickshire.

It was clarified that the intention was that all unparished areas within the borough would have the opportunity to come forward to request a Community Governance Review to form a new parish council.

A question was asked about how engagement with residents would take place. This would be an important step for people to understand what local government reorganisation and devolution looks like with the opportunity to have their say on the development of plans. Government consultation was at the end stage, and it would be important to understand what residents would want from a unitary authority before the final submission was made.

The latest population figures had been received and would be circulated to the Committee with the minutes.

A comment was made that the savings for establishment of a unitary authority were minimal. There were services that were under financial pressure and there was a question over how local government reorganisation would support more efficient delivery of those services. This was a piece of work to look at locally.

**RESOLVED THAT** – the update report be noted and the topic remain on the work programme to receive further updates as the Acting Chief Executive feels appropriate.

## **10. FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE MONITORING - QUARTER 4 2024/25**

The Committee received a report (Part 1 – agenda item 7) regarding the Finance and Performance Monitoring – Quarter 4 2024/25.

The Chief Officer for Finance and Performance attended the meeting to answer questions from the Committee.

The end of year report was presented as a statement of fact rather than financial projections. It had been agreed with the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Performance that for the 2025/26 municipal year future finance reports would be split into three separate reports for the Housing Revenue Account, the General Fund and for performance.

The Committee commented on the level of sickness absence. One of the main services affected was the Works Service Unit (WSU). A review of the WSU was currently being undertaken focussing on four areas: finance, health and safety, sickness and service planning. Hopefully the outcomes of that will be available in the next few months.

Monitoring was being carried out in a slightly different way. There had been a focus on agency staffing. Staffing costs were around 58% of council spending. Monthly salary forecasts were now being produced, and exception reporting was taking place. These would be submitted to Scrutiny Committee.

There was a significant investment in the budget for 2025/26. It was important to have robust information on understanding the cost base for budget monitoring purposes.

It was agreed that the exception report and fees and charges be included in the work programme.

A question was raised regarding risk management and a request was made for an update on the issues log. An external company, RSM, had recently been procured to provide risk management support and they were currently being onboarded. Issues would be managed through RSM's own software.

At a previous meeting of the committee, the mitigations for dealing with reducing the staff vacancy rate and staff sickness were discussed. Following this a question was asked whether the effects of these actions were being felt financially? Any impact would be included in the internal finance reports due shortly. The use of agency staff was being looked at with targeted improvement in recruitment. There were specific projects in place for higher risk service areas, including the work being carried out on the WSU. The contract with OPUS provided a better deal for recruitment.

Data on how the costs were changing from 2024/25 to 2025/26 would be provided at the next meeting.

**RESOLVED THAT** – the Chief Officer for Finance and Performance be requested to provide an update on the following at the next meeting:  
(1) issues management; and  
(2) comparative data on the impact of the changes being introduced to deal with reducing the staff vacancy rate and sickness.

**11. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee received a report (Part 1 – agenda item 7) regarding the overview and scrutiny work programme.

It was noted that an item for Council had not been included on the Forward Plan.

**RESOLVED THAT** – the work programme be updated as minuted above.

**CHAIR**