
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, Kent, ME10 3HT on Thursday, 27 November 2014 from 7.00 - 8.40 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Sylvia Bennett, Andy Booth (Chairman), John Coulter, Mark Ellen, Mike Henderson, Peter Marchington, Ben Stokes and Ghlin Whelan.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Zoe Kent, Bob Pullen, Kellie Mackenzie and Nick Vickers.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Lloyd Bowen, Jackie Constable, June Garrad and Mike Haywood.

370 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 29 October 2014 (Minute Nos. 309 – 317) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

371 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

372 FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT REPORT - SECOND QUARTER

The Chairman welcomed the Head of Finance to the meeting.

The Head of Finance introduced the report which set out the revenue and capital projected outturn for 2014/15 as at the end of period six, covering the period from April to September 2014. The Head of Finance reported that a projected underspend of £406,000 had been reported to Cabinet in September but the projected underspend was now £687,720.

Members then went through the report page by page and asked the Head of Finance questions.

Page Three – Table 1: Underspend by Service

A Member noted that four departments were saying they would spend exactly to budget, they should be encouraged to look carefully at this and whether they are likely to overspend.

The Head of Finance advised that with regard to the Human Resources and Internal Audit figures these were recharges from Maidstone. The salary costs of the Director of Corporate Services & Director of Regeneration post payments were known. However with regard to the communications payment the Head of Finance agreed to check no underspend was likely with the Head of Service.

Page 4 – Table 2: Main variations by Service

In response to a query from a Member, the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager agreed to provide a breakdown of how many families were currently in bed and breakfast accommodation.

The Head of Finance agreed to forward details of the travel costs incurred by planning officers travelling to Maidstone.

Page 7 – Other variances (to be met from total underspend)

The Head of Finance agreed to establish what the Sittingbourne Town Centre Development variances related to.

Page 8 – Table 4: Improvement & Regeneration Funds

A Member requested that the definition of the funds listed in Table 4 be provided.

Page 10 – Table 8: Debt outstanding by due date (not including Rent Deposit Scheme)

The Head of Finance agreed to forward a confidential paper to Members of the Scrutiny Committee which provided details of all 12 month debt.

Page 13 – Improvement and Regeneration Fund Allocations

The Head of Finance agreed to forward details of the Redundancy Payments 2014/15 and how much of this included retirement costs.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Finance for attending the meeting.

Resolved:

(1) That the report be noted.

(2) That the Head of Finance provides an update to Members on the outstanding issues raised above.

373 DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENT POLICY

The Chairman welcomed the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager to the meeting.

The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager introduced the report and explained that, following changes brought in by Central Government for Welfare Reform, SBC's Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) budget had increased in 2014/15 to £346,325 and as such it was considered necessary to review the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy.

The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager explained that all claimants were to be consulted in 2015 on the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy. The consultation would consider things such as: how claimants were meeting their shortfall; which vulnerable groups require more help than others; and how the DHP budget should be spent.

A Member requested that the period over which someone would receive support be included within the policy and also that the appeals system should conclude with an assessment by an independent reviewer. The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager agreed to add the information requested and also explore whether an independent appeals reviewer could be provided.

- Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager

Following a discussion about questioning a claimant about how they managed their money the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager suggested a general box be included on the claim form asking claimants 'Was there any type of expenditure you are having to cut back on?', this was welcomed by Members.

- Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager

A Member suggested that the order of the objectives be amended to read:

- Prevent homelessness
- Help alleviate poverty
- Support Vulnerable households
- Provide support at a time of crisis
- Encourage Employment

The Chairman thanked the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager for attending the meeting.

Resolved:

That Scrutiny recommend to Cabinet:

Recommended: (1) That the current Discretionary Housing Payment Policy be reviewed subject to the inclusion of the comments made by the Scrutiny Committee as minuted.

Recommended (2): That a full consultation be carried out to obtain feedback on how the budget should be spent.

374 WELFARE REFORM AND UNIVERSAL CREDIT UPDATE

The Chairman welcomed the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager to the meeting.

The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager gave an update on Welfare Reform and Universal Credit. She reported that Swale Borough Council (SBC) were to be included as a 'pilot' authority as part of Phase I of the Universal Credit 'Go Live' in March 2015. The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager spoke about benefit 'hubs', whereby the Benefits Team worked alongside the voluntary sector and JobCentre Plus to offer a range of services in one place. She explained that this would help to speed up the processing of claims.

In response to queries, the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager stated that if it was possible to arrange for a service similar to that provided in Sittingbourne and Sheerness to be based in Faversham they would seek to provide this; the 'hub' at Sheerness Gateway was working well and from January 2015 would be by appointment only.

The Chairman thanked the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager for attending the meeting.

375 REVIEWS AT FOLLOW-UP STAGE AND LOG OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Members noted the update on reviews at follow-up stage and log of recommendations.

376 OTHER REVIEW PROGRESS REPORTS

Asset Transfer Review

The Lead Member advised that the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) policy had been considered by both the Policy Development and Review Committee and Cabinet. He advised that there appeared to be some discrepancies in relation to how local authorities were responding to the new asset regulations particularly with regard to leasehold and freehold sites.

The Lead Member advised that they were currently in the process of arranging a meeting with the Cabinet Member for Localism and Cabinet Member for Finance, relevant officers and review coordinators. He hoped to be able to present a report at the 13 January 2015 meeting.

Contracts and Procurement

The Lead Member reported that a meeting with the relevant officers and review coordinators was being arranged for early 2015.

Joint Scrutiny of Mid Kent Improvement Partnership (MKIP)

A Review Coordinator reported that they had attended several meetings with officers, councillors and external representatives with a further meeting arranged for 8 December 2014 to finalise a report and recommendations, which would then be considered at a joint meeting of the Maidstone, Swale and Tunbridge Wells Scrutiny Committees at Tunbridge Wells Town Hall on Monday 12 January 2015.

The Review Coordinator explained that it had become apparent whilst gathering evidence for the review that communication about what MKIP actually meant was a real issue.

The Chairman reminded Members of the survey on MKIP which had been circulated to all Members and spoke about his disappointment that only a few members had responded. He thanked the two members of the Committee that had responded.

There was some discussion about Member awareness of MKIP and it was suggested that a Member Briefing be arranged and that the Member Development Working Group consider the issue at a future meeting.

377 CABINET FORWARD PLAN

The Committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan for 1 December 2014 – 30 March 2015.

378 URGENT BUSINESS REQUESTS

There were no urgent business requests.

379 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the Work Programme 2014/15.

A Member raised concern about the length of time it was taking for reviews to be concluded. He stated that once reviews were commenced a target completion date should be set to ensure reviews were focused.

Members considered progressing the Housing Services review and it was agreed that the Policy and Performance Officer would circulate the review plan to the review co-ordinators

with a request that they indicate which areas of Housing Services should be the focus of the review. The Head of Housing, Cabinet Member for Housing and a representative from AmicusHorizon would then be invited to attend the meeting on 13 January 2015.

- Policy and Performance Officer

It was agreed that reports for the following reviews would be considered at the 13 January 2015 meeting: Economic Development; Asset transfers; and Contracts and Procurement. An update on Welfare Reform and Universal Credit to be provided at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 19 March 2015.

There was some discussion about commencing a review of Primary Health and funding opportunities but it was considered that there was not enough time this municipal year for it to be commenced.

Resolved:

- (1) That following circulation of the scoping plan for the Housing Services Review the Head of Housing, Cabinet Member for Housing and a representative from AmicusHorizon be invited to attend the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 13 January 2015.***
- (2) That reports for the following reviews be considered at the 13 January 2015 meeting: Economic Development; Asset transfers; and Contracts and Procurement.***
- (3) That an update on Welfare Reform and Universal Credit be given at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 19 March 2015.***

Chairman

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All Minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel