
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne on Tuesday, 21 July 2015 from 7.00 - 10.01 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Mike Baldock, Cameron Beart (substitute for Councillor Peter Marchington), Andy Booth (Chairman), Lloyd Bowen (Vice-Chairman), Derek Conway, Richard Darby (substitute for Councillor Mick Galvin), Mike Dendor, Mike Henderson, Ken Ingleton, Samuel Koffie-Williams, Ben Stokes and Roger Truelove.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Katherine Bescoby, David Clifford, Bob Pullen and Nick Vickers.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Duncan Dewar-Whalley and Ted Wilcox.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Mick Galvin, Peter Marchington and Prescott.

111 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 24 June 2015 (Minute Nos. 83 – 87) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

112 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Mike Henderson declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest in respect of the budget for Flood Defences which was referred to in the Financial Outturn report. He advised that if this subject was discussed, he would leave the meeting for the duration of that discussion.

The Chairman declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest in respect of leisure facilities, which was referred to in the Financial Outturn report. He advised that if this subject was discussed, he would leave the meeting for the duration of that discussion.

113 FINANCIAL OUTTURN REPORT 2014/15

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Finance and the Head of Finance to the meeting. The Chairman drew attention to the Financial Outturn report, paper copies of which were available at the meeting, and invited the Committee to go through the document page by page.

In response to comments concerning the amount of underspend, the Head of Finance explained that the savings were largely as a result of savings achieved through the renegotiation of the waste contract, and how planning fees were budgeted for. He explained the purpose of the Performance Fund, the Regeneration Fund and the Transformation Fund.

Table 2, Main Variations by Service

A Member referred to the underspend in Grounds Maintenance, the overspend in Parks and Open Spaces and the £256k adjustment required by the auditors, and proposed that the Cabinet should be requested to look at this again, with a view to spending the funds on the renovation and refurbishment of play areas, possibly some new ones. The proposal was seconded, however, when put to the vote it was not supported.

Mid Kent Planning Service (MKPS) overspend – in response to questions, the Head of Finance undertook to provide the Member with details of the original estimate for the implementation of MKPS.

Recycling and Waste Minimisation – a Member referred to the problems with the public putting non-recyclable waste into household recycling bins and suggested the Cabinet should do more.

Street Cleansing – a Member referred to public perception of clean streets, and asked whether the savings in the Waste Contract had resulted in a reduction in cleanliness.

Leisure and Sports Centre – a Member asked for a breakdown of what made up the £73k overspend.

Parking and Highways – a Member asked what proportion of the £136k income was made up from parking fines. The Cabinet Member for Finance referred to the free Christmas parking in the town, but there were no facts to prove that this resulted in an increase in revenue for retailers. A Member gave an example of Cardigan in Wales, where retailers had seen an increase in revenue whilst car park ticketing machines were out of action.

Recycling and Waste – the Cabinet Member for Finance advised that Garden Waste was now making more income than expected. He also referred to work to encourage recycling, to avoid contamination. A Member advised that it was not always residents that caused the problem, but members of the public passing by.

The Head of Finance confirmed that the Council was not required to declare accrued annual leave in its accounts.

Democratic Services – the Cabinet Member for Finance advised that much of the training for Councillors had been undertaken in house, as it was more specific.

Health and Safety – the Cabinet Member for Finance explained why the journals had not been required.

Play Areas Commuted Sums – a Member suggested that this amount should be spent on play areas. The Head of Finance advised that this was to support S106 funding and undertook to find out further information for Members.

Sittingbourne Town Centre (STC) Development – Members raised concern about the overspend of £60k. The Head of Finance explained that the amount was for

project management costs, and explained why it was dealt with in the budget in that way. It was proposed and seconded, that the Cabinet be asked to give a full report on what had been spent on the STC project. This was agreed.

Revenue Rollover Requests – Table 3

Emerging Communities Project Fund – A Member asked what the project was for. The Chairman undertook to provide additional information about the project.

Council Tax Flood Grant – in response to a question, the Head of Finance explained that this was the balance left after remedial works had been carried out.

Data Matching and New Burdens – The Head of Policy explained what the software was for.

During the discussion, the Head of Finance confirmed that this money was grant funding, and so was to be spent for a specific purpose. It could not be spent for other purposes. He undertook to give a Member a copy of the previous year's report on this subject.

Highways Grants – a Member advised that the Faversham Enterprise Partnership no longer existed, but there was a Faversham Business Partnership. The Chairman asked for an update regarding Leysdown Rose Tinted, as a fee had been levied for failure to remove illuminations on time.

Table 4 – Revenue Rollover Requests – Operational

Planning Income – a Member asked what the proposed S106 Community Infrastructure monitoring software would do and what it was for, and suggested that the Cabinet should be asked to reconsider this. The Chairman undertook to call this item in.

Corporate Training Budget – the Cabinet Member for Performance advised that the Independent Medical Assessments (IMAs) was the counselling support offered to employees when returning to work.

Open Spaces Budget and Sports Facilities Budget underspends – a Member commented on what could be achieved with the amounts provided. The Cabinet Member for Finance undertook to provide a response as to whether New Road was Sheerness or Minster, and whether there were other funding sources for the play areas in Vincent Gardens and Kemsley Recreation, Sittingbourne, and why those two had been selected.

Members Localism Grants Budget underspend – a Member proposed that the carry forward should be allocated to Members who had fully spent their grants, and new Members. This was seconded. The Chairman undertook to call this item in.

Litter Picking Budget underspend – The Head of Finance advised that Stonebridge Pond, Faversham, was unrelated to the litter picking underspend.

Seafront Budget underspend – a Member asked whether this work had been completed by the apprentices. The Head of Finance undertook to find out and report back.

Table 5 – Revenue Rollover Requests – Bids

A Member proposed that the rollovers requested for topping up the building maintenance reserve, providing an additional planning officer and a consultant to develop the Sports Facility Strategy were not required.

The Cabinet Member for Finance explained why the additional funds were needed for building maintenance. The Chairman advised that he would not call this in, but the Cabinet be asked to take account of this feedback in future decisions. A detailed response would be requested on the Facilities Strategy costs.

In response to a question, the Cabinet Member for Finance explained why a payment was necessary for abortive work at the Meads Village Hall, Sittingbourne.

Table 6 – Allocations from the Improvement and Regeneration Funds 2014/15

Regeneration Officer Town Centres – in response to a question, the Chairman agreed to ask officers to give more detail about the work that would be undertaken by this post.

Christmas Car Parking Concessions 2014 – in response to questions, the Head of Finance explained why this had been included.

Further Education for Sittingbourne, Scoping Study – in response to questions, the Head of Finance agreed to ask officers to give more information about this study.

Redundancy Costs – the Head of Finance undertook to provide information about how many staff had been made redundant.

Table 7 – Revenue Reserves (prior to 2014/15 rollovers)

A Member raised concerns in respect of the reserves for Localism, Housing, Empty Property Initiative, Development Control and suggested the Cabinet should be asked to reconsider. He suggested the Cabinet should be asked to look at ways to make the Swale Local Loan Fund work, and asked what the Miscellaneous Reserve was for. The Head of Finance referred Members to the Council Accounts, as this report was a holding position and not a complete picture, and drew attention to the remit of the Audit Committee.

Empty Property Initiative – The Chairman undertook to request a full report on this for a future meeting.

There was some discussion regarding the content of the Miscellaneous Reserve, and the Chairman agreed to ask for a list of what this included.

Swale Local Loan Fund – the Chairman undertook to take this forward as a future review. The Cabinet Member for Finance gave an example of where funding had been agreed, but then had fallen through with the applicant.

Capital Rollover Requests 2014/15

Members asked questions regarding the telephony system; the Thistle Hill Community Centre, Minster-on-Sea; new play area in Iwade and the Income Manager module.

The Cabinet Member for Finance advised that there had been some delays with the play area in Iwade due to legal issues. The Head of Finance gave an update on the implementation of the new cash receipting system.

During the debate, it was acknowledged that it would have been useful for the Scrutiny Committee to consider this report, prior to it being considered by the Cabinet. The sequencing of meetings would be reviewed.

Resolved:

(1) That a full report be requested for the next Scrutiny meeting on 9 September, on what expenditure had been incurred on the Sittingbourne Town Centre project.

114 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT 2014/15 - QUARTER 4

The Chairman invited the Cabinet Member for Performance and the Policy Manager to introduce the report. The Policy Manager explained the purpose of the Scorecard for performance monitoring, and went through the Corporate Health Scorecard for the benefit of new Members.

In response to questions, it was confirmed that all staff had an annual appraisal, and that the monitoring of sickness levels would be split between long term and short term sickness in the future. A Member requested sight of the performance management report that was considered by Senior Management Team, and the Policy Manager agreed to forward this. The Policy Manager advised that the average sickness was 7.85 days per person, however, the public sector did experience higher levels of sickness than the private sector. He also explained quartiles and the difficulties in finding comparable data sources.

In respect of the Environment and Rural Affairs Scorecard, Members raised concerns about the downturn in perception in terms of cleanliness. The Cabinet Member for Performance advised that there were settling-in problems with the new waste contract and that he was confident Members would see an improvement in the next report, as not all of the data in the report was very recent. In respect of concerns about cleanliness, the Cabinet Member for Performance advised that there was a perception that there was a lot of rubbish around in Kent, and referred to a scheme they were piloting with litter wardens.

In respect of the Planning Scorecard, concern was expressed regarding the upward trend of complaints, the increase in income and the performance indicator that measured delegated decisions, in that it should not be seen as poor performance

for the Planning Committee to determine the applications, instead of officers. The Policy Manager advised that the performance indicator was set by the Council. Another Member raised concerns about planning and considered that officers needed help.

In respect of the Regeneration Scorecard, a Member referred to the performance indicators that measured Council spend with businesses headquartered in Swale, and Council spend with businesses employing 30 or more people. The Policy Manager referred to data quality issues that had been experienced with these indicators in the past, and advised that for 2015/16 the two indicators would be combined into a single indicator with a more robust methodology for ensuring high quality data. He undertook to give information on the rationale for combining these performance indicators into one. The Cabinet Member for Performance suggested that rateable business growth would be a better indicator.

115 SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2015/16

The Policy and Performance Officer outlined his report, and referred to Appendix II which set out the topics suggested so far. The Committee discussed the suggested items, and the Chairman sought to determine which items were considered to be most important. During the discussion, the Policy and Performance Officer undertook to provide new Members with information about the Mid Kent Improvement Partnership Planning Support Review.

Item 9 – Housing Services – this was considered to be the most important in the list and the Chairman advised that this would be a review for the Committee, rather than a task and finish group.

Item 10 – it was suggested that the Planning Services review should be restricted to development control, as the Policy Development and Review Committee was looking at planning enforcement.

Item 11 – Leisure and Tourism – the Chairman confirmed that this would be an item for consideration by the Committee, rather than a task and finish group.

Item 12 – Local Engagement Forums – the Chairman suggested that this should be a task and finish group – with one member from each area (Sittingbourne, Sheppey, Faversham).

116 SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

Members agreed to the suspension of Standing Orders in order that the Scrutiny Committee could complete its business.

117 REVIEWS AT FOLLOW-UP STAGE AND LOG OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Resolved:

(1) That this report be noted.

118 OTHER REVIEW PROGRESS REPORTS

The Chairman advised that this was item deferred to the next meeting.

119 CABINET FORWARD PLAN

The Policy and Performance Officer reminded Members that strategies and plans were within the remit of the Policy Development and Review Committee, and he outlined the remit of the Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved

(1) That the forward plan be noted.

Chairman

Copies of this document are available on the Council website <http://www.swale.gov.uk/dso/>. If you would like hard copies or alternative versions (i.e. large print, audio, different language) we will do our best to accommodate your request please contact Swale Borough Council at Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, Kent, ME10 3HT or telephone the Customer Service Centre 01795 417850.

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