
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, Kent, ME10 3HT on Wednesday, 4 July 2018 from 7.00pm - 8.53 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Bobbin, Lloyd Bowen (Chairman), Mike Dendor (Vice-Chairman), Mick Galvin, Ken Ingleton, Ben Stokes and Lynd Taylor.

OFFICERS PRESENT: David Clifford, Jo Millard, Tony Potter, Bob Pullen, Roxanne Sheppard, Nick Vickers and Rebecca Walker.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Duncan Dewar-Whalley (Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance) and Alan Horton (Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Families).

APOLOGIES: Councillors Mike Baldock, Roger Clark, Derek Conway, Mike Henderson and Roger Truelove.

89 FIRE EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chairman drew attention to the Fire Evacuation Procedure.

90 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 7 June 2018 (Minutes Nos. 42 - 53) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

91 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

92 SITTINGBOURNE TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION UPDATE

The Committee considered the written update.

Several Members thanked the Sittingbourne Town Centre Manager for circulating the Critical Path Analysis and Risk Register documents that had previously been requested.

A Member sought an update on the Central Avenue, Sittingbourne one-way reversal scheme associated with the High Street market closure. The Chief Financial Officer agreed to arrange for this information to be circulated to Scrutiny Committee Members.

There was a discussion around the completion dates of the roadworks.

Resolved:

(1) That the report be noted.

93 FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT REPORT

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance and the Chief Financial Officer to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance introduced the report which set out the revenue and capital outturn position for 2017/2018. He highlighted the £829,000 underspend and praised the Finance Team for their continued hard work in achieving savings. He highlighted recent investments and advised the Scrutiny Committee that, subject to any comments received, the report would be considered by Cabinet at their meeting on 11 July 2018. Finally, he congratulated the Finance Team for winning the Team of the Year award at the Swale Stars ceremony.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance invited Members' comments.

A Member referred to the additional income from Beach Huts on page 7 and asked how many Huts were owned and rented out by Swale Borough Council (SBC)? The Chief Financial Officer agreed to find out.

A Member sought clarification on the £29k underspend of Members' Allowances on page 9. The Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance advised that some allowances were not claimed.

In response to a question, the Chief Financial Officer advised that 'Corporate Items' as referred to on page 10 were detailed on pages 28 to 29 of the report and were non-service costs that related to the whole Council. In response to the same Member, the Chief Financial Officer explained what the costs were.

There was a discussion around Members Localism Grants (page 31) and the Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance confirmed that most of the grant money had been spent. He explained the reasons why grant money was sometimes unspent and highlighted the strict monitoring process that was followed.

A Member drew attention to the £44k underspend on public conveniences cleaning on page 33 of the report. In response, the Chief Financial Officer advised that the underspend was as a result of savings on the cleaning contract, and the savings would be reinvested into improving the facilities.

In response to a Member's question on the difference between Revenue Rollover Requests and Revenue Operational Bid Requests, the Chief Financial Officer explained that Operational Bid Requests were made to a general underspend pool and Revenue Rollover Requests were from within an individual service area. The Chief Financial Officer agreed to make the wording clearer.

A Member praised the format of the report and Members congratulated the Finance Team and compared them favourably to other less well-managed Councils.

POST MEETING NOTE: The follow up information requested was provided by the Chief Financial Officer and circulated to all Members of the Scrutiny Committee the day after the meeting.

Resolved:

(1) That the gross revenue underspend on services of £829,000 (including £1,917,000 additional income) be noted.

(2) That the revenue services rollovers of £571,660 and the setting up of new reserves as set out in Table 3 in Appendix I for approval be noted.

(3) That the revenue service bids of £288,060, as set out in Table 4 in Appendix I be noted.

(4) That the topping up of the Performance Fund and Regeneration Funds by £300,000 each from the General Fund and the Business Rates Volatility Reserve be noted.

(5) That the delegation to the Chief Financial Officer to allocate uncommitted underspends to reserve funds be noted.

(6) That the capital expenditure of £11,491,000 as detailed in paragraph 8 and Table 8 in Appendix I be noted.

(7) That the capital rollovers of £2,027,970 as detailed in Table 8 in Appendix I for approval be noted.

94 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Chairman welcomed the Policy and Performance Manager and Business Improvement Officer to the meeting for this item.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance introduced the report which set out the quarterly portfolio-based balanced scorecard performance reports for Quarter 4 (January to March 2018). He drew attention to the high targets set and praised the excellent performance figures achieved. The Policy and Performance Manager gave an explanation of the Balanced Scorecard Performance reports.

Corporate Overview

A Member raised a concern at the high risk scores for Cyber security and General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). The Policy and Performance Manager reminded Members that the risk summary on the scorecard was at a very high level and that much more detail on risk management was regularly provided to the Audit Committee.

In the discussion that followed, the Chairman said that he expected the GDPR risk to be high because of the high impact a breach might have. Another Member was pleased that there were plans in place to reduce risks and suggested that the GDPR Officer should work with the Information Commissioners Office to stress test.

The Policy and Performance Manager agreed to provide Members with more detail on the two risks identified.

A Member drew attention to the high levels of long-term sickness. The Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance advised that long-term sickness was not controllable and that just a few members of staff being off could alter the figures. He added that the Health and Safety Committee monitored stress levels of staff at their meetings. The Chairman agreed that short-term sickness levels needed to be managed, but reminded the Committee that the figures were from January 2018 – March 2018 when winter sickness was more common.

Environment and Rural Affairs

Members congratulated all those involved in achieving 100% target in responding to complaints.

Finance and Performance

There was no discussion.

Housing and Wellbeing

In response to a question from a Member, the Strategic Housing and Health Manager gave the definition of Affordable Housing as set by Central Government. In response to a question from the same Member, the Housing Options Manager clarified that the graph showed the number of people who had been prevented from becoming homeless after approaching Housing for advice, and added that some customers didn't return after the first approach.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance praised the work of Resident Services. A Member agreed and spoke positively about the continued increase in the number of long-term empty homes being brought back into use.

Planning Services

The Policy and Performance Manager highlighted the improvements across the service. A Member gave particular praise to the improvements in response times in Planning Enforcement.

Regeneration

The Chairman praised the 100% target achieved in response to complaints.

In response to a question from a Member, the Policy and Performance Manager agreed to provide a follow-up response on why the Rateable Business Growth always peaked in Quarter One.

A Member drew attention to the low levels of achievement in the Swale skills profile and suggested that this issue could be looked at in the future.

Safer Families and Communities (now Housing and Safer Communities)

A Member was pleased to see the steady decrease in the number of antisocial behaviour incidents.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance, the Policy and Performance Manager and the Business Improvement Officer for their attendance.

95 CHANGE TO THE ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chairman advised of a change to the running order, to move back the item on Housing – Update on recommendations made by the Scrutiny Committee, as the Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities had been delayed.

96 REVIEWS AT FOLLOW-UP STAGE AND LOG OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Policy and Performance Officer explained that this item usually gave a monthly update on what progress had been made following recommendations the Scrutiny Committee had made in past reports or discussions. He advised that, as monthly progress was historically slow, Members might wish to consider the item was brought to Scrutiny Committee every three months. He suggested that, in the case of the current Leisure and Tourism item, the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and officers be invited to the Scrutiny Committee meeting every six months.

All Members in attendance agreed.

Resolved:

(1) Members agreed that the Reviews at Follow-up Stage and Log of Recommendations be reported to Scrutiny Committee every three months.

97 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2018/19

The Policy and Performance Officer introduced the Committee Work Programme 2018/19. He highlighted current items still under review.

The Chairman suggested that no new reviews should commence until existing reviews were completed and that a review on Utilities could be considered at the end of 2018.

Resolved:

(1) Members noted the report.

98 HOUSING - UPDATE ON RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities, the Strategic Housing and Health Manager and the Housing Options Manager to

the meeting. He explained the Scrutiny Committee's concern over the lack of progress in the recommendations and subsequent invitation to attend the meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities thanked the Chairman and explained that whilst the recommendations were being worked on, updates had not been forthcoming, but would be provided in the future.

The Chairman went through the recommendations one by one and invited questions.

Recommendation (1)

In response to a question from a Member, the Strategic Housing and Health Manager explained the difference between affordable and social housing and different types of housing schemes available.

In the discussion that followed, the Strategic Housing and Health Manager explained that affordable homes were not only available to homeless households and explained the process of bidding on social housing. She advised that new homes built were not necessarily automatically given to the homeless. The Housing Options Manager added that, of the 30 homes currently available to bid on, six per month were usually allocated to the homeless. She said that she hoped it would soon rise to 10 per month.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities advised that there was a number of criteria to examine when considering if an applicant qualified for a property, and a homeless person did not automatically rise to the top of the list.

Recommendation (2)

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities said that there were meetings with Optivo on a quarterly basis, as well as more regular communication when a proposed new housing development exceeded more than 10 houses. He added that the Cabinet Member for Planning was carrying out a review of how homes in the future could be constructed with facilities to be suitable homes for life.

Recommendation (5)

In response to a question from a Member on whether loans could be used to restore properties, the Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities advised that the Policy was to bring homes back into use for landlords to rent out commercially.

In the debate that followed, the Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities referred to the former Citizens Advice Bureau building in Station Street, Sittingbourne being considered for temporary housing accommodation by Cabinet on 11 July 2018, and the 11 new properties Optivo were planning to build on land-locked land at Minster recently sold by SBC. He added that 65 empty homes were brought back to use last year and work was continuing to add more.

A Member drew attention that the development of new housing built by Housing Associations could not be sustained without subsidies as costs would not be covered. The Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities agreed, and highlighted the reduction in housing stock as a direct result of the Right to Buy scheme.

The Housing Options Manager spoke of the affordability tests carried out by Optivo and advised that only one case had been turned down. She said that this case had been challenged and overcome.

In response to a Member, the Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities advised that SBC's responsibility was a duty of care, not to provide all homeless people with a house. He added that Officers worked closely with local landlords and referred to the Landlord Forum.

Recommendation (6)

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities advised that the Homelessness Reduction Act came into force in April 2018 and the change in criteria suggested by the Scrutiny Committee had therefore been superseded. He added that each case would be different and considered on its merits.

In response to a question from a Member, the Housing Options Manager agreed to circulate the figures of the number of Housing Association tenants moving into the Borough from other Boroughs. She reminded Members of the resident criteria and advised that they did not have the data of those moving into affordable housing properties.

Recommendation (7)

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities said that due to an oversight, the original letter had not been sent. He added that the letter had now been drafted and would be shared with Scrutiny Committee Members when sent out.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities agreed to provide information on Private Rented Agreements requested by a Member.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities, the Strategic Housing and Health Manager and the Housing Options Manager for their attendance and extended an invitation to attend the Scrutiny Committee to give an update in six months.

Resolved:

(1) Members noted the progress made on the Recommendations.

99 OTHER REVIEW PROGRESS REPORTS

A Member advised that Members of the Development Management Task and Finish Group would be meeting on 25 July 2018 to progress the review.

The Policy and Performance Officer agreed to arrange a meeting of those on the Regeneration (other than Sittingbourne Town Centre) Task and Finish Group. The Chairman clarified that the review would cover the wider area of Sittingbourne, not associated with the current regeneration scheme. A Member suggested including the issue of lack of skills in Swale as part of the review.

100 CABINET FORWARD PLAN

The Senior Democratic Services Officer advised Members of the changes to the Forward Plan since the Scrutiny Committee Agenda had been published and reminded Members that the updated Forward Plan had been circulated via despatch.

101 URGENT BUSINESS REQUESTS

There were none.

Chairman

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