
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Virtual Meeting held via Skype on Wednesday, 18 November 2020 from 7.00 - 9.18 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Lloyd Bowen (Chairman), Richard Darby, Steve Davey, Mike Dendor (Vice-Chairman), Tim Gibson, Alastair Gould, James Hall, Carole Jackson, Elliott Jayes, Pete Neal and Ken Pugh.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Martyn Cassell, Jo Millard, Tony Potter, Bob Pullen and Nick Vickers.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Cameron Beart, Monique Bonney, Derek Carnell, Roger Clark, Alan Horton, Ken Rowles, David Simmons, Roger Truelove, Tim Valentine, Ghlin Whelan and Mike Whiting.

APOLOGY: Councillor Denise Knights.

258 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 21 October 2020 (Minute Nos. 198 – 203) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

259 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

260 SCRUTINY OF 2021/22 FEES AND CHARGES PROPOSALS

The Chairman welcomed the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, the Chief Financial Officer and the Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure to the meeting.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance introduced the report. He said that discretionary services must pay for themselves and there was little change to the Fees and Charges from the previous year, to reflect the difficult financial times.

The Chairman advised that Appendix II on pages 52 -69 listed the fees and charges set by Government which Swale Borough Council (SBC) had no discretion over. He invited Members to ask questions on the fees and charges set out in Appendix I which Members considered page by page.

In response to a Member's question on the process if a suitable contract for pest control was not appointed as in recommendation (2), the Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure explained that SBC promoted the contractor, the contract was currently out for tender, and he was confident that contractors would come forward. In the debate that followed, Members raised concern that the Council were not just an advisory service and that it was required to go through the full tender process to select a contractor.

Page 9

In response to a Member's question on how the private disabled works charge worked, the Chief Financial Officer agreed to find out.

Page 11

In response to a Member's question on what Con 29 was, the Chief Financial Officer agreed to find out.

Page 14

A Member sought clarification on the time limitation charges on electric charging points in car parks and the Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure confirmed there was only a cost charge if a vehicle used the facility during the car park fee-paying period. In the discussion that followed the Cabinet Member for Environment said that the use of the charging points could be monitored and the costs of installing charging points was already in the budget. The Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure added that the current costs outside of fee-paying hours was negligible, but 2021 was a key year for electric vehicle provision and the costs would be scrutinised and fees set accordingly.

Page 15

A Member sought clarity on the car park season tickets in the Borough and the Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure confirmed the Multi-Storey Car Park was not included and would amend the wording in the document.

Page 22

A Member referred to the fees for Travelling Fairs which was raised at the Cabinet meeting on 28 October 2020. The Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure said that separating the fees for fairs between local and commercial fairs would be discussed and he advised that the report would be updated for Members to consider at the next Full Council meeting in January 2021.

Page 26

A Member spoke positively on the popularity of the garden waste bins but warned that the higher than inflation increase in fees could discourage subscribers. He said a 1.5% increase would be fairer and would encourage users of the scheme. In response the Cabinet Member for Environment said that the fee had not been raised for many years, it was not index-linked and the £40 fee was still excellent value for money. He explained that it was still one of the cheapest fees in Kent and that there was no fee for brown bins on top. Other Members raised points which included:

- A small rise brought SBC into line with other authorities;
- the Council were facing financially difficult times;
- the public already paid to have their rubbish taken away so should not have to pay an additional fee;

- could see no reason for the increase;
- £3 was only a small increase;
- some other authorities did not collect garden waste at all;
- feedback from public was that it was good value for money; and
- supported the increase.

In response to question on the new waste contract, the Cabinet Member for Environment said it was currently being negotiated, and even if the contract was a like for like contract, there would still be a substantial increase in costs.

Page 27

In response to a Member's question on the cost of additional litter bins, the Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure explained that if any Parish Council requested additional litter bins, there was a provision to buy at a better rate.

Page 28

The Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure advised Members that the Council, as part of the Kent Resource Partnership, had written to Magistrates to seek a less lenient approach to those convicted of fly tipping.

Page 31

A Member asked why the kennels used to house stray dogs was based out of the Borough? The Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure explained that there were no suitable kennels in the Borough willing to come forward and the kennels used were in Medway and provided an excellent service. A Member said finding suitable kenneling facilities was historic.

Page 33

In response to a Member's question on Environmental Health Certificates for transit through non-EU countries to destination country, the Chief Financial Officer agreed to find out what the position might be after January 2021 when the UK was due to leave the European Union. Members agreed to change the wording to read 'EHC for transit through **any country...**'.

Page 40

A Member asked why some betting establishments were not being charged the statutory maximum fee. In the debate that followed, a Member said that the fees were set according to the type of gambling, and community activities such as bingo were set lower.

Councillor Elliott Jayes proposed that fees for betting premises on pages 41 to 46, except bingo clubs, should be considered further and raised to the maximum level. This was seconded by Councillor Ken Pugh. On being put to the vote, Members agreed.

A Member drew attention to the length of time the Street Trading Policy had been under review.

Page 47

A Member asked whether any Pleasure Boat Licenses had been issued. The Chief Financial Officer agreed to find out.

Page 48

A Member asked whether the application fee for pavement licences was for traders only? The Chief Financial Officer agreed to find out.

Page 50

There was a discussion on the room hire of Swale House. The Chief Financial Officer explained that rooms would not be hired out for the immediate future, but the fees could be looked at again for the 2022/23 budget, after the refurbishment of Swale House. A Member suggested a change to the comment to say “**Review suspended pending refurbishment of building.**”

In response to a Member’s question on whether equipment was included in the hire fee, the Chief Financial Officer advised that most hirers were non-commercial organisations, but this could be looked at in the future.

Page 51

A Member sought clarification on how long and the duration of each session to hire a room at The Guildhall, Faversham. The Chief Financial Officer agreed to find out.

Page 52

In response to a Member’s question on what constituted a mobile home site, where the changes were set out and whether the costs had been estimated, the Chief Financial Officer agreed to find out.

Page 72

A Member sought information on the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on parking enforcement and how parking habits had changed. In response, the Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure said that there was a predicted loss of income of penalty charges as there were fewer vehicle movements. He added that there needed to be a blend of enforcement whilst adhering to Government regulations. The Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure confirmed that the Council would need to drawdown the surplus from previous years to stabilise the budget.

The Chairman thanked the Leader, the Chief Financial Officer and the Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure for their attendance and contribution.

Recommended:

The Scrutiny Committee notes the report and makes the following recommendation to Cabinet:

(1) That the Scrutiny Committee asks Cabinet to consider maximising the fees for betting premises on pages 41 to 46 of the Agenda, with the exception of bingo clubs.

261 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Leader introduced the report which set out the quarterly performance management report for second quarter 2020/21 (July – September 2020). He explained that the first quarter report was cancelled due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Authority's resources, but the data was fed-in to keep a running assessment.

He highlighted paragraph 1.2 on page 74 of the report which detailed that 76% of all performance indicators were green, 10% were amber and 14% were red. The Leader drew attention to Chart 1 on page 75 which charted the gradual decline in red throughout the period.

Referring to the 20 corporate indicators, measured monthly at paragraph 2.8 on page 76, the Leader said that some of the indicators in red were Covid-linked such as increase in waste collection enquiries to Customer Services and reduction in response times for Planning Enforcement complaints due to childcare issues during lockdown.

The Leader drew attention to Table 3 on page 79 and said it was no surprise that there had been an increase in the number of households living in temporary accommodation.

A Member raised an issue with how Planning Enforcement complaints were logged. He said that the reference number recorded in the Mid-Kent planning administration team in Maidstone did not correspond with reference numbers kept by the Swale Planning Enforcement team and he feared that 76.7% was an underestimate. The Business Support Officer (Policy) agreed to look into this.

In response to a Member's comments around bin collections, the Leader said the Council were moving towards a new contract. The Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure added that many of the issues were historic and there had been increased interaction with the new management team at the contractor, however there were still Covid-19 related issues and missed bins was an area of focus to be improved upon.

The Chairman referred to the percentage of calls to the customer contact centre answered in 20 seconds and reminded Members there had also been a number of network issues. He asked whether there was a requirement of minimum Wi-Fi broadband strength for staff to work from home? The Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure said there was no minimum requirement in the terms and conditions, and that ICT Services were working well with staff with poor broadband.

He added that Swale House had been made Covid-19 secure in order to facilitate staff that had poor broadband. A Member commented that resilience variance was an issue as even strong Wi-Fi sometimes dropped.

Drawing attention to the information on the sticker campaign for bins as highlighted on page 78 of the report, the Chairman suggested there needed to be more publicity to make public aware. The Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure said there would be a social media campaign and stickers would be put on all bins. A Member said that putting waste in the wrong bins was a major issue. In response, the Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure said there was a longer-term impact of residents working from home, and there would be a focus on correct food waste disposal.

A Member praised the efforts of staff for achieving 98.5% of abandoned vehicles investigated within 24 hours as shown in Table 2 on page 78 of the report.

In response to a Member's question on the reduction of enquiries to the business support services, the Leader explained that this related to grant enquiries and he expected the figure to increase significantly again.

A Member sought clarification on the estimated visits to Council-owned or supported leisure centres. The Head of Commissioning Environment and Leisure said that the figures for all three leisure centres were estimated as they had opened and closed regularly during the pandemic and the actual figure would be known by the end of the year. He said that swimming lessons had not been run at The Swallows, and the works to fix the roof was expected to be completed by Christmas 2020.

Referring to Table 3 on page 79, of the report, Member asked whether the % of fly-tipping incidents attended was by SBC staff? The Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure confirmed it was. The same Member also queried the low number of Visitor Economy Businesses support by ECS. The Business Support Officer (Policy) agreed to find out. (POST MEETING NOTE response: Demand for support was driven by grants availability at any given time. By the summer, all grants had been paid so demand for ECS support dropped. Additionally, a lot of work had been done to encourage business to sign up for the Economic Development E-bulletin, which should reduce the numbers of enquiries).

The Chairman asked questions about long term sick absence of staff, whether any were Covid-19 related and whether self-isolation was recorded as sick leave? The Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure said that records of staff isolating and working, as well as those isolating and not working were kept but were not recorded in the sickness figures.

Several Members praised Planning staff for meeting the targets in determining planning applications and maintaining performance during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Chairman added that all SBC staff had gone above and beyond and should be applauded. The Leader said all staff had been fantastic and reminded Members that staff had also been without a Chief Executive.

A Member referred to the table on page 83 of the report and said that the % of beach huts occupied had a low target and a low outcome. In response, the Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure said that 90% occupation was high as the aim was to retain some huts for rental for local people. He said that whilst it was not currently a focus, the uptake remained above the target and further offers to those on the waiting list had recently been made. The Business Support Officer (Policy) added that 75% was the target, and 87% had been achieved.

In response to a Member's question on litter, the Head of Commissioning, Environment and Leisure said that litter was expected items such as packets or cans and detritus was a build up of smaller items such as cigarette butts or dust/leaves, etc.

The Chairman thanked officers for their attendance.

Resolved:

(1) That the report be noted.

262 CABINET FORWARD PLAN

In response to a Member's question on the Land at Whitstable Road, Faversham, the Cabinet Member for Environment explained that the land was not suitable for development.

In response to questions on the impact on savings on the Clear Air Zone, the Cabinet Member for Environment said it would not deliver savings, the costs would exceed the revenue and options would be considered.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer explained that the Local Plan Panel meeting scheduled for 19 November 2020 had been cancelled and that a report would instead be considered at the Local Plan Panel meeting scheduled for 2 December 2020.

In response to a Member's question on why the works to Swale House appeared on the Forward Plan twice, the Policy Officer reminded the meeting that the non-key decision was the update, and the key decision was the business case. The Chairman added that the Swale House Refurbishment business case would be considered for pre-scrutiny by the Committee in January 2021.

Resolved:

(1) That the Forward Plan be noted.

263 ADJOURNMENT

There was an adjournment from 8.22pm to 8.27pm.

Chairman

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