

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2017 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. London (Chairman)

Cllrs. Ball, Clack, Hogg, Kitchener, Lindsay, McArthur, Purves and Searles

Cllr. Lowe was also present

22. Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 8 November 2016 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

23. Declarations of Interest

No additional declarations were made.

24. Responses of the Cabinet to reports of the Scrutiny Committee

There were none.

25. Actions from the last meeting of the Committee

The action was noted.

26. Kent County Council Library Provision in the District

The Chairman welcomed County Councillor Mike Hill; Cabinet Member for Community Services, James Pearson; Service Improvement Manager of Libraries, Registration and Archives Service, and Donna Dunn Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells Services Manager, to the meeting, who gave an overview and answered questions on library provision within the District.

County Councillor Hill explained that libraries were the largest service provided under his portfolio and that it was a well loved service by the public. He advised that libraries would remain open as much as possible as they were an important part of the community. In the County there were 99 libraries in total, within the District there were 5 libraries. It was important that the library buildings were used to their full capacity and therefore other services, such as registrations were being included in library buildings.

James Pearson advised that the libraries, registration and archives had been an integrated service since 2012 that had been internally commissioned. The focus

***Corrections made on the accuracy of the Minutes at the meeting on 30 March 2017**

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was on quality outcomes and the positive difference that the service was making, as libraries were a crucial part of the health and wellbeing agenda. In the District there were 3 libraries that provided the service of registering birth, deaths and weddings. The mobile library service had been redesigned and the performance statistics would be known in August 2017. There were 192 volunteers in this District which was the most in Kent. The summer reading challenge for school children had a 23% increase from 2015. Other activities that were adding value were baby rhyme time, story time and talk time sessions.

Questions were asked of County Councillor Hill, James Pearson and Donna Dunn.

In response to questions from the Chairman, Members were advised that figures from November 2016 showed that Sevenoaks Library had 194,000 visits. This was down 2% from 2015 but it was a small decline, which was in trend with other libraries. Swanley Link had 195,815 visits. Although printed books were losing their popularity, many people were using the libraries for other services.

Members were advised that the number of employed staff had been reduced with the introduction of self service. Staffing levels were constantly being reviewed to make savings as required. Different opportunities were being explored for apprentices and to develop future archivists, and to give career pathways to employees. The exact number of professional librarians was unknown but staff had a variety of roles and a range of skills to fulfil them.

A Member asked what services were available for older and more vulnerable residents. James Pearson advised that the home library service was there to visit those who were unable to get out of the house, and for many it provided them with someone to talk to. There were talk time sessions and teach new world service which provided loaning iPads to older people to teach them how to use skype and connect with their families. Reminiscing sessions were popular with those suffering with dementia and there was a postal loan of audio books.

Some Members commented that although it was positive to see the libraries used by a high number of people, it could be difficult sometimes for it to be used in a traditional manner for quiet spaces to study and do research. Donna Dunn advised that comments would be taken on board.

In response to a question County Councillor Hill advised that as well as some of the buildings being refurbished new and replacement books were purchased.

The Chairman thanked County Councillor Hill, James Pearson and Donna Dunn for their attendance.

At 19:40 p.m. the Chairman adjourned the Committee for the convenience of Members and Officers. The meeting resumed at 19:45 p.m.

27. Performance Monitoring

The Chairman introduced a report which summarised performance across the Council to the end of December 2016. Members were asked to consider four

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performance indicators which were performing 10% or more below their target with a commentary from Officers explaining the reasons and detailing any plans to improve performance. If actions taken were not deemed sufficient, the report recommended referring those indicators to Cabinet for further assessment. The report also provided key performance indicators relating to the Portfolio Holders invited to the Scrutiny Committee meeting.

A Member expressed concern at the average number of days it took to process new housing benefit applications and changes to housing benefits and the impact these delays could be having on vulnerable people. In response to concerns raised the Head of Revenues and Benefits advised that the Benefits Team were in regular contact with stakeholders, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and the HERO Officers, so they could provide advice as to where claims were. If residents expressed concerns to the stakeholders, particularly of an eviction threat, then the Council would be contacted and the claim would be moved to a high priority.

The delay in dealing with the claims was due to staff on long term sick and vacancies. However the vacant posts were now filled except for one which was being interviewed for shortly. New processes were being implemented so that when applications were submitted, if there was any information missing the customer would be contacted straight away.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits advised that he was confident by the summer performance against the respective indicators would be in a better position and that an update would be circulated nearer the time to show the improvement.

Resolved: That the contents of the report be noted.

CHANGE IN ORDER OF AGENDA ITEMS

With the Committee's agreement the Chairman took agenda item 7 after agenda item 8.

28. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Health

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health presented a report updating the Committee on recent achievements and challenges ahead. She highlighted that since the cap on benefits in November 2016 to £20,000 there was a reduction of £56 a week for some residents. In the District 101 people were affected, with 30 people in private sector housing being affected.

In response to questions she advised that the £100,000 funding for extra HERO officer support was for the three years, with Sevenoaks District Council being the only Council to receive funding. The housing survey had highlighted that the Local Housing Allowance for the District was too low and needed to be brought in line with London. The private rented sector was only 12% of the total stock, serving the higher income groups.

A Member asked what steps could be taken to ensure that those suffering with dementia were not in hospitals but rather in appropriate care facilities. The

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Portfolio Holder advised that it was mostly dependent on the needs and support requirements of the person. Those with a higher need should be in contact with Social Services but for those with a lesser need, there were dementia friendly communities and cafes to help. A grant scheme was available on a smaller basis to help make amendments to homes to include ramps. There were some homes for those with dementia, however the housing team had advised that contrary to Kent County Council's advice there was not a surplus of these properties in West Kent. More housing for the over 65s was needed in the District and work with planning policy was underway to link the housing strategy and the local plan.

In response to a question, the Portfolio Holder was advised that temporary accommodation in the District was full and therefore three people were in B&Bs.

When asked about the Council taking in a family of Syrian Refugees the Portfolio Holder advised that the Council was putting an article in InShape requesting for any community groups to come forward who may be able to help. Social rented accommodation could not be used as this was for local need only, therefore the only other accommodation was private rented and in comparison to other Boroughs the rent in Sevenoaks was higher. The Government would only cover the costs of the rent for 2 years.

The Portfolio Holder informed Members that in the District there were around 300 empty homes. However this figure included those that were waiting to be sold, or the occupiers lived abroad. In reality only a few were empty in a state of disrepair, around 15 of those were brought back into circulation a year. The Council were involved in the 'no use empty scheme' which provided a loan of up to £25,000 to bring a property back into use.

29. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Policy & Performance

The Portfolio Holder for Policy & Performance updated the Committee on recent achievements within his portfolio. Members were informed that the property investment portfolio was expanding and the purchase of a carpark, shop and offices would be completed shortly. There were small areas of land that the Council retained when the housing stock was transferred to West Kent Housing in 1989 and it was being investigated what could be done with the land. The Bradbourne car park was set to be completed on time and within budget. He advised that in regards to the performance indicators and staff sickness, there could be a big impact if a small team was unwell.

The Portfolio Holder responded to Members' questions.

In response to a question the Portfolio Holder advised that the new website would be live on 21 March 2017. More online services would be provided and there would be a decrease in historical data to ensure that required information was found more efficiently.

Members asked questions about the Masterplan for Swanley and Hextable. The Portfolio Holder advised that there was a need for development in Swanley for family homes and infrastructure. For infrastructure development to take place

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more homes needed to be built. He advised that the report to Planning Advisory Committee and Cabinet was the beginning of the process, looking at what people wanted and where it should be placed. He advised that there were 27 elements to the Masterplan.

The Portfolio Holder was asked whether the Council's company, Quercus 7 could provide rented accommodation. He advised that this was something that Quercus 7 could undertake and would allow flexibility for private rented accommodation. This was not something that could be done as a Local Authority

In response to a question the Portfolio Holder advised that currently to plots of land owned by Sevenoaks District Council in Edenbridge would be developed with parking facilities.

The Portfolio Holder advised that the time taken for the processing of Housing Benefits had been affected by expectation that Universal Credits would be in place, and therefore when staff left the vacancies were filled with agency staff. However any vacancies were now being filled with staff employed directly by the Council.

30. Update from the Property Investment Strategy In-Depth Scrutiny Working Group

The Chairman of the Property Investment Strategy In-Depth Scrutiny Working Group updated the Committee on the Progress of the Group and advised that a formal report would be brought to the March meeting.

31. Work Plan

Members discussed the work plan. It was noted that the Portfolio Holder for Direct and Trading Services would be attending the March meeting and Portfolio Holder for Planning would be attending the summer meeting. It was agreed that there would be no external invitees to the summer meeting and instead the Portfolio Holders for Economic and Community Development and Legal and Democratic Services would also be invited. Sencio Leisure and Highways would be invited to the Autumn and Winter meetings.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.25 PM

CHAIRMAN