

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 2 April 2014 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. London (Chairman)

Cllr. Brown (Vice Chairman)

Cllrs. Abraham, Brown, Clark, Cooke, Mrs. Davison, Fittock, Maskell,
Mrs. Morris and Mrs. Purves

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Mrs. Bracken, Edwards-
Winser, Eyre, Neal and Raikes

Cllrs. Hogarth, Pett and Ramsay were also present.

37. Minutes

Resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 4 February 2014, be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

38. Declarations of Interest

No additional declarations of interest were made.

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

The response from Cabinet was noted.

40. Actions from the last meeting of the Committee

The completed action from the last meeting was noted.

41. Kent Police

The Chairman welcomed Area Commander Chief Superintendent Steve Corbishly and District Commander Chief Inspector Tim Cook to the meeting.

The Area Commander explained that Kent Police had gone through significant change. The Government's first comprehensive spending review had removed £50 million from the budget, equivalent to 1,000 staff and 50 officers. The second review had led to a further reduction of £20 million. Kent Police had focussed these reductions on back-room staff. From 24 June 2014 the number of police officers responsible to the District Commander would increase from 30 to 65 but they would also take on responsibility for responding to emergency call-outs.

The Area Commander noted that crime figures had risen. However, Kent Police had been subject to an inspection in 2013 which recommended a change to the way crime was reported and so 6% of previous incidents were now recorded crimes. Domestic violence

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reports had risen 6% from proactive engagement by the police. The District Commander added that crime had risen 8.3% in the District in the last year, but the actual number of crimes was small and was the third lowest in the Kent Police area.

Questions were addressed to the Area and District Commanders.

A Member representing Ash and New Ash Green sought assurances there would be continuity among PCSOs to allow them to build up local knowledge. Kent Police informed the meeting that the new PCSO for the area had been encouraged to build links with the community, parish council and District Councillors. They sought to keep PCSOs in the same place as long as possible and each should spend the majority of their time in the local area. However PCSOs may be required to fill gaps elsewhere and would move on as their career progressed.

It was confirmed that there were 78 more incidents of domestic violence reported in the past year. The Committee was advised that on 1 April 2014 Kent Police introduced a "Track My Crime" programme so that victims could trace the progress of an investigation through the website but this did not cover domestic violence matters which were dealt with more personally.

A Member felt it was important for police to send officers to close roads on Remembrance Sunday as well as laying a wreath. The Area Commander advised that closures were a matter for the Highways Authority but in many cases the Police would not have resources to police the event and to close the roads.

It was suggested that speeding on Seal Hollow Road, Sevenoaks had not improved over the past year, despite the involvement of Speed Watch. Kent Police recognised speeding as the single most prominent complaint they received, however long term solutions were usually within the role of the Highways Authority in the use of cameras and redesigning roads.

A Member noted that if a person were arrested in Swanley then they would have to be processed in Tunbridge Wells, which took the officer out of duty for a considerable period. The District Commander indicated that they would consider greater use of the station at Ebbsfleet. Crime in Swanley was at about the same level as the previous year.

A Member felt that PCSOs were sometimes isolated in the local community as many incidents would not be dealt with as a crime even if reported by the public. The District Commander was not aware of this view and advised that until the middle of March 2014 an officer had been sent for every reported crime. Another Member added that Kent Police often seemed more active at the beginning of an investigation.

A Member asked what impact the changes on 24 June would have on rural communities. The Area Commander advised that although there was a town-centred structure there was a Crime Rural Advisory Group chaired by Mike Bax which focussed on these matters. Kent Police was encouraging local communities to do more to lessen risk, such as locking agricultural machinery away.

The Area Commander was asked whether CCTV in the District was helpful to the police. He acknowledged that it was presently a question considered at many councils. Funding had just been put aside for Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) CCTV on the

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main arterial routes in the District. He felt they had always received great value from CCTV, especially with ANPR. Questions concerning funding should be referred to the Police and Crime Commissioner, as part of the wider debate taking place.

The Vice Chairman raised concerns at recent incidents of anti-social behaviour on the Vine, Sevenoaks and enquired whether proactive policing would reduce problems, given that there was a regular pattern of behaviour. The District Commander explained that several incidents had been linked to a single group of young people but there had been intervention work from the Community Safety Unit and Anti-Social Behaviour Officer, an ASBO had been applied for, a number given banning orders and action taken against those shops making underage alcohol sales to that group.

The Vice Chairman again raised the matter of closing roads for public events and his concern that road barriers were removed too soon from a Guy Fawkes event. The Area Commander suggested that for some events the police advised organisers to arrange private stewards. Specialist traffic officers would be required rather than local officers. Kent Police had to assess events on a case-by-case basis.

The Chairman enquired what actions Kent Police took to combat financial crime. They did have an Economic Crime Unit and had recently held Fraud Awareness sessions. However such crimes could be difficult to investigate, needing specialist knowledge and the perpetrators could be located anywhere.

The Chairman thanked Chief Superintendent Steve Corbishly and Chief Inspector Tim Cook for coming and answering the Committee's questions.

42. Performance Monitoring

Members considered a report which summarised the performance across the Council to the end of February 2014. Members were asked to consider seven performance indicators which were performing 10% or more below their target and if actions taken by officers were not deemed sufficient the report recommended referring those indicators to the relevant Advisory Committee for further assessment.

It was noted that the percentage of appeals dismissed against planning application refusals was below target for the month and for the year to date. It was suggested that further training could be given to all Members as they joined the Council, to ensure they could make planning arguments based on relevant considerations.

Action 1: Officers to provide a breakdown in appeals upheld where Members had overturned the Officer recommendation.

Members felt it was difficult to assess the significance of any indicators which fell below target, without knowing the number of cases which contributed to each monthly result.

Action 2: Officers to add commentary for each "red" indicator to explain the raw numbers which give the performance indicator results.

43. In-depth Scrutiny - Report of the Budget Working Group

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The meeting was advised that the Budget Working Group had not met since the previous meeting of the Committee and the Chairman of the Working Group had resigned from that post.

The Vice Chairman indicated that a new Budget Working Group could be set up either to look at the budget itself or to consider the process by which it was made, comparing the process with that of other local authorities. Members felt a Working Group could be useful but it would require tight terms of reference from the Committee to clarify the matter they felt should be scrutinised. It was agreed that no working group would be constituted but this could be reconsidered once the new Scrutiny Committee had met in the new municipal year.

A Member of the Leisure Working Group provided a short update on its work from notes provided by the Chief Officer Communities and Business. The Working Group would now not report back until the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 2 October 2014. The Committee was reminded that the Working Group was focussing on value for money from the service provider. The Working Group was advised that the Sencio Board would be able to provide many of the facts and figures the Group required.

44. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Economic and Community Development

The Portfolio Holder for Economic and Community Development introduced what he considered to be three principal challenges within his portfolio.

The Portfolio Holder highlighted that the Escalate fund scheme for zero interest loans had been launched and there were 12 applications from the District. The scheme had been advertised to all Business Rate payers in the District. A District Council Business Area Improvement Fund had been established to provide small grants for regeneration, improving the appearance of business areas. The Council published a "real Business" monthly email

The Portfolio Holder felt there was a role for the District Council in encouraging broadband provision to be brought to rural areas. The Council had supported the Gigaclear project between Seal and Underriver. Since the Council had provided this support West Kent had become a priority for BT in the upgrading of cabinets.

The Portfolio Holder was asked what types of business were applying under the Escalate scheme. They were predominantly service based though he hoped more would be industrial. The Council's website linked to the Kent County Council (KCC) Escalate website which explained how businesses could receive guidance and support in a pre-application process.

A Member asked how the Escalate scheme would ensure value for money and whether the decision makers were qualified. The Chairman of the fund was Mark Dance, KCC Cabinet Member for Economic Development, with Cllr Fleming Vice-Chairman as he was the Chairman of the West Kent Partnership. Applicants were advised to seek assistance from High Growth Kent before each application was considered by PwC in an independent process. The Board would then ask each applicant some questions. The Council's resources had been committed in setting up the fund but the scheme had few overheads and so ongoing costs were limited to publicising the scheme. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that all administrative costs for the scheme were paid for by KCC.

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A Member enquired whether it was necessary to develop both the Buckhurst 2 and Suffolk Way car parks and whether it would be preferable first to assess what impact one would cause on traffic, before the other began. The Portfolio Holder confirmed there would be consultation on further development but that Variable Message Signs would soon guide visitors more efficiently to the town's car parking spaces.

He confirmed that he too had received a letter concerning the level of support the Council gave to the electronics industry. He would be investigating the matter further.

A Member raised concern at the suggestion the Council begin a broadband company or invest in existing ones, given that there had been some notable failures in the sector. The Portfolio Holder did not intend to invest on the same scale as those failures and the opportunities were almost gone. However, the Council still had a role to improve provision, such as possibly in Crockham Hill, and he would make a case to Members if necessary.

45. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources set out what he considered to be business opportunities and threats within his portfolio. He emphasised that there was considerable uncertainty over the Council's Fraud Team and this was subject to ongoing discussions between the Local Government Association and the DWP. The Council had not been told how many staff would be transferred over. The LGA was concerned that remaining staff would not be given access to DWP data even though fraud usually involved more than one benefit at a time. The Portfolio Holder did not want the Council to lose its own Team, which would be required for Council Tax Support and corporate fraud.

The Portfolio Holder was pleased with proposals from Cllr Miss Stack to enhance service income.

The Committee noted the intention to purchase new property assets to achieve greater income. In response to a question the Portfolio Holder explained that he expected future asset purchases to be funded through the sale of assets, with £3.5million having been raised in the previous year.

The Chairman raised concerns over whether the Council achieved good value when selling property, such as with 12 Knole Way. The Portfolio Holder explained that property had been subject to Right to Buy and the occupant could have remained in that residence, preventing sale. The Cabinet Member preferred putting properties on the open market to ensure a full value was received.

Members asked what properties the Portfolio Holder intended to sell. The Committee was referred to the report presented to the Finance and Resources Advisory Committee on 26 March 2014. A Member suggested that the Council had collected properties around Swanley High Street, an area ripe for redevelopment, and would be valuable if taken together.

Another Member suggested that in the short term residential properties may provide good value to the Council, in the long term the towns and District could be better served

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by commercial properties. The Portfolio Holder reminded Members that many sites were tied by planning policies.

The Vice Chairman sought clarification on the Council's powers to compel development, or compulsorily purchase sites long undeveloped. The Cabinet Member understood compulsory purchase could only be used, without challenge, when the Council could show there was no alternative option. In a case such as the Farmers' site, for example, development had actually been started. The option to compulsorily purchase had not been seriously considered.

46. Work Plan

The Chairman advised the Committee that Brandon Lewis, Local Government Minister (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State) had declined the offer to attend before the Committee. It was agreed Jane Parish, the newly appointed Chief Executive of Sencio, be invited to the meeting of the Committee on 2 October 2014.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.04 PM

CHAIRMAN