

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 12 July 2022 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Brown (Chairman)

Cllr. London (Vice Chairman)

Cllrs. Ball, Barnes, Kitchener, London, Osborne-Jackson, Pender, Purves and Williamson

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Layland and Morris

Cllrs. Fleming and Thornton were also present.

1. Minutes

Resolved: That the Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 22 March 2022 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no additional declarations of interest.

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

There were none.

4. Actions from the Previous Meeting

The action was noted.

5. Kent Police

The Chairman welcomed Inspector Matt Atkinson, of Kent Police to the meeting, who gave an overview of the levels of crime within the District.

Members were provided with an overview of the statistics of comparative data for April to June 2022 and the some rolling year to date data. In comparative year Members were provided with the years, 2019, 2020, 2021 to 2022, due to the pandemic the year 2020 was sometimes to be treated as an anomaly. Data also included a rank for the District's place out of the 13 Boroughs and Districts in Kent,

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with 13 being the highest reported cases and one the lowest and in most categories the District had the lowest crime across Kent.

Members attention was brought to some key figures which included victim based crime where figures were down based on the previous three years. Theft reports were increasing but this was viewed as a positive in terms of greater reporting and that new measures, including the re-introduction of Town Centre Constables, made shop staff more confident in reporting incidents and there was also a higher success rate in the number of successful prosecutions for those who commit theft.

A Kent Priority was continuing to advocate for the reduction of Domestic Abuse and Violence against women and girls (VAWAG). All levels of abuse were recorded among the category and there was better accuracy or reporting of these incidents. Hate crime figures were slightly increased but the Inspector was confident this was due to more incidents being reported and more accurate recording.

In response to questions, the Committee was advised the process for reporting anti-social behaviour including reporting to the Community Safety Unit or through 101. The Inspector highlighted the importance of reporting to the Police rather than on social media as this would help create an accurate picture of what was happening. To help combat anti-social behaviour a bid for funding had been made and £18,000 was received for extra youth activities within Swanley.

In regards to shop thefts, Members were advised that the Town Centre Constables were there to support shops preventing commercial crime and shop lifting. Reporting of thefts previously had been irregular and by launching the operation there had seen a good success rate and the designated Officers were able to build relationships with, shops building on the importance of reporting and gathering evidence.

In response to a question Members were advised that the CSU were an incredibly valued partner and the Assistant Chief Constable had been very favourably impressed when he had visited, particularly the working relationship between the Police Officers and the CSU and the work with partners which was very face to face and for many years the relationship with the Council had been incredibly fruitful, and strong.

Inspector Atkinson, advised the number of local officers able to respond to an emergency call on a Friday or Saturday night from the District's stations. Most response cars would come from the Swanley Police Station but it could also come from Sevenoaks. If a suspect needed to be detained they would be either taken to Tonbridge, Maidstone or Ebbsfleet and depending on availability and the crime committed would have an impact on the which station was used. Numbers were still low with response teams but there was a substantial recruitment process taking place but the training programme was a long course.

In regards to further questions regarding 'serious offences' Members were advised that the 'tag' covered a wide range of offences and tackling Domestic Abuse was a priority in the Police and the CSU. A Domestic Abuse hub had been set up and this allowed the victims to remain engaged with the Police via phone or telephone link

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and this allowed communication to take place faster than waiting for a patrol car. If victims of Domestic Abuse felt engaged the offenders were more likely to be caught. The Vulnerable Victim team would always operate at 100% and if this figure dropped, other trained staffed would be moved over to support the team. There were lots of stigma and taboos around Domestic Abuse and VAWAG and by empowering the reporting of this would result in figures going up, but it was firmly believed that the figures going up reflected more victims feeling they were able to come forward and make a report.

Members expressed their thanks to Inspector Matt Atkinson for his attendance and update.

6. Performance Monitoring

Members considered the report which summarised performance across the Council as at March 2022. Members were asked to consider 13 performance indicators which were performing at 10% or more below their target with a commentary from Officers explaining the reasons and detailing any plans to improve performance. The report also provided key performance indicators relating to the Portfolio Holders for Development & Conservation and Improvement and Innovation.

In response to questions Members were advised that the impact of Covid was still affecting some services and therefore the Performance Indicators. Numbers of Covid infections were increasing again however many office based staff were still able to work from home when they were isolating. This unfortunately could not extend to some areas such as refuse collectors and therefore this was where there was one of the biggest impacts.

Members discussed the report and thanked Officers for the thorough commentaries and it was discussed In regards to PI 009 members discussed that although initially the figure was red, looking at the commentary provided the explanation which reflected the actual numbers, which in comparison was rather positive.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

7. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Development & Conservation

The Portfolio Holder for Development & Conservation presented her report starting with a note that performance indicators were consistently being met and only 2% of decisions were appealed. She advised that despite Covid, the Teams were able to adapt and work from home and staff were well supported with performance remaining high, particularly with an increase in the number of smaller householder applications coming through. Following Covid a proportion of staff moved on to further their career which was seen across many departments and sectors. The team was now fully staffed with many now taking up the opportunity to become senior planners. Building Control performance remained very strong with 70% market share, and the service had very good relationships with the customers.

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The emerging local plan had had a revised timetable which had been agreed by Cabinet, following Development and Conservation Advisory Committee. The regular reporting provided frequent check-ins for Members.

Members took the opportunity to discuss the report and ask the Portfolio Holder questions which focussed on the local plan. The Portfolio Holder advised that she among, staff and other Councillors were incredibly frustrated at the outcome of the last local plan examination and additional steps were being taken including seeking Counsel's advice through each of the stages and regular conversations with the Department for Levelling up Communities and Housing. She advised that guidance showed there was a clear distinction between Green Belt and Non Green-Belt sites with the latter having to be considered first, as well as having discussions with neighbouring authorities. Consideration of any green belt sites would be some time away.

Discussions were already taking place with neighbouring authorities to ensure that the "Duty to Co-operate" requirements will be met. Statements of Common Ground with each of our immediate neighbours will also be prepared as part of the process.

In response to further questions Members were advised that it was expected that there would be changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and currently the biggest challenge to her Portfolio was the situation presently with Government and the unknown impact this could have going forward. Terminology for development within the Green belt was clarified and Members were advised that all applications were considered on their own merits

In response to a question Members were advised that without taking on agency staff during the recruitment period, the team would not have been able to have continued at the level they were working at. They were funded by the salary savings and so the short time of using them, did not impact negatively on the budget.

Members expressed their thanks to the Teams which sat within the Portfolio Holder's remit for their fantastic work which had continued.

8. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Improvement & Innovation

The Leader and Portfolio Holder for Improvement and Innovation presented an update to the Committee highlighting five key areas, which he gave some key points on.

The Levelling up and regeneration bill, had been briefly covered by the Portfolio Holder for Development & Conservation, but another area of discussion was the creation of Unitary Authorities being created, despite the District Councils being unfavourable of the moves. There was a lot of work being undertaken with the District Councils Network.

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The Environment bill had stalled and there were some concerns, that it would not necessarily provide better services for residents. Other areas also included the fair funding review, further planning reforms and the change of Government Ministers which put the Council in a state of flux and would also affect our residents.

Moving on to other areas within in his Portfolio, the White Oak Leisure Centre was reaching around 2500 users per day which was 2000 more than expected, and was very welcomed. There were ongoing issues with the cost of demolition and responsibility for these costs was currently under review. Meeting point was due for completion soon. It was slightly behind schedule but this was outside of the Council's control. Planning permission for Bevan Place, White Oak Housing, and Stangrove would be going in shortly as well as a new application for Spitals Cross, following feedback received. It was being investigated for how to use the land East of the High Street in the best way going forward. Finally, it was hoped that refurbishment works on Edenbridge Leisure Centre would be coming forward in the future to bring it up to modern standards.

Moving to operational demand, staffing and systems the demand for services remained consistently around 20% higher than before Covid. Some of this demand was caused by staffing availability which was being seen across every sector. This resulted in sometimes having to go to advert 2 or 3 times before being able to recruit the best person to fill the post. A review of systems was also being looked at to help combat this and included looking at automatic renewals for garden waste permits. A report was also presented to the Improvement & Innovation Advisory Committee regarding cyber security and the Chief Officer for Customer & Resources had taken part in a training course with world leads in tackling cyber-crime.

The Portfolio Holder ended his presentation by advising the Committee that a resident's survey had been carried out with much success and that following the peer challenge nine recommendations had been made with many underway.

In response to questions Members were advised that White Oak was a four stage programme, unfortunately general construction costs were going up but it was also hoped that they would go down. The housing scheme would take a slightly different approach and it was anticipated that there would be a way to reclaim some of the expenditure on asbestos removal.

In response to a question, Members were advised that the reorganisation of the office space ensured that Teams were seated within their wider departments and this would produce the best way of working. So far staff were supportive of the moves and the upgrade of the 'Octagon' working space, which had created additional meeting rooms and informal work space which was important with the move to hybrid workings. It was questioned how much had been spent on the upgrade to which the Leader explained the costs were very reasonable when looking at the much needed work and the benefit it brought to service delivery.

In response to questions around cost of power and electricity the Portfolio Holder advised that the Council could be affected by the increasing inflation costs as the

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revenue budget remained the same as it had been nearly 20 years ago. On 7 July 2022, the provisional outturn report had been presented to Members and although the final outturn for the year was not too bad, and it had been kept within a decent limit, it was important to look at the pressures behind it. These pressures affected the Direct Services Team with increased demand, vehicles, maintenance, fuel and it was something that was taxing officers and Members of the Cabinet. Although looking at the district as a whole, many would accept the district was in a generally fortunate position, but there were pockets of high deprivation. The council was constantly looking at new ways of creating revenue and investments, especially when, despite the evidence of responsibly borrowing being used, this option now was not available and so other innovations needed to be considered.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for his attendance.

9. Re-constitution of In-Depth Scrutiny Working Group

Members considered the report which proposed the reconstitution of the Working Group in order to present the final report at the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee. Without being re-constituted the working group would not be able to present their final report as a new municipal year had started and the working group ceased to exist.

The Chairman expressed the importance of the report being shared with the members of the Working Group in the first instance and ideally for a consensus to be reached, although it could be noted in the report if this was not the case. He also advised the report should then be shared with officers in good time in order they could check for matters of factual accuracy and advise as appropriate. The report could then be submitted as per the published report deadlines to be considered at the November meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved: that the In-Depth Scrutiny Working Group consisting of Cllrs Osborne-Jackson (Chairman), Layland, London and Pender be re-established.

10. Work Plan

Members discussed the work plan and requested that Sencio be re-invited to attend the November meeting, sending a deputy to the Chief Executive if she was unavailable. It was also agreed that the Kent County Council Cabinet Member for Highways be invited to attend.

Members agreed should two external invitees attend no Portfolio Holder would be invited to attend.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.11 PM

CHAIRMAN