

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 9 January 2024 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Esler (Chairman)

Cllr. Penny Cole (Vice Chairman)

Cllrs. Baker, Ball, Penny Cole, Haslam, Leaman, Manston, Robinson and Williamson

An apology for absence was received from Cllr. Skinner

Cllrs. McArthur, Reay and Williams were also present.

23. Minutes

Resolved: That the Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 21 November 2023, be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

24. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Robinson declared that she was a Member of Darent River Preservation Society (DRiPS).

Cllr Williamson declared that he lived near Fort Halstead where water works were taking place, but remained open-minded.

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

There were none.

26. Actions from the Previous Meeting

Members noted the completed action.

The Chief Officer, Planning and Regulatory Services advised that the data he was providing covered 2022-23 to the end of March. There had been 58 appeals from 389 applications refused which was 15% overall. Out of the 58 appeals 40 were dismissed and 18 had been allowed.

He further advised that the budget for appeals equated to £213,000 for 2022/23 which covered staff salary costs, consultants, legal resource etc. There was no automatic ability to recover costs. In regards to comparisons of other Local Authorities in Kent. There were two type of appeals, Section 78 appeals and

householder appeals. In regards to householder appeals the percentage allowed was 29% which equated to 7 out of 24. For Section 78 appeals the percentage was 32% which equated to 11 out of 34. Members were advised that in comparison to other local authorities in Kent, the percentages could be similar but the numbers overall could be quite different. The average around the county of Section 78 appeals was allowed was 31% and for householder appeals was 27%.

27. South East Water and Thames Water in attendance

The Chairman welcomed David Hinton, Chief Executive and Rob Cumbie, Head of Communications, from South East Water, Richard Aylard, Sustainability Director and Carl Leadbetter, Head of Waste Network from Thames Water to the meeting both companies gave presentations on their remits.

The Committee first heard from South East Water, who advised fresh, clean drinking water was supplied to 2.3 million customers and on average 540 million litres of water was treated and pumped to customers each day. He highlighted the new water demand challenges, due to changes in how customers were using drinking water during peak demand. Initially in 2020 it was linked to Covid, but with more customers working from home the pattern had continued. Water demand during the hottest 7-day period for each year since 2016 had increased on average by 7%. Combined with the earlier impacts of climate change, this had put pressure on the ability to meet demand for water during peak times.

Members were advised that the biggest sources of water to the district were from Cramptons Road, and from Pembury. The water was supplied from a number of groundwater sources, such as boreholes, wells and springs. The presentation covered leakages and the environmental challenges faced in 2022/23. Most leaks were caused by the very dry summer followed by wet and quickly freezing weather. He advised that lessons had been learnt and emergency planning was being adjusted to prepare for higher numbers of people affected. Network Capacity, Infrastructure and planning for the future were also brought to Members attention.

Members asked questions regarding working together in response to emergency situations, such as providing bottled water. The Head of Communications advised that there was a new dedicated team for these situations. It was put forward by the Chairman that the Sevenoaks depot could be used for water pallets and, with the help of the Council's officers, to share water. Sevenoaks District Council had their own list of vulnerable people, and sharing the different lists would ensure that no one was missed. Members were advised that there were sharing models and there was a template which could be used.

Members posed further questions regarding agriculture and farmers. Additional work was being undertaken to ensure that crops and livestock were protected. It was important that people managing these were known to the water provider, so that water security could be provided in advance through water tankers, to ensure that they would not be affected by sudden dry periods. It was important to protect them without putting pressure on public water supplies.

Further questions were asked around new water sources and reservoirs, and whether it was economical to expand the size. Members were advised that this was based on demand and the likely future supply, taking into consideration climate change which could reduce the amount of water which could be taken from the environment. From this it would be assessed if there was a gap in water supply, and if one was likely, it would be analysed for the best value solution. This supply system could vary. Currently the main solutions employed were demand reduction and leakage reduction, but there were also reservoirs due to come into use in the mid-2030s, which would take 18 months to fill. Plans involved taking less water from the environment. Abstractions had to be demonstrated to show they were sustainable and would not impact on the environment - if they started to have an impact then they would be revised. This was done through working with the Environment Agency and other partners. There were a number of forecasts to ensure there was enough water for everyone, and factors which could affect this were built in, such as housing numbers and climate change.

The level of risk across the whole district was relatively similar. Commuter towns in general faced higher demand and were closer to a deficit than they were pre-Covid. To address this, water was being shared across sectors - areas where there had been no increase or reductions in demand had been connected to the areas of increase demand. Further infrastructure investment would assist in moving water around more effectively.

Further questions were posed on demand reduction and holistic solutions within planning. There was no one way to work with demand reduction. 90% of South East Water was on a meter usage, and customers were charged for the volume of use. Since this was introduced, normal daily use had dropped around 8%, though not for peak demand, such as in hot weather. Smart metering would help find internal leaks and help introduce discretionary charges for households with above normal usage. Grey water use was promoted, such as using water butts. Planning was crucial in terms of making homes of the future as water efficient as possible. The company tried to give advice where possible and supported any efficiencies through the planning process.

In regards to a question regarding water outages, Members were advised that a number of the impacted metrics, such as leakage, customer satisfaction, and interruptions, all linked to the ongoing weather issues. It was expected that customer satisfaction would drop. This would be addressed through infrastructure, to both provide more water, and store ~~and more~~ it more effectively. Efficient water storage would also save time in emergency situations. Recent events and demand drained the treated water storage tanks faster than they could be filled. Therefore it was important that the size of the storage available and the interconnection between areas were focused on.

The Chairman welcomed Richard Aylard Sustainability Director and Carl Leadbetter the Head of Waste Network from Thames Water to the meeting. She thanked them for their efficient work in addressing a recent issue in Westerham, and for

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incorporating feedback from residents into their plan for this. They gave a presentation which covered treatment works, storm overflows, impacts on river quality, water resources, drainage and wastewater management plan and reporting problems. He started with setting out their area of coverage within the Sevenoaks District and the impact of Covid water use and waste water demands changing. The freeze thaw which caught everyone off guard, and emergency planning had resulted in lessons learned and he was grateful to hear of collaborative working with the Council for bottled water. Regular operational meetings with flood officers were helpful with focusing attention on local needs was working well.

The area covered by Thames was mostly the Northern area and there was no waste treatment plant in the area, known as catchments. The nearest waste treatment works was Long Reach near Dartford. There was only one storm water overflow in wildernesses sewage pumping station, which was very small and although there was no requirement for monitoring there was one to monitor if any discharge happened.

Members were advised of the process for how a typical sewage treatment works and sewage works cannot be stopped. He advised that it was regrettable when overflow had to go into the rivers as although the waste had been screened it had not been treated at this point and work was being undertaken to reduce storm discharges where the networks were not big enough.

He advised that monitoring was taking place and there was a live interactive map which provided details of what was happening at any discharge points. Thames Water were also looking at ways to reduce storm discharges and set out the options available. He advised that there were pros and cons to each option and the local factors were an important consideration.

Members were advised of water resources in the district and in particular focus on the cycle of water, the amount of water abstracted about 40 years ago from chalk streams against current times. He highlighted that it had reduced over the years and it remained a focus to reduce abstraction from chalk stream sources.

The Head of Waste Networks advised that the Drainage and Wastewater Management Plan was a long-term strategic plan which set out how wastewater systems, drainage networks etc would be maintained and improved from 2025 onwards. There was a lot of collaborative work among partners to help with the management of the area.

Members took the opportunity to ask questions from Thames Water.

In response to questions Members were advised that although not formal consultees on planning applications, but they do try to keep in touch with the Council Planners where new applications may have an adverse impact on water in the area. There were plans to reduce the storm discharge into rivers and due to the heavy water conditions it was higher than liked, however there were targets in place to reduce this and areas with the greatest sensitivity were being prioritised, such as chalk streams and bathing water. It was reiterated that there were no discharges into rivers in the district. There

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was a very big plan coming for wastewater infrastructure and part of it was dependent on water supply chains and ensuring sufficient experts were there to be able to do the design work.

Members were advised that a significant number of monitoring being undertaken and they were important to control the network and with some atomisation flows could be redirected or held back which helps with treatment works under storm conditions.

Further questions from Members focused on areas of drainage and sewage issues which were coming up through the man holes, advance warning of works on the roads and highways and how this information could be provided to the public in advance. Members were advised that this was an issue as the system in Sevenoaks was not a combined system and the sewers in the road should only have foul water in them and for them to be overflowing in storm conditions meant that there was infiltration to the system, which would overload the treatments works. The specific area would need to be looked into for the surface water and what level was getting into the system further in the network. Temporary monitoring could be installed to see and what was happening. In terms looking at particular area by monitoring flows and where they come from would help identify where the problems were coming from. He gave an example of a particular road flooding and that flow was infiltrating the system or multiple properties were linked to the foul water system in terms of drainage and where this was identified work was carried out with home owners to ensure that water was put in the right place. There was no clear answer as it could be multiple options. It was important to identify where the water was getting into the system.

In regards to planned works Members were advised that although it may seem that nothing was happening when works were being undertaken, when clean water pipes were installed they needed to be flushed through and the roadworks would not be removed until they were content that all fresh water was clean. He advised that sometimes leaks get put into a programme of work and then they can be assessed, following that it can act as a precursor for something bigger and that could be when the emergency works take place.

In regards to performance indicators, Members were informed that there was a serious turnaround plan in regards to drinking water quality. There were a number of new monitors which were live and were recording data.

The Committee thanked South East Water and Thames Water for their attendance.

At 8.50pm for the comfort of Members and Officers the Chairman adjourned the meeting.

At 9pm the meeting reconvened.

28. Performance Monitoring

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Members considered the report which summarised performance across the Council as at the end of October 2023. Members were asked to consider six 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.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

CHANGE IN ORDER OF AGENDA ITEMS

The Chairman, with the Committee's agreement, brought forward consideration of Minute 29 – Portfolio Holder for Development & Conservation.

29. Questions for the Portfolio Holder for Development & Conservation

The Chairman welcomed the Portfolio Holder for Development and Conservation to the meeting. The Portfolio Holder advised that the key performance indicators were “in good shape” and the Local Pla timetable was still on track. Over the year £3.18million had been collected from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Areas of challenge ahead, included enforcement, the Building Safety Act.

Members asked questions concerning the Local Plan, National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). In response, the Portfolio Holder advised that the updated NPPF did not make too many changes and the changes published were not as substantial as they could have been. Therefore the plan making timetable would continue as it has previously been agreed. Section 5 in the NPPF had been updated with a new footnote which advised that only in exceptional circumstances could the housing assessment needs be deviated away from and so the expectation was that the standard method was to continue. He further advised that 10, 500 homes were still required to be found until 2040, and there were not enough brown field sites within the district and as a result, green belt sites had to be consulted on as an option.

Further questions focused on the Local Plan and lessons had been learned in regards to the timing of the consultation. However, all Town and Parish Councils had been notified and provided a copy of the local plan consultation document, In Shape had gone to every home in the district advising of the local plan and the pop up meetings had been very successful. It was hoped the results of the Local Plan would be provided to the Development & Conservation Advisory Committee in March.

Other questions to the Portfolio Holder responded, advising that as the plan development, infrastructure needs would be known and this would be planned accordingly. The new Building Safety Act would require new responsibilities for a new level of competence with a particular focus on height and requirements of monitoring.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for his attendance.

30. Questions for the Portfolio Holder for Cleaner & Greener

The Chairman welcomed the Portfolio Holder for Cleaner & Greener to the meeting and she summarised her areas of responsibility, as well as areas of success and some future challenges within the three main areas of Direct Services, Environmental Health and Licensing. Some of the key successes included the new collection round which had reduced fuel consumption by 11%, lottery funding for Bradbourne Lakes, and being the first local authority to be trained in heritage crime. Concerns included waste levels and staffing and vehicles.

She further advised that in regards to Environmental Health, the new XL Bully legislation could be an area of focus, depending on if there were any breaches. There was an increase of food safety inspections and a number of climate change initiatives taking place.

In response to questions regarding the future of waste collection, the Portfolio Holder invited the Head of Direct Services to provide further information regarding refuse sacks, who informed Members that it was proposed as part of the budget setting process regarding the ending of 'free' sacks. However, should it be agreed then it was proposed that every household would receive a 'bag for life' which was a 200L animal proof bag. The system was already in place with 130 other Councils and assisted collections would continue to be offered to residents who required assistance.

In response to further questions regarding refuse, Members were advised that a comprehensive report would be going through the Advisory Committee, before being considered by Cabinet. She advised that lessons had been learnt regarding the Christmas waste collection but that there had been a significant increase of waste to be collected over the Christmas period and this required the refuse trucks tipping more regularly. The amount of savings in fuel, due to the new rounds was around £75,000 and this was expected to increase.

The Chairman moved from the Chair that the meeting be extended past 10.30pm to finish the business of the meeting.

Resolved: That the meeting continue past 10.30pm to finish the business of the meeting

In response to questions regarding climate change and EV parking. Members were advised that regular reports came to the Joint Transportation Board regarding charging points as the highways were the responsibility of Kent County Council. Sevenoaks were responsible for our car parks and had delivered EV charging for taxis.

Action: For Members to be provided additional information regarding payment methods for EV charging at the Council Offices

In response to further questions, the CCTV played a vital part in its contributions to tackling crime.

Further questions focused on waste recycling and it was possible that emptying the waste in the recycling bags could slow down collection time slightly. However, many other Councils already used this method of collection. In regards to enforcement there were 270 live criminal cases and the team had been very successful in their prosecution of fly tipping and would continue to do so where possible. The enforcement team worked closely with the waste team and all had training on looking for evidence and bagging it up correctly.

Kent County Council were the waste authority and so set the rules of the waste and recycling requirements. It was expected that the new legislation would make waste and recycling easier for many.

In regards to a question on markets, the Portfolio Holder advised that they were open to new sites which wished for a market to run but it could be hard to find providers.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for Cleaner & Greener for attending.

31. Final Report of In depth Scrutiny Working Group

The Chairman of the working group, introduced the report and thanked Officers and the working group. He highlighted some key elements of the report, which included high temporary accommodation net costs, impact of out of district placements, key performance indicators and customer satisfaction.

The Committee discussed the recommendations within the report.

Resolved: That it be recommended to Cabinet that

- a) a KPI for all applicants being offered a homelessness assessment within 10 working days of an application, when an applicant has submitted all the required documentation for the assessment to be completed, be implemented;
- b) review whether the current staffing levels of the housing advice and support team are suitable to deliver good support to applicants and to be confident of meeting Recommendation A;
- c) consider extending the Corporate Satisfaction Survey, where possible, for applicants who contact the Council about housing matters;
- d) When monitoring the Personal Housing Plans with the applicant, SDC must ensure that the applicant understands the homeless process and SDC should seek feedback to ensure the process is as smooth as possible and to identify continuous improvements to the service;

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- e) the SDC HERO service, housing advice and homelessness website pages, be reviewed to ensure that advice and guidance is readily available and details the way people can make an application and contact the Council for urgent assistance;
- f) an annual review of the incentives that Sevenoaks Landlords Hub can offer (dependent on funding availability, landlord incentives are funded by the Homelessness Prevention Grant) to increase the number of private sector landlords working with the Council, be undertaken;
- g) as part of the Housing Allocations Policy review consider the viability of placing customers in permanent accommodation an hour away from their support networks, and whether this could be reduced to 45 or even just 30 minutes;
- h) ensure all staff through the Council's DAHA Accreditation process receives domestic abuse awareness training in order to further support individuals seeking council support from domestic abuse;
- i) a note be sent out to all Councillors of SDC by the Housing Team identifying how Councillors can make enquiries or escalate housing issues for review by the Housing Team, subject to the applicant's written consent; and
- j) all avenues to ensure the increased delivery of affordable housing within the District and include a KPI to show progress in reducing the numbers of households placed in temporary accommodation outside of the District, be explored.

32. Establishment of In-depth Scrutiny Working Group

The Committee considered a new in-depth scrutiny working group. Members discussed looking into staff recruitment, retention and wellbeing and the Membership of the working group.

Resolved: That

- a) an in-depth scrutiny working group be set up consisting of Cllrs: Haslam (Chairman), Baker, Horwood and Robinson;
- b) the working group consider staff recruitment, retention and wellbeing; and

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- c) a report on the work of the in-depth scrutiny working group and any recommendations be brought to a future meeting of the Committee for consideration.

33. Work Plan

The work plan was discussed, with the intention of bringing an interim report of the in-depth scrutiny working group to the March 2024 meeting. Members requested that it be recorded that Southern Water were invited to attend the meeting along with the other water companies but declined that invitation as they engaged in other ways.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 10.45 PM

CHAIRMAN