

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2013 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. London (Chairman)

Cllr. Brown (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs. Mrs. Bracken, Butler, Clark, Fittock, Gaywood, Mrs. Morris and Walshe

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Maskell and Raikes

Cllrs. Davison, Mrs. Davison, Fleming, Ramsay and Mrs. Sargeant were also present.

15. Minutes

Resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 26 September 2013, be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

16. Declarations of Interest

No additional declarations of interest were made.

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

There were none.

18. Actions from the last meeting of the Committee

The actions from the last meeting were noted. The Vice Chairman did not feel that it completely answered his query but would pursue further himself.

19. Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust

The Chairman welcomed Jayne Black, Director of Operations Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust and Colette Donnelly, Associate Director of Operations (Emergency Care) to the meeting. Ms Black thanked the Committee for the invitation as it gave a welcomed opportunity to explain what the Trust has been doing. There had been many big developments over the last couple of years notwithstanding the new building at Pembury. She had been in her role since mid March 2013, it had been a busy summer and lessons had been learnt pathway working alongside community trust, Social Services and the new Clinical Commissioning Groups to get the health economy ready for the winter and to improve performance. She has been impressed with the commitment of the staff who continued to learn and and try to address issues that arose. The Accident & Emergency four hour target was a benchmark, a quality target, things were to be done in a timely fashion. Within that time they needed to ensure that the patient received the right treatment, the right amount, at the right place – i.e. on a ward or at home. She admitted that they did not always get it right and not everyone was seen with the 4 hour target but there had been significant improvements in the last 6-7 months. Tunbridge

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Wells was currently achieving 88/89% and Maidstone 98/99% and as a Trust were now fifth in the country after being in the bottom ten. It had been acknowledged that patients needed to be seen by a senior doctor or nurse as quickly as possible in order to determine the next stage treatment. This had made a significant difference. Internal standards were also set. They had also worked closely with the South East Coast Ambulance Service (SECAMB) to achieve 15 minute turnarounds for patients brought in by ambulance and were currently the best in the South East at achieving this. Quality assessment rounds were carried out by a senior nurse every hour. Ms Donnelly advised that with regards to customer service, there was information for both staff and patients. All staff also underwent training and it was monitored by through audit and the complaint system and the friends and family data set.

The Chairman asked whether the benchmark of 4 hours was from arrival to treatment. In response he was advised that it was a national target, within 15 minutes a patient should have been seen by a senior decision maker, predominately a doctor. This was monitored on a daily basis and every week, and was at 95% most of the time. With reference to the 15 minute turnaround for those patients brought in by ambulance, there were two dedicated bays, the patient would be brought in and assessed by nurse then doctor. One Doctor was allocated to those two cubicles, so no one would be waiting in a corridor or an ambulance. Assessment actually started with the paramedics; however this was not factored into the 15 minute turnarounds. In response to a Member's question Ms Black reported that they had a good working relationship with SECAMB; there was work being done on more assessment at the paramedic stage for example if called to a hip fracture, using diagnostic skills to assess and fast track them to the correct department rather than bringing them into Accident & Emergency.

In response to further questions she advised that Darent Valley Hospital had been advised by SECAMB to come and observe the ambulance turnaround, this had been taken up and representatives had observed for a day. If a patient could not be off loaded this was treated as a serious incident. With regards to avoiding where possible sending the elderly and frail to A&E, they were working closely with the West Kent Clinical Commissioning Group, East Sussex and Kent Community Trusts and SECAMB looking at more use of community hospitals and community team support at home. Some work had already started with respiratory patients and assisted discharge. They had worked jointly with the Kent Community Trust on a rapid response model, teams going in quickly to assess whether hospital admittance was needed, doing best to keep at home using Occupational therapists and doctors etc, but if admittance was needed considering whether a community hospital would be more appropriate. With regards to mental health patients, there was a mental health nurse on duty and a psychiatrist on call. As with any patient it was a question of getting the patient to the right place as quickly as possible.

The Vice Chairman reported that he had attended A&E at Pembury in July and the targets referred to had not been met and he had not been pleased with the customer service shown him at the reception desk. Ms Black apologised that he had a bad experience and assured him that delay was not an option and it was made very clear to staff that patients should be seen in a timely fashion. She further advised that at Pembury minor were kept separate from more serious cases and that was adherence to a national recommendation. She was glad he had not witnessed chaos, even when busy that should not be the case. In July they had seen their busiest day 240 patients, the average was normally around 200. She would take the details of this incident back and work with the team. She reported that they monitored complaints and feedback and were putting

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together a customer care programme which they would be rolling out soon. With regards to understaffing, a review had been undertaken and it had shown that they were particularly lacking middle grades. They had also looked at the rotas and were putting extra staff on at known busier times. Consultants had also looked at their rotas and were also more available at those times such as the weekend and Mondays. At the moment they were in the process of recruiting more consultants for A&E which would hopefully be in place by April 2014. Other staffing levels should be up to establishment by January 2014. Fortnightly forward planning meetings were now embedded.

Another Member had experienced being an ambulance patient and had observed that he had been dealt with within the 15 minutes and had a smooth experience and had been impressed with the concern and expertise shown by staff.

The Vice Chairman asked whether the 15 minute target was made clear at A & E; whether there were feedback forms, and if so how were these distributed or offered to patients. Ms Black advised that they were looking at how best to promote feedback forms and welcomed ideas and feedback. She further advised that there were weekly emergency care performance meetings, and that day they had been discussing publishing 'live' waiting times on the internet and other useful information.

The Chairman thanked Ms Black and Ms Donnelly for attending and would be taking the opportunity to invite them back at a future stage. Ms Black in turn invited members of the Committee to come and observe the A & E department, and have a tour by a nurse or doctor.

20. Feedback from Scrutiny Training

Members confirmed that the training had been insightful. Further follow up training to be investigated for the following year as appropriate.

21. Performance Monitoring

Members considered a report which summarised the performance across the Council to the end of September 2013. Members were asked to consider five 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.

Concern was expressed over the indicators for planning appeals and planning processing, a Member reported that she had been previously advised that the new planning framework was responsible, and therefore Members wished to know what steps had been put in place to address these issues. The Committee was advised that training was being given on planning appeals prior to the next Development Control Committee meeting. Another Member queried whether the surveyor post was being filled as it had had such a significant impact on the performance. The Chief Officer Environmental and Operational Services advised that it had not been possible to recruit to the Building Control post which was currently being filled with agency staff, with an intention to re-advertise the permanent position and hopefully have someone in place by March 2014. A Member expressed concern over planning validation.

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Action 1: The Chief Planning Officer to inform the Committee on what steps had been put in place to address these issues arising from the new planning framework and their effect on planning processing.

22. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Finance & Resources

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources gave a brief overview of his areas of responsibility and work programme. He reported that he had first stood for election and joined the Council in 2003 because he was annoyed by Council Tax increases. Since then he was proud to say that he had reduced expenditure by £8 million and staffing by 240. Unfortunately due to reduced central government grants he had not been able to reduce Council Tax, however he now believed the Council was living 'within its means'.

The Chairman asked whether there was any significant issue that would keep the Portfolio Holder up at night. He advised that there was not as there was always a solution to be found and time to find it in. Unknowns were the biggest frustrations, for example the amount of government grant to be received next year, but that was why there was a ten year budget.

A Member commented that the ten year budget was a useful implement but seemed to include an optimistic figure of of Council Tax rise of 3% in later years and queried whether this was realistic. The Portfolio Holder advised that this was an assumption currently included which does not have to be achieved by solely increasing Council Tax, but also by increasing the number of properties paying Council Tax. He was also looking at increasing income streams, increasing the number of car parking spaces available was just one example of what could possibly be done. In response to a question regarding whether money could be saved in discretionary service areas, he responded that that was a question for Members.

A Member queried whether she should receive a reply to a letter she had sent the Portfolio Holder in May, he advised that he believed the officer he had passed he query to had responded. The Chief Finance Officer added that he thought a response had been provided to the Member concerned but would check and ensure the Member was updated.

A Member asked why the Monitoring Officer was investigating setting up a local trading company and asked for expansion on the ideas behind this. He advised that it was being investigated in order to explore possibilities; such as looking into the concept of starting a local bank, purchasing property to rent or develop, and reviewing the best use of the assets currently held.

The Vice Chairman asked what ideas there were for the £2.1 million from the M&S development. The Portfolio Holder advised that he had suggested investment in White Oak Leisure Centre but had received a negative response so far, however this was due to be considered at the Finance & Resources Advisory Committee in January 2014 – to which all members of the Scrutiny Committee were welcome to attend. He advised that he had more income generating projects that the money could be used for but he was reluctant to put it before Members as they were merely ideas that needed to be tested.

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A Member expressed concern at the Portfolio Holder not being worried, and asked whether he could estimate the proportion out of the £2.1 million that related to lost car parking from the flats development. The Portfolio Holder did not off hand.

Another Member asked what was his vision to minimise the cost of assets. The Portfolio Holder replied that one of the problems was that the district only had 7% of land that could be developed as the rest was greenbelt. There needed to be a discussion as to what could be taken out of greenbelt. As much use as possible had been made of the Argyle Road Offices and perhaps in the future moving somewhere smaller may be considered but he had yet to see anything suitable. The Member was pleased to hear his reply and asked for support of the New Ash Green Neighbourhood Plan which proposed taking land out of greenbelt. The Portfolio Holder stated that he would not disagree with that approach.

A Member commented that future problems were being made by freezing council tax and taking the central government offer. The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources agreed, but added that council tax had not been frozen the past two years, in fact it had been raised as close to the cap as possible.

A Member queried that the Portfolio Holder had mentioned increasing income from car parking, but then had also commented on car parks as being underperforming assets. The Portfolio Holder clarified his position by confirmed that large car parks took up a large amount of land, he would prefer maximisation of car parking to be achieved by tiered parking on smaller plots.

23. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Strategy & Performance

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy & Performance tabled a copy of the the new [Corporate Plan](#) for Members' information. He reminded Members that he had informed them at the last meeting that he wanted to look at the way services were delivered and what the community needed more prudential borrowing and investing in assets with greater returns in order to support and sustain services going forward. He advised that the reason a special purpose vehicle was being investigated by the Monitoring Officer, was to allow ways to invest in property or other projects going forward, all with the vision of the Council becoming self reliant. Other Councils were looking into similar things. He advised that he attended a meeting that day where national new Municipal Bonds had been discussed. The Local Government Association was in discussions as this provided an opportunity for Councils to borrow at a low and reasonable rate in comparison to being able to get a greater return. There were a number of projects being looked at, government funding had reduced whist council tax was increasing, it was now vital to look at different ways of funding services as going forward. On 3 December the Council was undertaking the Local Government Association's Peer Challenge over four days, which was a free assessment service using the expertise of peers and others in the sector to get an overview of the organisation.

A Member expressed concern on the low interest rate on bonds. The Portfolio Holder for Strategy & Performance advised that the government's Chief Economist had given no comfort to savers that evening when asked about interest rates. If you went to a high street bank on a short or fixed term variable rate basis there was greater risk, bonds offered a fixed rate over a set period.

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Another Member queried that the bonds would not help. The Portfolio Holder responded that the majority of government bonds were against government debt; the beauty of the municipal bond was that it was borrowed against a capital project.

In response to a Members question on how the capital money could be spent, he replied that it would be good to invest in capital projects, and base decisions around what the community needed. For example, White Oak Leisure Centre: there was a need to reduce the asset liability; if a replacement was built this would be reduced and there would also be a capital receipt from the sale of any land. The second strand was that it needed to be put to the community that if they wanted services to continue they needed to find a new way to pay.

Another Member echoed the voiced concerns about the bonds and current scale of borrowing. She also added that it had been necessary to employ a leisure company to run the centres, and queried how the Council could continue to run these services and not make an income. The Portfolio Holder replied that the Council assets mentioned were community assets, the leisure centres were an example of the Council owing an asset and delivering services without the management. This was another reason why a trading company was being investigated. It was about the Council's ability to provide services but someone else manages the commercial 'arm'. It needed further investigations and where experts were needed these costs would be factored in and would diminish returns but reduce risks.

A Member stated that Councillors were elected to provide services. On a small scale the Big Community Fund (BCF) helped services throughout the district, could not some of the money go to this fund as seemed good value for money. The Portfolio Holder advised that the reality was that that once the money in the fund ran out this would stop, though investigations were undergoing into further investments or a similar fund going forward. He would like to support the BCF as there had been projects of real value funded this way but the decision had been taken by the Council that it would run until the funding ran out and there was no money to take it forward and therefore he could not give the fund any money.

The Portfolio Holder for Strategy & Performance added that Members needed to understand the reality of where local government and SDC was. He had tasked officers with looking forward to after the 10 year plan and to be ready for the potential of no government funding and what would need to be done in order not to just use increasing council tax.

A Member asked what the Council would do if it achieved greater self sufficiency, and asked his view on the rural Broadband delivery by BDUK. The Portfolio Holder stated that the Government seemed keen on the idea of self sufficiency and it was likely that a District or Borough would be the first to manage it. What was not clear was what freedom would be given, his argument to the DCLG was that if not taking any money you should have increased freedom to spend how the community wished to spend it. With regards to Broadband he had found it interesting that as soon as a community led initiative had found a solution at Underriver, the District had been moved up the BDUK agenda. Not to say the Council should not continue to look for it's own solution as by the time the cables were laid technology would have moved on.

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The Vice Chairman referred to some questions that had been referred to the Portfolio Holder prior to the meeting concerning members' allowances and asked whether he would prefer to circulate the answers. The Portfolio Holder agreed to circulate the questions and answers to all Members of the Council for information.

The Vice Chairman made a comparison to the now self sufficiency of the Stag theatre, and the cost of private gyms, in comparison to the cost of SENCIO. The Portfolio Holder advised that this was being looked at but care needed to be taken when comparing private suppliers as the model was different. It was a question of public health and affordability.

24. Work Plan

The work plan was noted. A brief progress by the [Parking Scrutiny Working Group](#) was tabled for information. It was noted that the final report would be submitted to the next meeting. If Members had any questions they should forward them to the Chairman of the working group.

It was noted that the Budget Working Group would start to meet immediately after Cabinet on 5 December 2013. The Chairman strongly suggested that the Group needed to consider appointing a Chairman. Cllr Mrs Bracken stated that she would be willing to be Chairman which was supported by two other members of the group present.

A Member expressed concern that a report on Gypsy and Travellers Consultation had slipped a long way on the Local Planning & Environment Advisory Committee's work plan, as she understood it because of an officer being on long term sickness absence. She asked of this could be considered as an item. It was agreed that she should place this request with further details in an email to the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Committee.

Another Member expressed concern over the recent Council Constitutional amendments. It was noted that following a request at Council on 1 October 2013 that these be looked at, this had been investigated by the Governance Committee at its meeting on [5 November 2013](#). The Chairman advised the Member to put her concerns in a document addressed to the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer to give them the opportunity to reply to her concern. If the response was not to her satisfaction, to forward her concerns to the Chairman and Vice Chairman for them to consider whether it was something the Committee could or should consider.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.12 PM

CHAIRMAN