

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 14 July 2015 commencing at 7.30 pm

Present: Cllr. London (Chairman)

Cllr. Brown (Vice-Chairman)

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

Cllrs. Fleming, Parkin and Searles were also present.

1. Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 3 February 2015 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

2. Declarations of Interest

No additional declarations were made.

CHANGE IN ORDER OF AGENDA ITEMS

With the agreement of the Committee, agenda item 6 was brought before agenda item 3 and agenda item 9 before agenda item 5.

3. Kent County Council - Primary Education and Apprenticeships

The Chairman welcomed County Councillor Crabtree, Kent County Council (KCC) Deputy Cabinet Member for Education, and Ian Watts, KCC Area Education Officer for the Sevenoaks District, to the meeting.

Mrs. Crabtree gave a [presentation](#) on apprenticeships and the commissioning of school places. With regard to apprenticeships she emphasised that they were an excellent way for young people to earn while they learnt and would increase their opportunities while improving their pay levels. Qualifications up to the equivalent of a masters degree could be gained without the debt built up at universities. Employers would gain from the increased skills of their workforce, who would be in place while learning and apprentices would usually show increased loyalty. She felt KCC was leading the way on the number of apprenticeships but more bodies were likely to be expected to take on apprentices through the government's upcoming Enterprise Bill. KCC would pay for the first year in the case of the Assisted Apprenticeship Scheme for disabled people, care leavers, the home educated, young offenders and troubled families.

Mrs. Crabtree advised that school places were given through priority based on those in care, followed by those with siblings in the school, those with special needs and then based on the distance of their home to the school. It was a particularly high year for those with siblings already in schools. Sevenoaks town had been an area of real pressure

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for places and so some pupils had been placed in Seal Primary instead. It was expected that the development of Fort Halsted would have an effect from 2019 onwards and although there was currently capacity of 100 spaces at Halstead Primary these would be occupied by that point and CIL monies would be required for any expansion. Dunton Green Primary would have 7 classes phased in, funded by Section 106 monies. Final figures for primary school admission appeals would be circulated after the deadline for appeals of 20 July 2015.

Questions were asked to the representatives of KCC.

The Chairman and Vice-Chairman asked whether Halstead Primary would be where children from the Fort Halstead development would be accommodated. The Area Education Officer confirmed there would have to be a consultation before any expansion and although it was an obvious option it would also depend on any outflows of pupils from Sevenoaks and how residents would get access as it would be a significant distance.

The Vice Chairman also asked whether a cost analysis had been done of the 1,100 pupils leaving the district for grammar schools in Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells each day. No analysis had been done but it could be calculated.

The Officer was asked what work was being done to avoid the pressures for primary pupils which were felt in Swanley of bussing to Sevenoaks due to recent and upcoming developments. He confirmed there was some spare capacity at Horton Kirby while Hextable had been temporarily expanded. Any extra capacity needed to be based on land available and cost effectiveness. Costs for expansion exceeded the Government's basic needs funding and so was having to be funded through capital receipts and developer contributions. Future expansions could not be discussed until formal consultations had begun.

A Member urged that the Oasis Academy site be reopened and others enquired about demand in the area and why parents who put it as their first preference were not written to warning of its closure. The Officer advised that it was a large 15ha site, at the top of their thoughts for future school provision. It was needed for the large demand from the north of the District and from Dartford, particularly as the demand for primary school places moved upwards towards secondary schools. The decision to close the Oasis Academy was made by the Secretary of State, against the strongest arguments of KCC, on the day before the Spring Bank Holiday, making notification difficult.

The Officer was asked whether there would be sufficient appropriate buildings and staff for future school provision. He accepted that they had difficulty getting staff and had to recruit from Canada, Australia and Ireland who provided very high quality staff. Schools would not be approached for expansion unless there was capacity on their land. The Member highlighted, from his own experience, that young staff from Ireland would be very well trained but may not stay long at a school.

Responding to questions about apprenticeships, Mrs. Crabtree and the KCC Area Education Officer advised that if apprenticeship became mandatory under the Enterprise Bill then, unless the apprentices were NEETs, these would not be funded except for National Apprenticeship service grants of £1,500. Schools would not get the highest Ofsted results unless their careers advice services covered the option of apprenticeships

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well enough. Apprentices under these schemes had more employment protection than in the past and, at Level 2 Apprenticeships, employers would not receive payment unless apprentices without the qualifications would be entered to achieve A*-C GCSE Mathematics and English.

The Chairman thanked Mrs. Crabtree and the KCC Area Education Officer for the Sevenoaks District for attending.

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

There were none.

5. Actions from the last meeting of the Committee

There were none.

6. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Policy & Performance

The Portfolio Holder for Policy & Performance explained that the focus of his Portfolio would be to get the Council to a position where it could become self-sufficient. Connected with the move to self-sufficiency was improving the customer's and the resident's experience in meeting the Council's services, particularly being able to lead them to online services. The Portfolio Holder responded to Members' questions.

The Chairman asked what the Portfolio Holder considered to be the most significant risks within his Portfolio. The first was the risk of doing nothing, as the drive for self sufficiency was the result of balancing those risks against failing to act. The second was that staffing had reduced as the Council had tried to reduce its core costs. Reduced staffing led to a risk of a lack of capacity. The Chairman further asked about the sustainability of the District Council looking forwards. The Portfolio Holder advised that the Council's 10-year budget meant it was ahead of neighbours in adapting to the reduced funding. The Council continued to explore partnership working with those other Local Authorities who had an appetite for it and with whom it would work best.

The Vice Chairman asked what his expectations were for the Government Revenue Support Grant to the Council in the next year. He responded that the Council was working with an assumption of £1.5million but the Autumn Statement would likely see a further reduction. He hoped to get to the point where the Council was not dependent upon the grant in its core budget. The next phase would be to then reduce dependence on the New Homes Bonus.

The Portfolio Holder was asked what further projects the Council intended in the move to self-sufficiency. He confirmed that following the purchases the Council was a third of the way to the revenue stream intended. The market was now approaching the Council with properties as it was respected as a purchaser. The Council was continuing with work on the Buckhurst and Bradbourne car parks and was considering options for the one behind the former Farmers' Pub site.

Asked about the Council Offices, he said that he wanted to get to the point where the Argyle Road offices were not costing the Council money. They had already been successful in bringing others into the building who were paying a market rent. The

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building was flexible but presented challenges in terms of energy efficiency. The swimming pools were particularly poor for energy efficiency.

A Member enquired whether the property investment would continue to provide returns during a recession. The Portfolio Holder explained that the Head of Economic Development & Property was looking for a mixed portfolio of properties. In some cases the Council would also see a return as a developer and in some cases would retain the value as freeholder. Empty properties had been built into the model.

Another Member asked whether it was risky to borrow money to invest in property. The Portfolio Holder advised that money had not yet been borrowed, but instead been redirected from the Council's investments which were receiving less than 1% return. Property investment had to, and was returning 6%.

A Member sought clarification from the Portfolio Holder on the reductions in the numbers of staff. He said that reductions had mostly been at the senior manager level but these cuts has also then filtered down. An example was the partnership working with Dartford Borough Council which had produced efficiencies.

7. Scrutiny Committee's Terms of Reference, Roles and Powers

The report set out the roles and powers of the Scrutiny Committee, taking into account its powers under the Local Government Act 2000, the Police and Justice Act 2006 and the Council's Constitution. It explained that the Committee could play a wide role, particularly in holding the Cabinet to account, questioning the impact of decisions, assessing the Council's relationship with partner organisations and in taking on in-depth projects.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

8. Reconstitution of Leisure In-Depth Scrutiny Working Group

The Committee reviewed the Leisure in-depth scrutiny working group, its terms of reference and membership and whether it should be reconstituted for the present municipal year.

Members agreed that the Working Group should build on the work of the Group previously but should report no later than 3 May 2016.

Resolved: That

- a) the terms of reference of the Leisure In-Depth Scrutiny Working Group be reconfirmed:
- b) Cllrs. Ball, Brown, Clack and Kitchener be appointed members of the Working Group; and
- c) Cllr. Brown be appointed Chairman of the Working Group.

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9. Performance Monitoring

Members considered a report which summarised performance across the Council to the end of May 2015. Members were asked to consider three 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 Chief Officer Corporate Support clarified that the target number of food inspections was across the year and was still expected to be met by year-end. Of the four planning appeals against the Council in the first two months of 2015/16 which had been upheld, one was a decision by the Development Control Committee overturning an Officer recommendation.

The Chairman requested that Members notify him of any Local Performance Indicators they wished to see regularly reported to the Committee.

10. Work Plan

The Committee considered its workplan for the remainder of the municipal year 2015/16.

Members agreed that a representative from KCC Commercial Services be invited to the meeting in May 2016, which they felt would complement questions at the meeting concerning Direct & Trading Services.

The Chairman asked that Members contact him if they have any matters of significant concern they would like added to the workplan.

Action: Officers to provide key performance indicators relevant to the Portfolio Holders invited to the Scrutiny Committee at each meeting.

The Members hoped for the Leisure In-Depth Scrutiny Working Group to provide an update to the meeting in November 2015, and interim report in February 2016 and the final report by May 2016.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.37 PM

CHAIRMAN

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