

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 5 February 2019 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Brown (Chairman)

Cllr. London (Vice Chairman)

Cllrs. Ball, Clack, Kitchener, Lindsay, London, Purves and Searles

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Hogg, McArthur and Reay

Cllrs. Firth and Hogarth were also present.

### 20. Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 13 November 2018 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

### 21. Declarations of Interest

No additional declarations of interest were made.

### 22. Responses of the Cabinet to reports of the Scrutiny Committee (if any)

The Chief Officer Corporate Services informed Members that the findings of the In-Depth Working Group of Scrutiny on Staffing Levels had been reported to [Cabinet](#) on 10 January 2019. Cabinet had wished to thank the Scrutiny Working Group for carrying out this work and Cabinet had passed the recommendations on to officers to investigate further as appropriate.

### 23. Actions from the Previous Meeting

Members considered the planning figures relating to decisions, appeals and overturns. The outcome of appeals was discussed and Members noted that of the 64 appeals, only 63 were accounted for as being dismissed or allowed. Additional information was requested on the numbers of granted and refused applications.

*Action 1: Chief Planning Officer to provide a breakdown of refusals and granted applications from the total number of applications determined. The status of the appeal not listed as dismissed or allowed be clarified.*

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Members considered the reminders and rates of non-payment for Building Control services and questioned if costs could be charged to non-paying clients for administration and enforcement.

*Action 2: Chief Officer Corporate Services to provide the Committee access to the legal advice relating to non-payment for building control services.*

Members noted that the annual cost of Emergency Accommodation was increasing significantly. They were advised by Chief Officer Communities and Business that increased costs were correlated with greater Council's responsibility for homelessness following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. It was advised that these costs were mostly recovered from Housing Benefit and grants. Emphasis had been placed on Homelessness Prevention including the work carried out by the Council's HERO officers. Members noted that many people placed in emergency accommodation were placed outside of the district.

It was noted that there was an increased cost associated with the employment of an agency worker which was partially offset by the benefits received by full time staff. Additional information was requested on agency staff working at the Council.

*Action 3: For Chief Officer Corporate Services to provide information on the number of agency staff employed by the Council per year.*

The actions were noted.

### 24. West Kent Housing

The Chairman welcomed Frank Czarnowski, the Chief Executive of West Kent Housing who gave a [presentation](#) on affordable housing in the district. The presentation covered the organisations 6 key objectives relating to customers, homes, older people, growth, community and viability.

The Committee were then invited to ask questions. Members were advised that specialists teams were available to try and resolve issues related to antisocial behaviour. West Kent Housing's approach to their garage stock was discussed with some well used garages in prime locations being refurbished and maintained while garages while some empty garages were being demolished. The shortage of parking spaces in the district was noted however Members were advised that some garage units were not being used while others were being used for non-car parking activities.

Members queried the moving in process for West Kent tenants especially in relation to overlapping rent payments for former and new homes. If tenants were required to pay the deposit and rent for a new West Kent House when agreeing to take the property it was considered likely that they would also be paying rent on the property they would be moving from. Improvements would sometimes be carried out following the new tenant moving into the property and 'decoration vouchers' were available in some cases. Members were advised that there were often tensions between renovations and improvements taking place at the property, renting the property and tight timescales. It was also noted that Universal Credit

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would cover overlapping rent payments in some cases however for those not on benefits paying multiple rents would be considerably difficult.

It was advised that the average turnaround for a property was over 4 weeks with an average of 7% of all properties being empty. The waiting time for a residential property was recognised to be different for different sizes of property with 2-bedroom houses being the most in demand. Independence at home for older residents was supported through psychical adjustments (rails, lifts ect.) and professional support. Members were informed that money raised through rents and loans funded an ongoing development plan which included the purchase of new stock and the refurbishment of existing properties.

The Chairman thanked Chief Executive Frank Czarnowski for his attendance.

(Councillor Brown left the meeting)

### COUNCILLOR LONDON IN THE CHAIR

#### 25. Performance Monitoring

Members considered the report which summarised performance across the Council to the end of December 2018. Members were asked to consider 8 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. The report also provided key performance indicators relating to the Portfolio Holders invited to the Scrutiny Committee meeting.

Members considered the average time taken to process a new claim for housing benefit. It was advised that 23 days was the target and additional information was requested on how long it was taking for other Councils to complete this process.

*Action 4: Chief Finance Officer to provide figures on the average time taken to process a new claim for housing benefit in other Councils.*

Resolved: That the report be noted.

#### 26. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Legal and Democratic Services

The Portfolio Holder for Legal and Democratic Services presented a report updating the Committee on recent achievements and challenges ahead.

The Portfolio Holder updated Members on the Licensing Partnership which had been approached by the London Borough of Bromley who were interested in joining the partnership. Bromley and the Partnership were also investigating the possibility of the Partnership carrying out enforcement and compliance in Bromley as part of an enhanced service. It was advised that although the Partnership was not currently a profit centre, expanding the Partnership would bring down the costs for the individual authorities to carry out the service. Members were informed that as per the terms of reference of the Partnership any dissolution would be subject to a 6 months break clause.

Questions were raised relating to managing liability across the Licensing Partnership, and Members were advised that that considerable effort was made before taking on a new partner to avoid issues and mistakes. Measures were taken to understand the Licensing processes at other partnership authorities and to align IT software.

Members were advised that finding suitable properties for trading company Quercus 7 had been difficult, however many deals had been considered, and the company were careful to select only the most viable. In response to Member questions, the Portfolio Holder advised that the property purchased by Quercus 7 in Westerham has been subject to a 13% reduced rate. Quercus Housing was restricted to a timeframe in relation to its Section 106 funds and schemes should commence shortly to avoid funds being returned to developers. Members were advised that property consultants had factored in the running cost and management of properties in Quercus Housing's financial plan. In the case of small investments, it was expected that the properties could be managed by the Council who would be paid for its services by Quercus Housing.

It was highlighted that all Legal Successes may have not been listed in the report as individual departments reported back on their successes through their own Portfolio Holders. Members requested more information on the work listed for 120 Chipstead Lane, Sevenoaks which was described as a complex landlord-tenant case where it was in the Council's interest to intervene as the site had required a significant amount of Council resources. In response to further enquiry, it was agreed that the Head of Legal Services would provide more information relating to this case to the relevant Ward Councillor.

Member training had been delivered as per the request of Members however uptake hadn't been as high as hoped, and training was hoped to be recommenced early in the next cycle. Members views on training were welcomed.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for her attendance.

#### 27. Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Economic and Community Development

The Portfolio Holder for Economic and Community Development presented a report updating the Committee on recent achievements and challenges ahead. Members were advised that the Sevenoaks Community Safety Unit was the only one in Kent which was not lead by a Police Officer. The developments at the Swanley Convent of Mercy site, which had recently been closed following anti-social behaviour, were noted. Some Members voiced concerns at the amount of time taken to close the site.

The Portfolio Holder advised that electric vehicles were now installed in all new developments and the Bradbourne and Buckhurst 2 carparks had been designed with the infrastructure to increase the number of electric spaces according to need. The success of the new Premier Inn in Sevenoaks was on target with occupancy levels of 86% in the first 3 months with current occupancy believed to be higher.

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Members discussed developments on the former Tesco Sevenoaks High Street building, and were informed by the Portfolio Holder that the Council had been communicating with the land owner. A short-term use for the shop front was being considered while long term plans for the site were being finalised. Other businesses in the town centre had reported a decrease in footfall since Tesco's closure.

The Portfolio Holder reported that several businesses in Sevenoaks Town had seen their revenue shift to mainly online sales but were still keen to maintain their high-street presence. The Council owned 96 High Street, Sevenoaks was currently housing 20 artist studios as part of an experiment on potential alternative uses for town centre locations. It was reported that these studios were currently all in use.

Members discussed the planned improvements to Swanley Town Station, a development which had been granted CIL funding in 2018. It was noted that funding was now sufficient to start the project, but schemes were still being finalised with Southeastern Railway. The development was noted as being time sensitive and some funding may be recovered if there were significant delays to the schemes implementation.

Members questioned the Council's role in promoting businesses, tourist attractions and lodgings on its website. It was advised that there was currently a link to an external site and suggestions were made to provide links from the Council's website to the various Town Council's site for tourism information.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for his attendance.

### 28. Work Plan

Members noted that Sencio and the Portfolio Holders for Planning and Housing and Health would be attending the meeting on 2 April 2019. The Chairman's Annual report to Council would also be presented at the April 2019 Scrutiny meeting.

It was agreed that the Leader of the Council and the Portfolio Holder for Direct and Trading Services would be invited to attend the meeting on 16 July 2019 alongside the NHS Dartford, Gravesham and Swanley Clinical Commissioning Group. The Chamber of Commerce, Kent County Council Highways Team and Kent Police were scheduled in for the subsequent 2019/20 meetings.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.20 PM

CHAIRMAN

