

Medway Council
Meeting of Business Support Overview and Scrutiny
Committee

Thursday, 4 December 2014

6.30pm to 8.15pm

Record of the meeting

Subject to approval as an accurate record at the next meeting of this committee

Present: Councillors: Avey, Carr, Clarke (Chairman), Pat Gulvin (Vice-Chairman), Harriott, Iles, Juby, Mackness, Maple, Price, Royle and Wildey

Substitutes: Councillor:
Griffiths (Substitute for Murray)

In Attendance: Stephen Gaimster, Assistant Director, Housing and Regeneration
Stephanie Goad, Assistant Director Communications, Performance and Partnerships
Matthew Gough, Housing Strategy Manager
Mick Hayward, Chief Finance Officer
Wayne Hemingway, Democratic Services Officer
Christine Wilson, Head of Legal Services

560 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 7 October 2014 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

Clarification was sought on whether information had been provided to Councillor Juby regarding the £35,000 overspend in relation to the Napier Primary School project. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that this information had been provided and would arrange for it to be resent to Councillor Juby.

An update was sought on the Government's position on whether the £2 million funding transferred from the Council's HRA account to the general fund could now be used to fund the development of a new Community Hub in Twydall. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that there was continued correspondence between the Council and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) on this matter and that no final decision had been made on the matter.

561 Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Murray.

562 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were no urgent matters by reasons of special circumstances.

563 Declarations of interests and whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other interests

There were none.

564 Holding to Account of the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Customer Contact

Discussion:

Members received an overview of progress on the area within the terms of reference of this Committee and covered by the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Customer Contact as set out below:

- Customer contact
- ICT
- Legal.

The Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Customer Contact, Councillor Hicks, responded to Members' questions and comments as follows:

Resources - With regard to customer facing teams within this portfolio, questions were asked how the Council was responding to increasing pressure at a time of decreasing resources, and how the replacement location for Riverside 1 would be funded should the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) decide that the proposed funding stream (the transferred Housing Revenue Account (HRA) funding) could not be used for this purpose. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that work was taking place to move the services provided at Riverside 1 to Kingsley House, Gillingham given that Riverside 1 was no longer fit for purpose and that this would result in an improvement to service efficiency. The closure of Riverside 1 was likely to take place within the next six months.

The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the use of the £2 million transfer from the HRA to the general fund was still being discussed by the Council and DCLG and that the Council would look at alternative funding streams should use of the HRA funding not be permitted for the relocation.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 December 2014

Self-exclusion pilot scheme for gamblers – the Portfolio Holder and the legal team were thanked for their work towards the introduction of this pilot scheme which had been developed as a result of cross-party working. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that this pilot scheme would run for two years and that Medway was the first Local Authority in the country to run such a scheme. He referred to an article in the Local Government Chronicle written by the Assistant Director, Legal and Corporate Services, on this matter, which had been provided to Committee Members.

Licensing issues – it was requested that further consideration be given to the issue of the cumulative impact of alcohol in parts of Medway (including Rochester and Chatham town centres), by continued partnership working with, such as, Public Health and the Health and Wellbeing Board. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that he was encouraged by the progress made on these issues and that he would continue to keep this under scrutiny.

Legal services – clarification was sought as to when the processing of care proceedings would be reduced from the current position of 33 weeks down to the target of 26 weeks. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that there had been a recent restructure of Legal Services and that he was hopeful that progress would be made on this particular target in the next 6-12 months.

Decision:

The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee thanked the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Customer Contact for his attendance at the meeting and the answers he had provided.

565 Housing Strategy Annual Review

Discussion:

The Head of Strategic Housing introduced this report which set out details of the draft Housing Strategy 2015-18, which replaced the Housing Strategy approved by Cabinet in 2011. The Housing Strategy set out the Council's strategic approach for housing services and detailed how the Council would enable the delivery of these services. It also provided a comprehensive picture of current housing needs and demands in Medway and set out how the Council and its partners would counter existing and anticipated challenges.

Committee Members raised a number of points and questions including:

Format of the draft Strategy – there were some typographical errors within the document and there needed to be consistency between the four strategic priorities, the actions to achieve the strategic priorities and the overall Action Plan and this needed to be addressed for the version of the Strategy being submitted to Cabinet on 16 December 2014.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 December 2014

Clarification of the role of the Housing our Ageing Population Panel for Innovation (HAPPI) – the Head of Strategic Housing confirmed that this was a national body including membership from a range of organisations including the Homes and Communities Agency, the building industry and care providers, the aim of which was to provide guidance on design standards to achieve age-inclusive housing. With regards to the planning process, this guidance was included within the Council's affordable housing standards and S106 guidance.

A potential lack of ambition within the draft Strategy – it was suggested that the housing waiting list would not be dealt with by the actions contained within strategic priority one (increase the supply of suitable and affordable homes) and that the Council should do more in relation to bringing empty homes back into use. The Head of Strategic Housing confirmed that there was a limit to what the Council could do in relation to empty homes. However, it worked with partners including Housing Associations to take the necessary steps to reduce empty homes by working with residents and owners and with the Council's Derelict Property Officer within the planning service.

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) – it was suggested that there was a wider issue regarding rogue landlords in Medway and that further partnership working was required to deliver better outcomes. The Head of Strategic Housing confirmed that the Council did take action against landlords and that recently there had been two successful prosecutions with a further 14 cases pending.

Social isolation – it was recognised that housing had an important role to play in reducing social isolation. The Head of Strategic Housing confirmed the linkages between health and housing and the partnership working between the Housing Department and Public Health in relation to this issue.

Anti Social Behaviour – further consideration was requested to the use of the community trigger to deal with anti social behaviour. The Head of Strategic Housing confirmed that work was ongoing with the Council's Community Officers in relation to this issue.

Forthcoming Housing Scrutiny Task Group – it was suggested that consideration should be given to the role this Task Group could play in terms of informing the Housing Strategy. The Head of Strategic Housing acknowledged the role of the Council's Task Groups in delivering improvements to housing.

Format of the covering report – concern was expressed regarding the options section set out in the covering report given there was a statutory duty to produce a Housing Strategy.

The level of supply of social housing – concern was expressed regarding the growth in demand for private rented housing, enabling landlords to pick and choose their tenants. This was coupled with short term tenancies with the result that some families may be required to find new accommodation on a regular basis. In addition, in some areas of Medway identical housing attracted substantially different rental levels, where private rented housing sat alongside

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 December 2014

council housing. The Head of Strategic Housing confirmed that the Council was working hard to deliver more affordable homes.

Clarification of Medway's affordable housing requirements – Members sought clarification between the figures provided in paragraph 4.1 of the draft Strategy given that different figures had been referred to at a recent Planning Committee meeting. The Head of Strategic Housing confirmed that this information would be clarified for the Cabinet report on 16 December 2014.

Clarification of the number of benefit claimants moving into the area and AMAT's position in Medway as a housing provider – clarification was sought outside the meeting on the information provided in the penultimate paragraph 3.2 of the draft Strategy. Concern was expressed about the amount of housing provided by AMAT and the need for alternative providers to come forward in Medway. The Head of Strategic Housing confirmed that AMAT was a private company and would make its own decisions as to where it would provide housing. However, the Council continued to work with other providers to develop in Medway, and that the Council encouraged a mix of providers in Medway.

Clarification of the role of First Stop (paragraph 6.2.4 of the draft Strategy) – the Head of Strategic Housing confirmed that this was a new national initiative. There was currently limited provision of this advice service and that the Council was working with providers to develop the service.

Clarification of action point 2.16 (Actions to achieve Strategic Priority Two) – whether this applied to all housing or just affordable housing. The Head of Strategic Housing confirmed that the scope of the Housing Strategy related to affordable housing and that wider planning policy provided overall standards for housing.

Decision:

The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the Draft Housing Strategy 2015/2018 and endorsed it, with its views as set out above, prior to its submission to Cabinet for adoption subject to:

- (i) Clarification of Medway's affordable housing requirement.
- (ii) Clarification of the information regarding the number of benefit claimants moving into the area.

566 Homelessness

Discussion:

This report provided Members with details of the Council's approach to Homelessness. It was noted that the Council's overall approach to homelessness was set out within legislation, within its Homelessness Strategy and its Housing Strategy.

Committee Members raised a number of points and questions including:

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 December 2014

Council's Housing Allocation Policy – concern was expressed regarding the term "...removing the incentive to make a homeless application" (bullet point 1, paragraph 10.2 of the report) in so far that it suggested that some households may have made a choice to become homeless in an effort to be re-housed. The Head of Strategic Housing explained the process by which households may have received a higher priority under the previous Allocation Policy by making a homeless application and that the Policy had been revised in September 2013 which reduced the priority awarded to homeless households.

Supported accommodation for homeless households – reference was made to the Temporary Accommodation Task Group (2009) during which Members visited a scheme in Southampton which supported those in need of temporary accommodation. Members discussed the merits of the scheme operated in Southampton and the Head of Strategic Housing explained that the Medway Scheme provided 93 units of accommodation including a range of services and support as set out in paragraph 6.5 of the report. Members requested a briefing note providing full information of the Medway Supported Accommodation Scheme for Homeless and asked that a site visit be arranged for Members to visit the scheme.

Homebond – concern was expressed regarding the effectiveness of the Medway Homebond in securing housing for tenants in receipt of benefits because landlords may prefer to let housing to private tenants. The Head of Strategic Housing confirmed that the Council would continue to review the effectiveness of the scheme, however, there were some mitigating factors which meant that such tenants may be at a disadvantage. For example, some landlords would not be able to accept such potential tenants owing to the terms of their mortgage agreements. In addition, he informed Members that private accommodation could sometimes be rented out within three hours of it being made available for rent, given the level of demand from private tenants.

Decision:

The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report and requested:

- (i) A briefing note to provide full details of the Medway Scheme to provide supported accommodation for homeless households.
- (ii) A site visit be arranged for Members to visit Medway Scheme to provide supported accommodation for homeless households.

567 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report 2014/15 - Quarter 2

Discussion:

This report summarised the performance of the Council's Key Measures of Success for July – September (Quarter 2) 2014/15 as set out in The Council Plan 2013-15.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 December 2014

The Assistant Director, Communications, Performance and Partnerships, referred Members to performance information in the report and noted that there was no feedback to report from the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees on this occasion given that the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee was the first Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider this latest period of performance.

Decision:

The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted quarter 2 performance against the key measures of success used to monitor progress against the Council Plan 2013/15.

568 Draft Capital and Revenue Budgets 2015/16

Discussion:

This report presented the Council's draft capital and revenue budgets for 2015/16. It was noted that each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees would consider the draft budgets for relevant service areas before returning to this Committee (3 February 2015), Cabinet (10 February 2015) and Full Council (26 February 2015) for final decision.

The Chief Finance Officer informed Members that the initial budget proposals had been considered by the Cabinet on 2 December 2014 and these proposals were based on the principles in the Medium Term Financial Plan. Presently, the forecast budget gap for 2015/16 stood at £12.017 million and whilst work was underway to reduce the gap, there remained significant pressures in the Children and Adults Directorate, to which the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee (9 December 2014) had received detailed information in relation to specific budget pressures. He also referred to the recent Autumn Statement which had not raised any further issues in relation to the likely funding position for 2015/16.

Committee Members raised a number of points and questions including:

Business Rates (NNDR) appeals – concern was expressed regarding the process for appeals against valuations on the 2005 and 2010 valuation lists, which was administered by the Valuation Office, but where any liabilities would fall to the Council, and whether the Council should make representations to the Government on the matter. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the deadline for any appeals regarding the 2005 and 2010 valuation lists was 31 March 2015 which would have the potential effect of limiting the number of claims. He informed Members that the Local Government Association (LGA) continued to lobby the Government on this matter.

Academies – Members discussed the effect of Academies on the Council's budgets and the services provided by the Council to schools in Medway and whether the Council should have a specific policy around the retention of schools under Local Authority control. The Chief Finance Officer informed

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 December 2014

Members that it was a matter for each Academy whether it would buy back services from the Council but they were no obliged to do so. It was noted that the Education Support Grant had been reduced given the increase in the number of Academies over time, however, there remained an overall responsibility for the Council in areas such as schools improvement despite the reduced funding.

It was noted that the reference to paragraph 9.3 in Table 4 (Basic Needs Grant) should have read paragraph 9.5.

Decision:

The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the draft capital and revenue budget for 2014/15 and agreed to forward the programme to individual Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

569 Petitions

Discussion:

This report advised the Committee of a petition presented at the Council meeting on 16 October 2014 raising concerns about 'out of town' taxis working in the Medway area. Members were informed that the matter was subject to consultation and would be referred back to the Licensing and Safety Committee in due course.

Decision:

The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the summary of the response to the petition provided by the Assistant Director, Legal and Corporate Services and the action proposed by the Licensing and Safety Committee in response to the petition and Council resolution.

570 Work programme

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report advising the Committee of the current work programme which allowed them to adjust it in light of the latest priorities, issues and circumstances.

The report gave details of the items listed on the Cabinet Forward Plan that fell within the remit of this Committee and Appendix 2 to the report set out the work programmes of the other three Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Committee Members raised a number of points and questions including:

Membership of forthcoming Housing Scrutiny Task Group – that consideration would need to be given to this matter and the potential relationship of the Task

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 December 2014

Group with both the Business Support and Regeneration, Community and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Performance and budget monitoring – that consideration be given to the possibility of providing combined performance and budget monitoring reports to Members.

The Chairman undertook to discuss these matters with the Head of Democratic Services.

Decision:

The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed:

- a) the additions to the Committee's Work Programme; and
- b) the work programmes of all overview and scrutiny committees (set out in Appendix 2 of the report).

Chairman

Date:

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