

Medway Council
Meeting of Business Support Overview and Scrutiny
Committee

Thursday, 13 August 2015

6.30pm to 7.55pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Avey, Carr, Freshwater, Hall, Maple, Murray, Royle, Tejan and Wildey (Chairman)

Substitutes: Councillors:
Iles (Substitute for Clarke)
Purdy (Substitute for Etheridge)
Stamp (Substitute for Griffiths)

In Attendance: Stephanie Goad, Assistant Director Communications, Performance and Partnerships
Perry Holmes, Assistant Director, Legal and Corporate Services/Monitoring Officer
Tricia Palmer, Assistant Director, Organisational Services
Michael Turner, Democratic Services Officer
Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer

229 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 25 June 2015 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

230 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Clarke, Etheridge, Griffiths and Howard.

231 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

232 Declarations of interests and whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none

Other interests

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Councillor Stamp declared an interest in relation to agenda item no 5 (Six Month Review of Welfare Reform Task Group Review) as his partner is the Chief Executive of Medway Citizens Advice Bureau.

233 Six Month Review of Welfare Reform Task Group Review

Discussion:

Members considered a report which gave an update on progress made with the Committee's recommendations from the Welfare Reform in-depth review, which were agreed by the Cabinet on 2 September 2014.

A Member made the point that since the Task Group had made its recommendations the further reductions in welfare spending made at a national level meant that the Group would no doubt come to substantially different conclusions if it were still in operation. The point was also made that in the last three years responsibility for local welfare provision had moved from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to a third sector organisation funded by the Council and then to the Council with no direct grant provided. The contract for this had been extended by the Council and Cabinet would need, in the near future, to consider what to do when it ended. Reference was made to the need for a local safety net to help people who would otherwise face significant problems. It was therefore suggested that the Committee should recommend Cabinet that some form of local welfare provision should be maintained when the current contract expired.

Reference was also made to reports that the Government were planning to stop EU migrants claiming benefits during their first four years in the UK. As this would also stop Britons aged 18 to 22 claiming benefits such as tax credits and child benefit it was argued this was a significant development that the Council should monitor closely. The Chief Finance Officer replied that this would be looked at as part of the overall welfare reforms announced in the summer budget.

A Member asked for more information about the Street Weeks scheme in light of concerns about its effectiveness given a decrease in support by the DWP. It was agreed Members would be provided with a briefing paper on this.

The importance of digital inclusion was emphasised and the point was made that Universal Credit was entirely dependent on people being able to access the internet. A Member asked if library staff had been trained to help people make online applications. The Assistant Director - Communications, Performance and Partnerships advised that staff at Kingsley House had been trained but she would need to check the position regarding library staff.

The Chief Finance Officer advised that dates for the planned stakeholder events had not yet been set, but that the Member briefing explaining the welfare reforms and the scheme's operation in Medway was scheduled for the end of September 2015. Members requested that dates be fixed as soon as possible.

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Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- (a) note the progress made against the actions from the review;
- (b) request that a briefing note on the latest position regarding Street Weeks be provided for Members of the Committee;
- (c) recommend Cabinet to consider putting in place some form of local welfare provision when the current contract expires.

234 Council Plan Year End 2014/15 Performance Monitoring Report

Discussion:

Members considered a report which summarised the performance of the Council's Key Measures of Success for Quarter 4 Year End 2014/15 as set out in the refreshed Council Plan 2013/15. Tabled at the meeting was Appendix 2 to the report which set out the performance discussion of the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

In discussing the report Members raised the following points:

- The poor condition of roads in some wards which had an impact on people's quality of life amongst other things
- The lack of effective partnership working between the Council and housing providers and frustrations about organisations passing responsibility for issues to each other. An example was given about fly tipping at a housing association development which was not being addressed due to a lack of clarity about land ownership
- Regarding the 260 households in temporary accommodation in Quarter 4, a Member asked for details of the background to these households before they became homeless – in particular previous housing tenure but also covering age, whether individual or family, and whether looked after children (including previous looked after children) or ex offender. This would allow the Council to better understand the issues and see if there were any patterns which the Council could then seek to address

Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- (a) note the 2014/15 performance against the Key Measures of Success used to monitor progress against the Council Plan 2013/15;

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- (b) request a briefing note, as outlined above, on the background to the 260 households in temporary accommodation in Quarter 4.

235 Medway Adult Learning OFSTED Report

Discussion:

Members considered a report, and also received a presentation, regarding the outcomes from the recent OFSTED inspection of Medway Adult Learning. The report proposed the way forward in addressing the issues raised by the inspection.

Members welcomed the fact that the outcome of the inspection was Level 2 (Good), across all areas. In particular officers were commended for the significant progress which had been made in a relatively short period of time given the service had been graded inadequate as recently as 2012.

A Member felt that there could well be further opportunities for greater partnership working in North Kent with reciprocal agreements in place between the service and partners. The point was made that some courses may be better provided by partners and if so the Council should cease providing them. All of this would help with the funding difficulties facing the service. It was also suggested that those people studying craft subjects could be encouraged to think about setting up in business.

A Member asked if there were any issues causing difficulties in the recruitment and retention of tutors. The Assistant Director replied that levels of pay were not a particular issue. Many tutors had been employed since before Ofsted inspections started to happen and in some cases tutors had not adapted well to this environment and had moved on.

Reference was made to the 24+ Learning Loans for help with the costs of courses. The Assistant Director, in response to a question, undertook to look at how this could be better advertised.

In response to a question, the Assistant Director advised that specific financial education courses were not provided but elements of this were covered in other courses.

With regard to employability programmes the Council did collect data about age profiles and demographics etc. but this varied according to courses. Further data was still needed.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to

- (a) note the report and the improved inspection grade, together with the necessary further improvements to make the service outstanding;

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- (b) note the changes with grant funding and that options are being discussed with partners about joint working to alleviate funding difficulties.
- (c) ask that a letter be sent to staff in the Medway Adult Learning Service congratulating them on their achievement and thanking them for their hard work.

236 Work programme

Discussion:

Members considered a report advising the Committee of the current work programme. 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.

The Democratic Services Officer advised, in relation to outstanding actions from previous meetings, that the briefing note on Berengrave nature reserve had now been circulated and the site visit for Members to visit a scheme to provide supported accommodation for homeless households would take place by the end of September. With reference to the briefing note a Member asked to see the survey setting out the works needed to the walkway.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to

- (a) note the work programme;
- (b) the changes to the work programme as detailed in paragraphs 3.3.2 and 3.3.3 of the report and;
- (c) note the work programmes of all overview and scrutiny committees (set out in appendix 2 to the report).

Chairman

Date:

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