

Medway Council
Meeting of Business Support Overview and Scrutiny
Committee

Thursday, 6 July 2017

6.30pm to 8.56pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Carr (Chairman), Clarke, Freshwater, Hall, Mrs Josie Iles, Maple, Purdy, Royle, Stamp and Tejan

Substitutes: Councillors:
Kemp (Substitute for Tranter)
Khan (Substitute for Murray)
Wicks (Substitute for Etheridge)

In Attendance: Mark Breathwick, Head of Strategic Housing
Stephanie Goad, Assistant Director Transformation
James Harris, Head of Category Management (People)
Perry Holmes, Chief Legal Officer/Monitoring Officer
Phil Johnson, Operations Director, Medway Norse
Tomasz Kozlowski, Assistant Director, Physical and Cultural Regeneration
Rob Lucas, Operations Director, Medway Norse
Carl Rogers, Head of Category Management (Place)
Michael Turner, Democratic Services Officer
Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer
Christopher White, Business Improvement Manager

139 Chairman's Announcemnet

The Chairman announced that Steph Goad, Assistant Director, Transformation would be leaving the Council to join MHS Homes as Operations Director. Steph joined Medway Council in 1998 and had been appointed to her current role in February 2016. Steph had been an invaluable source of support and good advice to Members and particularly this Committee over many years. On behalf of the Committee the Chairman thanked Steph for her excellent service to the Council and the people of Medway and wished her well in her new career.

140 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Etheridge, Murray and Tranter.

141 Record of meetings

The record of the meeting held on 13 April 2017 and the record of the Joint Meeting of Committees held on 17 May 2017 were agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

142 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

143 Declarations of interests and whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other interests

There were none.

144 Update on Medway Norse

Discussion:

Members considered a report which outlined the partnership's achievements and performance up to the end of the fourth quarter in its fourth year of trading.

With regard to paragraph 4.4 of the report it was clarified that it was Norse Commercial Group who had recently been awarded the schools cleaning framework contract referred to and not Medway Norse as incorrectly stated in the report.

The following issues were raised:

- **Position of Council appointed Director on Medway Norse**

As the Assistant Director Transformation who currently served as a Director of Medway Norse would be leaving the Council, a Member asked if the appointment sat with the post or the individual. He also queried whether there would be any Member input into the new appointment. Members were advised that the position sat with neither the post nor the individual. A replacement Medway Norse Director would be appointed by the Council but this would not necessarily be the new Assistant Director. An undertaking was given that Members would be consulted on the appointment as they had when it was originally made.

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- **Chatham Bus Station Ticket Office**

A Member expressed concern at the current situation whereby the vast majority of bus users were unable to buy tickets at the Chatham bus station ticket office. Officers advised that the Information Centre function had recently been transferred to Medway Norse and Arriva had since decided, for commercial reasons, to remove the ticket selling service. A Member asked that the Committee be kept updated on progress as this was a particular problem for parents with school age children.

- **Expansion of Joint Ventures in area**

In response to a question about whether there were other joint ventures in the area possibly competing for the same contracts; Members were advised that there were no other local authority/Norse joint ventures east of Medway, with the nearest one being in Enfield.

- **Impact on workforce of Brexit**

A Member asked if there were any concerns that Medway Norse's high standards of service could be placed at risk if staff decided to leave as a result of Brexit. The Operations Director, Medway Norse replied that he had no immediate concerns about this issue and the numbers of staff affected by Brexit was small.

- **Grounds maintenance contract**

A Member commented that concerns from the public and Members last year about this service did not appear to have led to any improvements. He asked if Medway Norse were confident they had sufficient resources to deliver the contract to the specifications expected. Reference was also made to the encroachment of trees onto public highways, including major routes. Officers undertook to look at the issues raised about the grounds maintenance contract but commented that in the last 12 months complaints had reduced and training had been provided for staff. Whilst Medway Norse needed to manage high expectations, on the whole the contract was delivered to agreed specifications and there were enough resources to do so. The tree maintenance budget was a separate budget and due to the level of funding available it was necessary to prioritise works. A Member commented that grounds maintained standards were generally lower in other areas and carried out to a much higher standard in Medway.

- **Living Wage**

A Member commended Medway Norse for absorbing national statutory living wage pay increases while still delivering the agreed surplus for the Council. The Operations Director commented that this had been difficult to achieve. It had required some minor reductions in staffing but the majority of affected staff had been redeployed.

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- **Member surgeries**

Members welcomed the fact that surgeries for Members to discuss operational Medway Norse matters would now be held in each of the 22 wards rather than at a central location. Medway Norse were asked to ensure ward members were aware of this change.

- **Local Business Participation**

Several Members asked for clarification on the figures in paragraph 8.1 of the report. Officers explained that the table set out the total spent by Medway Norse in Kent, broken down into the figures for Medway and Medway and Kent combined. It was agreed that future reports would make this clearer.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the report, and;
- b) request an update on the position regarding the Chatham Bus Station ticket office.

145 Outcome of Public Consultation on the Proposed Closure of Thomas Aveling Public Library

Discussion:

Members considered a report which set out the results of the public consultation on the future of Thomas Aveling Public Library, where the Council had indicated its preferred option to close the library.

Cabinet would be asked to take a decision on the future of Thomas Aveling library on 11 July 2017, taking into account the comments of the Committee.

At the request of Members, the report also provided a brief update on certain other budget reduction agreed by Council in February 2017, i.e. proposals regarding Community Hub opening hours and the future management arrangements for Grain Library.

The Head of Libraries, Business Support and Community Hubs explained that the fundamental difficulty with the continued provision of a library at this site was its rigid opening hours during week days (3-6pm). This was an unpopular time amongst users and prevented the wider scope of activities being provided that were found at other libraries.

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The following matters were discussed by Members:

- **The consultation exercise**

A Member commented that it was disappointing that only 151 responses to the consultation were received, which was a small percentage of the total number of users of the library. Another Member highlighted that 87% of respondents wanted the current service to remain in place and made a wider point about the value of consultation and the credibility of the Council if the vast majority of respondents oppose a proposal to withdraw a service but the Council nevertheless decided to proceed.

The Head of Libraries, Business Support and Community Hubs acknowledged that a high proportion of those who responded were against the closure of the library. Many users of the Thomas Aveling library also used other libraries, probably because of the longer opening hours, more extensive range of activities and events, and greater stock of books available elsewhere. The service had welcomed the views expressed during the consultation and were looking to learn from them. It had become clear that awareness of the online library service was not as great as expected and this would be promoted. The consultation had revealed that there was a willingness to use alternative offers – for example online lending and the mobile library.

- **The use of volunteers**

A Member queried why the report concluded that the use of volunteers to maintain the library was not viable yet for Grain library this was the favoured approach. Another Member commented that because the library was located on a school site the use of volunteers could be problematic. The Head of Libraries, Business Support and Community Hubs advised that volunteers provided an excellent service and were mainly used for the home library service and to help with specific events at libraries. The use of volunteers at Grain library was being trialled as a way of maintaining provision as other community activities took place in the building that housed the library and if the library was to close with the withdrawal of council financial support to the building this could have a detrimental effect on community services. However, this approach was not seen to be appropriate for other locations and there was a clear need for paid, professional staff in Community Hubs given the breadth of services provided.

Another Member expressed a concern about the impact of the use of volunteers on existing staff morale and implications for their career progression. The Head of Libraries, Business Support and Community Hubs responded that staff had been generally more concerned about the possible use of volunteers as a model rather than the proposed closure of Thomas Aveling. He also said that it would be difficult to envisage volunteers delivering the range of activities, events, advice, and promoting libraries as a focus for community activity. However, with the

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exception of Grain library there were no plans at officer or Member level to move to a model of using volunteers in place of paid staff.

- **The use of the library by children with autism**

A Member referred to the issues raised in public meetings and correspondence and noted specifically a comment that the library welcomed autistic children. He queried whether this might mean there was a greater level of children with autism using the library than at other libraries and proposed that the answer to this point be established and reported to Cabinet on 11 July.

- **Consistency of opening hours**

A Member expressed concern at a lack of consistency in library opening hours. Since 2016 the Customer Contact desks at Community Hubs closed at 6pm. Library hours remained at 7pm which had led to customer complaints about the inconsistency. Given the very low level of customer demand at the community hubs between 6-7pm and to be consistent with the timings for community hub and library services offered on the same sites all libraries within Hubs were also now closing at 6pm. However, two branch libraries (Rainham and Wigmore) still closed at 7pm for one night per week. He commented a 6pm closing time was not helpful for commuters and queried whether 7pm would be more suitable for those libraries with higher footfall in the evening. The Assistant Director, Transformation commented that key for her was to respond to customer demand and shape the service in each library accordingly where possible rather than ensuring consistency of opening hours across all sites.

- **Data on visitors to the library**

A Member asked if there were any figures for people who visited the library just to meet others or browse newspapers etc. Members were advised that there was data for the number of books issued, event attendance, numbers using ICT and data for visits overall but not broken down by these types of visits.

- **Drop boxes**

Arising from the discussion on access to libraries by commuters, a Member asked if drop boxes could be provided so books could be returned when libraries were closed. An undertaking was given to look at this. There were issues around ensuring the boxes were not misused and it was acknowledged that whilst the technology existed so that only someone with a library card could access a drop box this option was more expensive.

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- **Possible impact on the school library**

An assurance was given that the closure of the public library would have no impact on the school library which currently co-located with the public service.

- **Other Issues**

The point was made that the current library was itself a replacement for another library which closed in the area. Also, for some people who lived near the library travelling to Rochester to use the main library could be difficult.

A Member of the Committee whose ward contained the library expressed his disappointment at the loss of a service but recognised the disadvantages arising from this particular site. While he felt that in the past the Council had not done enough to promote the library, ward councillors had only received two representations about the proposed closure. Given the high number of people in residential homes in the immediate area, he welcomed the fact that older residents, care homes and residential homes would be contacted about services to increase older people's take up of the service.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the outcome of the consultation on the future of Thomas Aveling library;
- b) ask that further investigation take place on whether there may be a greater use of the Thomas Aveling library by children with autism compared to other libraries and that the outcome of this be reported to Cabinet on 11 July;
- c) recommend that Cabinet consider the issue of consistency of library opening hours, and customer usage patterns and demands, and;
- d) note that the provision of drop boxes at libraries will be investigated.

146 Procurement Strategy

Discussion:

Members considered a report which provided an update on the progress made against the procurement strategy 2016-21. A revised version of Appendix 1 (progress against the strategy) was also considered.

A Member asked that the issue of the procurement of insurance be looked into following concerns raised at the Local Government Association annual

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conference about the role of brokers. The Chief Finance Officer advised that the Council was essentially self insured so premiums paid to brokers were not significant. However, he would look at this further.

A discussion took place about total place procurement and working with partners such as the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and a Member asked if budgets could be re-adjusted to reflect savings generated by one partner's procurement activities where another partner benefited. The Chief Finance Officer advised that procurement for the Council and the CCG was mostly done through the joint commissioning team and pooled budgets meant that benefits could be shared.

Members welcomed the significant progress made in procurement in recent years and particular reference was made to the good work with SMEs.

A Member asked if the Council had signed up to the Prompt Payment Code. The Chief Finance Officer undertook to look at this.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the progress made against the Procurement Strategy 2016-21.

147 Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2017-19

Discussion:

Members considered a report which set out the background to the Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2017-19, the consultation process, and the refinement of the strategy based on feedback received.

The comments of the Committee would be reported to Cabinet on 8 August 2017.

The following issues were discussed:

- **Funding to deliver the Strategy**

In response to a question about whether there was sufficient funding to deliver the Strategy, the Head of Strategic Housing replied that none of the actions would require additional funding. The Strategy would be funded from existing resources, partner contributions and also external funding would be explored.

A Member welcomed the Strategy as a step in the right direction.

- **Supply of affordable homes/S106 agreements**

Noting the aim in the Housing Strategy to increase the supply of affordable homes, a Member noted that numbers of affordable homes in

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recent years had been very low. The point was also made that affordable housing covered a range of types of housing and what was really needed was a significant increase in social housing. The Head of Strategic Housing acknowledged the supply of social housing had fallen since 2012 but supply had increased this year with 220 units projected to be delivered in 2017-18, including some shared ownership.

Another Member commented that the biggest threat to the delivery of affordable homes was developers using viability reports to successfully argue that the recommended contributions made the development non-viable, leading to affordable home numbers it being renegotiated. The extent of liaison with the planning team on this issue was queried and the Head of Strategic Housing advised that the Affordable Housing Officer liaised with the planners and developers and there was a robust process in place to scrutinise viability reports. The Council also learnt from other councils about best practice in this area. If necessary external specialists would be brought in to ensure affordable housing was delivered in respect of the Council's regeneration projects.

A Member referred to a large developer who had not delivered on a S106 agreement and asked if this had been shared with other councils. Members were advised that this case would be raised in future discussions with Government bodies.

- **Intentionally homeless**

A Member asked for figures of people deemed intentionally homeless as opposed to homeless. As the figure was not available an undertaking was given to provide the information. The focus of the Strategy was to prevent homelessness as far as possible. The housing team also worked with colleagues in Children and Adults so that joint assessments were carried out when people presented as homeless.

- **Home bonds scheme**

Referring to difficulties people were finding in getting home bonds accepted in the private sector rental market, a Member asked for an update on this scheme. The Head of Strategic Housing advised that persuading some private sector landlords to accept Home Bonds could be challenging in spite of work with the Landlords Forum and the scheme was not suitable for everyone. The scheme was being revised with a view to the Council taking on more of a match maker role.

- **Kingsley House**

A Member referred to reports of staff at Kingsley House providing a poor service to some users. The Head of Strategic Housing commented it was recognised that vulnerable people's interaction with housing staff could sometimes become confrontational. The team at Kingsley House had now been split and a preventative team had been established which

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assessed an individual's circumstances and helped them find accommodation.

- **DCLG funding bids**

In response to a comment that the failure of the recent bids had been frustrating, Members were advised that the Council had asked for feedback from the bidding process.

- **Homelessness Forum**

A Member noted the involvement of the Homelessness Forum in the development of the Homelessness Charter and commented that the Forum was seen by some as not being very transparent. The Head of Strategic Housing replied that the aim of the Charter was to set out the responsibilities of the various partners and their roles in tackling homelessness problems. The Forum was well established and comprised statutory and voluntary agencies. Relationships with volunteers could be complex and though they were well meaning there was the potential for their approach to exacerbate problems.

- **Accommodation for 18-35 year olds**

Referring to the aim of delivering 10 rooms in shared housing for 18-35 year olds, a Member asked if the 10 rooms were in one building or spread across Medway. The Head of Strategic Housing advised the plan was to turn larger properties into shared accommodation.

- **Out of Borough placements**

A Member commented on a big increase in people living in Chatham who had been placed there by other councils (mainly London Boroughs). They would often have complex problems and he asked what would happen if the council which placed a family no longer had a duty of care for them. The Head of Strategic Housing commented that the Council could not stop these placements but would raise concerns with a Council which placed people in sub standard accommodation or were paying above market rates for accommodation. There was a requirement to notify the host council in the case of housing placements but this did not apply for social services placements.

- **Supply of landlords**

Noting that a significant proportion of rental properties in Medway were let to London commuters, a Member asked what would happen if there were not enough private landlords prepared to house homeless people. The Head of Strategic Housing commented that the priority was to ensure the current arrangements were working properly. If necessary the Council would need to house people out of borough but that would be a last resort.

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Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the draft Homelessness Prevention Strategy and ask Cabinet to consider its comments on the Strategy.

148 Various Land Disposals

Discussion:

Members considered a report which updated the Committee on the progress made regarding seven land disposals that were last considered by the Committee in July 2016 (see minute no. 143).

A Member commented that, whilst not opposed to land disposals in principle, the location of The King's Head disabled car park in Rochester High Street was important for disabled visitors attending large events at Rochester Castle. The Chief Legal Officer stated that concerns about the loss of these spaces had been raised during the consultation and he would look at possible mitigating actions.

Reference was also made to a representation from Arches Local to the Luton Road shopper's site. A Member commented that Arches Local was not a charitable organisation as mentioned in the report and asked what the Council's view was on their proposal for a market on the site. The Chief Legal Officer commented that there was not much detail in the proposal and he would need to understand how this would work.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the progress made on the various land disposals detailed in the report.

149 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report End of Year: Quarter 4: 2016/17

Discussion:

Members considered a report which summarised the performance of the Council's key measures of success and projects for end of year (Quarter 4 2016/17) as set out in the Council Plan 2016/17 and which fell within the responsibility of the Committee.

Members asked for details of the five upheld Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) complaints referred to in paragraph 4.3 of the report and also for a briefing note on the arrangements for delivering local welfare assistance as the provider appeared to have changed.

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Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the 2016/17 performance against the key measures of success used to monitor progress against the Council Plan 2016/17, and;
- b) request a briefing note on the arrangements for delivering local welfare assistance and also further details on the 5 upheld LGO complaints.

150 Work Programme

Discussion:

Members considered a report regarding the Committee's current work programme.

Members were advised of recent discussions at the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Audit Committee where possible items for the Committee's work programme had arisen. At the Health and Wellbeing Board on 27 June a suggestion had been made that, given the increasing reliance on the voluntary sector to provide services, the viability of this should be investigated. The possibility of this being discussed at the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been mentioned although no conclusion had been reached as to the most appropriate committee. At the Audit Committee on 29 June Members had discussed business continuity arrangements and building security at Gun Wharf and recommended that this Committee be requested to consider a report on these matters.

Following the recent Grenfell tower fire a Member suggested that a possible addition to the work programme could be the capacity of the Council to deal with a major disaster.

It was agreed that these issues could be considered at the next agenda planning meeting.

A Member noted that Cabinet would be considering proposals to consult on proposed changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and queried whether this should come to the Committee for scrutiny. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the changes were minor in nature and in response to changes introduced by the Government.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the current work programme and agree the changes to the work programme as set out in paragraph 3 of the report;
- b) note the work programmes of all overview and scrutiny committees;

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- c) note the process for selection of topics for the next round of Scrutiny Task Groups in 2018/19 and invite all Members of the Committee to submit ideas based on the criteria set out in paragraphs 3.7-3.10 above to the Democratic Services Officer ahead of the next agenda planning meeting for this Committee;
- d) agree that the meeting of the Committee scheduled for 24 August be cancelled in the event that there is no business, and;
- e) agree that next agenda planning meeting discuss the capacity of the voluntary sector, business continuity and building security at Gun Wharf and the capacity of the Council to deal with a major disaster as possible items for the work programme

Chairman

Date:

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