

## KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

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### SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 24 November 2021.

PRESENT: Mr A Booth (Chairman), Mr P V Barrington-King (Vice-Chairman), Mr N J Collor, Mr G Cooke, Mr R C Love, OBE, Mr H Rayner, Mr O Richardson, Dr L Sullivan, Mrs T Dean, MBE, Mr P Stepto and Mr D Jeffrey

ALSO PRESENT: Mr R W Gough (Leader of the Council) and Mrs S Chandler (Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services)

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms Z Cooke (Corporate Director of Finance), Mr M Dunkley CBE (Corporate Director of Children Young People and Education), Mr B Watts (General Counsel), Mr S Collins (Director of Integrated Children's Services), Mr D Shipton (Head of Finance Policy, Planning and Strategy), Ms C Holden (Head of Strategic Commissioning, Children and Young People's Services), Ms H Cook (Senior Commissioner), Ms L Alesbrook (Financial Hardship Programme Manager), Mrs A Taylor (Scrutiny Research Officer) and Mr M Dentten (Democratic Services Officer)

### UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

#### **16. Declarations of Interests by Members in items on the Agenda for this Meeting** (Item A4)

No declarations were made.

#### **17. Minutes of the meeting held on 13 October 2021** (Item A5)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 13 October 2021 were an accurate record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

#### **18. 21/00086 Commissioned Open Access Provision for Youth Services and Children's Centres** (Item B1)

*Mrs S Chandler, Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services; Mr M Dunkley, Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education; Mr S Collins, Director of Integrated Children's Services; Ms C Holden, Head of Strategic Commissioning, Children and Young People's Services; and Ms H Cook, Senior Commissioner were in attendance for this item.*

1. The Chairman introduced the item and invited the proposer of the call-in, Dr Sullivan, to provide an overview of the reasons for her call-in. Mr Stepto as the seconder was also invited to speak.

2. Dr Sullivan set out the grounds for her call-in. She raised concerns with the proposed contract extension and reminded members that the contract was last competitively tendered in 2015, which she considered a worrying trend. She stated that the decision had been called in to allow the Committee the opportunity to hold the Cabinet Member to account on the governance process followed. She noted that given the implications that referral of the decision to County Council would have, including a loss of service due to the imminent end of the existing contract term in November 2021, that the Committee's hands had been tied by the decision timeline.
3. Mr Stepto stated that he was disappointed that the decision was taken late, when the lack of consultation compared to the norm was considered. He questioned why other service providers had not been considered.
4. The Chairman invited Mrs Chandler to provide an overview of the decision.
5. Mrs Chandler explained the reasons why recommissioning had not commenced in Spring 2021, which included awaiting the full outcome of the budget consultation. She outlined the benefits of the service to young people and confirmed that the rationale for extending the contract was to ensure that service provision remained unchanged. She noted that the CYPE Cabinet Committee had evaluated the contract twice, in September 2018 and October 2019, as part of their review of commissioned services.
6. Members stressed the need for contract renewals and recommissioned services to go to Cabinet Committees for consideration in a timely and routine manner.
7. A Member asked that consideration of the Council's commissioning processes be considered by the Scrutiny Committee at the appropriate time. The Chairman agreed to add the item to the Committee's work programme.
8. Members recognised that whilst the decision process had not been optimal, a reasonable series of events had occurred, given the impact of Covid-19 on the service.
9. Mrs Chandler was asked by a Member to consider the voice of service users in future recommissioning activities and include their views in reports to committees.
10. Mr Rayner moved and Mr Love seconded recommendation (a) "that the committee make no comments".
11. Members voted on the motion. The vote was won.
12. Mr Watts advised that the draft Annual Governance Statement recommended a return to pre-pandemic, business as usual executive decision practices in the new municipal year. He added that there were more urgent decisions taken in the past year than the previous decade combined and whilst that was fully understandable during key lockdowns, and because of frequent changes to government guidance, it should not be the norm.

13. Mrs Chandler thanked the committee for their consideration and welcomed further comments on the decision outside of the meeting.

RESOVLED that the Scrutiny Committee make no comments.

## **19. Covid - 19 Financial Monitoring** (Item C1)

*Mr R Gough, Leader of the Council; Ms Z Cooke, Corporate Director of Finance; Mr D Shipton, Head of Finance Policy, Planning and Strategy; and Ms L Alesbrook, Financial Hardship Programme Manager were in attendance for this item.*

1. The Chairman gave the rationale for bringing the Covid-19 Financial Monitoring item to the Committee, noted the magnitude of the grant funding received and confirmed that the item had been a joint request by himself and the Opposition Group Spokesmen.
2. Following an invitation from the Chairman, Mr Gough provided a verbal overview of the Council's Covid-19 grant spending. He reminded Members of the different grants received, that they had been provided in ringfenced and un-ringfenced forms, covered significantly differing periods and had been carried over in some instances from the previous financial year, due to the timing of receipt. Members were informed that there would be no further carry forward of existing grant funding. He emphasised that the focus of Covid-19 grant funded programmes, especially Helping Hands, had been to support families and people in distress, which had become more important when the impact of the pandemic on living standards was considered.
3. Ms Alesbrook gave a presentation on the key grant funding received and programmes undertaken. Key developments highlighted included: the impact of Covid-19; Winter Grant Fund and Local Support Grants; Kent Together; the Household Support Grant; an overview of the current climate; governance and communication; support to residents and businesses via the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF); Helping Hands; financial hardship; and the next steps.
4. A Member asked whether there were any ways free school meal vouchers could be delivered flexibly or funded locally by Members using their devolved grant funds. Ms Cooke set out the free school meal voucher financial requirements and recognised the suitable role of schools in coordinating the scheme. She added that KCC provided funding for community hubs, foodbanks and delivered support through the Kent Support and Assistance Service (KSAS). Mr Gough acknowledged the importance of building community resilience beyond the grant funded programmes and investigating how best KCC shared data with the voluntary and community sector (VCS).
5. Members asked for reassurances that KCC would not face a financial cliff edge when the grant funding had been expended and that the impact of future changes on vulnerable residents would be mitigated to the greatest possible extent. Mr Gough confirmed that analysis of how signposting could be effectively used, where services could not continue beyond grant funding, had been undertaken. The continuation of digital support services and resources

was also highlighted. Ms Cooke reassured the Committee that Finance had worked to ensure the financial sustainability of programmes and that there was no time limit on the funding of the Helping Hands scheme, as it had been financed by un-ringfenced grant funding.

6. In relation to the £6m national grant to fund targeted support for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC), a Member asked how much had been allocated to KCC. Ms Cooke confirmed that £800k had been received and that the grant covered costs directly related to Covid-19.
7. Further information on the operation of the Crowdfund Kent scheme was requested by a Member. Ms Cooke confirmed that the scheme was a civic crowd funding scheme open to properly constituted community organisations and used a match funding model to ensure that projects had public support.
8. A Member asked how KCC could fill the gaps left by a lack of VCS provision, in order to build community resilience. Mr Gough confirmed that KCC would continue to provide financial advice to VCS organisations and that the findings from programmes during the pandemic had been applied to new initiatives, to ensure positive community outcomes.
9. A lack of community engagement in relation to Active Travel schemes was highlighted by a Member, who stressed the need to look at the effectiveness of consultations and soft community engagement. Mr Gough acknowledged that the first Active Travel tranche had been hurried, due to a series of tight centrally set deadlines and that it had not been an issue unique to Kent. He reassured Members that investigations were underway on creating a long-term bank of future schemes.
10. Concerning the 1,659 devices issued to support home learning, a Member asked who was responsible for their maintenance and warranty? Ms Alesbrook agreed to share the requested information with the Committee following the meeting.
11. Following a question from a Member, Ms Cooke confirmed that Lydia Jackson, the Crowdfund Kent scheme lead, could provide advice for community groups that sought constitution.
12. Members commended the grant funded initiatives and noted the positive outcomes they had for Kent's residents.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

## **20. Work Programme**

*(Item D1)*

1. Mrs Taylor informed Members that the topic of the next Short Focused Inquiry (SFI) would be discussed at the Committee's next meeting in December. All Members of the Council were invited to submit topics.

2. Mrs Taylor confirmed that the consideration of KCC's property portfolio had been moved to the Committee's March 2022 meeting, in order that it follows related executive decisions.
3. Mr Cooke asked that consideration of KCC's property and facilities management be considered separately.
4. Mr Barrington-King updated members on the Home to School Transport SFI. He confirmed that 5 hearing sessions had taken place and included input from a wide range of experts, stakeholders and the Kent Youth County Council. He commended the constructive involvement of Members.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.