

## KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

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### **POLICY AND RESOURCES CABINET COMMITTEE**

MINUTES of a meeting of the Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee held in the Online on Friday, 6 November 2020

PRESENT: Mr B J Sweetland (Chairman), Mr R A Marsh (Vice-Chairman), Mr M A C Balfour, Mr P V Barrington-King, Mr P Bartlett, Mr R H Bird, Mr N J D Chard, Mr T Bond, Mr G Cooke, Mrs M E Crabtree, Mr D Farrell, Mr P W A Lake, Mr D Murphy and Mr H Rayner

ALSO PRESENT: Mr P J Oakford

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr D Cockburn (Corporate Director Strategic & Corporate Services), Mrs A Beer (Corporate Director of People and Communications), Mr A Cole (Head of Technology Commissioning & Strategy), Ms Z Cooke (Corporate Director of Finance), Mr V Godfrey (Strategic Commissioner), Ms R Kennard (Chief Analyst, Strategic Commissioning Analytics), Mr D Shipton (Head of Finance - Planning, Policy & Strategy), Mrs R Spore (Director of Infrastructure), Mr B Watts (General Counsel), Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer) and Ms E Kennedy

#### **UNRESTRICTED ITEMS**

##### **241. Apologies and Substitutes**

*(Item 2)*

Apologies for absence had been received from Mrs T Dean, OBE.

There were no substitutes.

##### **242. Declarations of Interest by Members in items on the Agenda**

*(Item 3)*

There were no declarations of interest.

##### **243. Minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2020**

*(Item 4)*

1. Mr M A C Balfour asked that the text of paragraph (2) of minute 240 be amended to record that Mr Farrell's point was not universally supported: ' .... most other Members supported Mr Farrell's statement...'
2. It was RESOLVED that, subject to the above change, the minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2020 are correctly recorded and a paper copy be signed by the Chairman when this can be done safely. There were no matters arising.

##### **244. Technology Strategy Update**

*(Item 5)*

1. Ms Spore introduced the report and emphasised the importance of the strategy in shaping the County Council's response to the covid-19 pandemic, accelerating the work plan and establishing a firm basis for future growth. The committee was being asked to agree to adopt the strategy as a working draft.
2. Mr Cole presented a series of slides (included in the agenda pack) which set out key trends covered in the strategy, a summary of progress and an activity plan for 2020 – 2023. He emphasised the robustness of the Council's technology strategy, both before and after the pandemic.
3. Mr Cole and Ms Beer responded to comments and questions from the committee including the following:-
  - a) the strength of the Council's technology strategy was emphasised and welcomed, both in terms of coping with the demands of the pandemic and supporting staff to work from home, and in delivering services to Kent residents;
  - b) asked if there was sufficient connectivity to continue to deliver the strategy and if weaknesses in coverage could be a limiting factor in its delivery, Mr Cole advised that the Council's broadband width across the county was generally sufficient. However, some staff working at home were in areas with less robust local networks. The BDUK team was working hard to address slow spots to mitigate this;
  - c) concern was expressed that some online meetings included domestic background noise, which could be disruptive and create an unprofessional impression. Mr Cole advised that rules about the behaviour of participants in online meetings could be set out at the beginning of the meeting. Ms Beer added that staff values and behaviour could be set out in organisational development plans so all staff were clear of expectations. The Corporate Management Team could address any training needs;
  - d) asked how the County Council worked with its district partners to optimise connectivity, Mr Cole advised that all local councils were partners in the Kent Public Sector Network (KPSN). This network was stable and resilient. There were opportunities to rationalise software and the Council needed to be able to link to other organisations who used other networks for meetings, for example, Zoom;
  - e) concern was expressed that the KPSN could not help local network weaknesses which affected staff working at home, for example, in remote rural areas. More information was requested in future reports about progress on addressing this, and information on consolidation of the Council's and other organisations' networks;
  - f) concern was expressed about sectors of the public who did not have a suitable device to allow them to access online networks, or struggled to use them effectively. The Council should seek to ensure that everyone could access the Council's services they needed when considering service delivery models;

- g) concern was expressed that officers working and taking part in meetings at home would need support and perhaps training with aspects other than meeting etiquette, for example, the importance of taking regular breaks away from the screen and taking exercise outside, to guard their physical and mental wellbeing. Ms Beer advised that staff were known to be less likely to take breaks at home than they were in the office;
  - h) asked about the robustness of the County Council's IT security, Mr Cole advised that a layered approach included new features to counter malware and back up solutions;
  - i) asked how well the Council connected to its partners, for example, the NHS and Public Health England, Mr Cole advised that these, the police and other partners were all linked by the KPSN and were able to collaborate effectively on IT issues; and
  - j) asked about the inclusion of the County Council's commercial companies in the IT strategy, Mr Cole advised that Local Authority Trading Companies (LATCOs) were segregating themselves from the County Council network and establishing their own technology strategies, where these were not in place. The Council had a robust security environment in place to protect its systems. Commercial Services operated on a separate network to the Council, and the latter took the appropriate steps to protect its infrastructure following the cyber security issues experienced by Commercial Services earlier in the year. The Council work closely with all the LATCOs to ensure that any learning was shared, and appropriate actions were considered, as appropriate. Mr Watts added that the committee was due to receive a report at its January meeting regarding the LATCOs, which would update the committee further as to their activity.
4. It was RESOLVED that, taking account of the points raised above, the draft Technology Strategy 2020-2023 be endorsed.

## **245. Financial Update**

*(Item 6)*

1. Mr Oakford introduced the report and advised that it took account of the budget amendment and Council Tax collection losses but did not include the financial impact of the second lockdown period. Mr Shipton summarised the report's content and pointed out that it was in a new format which was designed to be easier to read. He advised that it was still the intention to publish the 2021/22 budget and 3-year Medium Term Financial Plan on 5 January 2021 for consideration by the full Council on 11 February 2021, but some flexibility around the publication date might be necessary.
2. The Chairman placed on record his thanks to the Finance team for their work during the covid-19 pandemic in keeping up with the demands of financial planning and monitoring.
3. Members made the following comments:-

- a) the clarity of the report was welcomed but its content did not make for comfortable reading, and some information had been superseded by Government announcements made since the report was drafted;
  - b) asked about the possibility of using some reserves, Mr Oakford advised that the County Council did not currently have large reserves, so this option was not being considered at this time. If reserves were used, they would need to be replaced to ensure financial resilience. Some reserves had previously been drawn down to support unaccompanied asylum seeking children arriving in Kent and the Council was lobbying the Government to provide funding to offset the drawdown. Mr Shipton advised that a commitment to review the use of reserves had been made as part of the 2021 budget setting;
  - c) a report on the sustainability of the Council's resources and future options was requested for a future meeting; and
  - d) Mr Oakford and the officer team were thanked for their diligence and hard work in doing all they could to protect the Council's financial position.
4. It was RESOLVED that the information set out in the report relating to the budget amendment agreed by County Council on 10 September 2020, the confirmation of a one-year Spending Review for 2021-22, the County Council's covid-19 monitoring returns, including comparisons with other authorities, Council Tax collection losses in the first five months of the year, and the ongoing unprecedented significant uncertainty over budget planning for the future, be noted.

#### **246. Strategic and Corporate Service Directorate Dashboard**

*(Item 7)*

1. Mr Godfrey and Ms Kennard introduced the report and highlighted the good performance against most targets, despite the impact of covid-19, with only 4 out of 25 being rated red, most of them dipping for only a short time.
2. In relation to target FN02, Mrs M Crabtree, Chairman of the County Council's Pension Board, highlighted that Mrs Barbara Cheatle and the pensions administration team had issued all benefit illustrations by the usual deadline despite the impact of covid-19 and the added work created this year by both the McCloud judgment and the employers' new exit cap. She thanked Mrs Cheatle and the team for their work.
3. Asked about the high call volumes under target CSO4B, Ms Kennard advised that the key performance indicators (KPIs) measured the number of calls received but not the time taken to respond. Ms Beer added that the number of out-of-hours calls had been higher than usual. She advised that the KPIs used reflected the contract requirements of Agilisys and offered to provide members with information on the time taken to respond to calls and the length of calls.
4. It was RESOLVED that the performance position for Strategic and Corporate Services be noted.

## **247. Work Programme**

*(Item 8)*

1. It was requested that a separate report on the use of reserves (minute 245 above) would be prepared to accompany the usual Financial Update item, and Ms Cooke undertook to provide this.
2. Mr Watts advised that the Legal Commissioning item listed on the work programme would include the issues raised about LATCOs under the Technology Strategy update (minute 244 above). He also reminded the committee that its meeting in March 2021 was scheduled after the election notice was expected to be issued on 19 March 2021 and that issues for discussion during the pre-election period should be selected carefully.
3. There were no other requested changes and it was **RESOLVED** that the committee's work programme for 2021 be agreed.

## **248. Motion to Exclude Press and Public**

**RESOLVED** that, under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

### **EXEMPT ITEMS**

(Open access to minutes)

## **249. Property Accommodation Strategy - Strategic Headquarters (SHQ) Update**

*(Item 9)*

1. Ms Spore introduced the update report, which had been requested at the committee's previous meeting, and summarised key points. Ms Spore, Mr Oakford and Mr Watts responded to comments and questions of detail from the committee, including the following:-
  - a) asked about the impact and relevance of the Local Government White Paper and Local Democracy Initiative to the decision the County Council needed to make about its estate, Ms Spore and Mr Oakford advised that the timetable and recommendations arising from the White Paper were not yet known and would take time to be implemented. Investigative work on the future of the Council's estates could not be delayed to wait for it. It was emphasised, though, that the Council had not yet committed to any specific course of action or expenditure while investigative work was ongoing, and no design work or marketing was progressing. An update report would be made to the committee's January meeting;
  - b) concern was expressed that investigative work currently going on would need to be repeated once the outcome of the White Paper was known, and some Members expressed discomfort with the direction and speed of current work. Although reviews of use of premises had been regularly undertaken, for example, New Ways of Working phases 1 and 2, such a project had not previously been undertaken in such difficult financial times;

- c) asked about current expenditure and the amount spent on engaging consultants, Ms Spore clarified the figures and advised that the planned spend set out in the previous report had not yet been committed and that design and feasibility work done was at no cost to the Council. Once requirements were understood, the SOC and funding model would be updated. She undertook to supply Members confidentially outside the meeting with details of the spend on consultants since January 2020;
- d) asked about the cost of making Sessions House covid-secure for the Coroner's inquest currently going on, Ms Spore advised that areas of the building sufficient to accommodate the inquest had been made secure and she undertook to supply details confidentially outside the meeting;
- e) asked what would happen if the Government did not renew its consent to hold virtual meeting and SHQ was not available for staff to move back in to, Mr Watts advised that he would report to the Selection and Member Services Committee later in November on how future meetings could be held. Planning was always ongoing for the next three months ahead. He undertook to seek confirmation from the Government, and if no confirmation about remote meetings had been forthcoming by February 2021, the Council would need to plan some way of achieving face-to-face meetings which were covid-compliant;
- f) asked about the work of the Kent Estates Partnership (KEP), Ms Spore advised that this included the NHS, police and other partners and covered all local authority property. There was renewed appetite in the County Council, district councils and all partners to review how accommodation was used. Asked about how the County Council and other partners, for example, the police, liaised about use of their respective estates, Ms Spore undertook to give Members further information about this outside the meeting. Mr Oakford reminded the committee that the Council had a duty to deliver services to Kent residents in the most efficient way; it was not just a question of the buildings used;
- g) asked about work to action the committee's resolution at its previous meeting, Mr Oakford advised that a working party had met and that he had written to the committee to update them on action to address the points raised.

2. It was RESOLVED that:-

- a) the report be noted, and Members' comments, set out above, be taken into account;
- b) the following requested information be supplied to Members before the committee's January meeting:
  - i) information about how the County Council liaises with partners, for example, the police, about accommodation issues;

- ii) a letter to Members to cover finance issues, including all costs of consultants and of making part of Sessions House secure for the Coroner's inquest;
- c) reports be submitted to the committee's January meeting as follows:
  - i) a full update on the outcomes of SHQ survey work, costs and next steps; and
  - ii) information about the Kent Estates Partnership in a separate report.