

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CABINET

MINUTES of a meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 27 January 2022.

PRESENT: Mr R W Gough (Chairman), Mrs C Bell, Mr D L Brazier, Mrs S Chandler, Mr P M Hill, OBE, Mr D Murphy, Mr P J Oakford and Mrs S Prendergast

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

1. Apologies and Substitutes

(Item 1)

Miss Carey attended the meeting virtually.

3. Minutes of the Meetings held on 9 December 2021 & 6 January 2022

(Item 3)

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 9 December 2021 and 6 January 2022 were a correct record and that they be signed by the Chair.

4. Cabinet Member Updates

(Item 4)

1) Mrs Bell said that the overall Covid-19 rate had fallen by 3.9%. There were 7 school outbreaks in the county and 7 outbreaks in care homes. Dover had the highest rate of 1034 cases per 100,000 closely followed by Tonbridge and Malling and Gravesham. Tunbridge Wells had the lowest rate at 783 cases per 100,000. Covid-19 rates were highest in school age children, with those age 5 to 9 years old showing a 66% increase on the previous week and cases in children aged 10 to 14 years old had increased by 42% on the previous week.

Outbreaks recorded in the prisons on the Isle of Sheppey and at the asylum centres at Ashford and Folkestone were being managed. PCR testing has fallen in the last week but reporting of lateral flow tests had remained stable. There had been a decline in the number of people in hospital with Covid-19 and staff sickness rates across the hospital trusts had not increased.

The take up of the booster vaccination had continued to rise gradually. Dartford and Gravesham had the lowest rates of booster vaccination but rates of first and second doses were continuing to rise in 12-15 and 16-17 year olds.

There had been issues with sporadic 'anti-vaxx' protestors at certain vaccination clinics and Kent Police had provided support for the clinics.

The legal obligation to wear a mask in certain settings was being removed but KCC's advice remained that the public should exercise caution and wear face coverings in settings such as supermarkets.

The government had announced that restrictions relating to Adult Social Care in England were to be eased from 31 January 2022. The limit to the number of visitors to care homes was to be removed, self-isolation periods were to be cut and care homes would only have to follow outbreak management rules for 14 days, not 28 days.

2) Mrs Prendergast said Covid-19 guidance in schools had been updated and face coverings were no longer advised for staff and pupils in communal areas of education settings. Directors of Public Health would only be able to recommend that staff and pupils wear masks in places where there were outbreaks or where the local public health situation justified it. This would require sign off from the Education Secretary. Circumstances in each school were different and some schools were experiencing significant levels of infection. KCC's advice remained that dependent on the outcomes of their own risk assessment, they may decide to implement additional infection control measures. Officers were meeting regularly to exchange information and to ensure that schools were supported to best manage the change in regulations.

On the Isle of Sheppey, under the umbrella of the government's raising school standards and Levelling Up agendas, the DfE approached KCC regarding development of a partnership project to improve school outcomes within a geographic area. Since then, work had been underway to develop an evidence based model building the community and wider assets on the island. The project aimed to separate the link between deprivation and educational outcomes in a sustainable way by working with a group of schools, rather than focussing on individual schools. During the development phase, KCC had established a link with the Breaking Barriers initiative, a national organisation commissioned by Swale Borough Council to develop a targeted place based approach to improve adult opportunities. Bringing together this level of expertise, experience and resources has the potential to make sustainable change on the island. KCC's focus would be on improving parental engagement.

Together with the Director for Education and the Lead Advisor for Education, Mrs Prendergast visited Goudhurst & Kilndown Church of England Primary School. The Executive Headteacher, Lindsay Roberts, had invited them to find out more about the impressive development work the school had been doing in collaboration with Kent and Medway Maths Hub and The Education People which had led to improvement across all ability levels.

3) Mr Brazier said he had attended the planting of trees on Highways land in Sevenoaks as part of the Queen's Green Canopy Scheme to celebrate Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee. Around 500 trees were to be planted in the county.

News regarding the Department for Transport's allocation of funds for the Bus Improvement Plan submission had not yet been received.

There was to be a Border Facility at Dover intended for animal products and discussions had started with DEFRA about project management of the scheme.

Mr Brazier and the Leader were to visit the Thanet Parkway train station which was under construction near Ramsgate. Completion was expected in 2022.

4) Miss Carey said that the consultation on the Household Waste & Recycling Centre booking system had shown that more people were in favour of retaining it and furthermore, the consultation had shown that people wanted same-day bookings. The findings of the consultation were reported to the meeting of the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee on 18 January 2022 and a clear majority of Members were in favour of keeping the booking system and same day bookings. Following the meeting, Miss Carey had taken the decision for the booking system to be retained. Thanks were given to the Waste Team who had been responsive and diligent throughout the process. A customer service improvement had come out of what had originally been a response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Solar Together Scheme was a collective buy-in scheme for solar panels and batteries. It was open for householders and community buildings. Interest in the scheme was able to be registered and applications were to open on 7 February 2022. More information was on: kent.gov.uk

Matt Smyth, who was Partnership Director at South London Waste Partnership was to join KCC as Director of Environment and Waste.

5) Mr Murphy said there was partnership working underway with Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and their CEO, Jo James, to fill the vacancies at Dover's Port Health Facility. Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce's social media presence would be used to promote the job roles.

Commercial aviation had accounted for 2.5% of global carbon dioxide output per annum prior to the pandemic. HyPoint, a pioneering zero emission aviation company had located at Discovery Park in Sandwich. HyPoint made equipment powered by hydrogen. The company was to hold a virtual opening on 9 February where KCC would be represented.

6) Mr Hill said the Winter Olympics being held in Beijing was to begin on 4 February. There were two representatives from Kent, Matt Weston from Tunbridge Wells who was competing for a skeleton medal and Taylor Lawrence from Westgate-on-Sea competing in the 4-man bobsleigh.

7) Mr Sweetland said there had been an opportunity to consider the new People Strategy. The pandemic had led to key elements of the Strategy from 2017 being accelerated and it had been successfully delivered by the end of 2021. The new Strategy said KCC supported people to deliver to the best of their ability, celebrating the skills and talents of the diverse workforce. There was a clear link between these principles and the experience of residents and service users. The final version of the People Strategy was to be monitored through the Personnel Committee and key performance indicators.

KCC's staff turnover was 12.1% which was considered a healthy level for a large organisation. This had dropped to around 9% in March 2021 but prior to the pandemic, the turnover was about 12.4-12.8%.

Staff sickness days had dropped significantly over the last two years. Mental health had been one of the top sickness issues reported. This was in line with the rest of the country. Steps were being taken to ensure staff were looked after in respect of their mental health.

The latest Staff Survey had shown that most staff wanted to work flexibly and were happy with hybrid working. It was recognised that not all staff were able to easily work at home and there were office spaces available. The numbers of staff preferring remote working had increased between January and July 2021. Productivity had not dropped and most managers had created effective ways of measuring staff output.

8) Mr Oakford said that work done by the Democratic Services Team deserved to be recognised. The team had ensured that meetings had continued in the last 2 years and KCC had maintained its services. The Schools' Appeals Team within Democratic Services had been dealing with hundreds of school appeals, providing support and advice to schools across the county.

New graduates were being recruited by Governance, Law and Democracy (GLD) after other graduates within the service had moved on, having qualified for further roles within the organisation. There was to be recruitment of school leaver apprentices to work in Data, Democracy and Law.

Despite the pandemic, Democratic Services had delivered more meetings and more democratic activity than ever before. While some meetings have had to be held virtually, a full rosta of meetings had taken place throughout the municipal year. GLD were working on a range of solutions to improve efficiency, online access to legal, data and governance advice, helping with self-service and to ensure proper running of the organisation. Work had been undertaken in People and Communications to transform Members' pages on Knet, which included information and resources to help them in their roles. The online resources were available alongside the support offer from Member Hub which had recently welcomed new team members. Thanks were given to staff who support Cabinet and Opposition Leaders. In an unprecedented time with considerable additional workloads across GLD, staff had worked hard to support the entire council and to support the outstanding services provided to Kent's residents.

5. Capital Programme 2021-24 and Revenue Budget 2021-22

(Item 5)

1) The Leader introduced the report and advised that the draft budget proposals had been published on 5 January, had been presented at Cabinet Committees and feedback had been received. Thanks were given to the portfolio holders for their input in the process.

2) Mr Oakford said the draft budget proposals had been through process of being presented at Cabinet Committees and Scrutiny Committee. Finance officers have gone through questions and points raised by Members at those meetings. There was a requirement to consider those points and move forward to approve the budget proposals which were to be agreed at Full Council on 10 February.

3) Children's, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee

In response to comments and questions raised, it was noted:

- Directorates were to apply for funding from a central budget where demography related need could be evidenced and this contingency budget had been set aside specifically for demography related costs.
- Mrs Chandler said that a review of Open Access was to take place later in 2022 and would be subject to consultation. There were a range of savings in the budget.
- Mrs Prendergast said school transport savings had not been possible. There was work underway to look at efficient ways of transporting children such as standard pick-up points, charging for post-16 and exploring options for the Kent 16+pass.

4) Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee

In response to comments and questions raised, it was noted:

- The Strategic Reset Project was looking at how KCC was to move forward to future-proof and offer services in a more digital way.
- A request for the reserves information to be set out in the final budget book. That has now been finalised and will be published with the budget before full council.
- An extra £600,000 had been allocated to address some immediate issues with regard to the Country Parks and Public Rights of Way but additional funding would be welcomed to deal with the backlog.
- During the pandemic, the cost of building materials and labour had gone up. The extraction of 106 agreements from developers was likely to become more difficult- it was planned to 'beef up' the team within existing resources. It was not proposed to seek additional resource.

5) Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee

In response to comments and questions raised, it was noted:

- The budget situation was extremely challenging, coming out of a 2 year pandemic where some of the new costs are staying as 'the norm'. There had been a huge increase in demand and complexity, which had impacted on the draft budget.
- Further clarity was needed from central government as there would need to be a balance between environmental measures and housing developments.
- Kent Highways were underfunded but the condition of Kent's Highway network was better than ever within Mr Brazier's memory due to the work of senior officers and Members. Climate change and the associated weather conditions had caused stress on the drainage system in Highways.
- The Kent Travel Saver had been provided to the people of Kent for close to 15 years and had been hugely successful and of enormous value to families who

wanted to send their children to a selective schools. Prices had to increase over the years and that was likely to need to happen again.

6) Adult Social Care Cabinet Committee

In response to comments and questions raised, it was noted:

- The aim of the fundamental redesign, Making A Difference Every Day was managing the situation with demand by doing things differently. Building community resilience, making better use of data and technological as well as working practice innovation were all important in delivering efficiencies but also improving user experience.
- The Kent Homeless Connect was due to finish in September 2022 and work was being undertaken to understand the impact. Options were to be considered around transitional funding and ways of mitigating impacts were being explored. Discussions with district councils had been constructive and it was hoped that solutions could be found working together.

7) Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee

In response to comments and questions raised, it was noted:

- Mr Oakford said that KCC had good financial management and was building financial resilience. Therefore, KCC was not under immediate threat of having to issue a Section 114 notice.
- Local authority funding had been reduced through the period of austerity. It was noted that the last two years had not been 'normal' and central government had provided financial support to local authorities during this period. Central government had also provided support for businesses to keep people employed in the county.
- Data showed KCC's relative position to other councils with regard to debt reserves ratio as in the top of the bottom quartile. KCC had around £1 billion of debt, £100 million was to be paid each year to re-finance the debt. Around £400 million had been borrowed via a government Highways scheme and was to be paid back by government. Subsequently, the rules were changed and debt became KCC's responsibility and this had a significant impact on KCC's debt position. By the end of the year, the high needs deficit was to be around £100 million underwritten by government but if that were to change, KCC would be in a difficult financial position but this would apply to every authority across the country.

8) Health Reform and Public Health Cabinet Committee

- Mrs Bell said there was a national shortage of health visitors and this had been ongoing since before the pandemic. This was difficult for KCC to influence as they were recruited from the NHS workforce. The Key Performance Indicators showed as green and the service continued to show that contacts were happening. The service was performing well.

- A cut to the Public Health grant was not anticipated. One of the assumptions was that there would be an inflationary increase to £71m. It was noted that demand had increased in the same way as demand had increased for other services provided by KCC.
- The Contain Outbreak Management Fund was a contingency fund and funds could be rolled over to the next financial year.

9) Scrutiny Committee

- The Leader, Deputy Leader and other Cabinet Members attended.
- There was an expected £20m overspend which looked like it would need to be funded from reserves. The underspends from previous years had been put into reserves.
- New review and monitoring meetings were to take place quarterly to look at performance in great detail and management information would be made available earlier.
- Reserves would not be used for discretionary services.
- KCC would be working to drive down energy costs. There would be a reduction of costs as buildings not being used would be disposed of and investments made into building being used.
- The increase in the interest rates was not likely to directly affect KCC but there was a risk to the budget if inflation continued to rise. It was noted that the increase in interest rates could affect the services providers commissioned by KCC. Services commissioned had inflationary rates built into their contracts.
- In response to a query around whether the use of consultancy was a discretionary spend, it was noted that certain projects could not be moved forward without consultancy if there was no in-house expertise.

10) The Leader thanked Mr Oakford and Cabinet colleagues for their part in discussions with Cabinet Committees. There were significant challenges relating to inflation and increases in demand moving forward. Government funding had been increased but did not reflect the increase in demand.

The changes that were made to the way developer contributions were collected had been unfavourable to KCC.

11) Mr Oakford said there were no formal amendments proposed.

12) RESOLVED to endorse the draft budget to be presented to County Council on 10 February for final decision.

6. Special Educational Needs Strategy 2021-2024 - Update (Item 6)

Matt Dunkley, Director of CYPE was in attendance for this item.

1) Mrs Chandler said the report set out the additional ambition statement for SEND which was agreed in March last year. The statement showed how KCC planned to deliver a model of provision which promoted greater inclusion of children and young people within mainstream schools and the realignment of SEND schools in Kent. There was an aim for the proportion of children in each provision type to reflect Kent's statistical neighbours and national averages. Considerable work and progress had been made in this area.

Mrs Chandler said that one of the key paragraphs in the report was 2.3:

The concept of a SEND inclusive mainstream school is underpinned by evidence that the educational experience and outcomes for many pupils with additional and special needs can be better in a mainstream school, and they are better prepared for adult life in society

There were mainstream schools in Kent that had embraced inclusion and that had good outcomes for all pupils. The amazing work undertaken in special schools would continue to play an important part of the schools' offer.

There had been significant pressure and demand on services during the pandemic and these issues had been felt nationally. The situation was unsustainable and went against the wishes of parents and children who supported inclusion.

Work had been undertaken in line with evidence that had emerged through engagement with schools, parents and carers. Significant progress had been made in workstreams identified in the Written Statement of Action, particularly on requests for ECHPs and completion of educational psychology assessments. KCC had been working closely with the Kent Parents and Carers Together Forum to make sure parents' and carers' views were understood.

2) Mrs Prendergast said that she had worked closely with Mrs Chandler. There was comprehensive evidence showing benefits of SEND inclusion for pupils without SEND. It also played a huge role in increasing social inclusion and removing discriminative attitudes.

3) Mr Dunkley said that there had been a commitment to inclusion but this update to the strategy would strengthen and emphasise the authority's desire to no longer be an 'outlier' in terms of data and national averages. There was a danger of KCC becoming a financial outlier as a consequence of these differences. All outcomes would be better if KCC's ambitions could be achieved and parents and carers had confidence that local schools could meet the needs of children with SEND.

4) RESOLVED to agree the recommendations as outlined in the report.