

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

GROWTH, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITIES CABINET COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 6 November 2024.

PRESENT: Mr A Sandhu, MBE (Chairman), Mr D L Brazier (Vice-Chairman), Mr M Baldock, Mrs R Binks, Mr D Crow-Brown, Ms K Grehan, Mr M A J Hood, Mr J P McInroy, Mr J Meade and Mr M J Sole

ALSO PRESENT: Mr D Murphy, Mrs C Bell and Mr P J Oakford

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr D Smith, Mrs S Holt-Castle (Director of Growth and Communities), Ms H Savage (Democratic Services Officer), Ms B Hooker (Head of Coroner Service), Mr S Jones (Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport), Mr T Marchant (Head of Strategic Development and Place), Mr M Rolfe (Head of Community Protection), Mr G Rusling (Head of Public Rights of Way & Access), Mr S Samson (Interim Head of Economy), Ms J Farrell (Head of Service) and Dr E Schwartz (Deputy Director Public Health)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

227. Apologies and Substitutes

(Item 2)

Apologies were received from Mr Cannon, Mr Lewis and Mr Ridgers.

Mr Baldock and Ms Grehan were present virtually.

228. Declarations of Interest by Members in items on the Agenda

(Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

229. Minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2024

(Item 4)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2024 were a correct record.

230. Manston Airport (Presentation)

(Item 5)

Mr Tony Freudmann, Director RiverOak Strategic Partners Limited, was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Tony Freudmann, Director of RiverOak Strategic Partners Limited, provided a presentation on Manston Airport, a copy of which was included in the agenda pack.
2. Members thanked Mr Freudmann for the presentation and discussed and commented on the airport in relation to sustainable growth, transport and infrastructure, and the impact it would have on jobs and the economy.
3. RESOLVED to note the presentation.

231. Verbal updates by the Cabinet Members and Corporate Director
(Item 6)

Mr James Pearson (Head of Libraries, Registrations and Archives) was in attendance for this item.

1. Mrs Bell, Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services, provided an update on the following:
 - (a) Feedback from the recent Folkestone Library consultation was being analysed and would inform the future decision.
 - (b) The Libraries, Registration and Archives (LRA) service had retained Customer Service Excellence standard. The Assessor was impressed by the enthusiasm displayed by staff, their local knowledge of communities and customers, the creativity and innovation that took place, and how the services and staff were open to change.
 - (c) Kent Libraries had once again signed up to the Warm Welcome Campaign which highlighted all Kent libraries as safe and welcoming places people could visit. This was featured on a recent ITV Meridian news item where staff at Margate Library were interviewed promoting warm welcoming library spaces.
 - (d) Black History Month in October was commemorated in libraries and throughout 2024 there had been a touring exhibition called 'Beyond the Bassline' 500 Years of Black British music, on loan from the British Library.
 - (e) Community Wardens had been allocated communities following changes to the service and engagement was taking place with parish and local councils regarding the option for them to fund a Warden in their area.
 - (f) Mrs Bell joined the Chair of National Trading Standards, Lord Bichard, at a visit with the Council's Trading Standards Ports Team to find out about their work protecting the border. The visit focussed on preventing illegal vapes entering the country but covered the whole remit of the team at the border. A visit to the Port of Dover was included where some of the challenges facing the team were demonstrated. Lord Bichard asked for the challenges that could be addressed centrally to be shared with him in writing so that he could discuss them with Government.

- (g) Trading Standards led and coordinated a multi-agency operation targeting illicit trade in tobacco products and vapes. Agencies included Kent Police, HMRC and local authorities.
 - (h) Mrs Bell attended the launch of the first Local Vape Action Project in Tunbridge Wells which was led by British Vape Trade Association and the project aimed at ensuring only legal safe products were sold and that sales to children did not occur.
 - (i) The main focus of the Resilience and Emergency Planning service continued to be the Entry/Exit System border checks and work continued internally and across the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum to ensure the Council was prepared. The Business Continuity Management System progressed and the Adult Social Care and Health directorate were trialling the system.
 - (j) Mrs Bell recently met representatives from the British Horse Society at Squirrels Riding School in Bluebell Hill, along with the local member, Chairman of the Council, and the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, and heard about the challenges faced by equestrians using public rights of way and safety issues on the roads.
2. Further to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:
- The Trading Standards Team was at the heart of the government consultation on vapes to ensure the right support could be provided to businesses. The market was starting to change ahead of the ban and the use of reuseable vapes was increasing.
3. Mr Murphy, Cabinet Member for Economic Development, provided an update on the following:
- (a) The lead officer for No Use Empty (NUE), Steve Grimshaw, delivered a presentation to Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) officers following a recent letter from Mr Murphy to the Housing Minister, Mr Matthew Pennycook MP.
 - (b) The NUE scheme had returned approximately 8500 empty properties in Kent back into use since April 2005. So far for the financial year 2024/2025 22 loans had been approved with a value of £2.3million. The outstanding bad debt of the NUE scheme since 2005 was only £140,000.
 - (c) The NUE team recently participated in a day's filming about the successful empty properties scheme for a feature on the BBC's 'The One Show'.
 - (d) The NUE New Build Scheme had funded 243 new homes across eight Kent districts and a further eight applications were currently being progressed. Work was ongoing with the Kent and Medway Business Fund with a view to accessing more funding to promote commercial schemes.

- (e) Since the Kent & Medway Business Fund was relaunched earlier in the year, 15 applications had been approved for loans to the value of £1.2million for small business development.
 - (f) Mr Murphy attended, in September 2024, the opening of the Taittinger Vineyard in Chilham, Kent which was the first venture of any French vineyard outside of France. The vineyard comprises 150 hectares and had been a 10-15 year project. A growth in vineyards was now being seen in Kent which was the largest growing vineyard area in England.
4. Mr Jones, Corporate Director Growth, Environment and Transport, provided an update on the following operational matters:
- (a) The Registration teams were experiencing an increase in service demand through winter and customer service officers were allowing as many extra appointments as possible during this challenging period.
 - (b) The workload for continuing domestic abuse related death reviews remained high with 22 reviews currently being undertaken. Two sessions of a lessons learnt webinar were held in October in partnership with the Kent and Medway Safeguarding and Adults Board.
 - (c) Ashford Gateway hosted a team from Arts Council England to observe a 'Playground' session and the Arts Council England fed back that they viewed 'Playground' as a national example of good practice.
 - (d) Mr Jones thanked the 900 volunteers who added value to the Libraries, Registration and Archive service in delivering, for example, the home library service, maintaining reading gardens, research, supporting local history collections, and making a positive difference to communities. A promotional push of the Home Library Service would take place in the new year to highlight how people could get involved and encourage more volunteers to join the team.
 - (e) Mr Jones thanked the Economic Development team for their newsletter.
5. RESOLVED to note the verbal updates.

232. Draft Revenue Budget 2025-26 and Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2025-28
(Item 7)

1. Mr Oakford introduced the report highlighting that it was published before the government's Autumn Budget and therefore did not include anything contained within that. He said the provisional Local Government Financial Settlement would not be received until December and therefore assumptions had been made regarding the grants the Council would receive. Mr Oakford explained that the draft budget and MTFP was not yet completely balanced, principally due to undelivered savings in adult social care, and £19.8million of policy savings also needed to be found. He said the increase in the living wage would have a substantial impact on the Council and its commissioned services. Mr Oakford said he believed, based on the recent Autumn Budget, that the Council

should receive an extra £13million for adult social care but, whilst this was welcomed, it was not enough to have a sufficient impact on the Council's budget.

2. Mr Murphy explained, in relation to the Economic Development portfolio, there was a spend of £3.8million against which there was an income in excess of £500,000 through No Use Empty and the East Kent Opportunities Scheme. He said savings of £85,000 had been included and highlighted this amount, although seemingly small, should be considered against the overall spend of £3.8million.
3. Mrs Bell said the overall budget for Community and Regulatory Services was approximately £25million, against which there was an underspend of just over £800,000 principally through additional income generated by Trading Standards, the Registration Service, and staff vacancies in the Coroners Service. Savings for 2025/26 reflected the overall size of the budget and work in previous years to make policy and efficiency savings. Mrs Bell highlighted a saving target in the Libraries, Registrations and Archives service of £300,000 was likely to be achieved through additional income from the service.
4. Further to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:
 - The new layout of the report was welcomed.
 - Cyclopark was a discretionary spend and Mr Murphy would be meeting with partners later in the year to discuss future plans.
 - The ambition was for Locate in Kent, Visit Kent and Produced in Kent to work together as one entity.
5. RESOLVED to note the administration's draft revenue budgets including responses to consultation.

233. Introduction of the National Medical Examiner Process - Impact on Kent Coroners and Registration Services (Item 8)

Ms Belinda Hooker, Head of Kent and Medway Coroner Service was in attendance for this item.

1. Mrs Bell introduced the report regarding the implementation of the statutory Medical Examiner System and its impact on coroners' responsibilities and ways of working, and explained the role of the Medical Examiner.
2. Further to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:
 - It was anticipated that the changes being implemented, once the new system was established, would speed up the issuing of death certificates.
3. RESOLVED to note the changes in relation to the death management pathway and the impacts on the Coroner and Registration Services.

234. 24/00092 - Kent & Medway Skills Bootcamps Programme (Item 9)

Ms Jude Farrell, Head of Community Learning & Skills, was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Murphy, Mr Samson and Ms Farrell introduced the report regarding a recent Kent County Council bid to the Department for Education (DfE) for a local, sector-focused 'Skills Bootcamps' programme for the 25-26 financial year to support local employers and the Kent & Medway workforce. Mr Samson said the outcome of the bid was expected in December 2024 and, if successful, 25 different bootcamps would be run for different sectors. It would secure £1.7million funding of which the Council would use approximately £250,000 to ensure the scheme was run on a full cost recovery basis.
2. Further to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:
 - Work had begun with employers in different industry sectors, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and other stakeholders to identify who may wish to be involved in the programme. There would also be local communication before each bootcamp was launched.
 - Work was taking place with providers and stakeholders involved in the Lower Thames Crossing and a sub-contract opportunity within CYPE relating to the Adult Skills Fund aimed to prepare people for bootcamps.
 - There was the opportunity to approach the DfE for more funding in year if gaps in skills were identified.
 - The programme would effectively be a pilot and the procurement process would allow for flexibility for learners to access the programme from across the county. Opportunities for online learning would also be considered and discussed with training providers should a barrier to participation be identified and subject to the nature of the bootcamp. Market engagement through different stakeholder groups had taken place to ensure there was a full coverage of providers from across the county.
 - A geographical map highlighting what was available would be helpful and this was something that could be considered after programme launch.
3. RESOLVED to endorse the proposed decision by the Cabinet Member for Economic Development (subject to receiving confirmation of funding from the DfE) to:
 - (i) APPROVE the acceptance of the National Skills Fund Grant, subject to final review and consideration of detailed terms and conditions from the Department of Education, for delivery of the Skills Bootcamps Programme for Kent & Medway.
 - (ii) DELEGATE authority to the Director of Growth and Communities after consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economic Development, to review and agree to the required terms and conditions to enter into the necessary grant arrangements.
 - (iii) DELEGATE authority to the Director of Growth and Communities to take other necessary actions, including but not limited to entering into contracts or other legal agreements, as required to implement the decision to deliver

a Skills Bootcamp Programme for Kent and Medway as shown at Appendix A.

235. Public Rights of Way and Access Service - Overview

(Item 10)

Mr Graham Rusling, Head of Service Public Rights of Way and Access, was in attendance for this item.

1. Mrs Bell introduced the report which provided an overview of the Public Rights of Way and Access Service and explained that the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for the 'median number of days to resolve priority faults on the public rights of way network' had reduced in quarter 3 (2023/2024) to 20 (and rag rated green) and the performance reports for quarter 4 (2023/2024) and quarter 1 (2024/2025) showed the number of days had reduced to 9. She drew Members' attention to Appendix B, sections 3.3 – 3.15, which set out the approach to the operational management of the network.
2. Further to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:
 - PROW officers were commended for the service they provide.
 - Active Travel England funding was secured for the repair of a towpath between Aylesford and Maidstone and work was in progress.
 - Active Travel England were currently producing rural guidance and engaging with the PROW sector.
 - The current length of time for a PROW application to be processed from receipt to allocation to an officer was 58 months. The backlog was 93 cases and 14 or 15 per year were being progressed. The backlog was likely to increase as the Definitive Map and Statement would close to applications based on historical evidence as from 1 January 2031 and stakeholder groups were actively researching where applications could be made before that date.
3. RESOLVED to note and endorse the report.

236. Integrated Work and Health Strategy for Kent & Medway

(Item 11)

Ms Ellen Schwartz, Assistant Director Public Health, was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Murphy, Mr Samson and Ms Schwartz introduced the report which provided an update on the development of an Integrated Health and Work Strategy for Kent & Medway which aimed to tackle economic inactivity relate to long-term health conditions.
2. Further to questions and comments from Members, it was noted that:
 - In terms of how often sick leave was reviewed, there was a reasonable adjustment section on 'fit note' forms that was used around 6% of the time. In June 2023 there were around 2357 issued relating to mental health issues and 1300 relating to musculo skeletal conditions. More

information would be provided in relation to how often reviews took place and who conducted them.

- The initial focus of the Strategic Partnership of Health and Economy was the Work and Health Strategy due to the funding being available from government. The broader remit of the partnership included how health and economic development could be looked at jointly to improve quality of life for residents, enhance workforce capacity and help businesses.

3. RESOLVED to note the report and endorse the development of an Integrated Work and Health Strategy for Kent & Medway.

237. Work Programme 2024/25

(Item 12)

1. Mr Sole asked that the item – Kent Rural Partnership – on the work programme include an update on Kent agriculture and land industry.
2. RESOLVED to note the Work Programme.