

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held Online on Tuesday, 6 October 2020.

PRESENT: Mr A Booth (Chairman), Mr J Wright (Vice-Chairman), Mr M A C Balfour, Mr P V Barrington-King, Mrs P M Beresford, Mrs R Binks, Mr R H Bird, Mr G Cooke, Mrs T Dean, MBE, Mr D Farrell, Mr R C Love, OBE and Dr L Sullivan

ALSO PRESENT: Mr P J Oakford (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services) and Mr M D Payne (Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport)

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms Z Cooke (Corporate Director of Finance), Mr S Jones (Director of Highways, Transportation and Waste), Mrs N Floodgate (Schemes Planning & Delivery Manager), Mr G Romagnuolo (Scrutiny Research Officer) and Mrs A Taylor (Scrutiny Research Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

8. Apologies and Substitutes

(Item A2)

Apologies were received from Mr Ridgers.

9. Declarations of Interests by Members in items on the Agenda for this Meeting

(Item A3)

1. Dr Sullivan declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item C3 and noted that her husband held the Community & Leisure Cabinet Portfolio at Gravesham Borough Council.
2. Mr Farrell declared an interest in Item C3, as an employee of Deltic Group.

10. Minutes of the meeting held on 7 July 2020

(Item A4)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 7 July 2020 were a correct record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

11. Minutes of the meeting held on 24 July 2020

(Item A5)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 July 2020 were a correct record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

12. Financial Update

(Item C1)

Mr P Oakford, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services and Ms Z Cooke, Corporate Director of Finance were in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Oakford presented a Financial Update to the committee. He addressed central government grant funding and outlined the expected timeline and sources of future funding, including how Covid-19 government grants had been spent. The financial impact of Covid-19 and projected net shortfall for the next financial year were highlighted, as were the grounds for the amended County Council budget.
2. A Member asked whether KCC would be able to levy a 2%, adult social care precept, council tax increase, following the conclusion of the authority's original three-year arrangement. Ms Cooke confirmed that further adult social care precept arrangements could be made following the initial period and that the financial settlement with government was anticipated in mid-December 2020, she agreed to update the committee following a formal indication of the settlement date.
3. Two Members emphasised that council tax increases should be a last resort, when the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Kent residents was considered.
4. In reference to the NHS hospital discharge grant for care homes, a Member asked what impact it had had on the authority's finances and whether any portion of the ring-fenced grant had been consigned to test and isolate patients. Mr Oakford confirmed that the discharge grant had been received to cover the cost of transferring patients from hospitals to care homes, on behalf of the NHS and that there had been no negative financial impact on KCC as a result of the arrangement.
5. When asked by a Member to what extent KCC would be financially resilient in the event of a second Covid-19 wave or Kent-wide lockdown, Mr Oakford emphasised that the authority's resilience was dependent on the extent of future government support packages and commended the financial support previously given by government. He reassured the committee that the authority's reserves would be used to fund services in the event sufficient government financial support were unavailable on the basis that these would need to be replenished.
6. Mr Oakford was asked how Kent compared to other neighbouring and similarly sized local authorities, financially. He confirmed that KCC's key services had been benchmarked with peer councils by Finance and that a departmental level comparison would be available in the future. Ms Cooke added that county treasurers met on a regular basis and financial differences were apparent primarily where local policy choices relating to levels or methods of service differed.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee note the update.

13. Pop Up Cycle Lanes - Verbal Update

(Item C2)

Mr M Payne, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport; Mr S Jones, Director of Highways, Transportation and Waste and Mrs N Floodgate, Schemes Planning and Delivery Manager were in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Payne provided a verbal update. He outlined the timeline of KCC's active travel bid and receipt of £1.6m in funding from the Department for Transport for the scheme's first tranche. He emphasised that the Department for Transport had mandated a 4 week deadline for projects to begin, from the receipt of funding, and an 8 week deadline for project completion, from initiation. It was specified that 24 trial schemes had been implemented, 5 schemes had concluded.

2. Mr Payne addressed community relations, he cited the use of emergency Traffic Regulation Orders, which had been required to meet the scheme deadlines, as the primary factor for the lack of public consultation and engagement. He noted that a longer deadline for the scheme's second tranche was desired, to permit wider community and business consultation. Members agreed that greater community engagement would have been constructive, though noted the constrain the strict deadlines had placed on public consultation.

3. When asked if figures indicated in local media, that a third of projects had ended were accurate, Mrs Floodgate confirmed that the actual figure had been far lower and cited Mr Payne's previously mentioned figure that 5 of the 24 schemes had ended. She further noted that Public Rights of Way improvements had also been made with the funding.

4. A Member asked how the performance of schemes had been monitored. Mrs Floodgate confirmed that monitoring had depended on the type and maturity of projects, with levels of walking, cycling and traffic as well as the availability of Vivacity cameras significant factors. Regarding Vivacity cameras she confirmed that the Department for Transport had funded the units and that they formed part of a nation-wide trial of live labs.

5. Mrs Floodgate confirmed that members of the public had been able to provide their feedback via a dedicated active travel mailbox. A Member requested that they be copied into correspondence between the active travel mailbox and constituents or local businesses, when related to project notice, changes, or other significant updates.

6. Mr Jones stated that modifications to projects had been made following resident feedback and that community benefit was the core factor in judging the success of individual projects funded by the scheme.

7. Members suggested that scrutiny of the deployment of Vivacity live lab cameras be considered at a future meeting. Mr Jones agreed that Vivacity and himself could provide the requested information at a future meeting. He further confirmed that KCC did not conduct any public enforcement based on information gathered from the cameras and that information had been used purely for data analysis.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee note the update and the following action be taken:

a) Information related to the use and specification of Vivacity live lab cameras be circulated to the committee.

POST MEETING NOTE: A briefing on Vivacity cameras along with a broader overview of the Live Labs project has been suggested for the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee in January 2021.

14. Short Focused Inquiry - Visitor Economy *(Item C3)*

1. The Chairman thanked Members for their contributions towards the Short Focused Inquiry report. Members paid tribute to the witnesses who had been involved in the inquiry.
2. Members discussed the contents of the report. A Member noted that in relation to Recommendation 2 of the inquiry report, care should be taken to time television advertising which promoted Kent as a safe and attractive visitor destination at a point where national or local Covid-19 social restrictions allowed tourism.
3. A Member requested that the Short Focused Inquiry membership, as documented in the report, include only Members who had contributed to the inquiry.
4. In relation to Recommendation 6 of the inquiry's report, a Member highlighted the need to prioritise small business recovery. Hospitality sector training and transparent ratings were also noted as areas for sector focus. The change in working arrangements was mentioned as an aid in the support of rural high streets and retail when the reduction of tourist figures had been considered.
5. It was noted by a Member that different areas of Kent had been affected to different extents and that the themes outlined in the inquiry did not persist in all areas.
6. Members noted that whilst all sectors had been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, the hospitality sector, especially in Kent, had been the most impacted.
7. A Member noted that the high street retail operating model had begun its evolution prior to the Covid-19 and that online retail had had a greater impact on the sector than the pandemic in the change of customer habits.
8. Public transport accessibility was raised by a Member as an area of significant impact for the tourism sector in Kent. Flexible ticketing was highlighted as a means of increasing accessibility and ease of use.
9. The Chairman agreed to reflect the committee's concerns regarding the timing of tourism promotion and the scale of the impact of Covid-19 on Kent's Visitor Economy in his covering letter to the Leader and Cabinet Member.
10. Mr Romagnuolo updated the committee on the progress of the proposed Kent Farming Economy Short Focused Inquiry, he outlined his initial research which

regarded the impact of the pandemic on the industry and noted that it was unclear what support farmers would receive before parliamentary bills had passed.

11. Mr Farrell moved and Dr Sullivan seconded an amendment to the recommendation to include the words **'KCC Scrutiny Committee:-**

- a) recognises the importance of the visitor, hospitality and creative sector to the Kent economy in both providing skilled employment and enhancing the quality of life of residents and visitors;**
- b) notes that many businesses are being adversely affected by current restrictions, while some are being made unviable through their enforced closure. The Committee believes all sectors should have a roadmap for reopening;**
- c) commends the Government on the introduction of the furlough scheme but Calls on it to create a dedicated furlough scheme for the hospitality and creative sectors that should operate until national and locally imposed restrictions on their businesses are lifted;**
- d) further, believes that the Government should urgently review the 10pm curfew and present the scientific evidence for its imposition, should it continue; and**
- e) the committee requests the Leader and Cabinet Member urgently write to relevant Government ministers outlining what this committee has identified as key issues.'**

12. Members voted on Mr Farrell's amendment. The amendment was lost.

13. Mr Love moved and Mr Wright seconded an amendment to the recommendation to include the words **'That the Scrutiny Committee ask the Leader and relevant Cabinet Members to consider how they might bring to the attention of local, regional, and national policy-makers the devastating impacts of both Covid-19 and the responses to Covid-19 that are outlined in this report.'**

14. Members voted on Mr Love's amendment. The amendment was won.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Approve the Short Focused Inquiry Report into the visitor economy;
- b) that the Report be submitted to the Leader and relevant Cabinet Members along with a request for a formal response to the recommendations within two months; and
- c) that the Scrutiny Committee ask the Leader and relevant Cabinet Members to consider how they might bring to the attention of local, regional, and national policy-makers the devastating impacts of both Covid-19 and the responses to Covid-19 that are outlined in this report.