

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 26 February 2025.

PRESENT: Mr A Booth (Chairman), Mr P V Barrington-King (Vice-Chairman), Mrs R Binks, Mr A Brady, Mr D L Brazier, Ms J Hawkins, Mr A J Hook, Mrs S Prendergast and Mr S Webb

ALSO PRESENT: Mrs S Chandler, Mr R W Gough, Mr D Jeffrey, Mr P J Oakford, Mr R G Streatfeild, MBE and Mr D Watkins

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr M Albiston (Director of Adult Social Care (Operations) Kent), Alesbrook (Financial Hardship Programme Manager), Ms R Anderson (Head of Business Information, Strategy and Assurance), Mr J Betts (Interim Corporate Director Finance), Mrs S Hammond (Corporate Director Children, Young People and Education), Mr R Smith (Corporate Director Adult Social Care and Health), Mrs R Spore (Director of Infrastructure), Mrs A Taylor (Scrutiny Research Officer), Ms J Taylor (Head of Capital Works), Mr B Watts (General Counsel) and Mr T Woolmer (Head of Strategic Partnerships)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

98. Apologies and Substitutes

(Item A2)

Apologies were received from Mr Bond, Mrs Game, Mr Richardson and the Parent Governor and Church Representatives.

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

(Item A3)

There were no declarations of interest.

100. Devolution and Local Government Reform

(Item C1)

1. Mr Gough introduced the item, highlighting the complexity of the devolution and local government reform (LGR) process. It had been three weeks since the announcement from the Government that Kent and Medway had not been selected as one of the areas that would be part of its Devolution Priority Programme.
2. There remained confusion over the reasons behind the decision to exclude Kent and Medway, particularly when every other Eastern and South Eastern Council was included. The Government cited the size difference between Kent and Medway as a reason for the exclusion, however this had not been raised as an issue during discussions in the run up to the decision being made.

3. The Government had confirmed that the LGR process would proceed regardless of devolution priority status. An initial submission had been requested by Government by 21 March 2025 with full proposals expected by 28 November. The discussion around the number and shape of unitary councils was ongoing.
4. Mr Gough emphasised the importance of public service reform, leveraging Kent's co-terminosity of major public services. Engagement with partners such as the police, fire, health and educational institutions was crucial.
5. Mr Gough responded to questions from Members which included the following:
 - a. Concerns were raised about transparency and need for open conversations with stakeholders. Mr Gough explained that he proposed to establish a committee to focus on devolution and LGR, with regular briefings for all members – Members were keen that stakeholders, such as Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC), were given the option of a seat on that Committee.
 - b. It was important to continue to engage with parish and town councils through KALC and other forums, this had been done and extensive discussions had been had with KALC including the Leader of Medway Council attending the KALC AGM.
 - c. It was important to maintain flexibility and adapt to evolving circumstances, there was a commitment to ongoing engagement and transparency throughout the process.
6. With regards to the timeline for new councils, this was complicated, however the current working assumption was towards shadow elections in 2027 and new bodies in 2028.
7. There was a need to get devolution back on track, there were good working relationships across Kent and Medway with regular meetings of Leaders and Kent Joint Chiefs.

RESOLVED that the Committee note the update provided by the Leader of the Council.

101. Household Support Fund

(Item C2)

1. The Chairman invited Mr Hook, as the Member who requested that the item be placed on the agenda, to outline the reasons for it being considered by the Scrutiny Committee. Mr Hook explained that he wished to explore why the Household Support Fund (HSF) was being used in the way it was, particularly the criteria for eligibility, including income thresholds and savings limits. Mr Hook also had concerns about the lack of consideration for housing costs within the eligibility criteria and pensioners missing out and efforts to promote take up of the schemes.
2. Mr Gough explained that the HSF had become a regular part of the Council's activity having been established during the pandemic. It began with a focus on

free school meals during the summer holiday and had evolved into part of the structure for tackling poverty, disadvantage and financial hardship.

3. Mr Gough explained that the “Just Missing Out” scheme was a response to the situation that had arisen from the discontinuation of the winter fuel payment for those who were not on pension credit. A twin track approach meant the Council was both seeking to publicise the fund as well as boosting the take-up of pension credit and also to reach those who were just excluded.
4. The take up of the Just Missing Out Scheme had been modest, with around 1,500 people applying from up to 5,000 eligible residents. Work continued to address this, and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had been complimentary about the way in which the scheme had operated and that the approach to criteria worked well.
5. Approximately 20% of the funding was devolved to districts and boroughs which then ran their own customised schemes locally to meet specific local need.
6. Lucy Alesbrook explained that there were limitations around the HSF, the DWP had made it clear that housing support should be limited within the delivery of the fund.
7. In talking to partners about eligibility criteria for the scheme it was clear that it could be a challenge for people in hardship when faced with very complicated processes to enable them to access support, a particular success of the HSF had been in making the process as simple as possible for people to access.
8. In relation to the pension credit campaign, Officers were working in partnership with district and borough council colleagues who received the data on pension credit take-up. Further information would be provided to Members when it was available.
9. Regarding free school meal eligible households, support was available as a wider part of the delivery of HSF.
10. Members received confirmation that the government had committed to funding the HSF for another year, a Member requested that consideration be given to housing costs in future criteria and the consideration given to continuing the simplicity of the application process was welcomed.
11. The Cabinet Member and Officers responded to questions from Members which included the following:
 - a. Could more information be provided on distribution throughout the county?
 - b. Unspent funds would be assumed into the general HSF and would be allocated to people in financial hardship.
 - c. A breakdown of the current financial position of the HSF would be provided along with district spend.
 - d. In terms of marketing and promotion to raise awareness of the Just Missing out scheme radio adverts had been used along with bus, train advertising and mail-outs to members of the public and partners – further information on the marketing would be provided.

- e. Ms Alesbrook confirmed that Canterbury City Council had undertaken a public participation scheme. The ways in which the district and borough councils operated their schemes differed but KCC worked closely with the them and where there were opportunities to support each other these were promoted.
- f. In response to a question about those missing out on Pension Credit the Just Missing Out Scheme was intended to focus on that group and provide them with support

12. The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for attending the meeting, for providing responses to the questions asked and for offering to provide further information as requested.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee note the information provided in relation to the delivery of the Household Support Fund.

102. Asset Management Strategy 2024-2030 Decision - 24/00069 *(Item C3)*

1. The Chairman introduced this item, which had also been requested by Mr Brady, highlighting the importance of the Asset Management Strategy (AMS) 2024-2030, especially in challenging financial times.
2. Mr Peter Oakford, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services, was invited to provide an overview, he emphasised the strategy's focus on maintaining properties as "warm, safe, and dry." Maintenance had fallen into being reactive whereas it should be preventative maintenance. The property team had reviewed all properties, identifying underutilised buildings and were focusing maintenance funds on essential assets. The team had successfully accelerated asset sales, doubling the expected revenue, which had helped mitigate budget challenges.
3. The strategy aimed to address the financial constraints of the Council by optimising property management. There was an emphasis on regular maintenance to avoid costly repairs and efforts were made to better utilise buildings and dispose of underutilised assets.
4. The Cabinet Member and Officers noted comments and responded to questions which included the following:
 - a. In response to a question from the Chairman about the current value of KCC's building assets and the number of properties that were currently vacant the officers confirmed that the estate was valued at approximately £2.77 billion, with around 100 vacant properties. The AMS set out the nature of the portfolio, the types of assets that fell into each category and the proportions of freehold and leasehold.
 - b. The previous strategy ran from 2018 – 2023 and during the pandemic there were both challenges and budget pressures. The impact of the "warm, safe and dry" strategy had resulted in the Council struggling to maintain anything over the warm, safe and dry standard. However, the new strategy included lifecycle management to ensure ongoing maintenance costs were considered.

- c. Concerns were raised about the transparency of asset utilisation and the impact on community assets, it was confirmed that the strategy included measures to improve transparency and collaboration with members.
- d. The Cabinet Member and Officers offered to report back to Members at a future meeting to follow up on the further questions of Members.
- e. In developing the new strategy, a number of internal workshops had been run setting out what had been achieved during the old strategy and lessons learned from those. A new Facilities Management contract was procured which included the restructure of the way that services were delivered. A key objective in the new strategy was around the co-locations and flexibility of the use of buildings.
- f. Was there a list of underutilised assets? More engagement should be undertaken with the local member to determine why it's not utilised and to find ways for the community to utilise the asset for the benefit of residents and the council to ensure KCC was not disposing of an asset that might be of community need.
- g. KPIs had been developed in relation to the strategy and these would be reported to Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee in due course.
- h. A Member asked whether directorates had a responsibility for monitoring the list of council assets or whether this was done by the property team? The broad asset reviews were part of the strategic reset programme, this was split into office estates, community estate (e.g. libraries) and specialist estate (assets we hold for a particular purpose).
- i. In response to a question about the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) relating to the decision, it was confirmed that individual EQIAs were undertaken around particular streams of activity. When further decisions were made separate EQIAs would be produced which would highlight the impact of the decision.
- j. Individual property data was available and the officers offered to provide a briefing for members on the key elements.
- k. In terms of transparency, a lot of information was publicly available in terms of the asset base. Tools were available for members to search for particular assets in particular locations to determine ownership for example. This would be promoted following the KCC elections in May 2025.

5. Members were keen to take up the offer of further updates to the committee.

6. The Chairman thanked Mr Oakford and the officers for attending the meeting and for answering Members' questions.

RESOLVED that Members note the decision taken in relation to the Asset Management Strategy 2024-2030.

103. Transfer of the 18-25 section of the Strengthening Independence Service - Decision 24/00109
(Item C4)

1. The Chairman asked Mr Streatfeild to introduce this item as he had requested that it be placed on the agenda for discussion.

2. Mr Streatfeild emphasised the importance of the decision which focused on the transfer of the 18-25 section of the Strengthening Independence Service (SIS) from the responsibility of the Director of Children, Education and Young People (CYPE) to Adult Social Care. He raised concerns about the lack of consultation and communication with parents and the Corporate Parenting Panel regarding the transfer. He also raised concerns about the legal and financial implications of the transfer, including the potential risks and that no equality impact assessment was submitted to the Cabinet Committee when they were asked to discuss the decision.
3. Mrs Chandler, the Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services explained the rationale behind the decision, emphasising that it was based on statutory responsibilities and the consistency of services for the 18 to 25 cohort. She assured Member that the services and staff would remain unchanged, with only the line management structure being altered.
4. Mr Watkins, Cabinet Member for Adults and Public Health concurred with Mrs Chandler.
5. Mrs Hammond, Corporate Director for CYPE provided a comprehensive overview of the transfer, including the number of young adults affected and the financial implications. She clarified that the transfer was purely an organisational change and that the services provided to the young adults would remain the same.
6. The Cabinet Members and Officers responded to questions from members which included the following:
 - a) In response to questions Officers addressed concerns about the communication plan, communications were being drafted to young people, their families and KCC's partners, there was to be no difference in the service provided.
 - b) The General Counsel confirmed that as this was not a call-in of the decision the decision had been taken in relation to the transfer of statutory functions. He was comfortable from a legal perspective about the decision but if changes were to be made around the way in which the services were delivered this would require further decision making.
 - c) In relation to the impact on EHCPs the numbers which were challenged were very small, this would continue to be monitored.
 - d) Regarding staff concerns these had been raised by a staff group in relation to the way in which children's social workers were rewarded through their pay. Following the recruitment and retention challenges with children's social workers the recruitment and retention packages would not change, but this would lead to inequalities in pay and conditions and this would be reviewed in the longer term.
7. Members asked that the decision be brought back to the committee at a future date to assess the impact of the transfer.

RESOLVED that Members note the decision and request that it be brought back to the Committee at a future meeting.

104. Work Programme
(Item D1)

RESOLVED that the work programme was noted.