

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 Tuesday, 14 March 2023.

PRESENT: Mr N Baker (Chairman), Mr H Rayner (Vice-Chairman), Mrs R Binks, Mr C Broadley, Mr T Cannon, Ms M Dawkins, Mr S Holden, Mr M A J Hood, Ms J Meade, Mr A M Ridgers, Mr D Robey, Mr M J Sole, Mr R J Thomas and Mr D Watkins

ALSO PRESENT: Mr D Murphy and Mr P M Hill, OBE

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr D Smith (Director of Economic Development), Mrs S Holt-Castle (Director of Growth and Communities), Hayley Savage (Democratic Services Officer) and Mr S Jones (Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

119. Apologies and Substitutes

(Item 2)

Apologies had been received from Mr Meade and Mr Manion and there were no substitutes.

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

(Item 3)

Mr Sole declared an interest under item 7 – *No Use Empty (NUE) update and continuation of the initiative* - that a client of his firm had received funding from the No Use Empty Scheme.

The Chair declared an interest under item 9 – *New Contracts for the Provision of Post-Mortem Facilities for the Mid Kent & Medway, Northwest Kent, and East Kent Coroner Areas* - that his fiancée worked for the East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust.

121. Minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2023

(Item 4)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2023 were a correct record.

122. Verbal updates by the Cabinet Members and Corporate Director

(Item 5)

1. Mr Hill, Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services, provided an update on the following:

- (a) Two submissions from Kent Libraries had been shortlisted for the Libraries Connected Awards and included the Playground project in the children's award category and Kent Prison Libraries in the reading award category. The results would be announced in June 2023.
 - (b) The new ceremonies room had opened at Oakwood House and the first citizenship ceremony had taken place. The new coroner's courts and accommodation would open in Oakwood House later in the year.
 - (c) The Connected Communities Project had come to an end and a conference took place in France in March 2023 to evaluate the four-year social prescribing project. The team shared their project journey at the conference along with success stories and lessons learnt.
 - (d) Active Kent and Medway's Active Partnership Board had a new Chair, Mr Graham Razey, who was the Chief Executive Officer of East Kent Colleges Group.
2. Mr Murphy, Cabinet Member for Economic Development, gave a verbal update on the following:
- (a) Mr Murphy had visited No Use Empty (NUE) sites around the county, most recently at Folkestone, where 14 flats had been constructed on the site of the Royal Victoria Hospital and would be sold to Folkestone & Hythe District Council as affordable lets.
 - (b) In February 2023 Mr Murphy accompanied the Leader, and colleagues from Essex County Council to Zeeland for the commemoration of the 1953 flood disaster.
 - (c) Mr Murphy would be attending a series of meetings over the coming weeks with organisations at Discovery Park, with the CEO at the Port of Dover regarding the EU Entry/Exit System (EES), with East Kent Colleges Group regarding their skillset programme across Folkestone, Dover, and Ashford, and with the Environment Agency regarding planning enforcement.
 - (d) A discussion had taken place with the Head of Transition and Co-operation Unit in the Welsh government to share lessons learnt from the Council's involvement with the Straits Committee and to discuss potential future cooperation between the Welsh Government and KCC in terms of trade and environment.
3. Mr Jones, Corporate Director for Growth Environment and Transport, gave a verbal update on the following:
- (a) Active Kent and Medway had undertaken an Active Lives Children and Young People survey which covered the 2021/2022 academic year and showed that activity levels in Kent and Medway had returned to pre-pandemic levels.

- (b) The Kent Community Safety Team continued to work with partners, learn from domestic homicide reviews and undertake workshops to assist district and borough community safety units in complying strategic assessments. These assessments were critical in bringing together the statutory Kent Community Safety Agreement.
 - (c) Community Wardens across Kent had undertaken numerous welfare visits to vulnerable people affected by the rising cost of living and energy costs and had been giving advice on energy grants and how to use energy more efficiently.
 - (d) Early findings from the evaluation of the Connected Communities Project showed that social prescribing across the partner regions successfully reduced social isolation, loneliness and anxiety following an intervention.
 - (e) Mr Jones accompanied Mr Hill to the screening of the Playground project at the Jasmin Vardimon Company studio in Ashford and would be joining a session in Edenbridge with the team. Playground was a unique programme of highly creative activity for babies and young children and their families.
 - (f) Mr Jones highlighted some activities carried out by the Culture and Creative team including the Place Partnership Project Fund award to Creative Estuary, feasibility work for a new film facility at Dreamland in Margate and the Creative Industries Clusters Programme.
4. Mr Jones responded to the following questions and comments from Members:
- (a) Asked about the future funding for the Playground project, Ms Holt-Castle said Playground had three years' funding from the Arts Council.
 - (b) Members commented on the valued social prescribing work carried out by community wardens and questioned how the savings identified within the Council's budget would affect this. Mr Jones said the model was currently being considered and a report would be brought back to the Committee in due course.
 - (c) Asked about community safety and whether crime statistics could be related to police activity, in consideration of public confidence and police performance, Mr Hill agreed this would be of interest to both the Kent Community and Safety Partnership and the Police and Crime Panel.

RESOLVED that the verbal updates be noted.

123. Risk Management: Growth, Environment and Transport Directorate
(Item 6)

Mr Mark Scrivener (Corporate Risk Manager) and Mr Tony Harwood (Resilience and Emergency Planning Manager) were in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Scrivener introduced the report which presented the strategic risks relating to the Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee

and comprised of three risks on the Corporate Risk Register, and a summary of Key risks from the Growth, Environment and Transport directorate.

2. Mr Jones, Ms Holt-Castle, Mr Murphy, and Mr Harwood responded to the following questions and comments from Members:
 - (a) Asked about the risks relating to the maintenance of community assets, the use of preferred suppliers and the criteria used for tenders, Mr Jones said the Council was bound by stringent procurement legislation and noted the importance of securing quality providers.
 - (b) Asked about risk CRR0003 in connection with securing Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) developer contributions, Mr Murphy said the Council did not have any statutory powers to enforce the payment of contributions and the only current recourse was legal action. He said the outcome of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill was still awaited and would include proposals for the CIL and Section 106 process. Ms Holt-Castle said the Council worked constructively and robustly with the districts and boroughs, as the local planning authorities, to understand the current processes that were in place and develop a mutual understanding of the funding required for community infrastructure. Asked about dedicated legal representation, Ms Holt-Castle said to date this was done on an ad hoc basis depending on individual developments. Mr Jones said the same legal representatives were used where at all possible to provide consistent specialised support. He emphasised that the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill was critical legislation and teams within the GET directorate had responded to the National Planning Policy Framework consultation.
 - (c) Asked about risk CRR0004 in relation to service continuity and the increased risk of cyber-crime, Mr Harwood said changes to working since the pandemic had changed the risk to the Council (but not increased it) and assured members that business continuity plans were being upgraded to match the current risk and threat. He said the Council's business continuity function was being systemised, and made more resilient, and several exercises were taking place around cyber attack scenarios and sustained power outages. A Member commented that home working could pose a security risk and Mr Jones said from an operational perspective the Council was educating and providing as many tools as possible to alert people to the risks and measures were being taken to support staff.
 - (d) Asked why the current and target scores for risk CRR0003 were high, Ms Holt-Castle said this related to situations where the Council could not directly manage the risk for example the national economic position and the management of the shared prosperity fund by districts.
 - (e) A Member commented that it would be helpful if future reports included the assessed risk from the last report to show the direction of travel.
 - (f) Asked how simultaneous emergency was defined, Mr Harwood said it was different events taking place concurrently and noted that simultaneous events were taking place every day. He said the consequences of an emergency, however broad, was one operational response.

RESOLVED that Members' comments on the risks presented be noted.

124. 23/00013 - No Use Empty (NUE) update and continuation of the initiative
(Item 7)

Mr Steve Grimshaw (Strategic Programme Manager) was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Murphy introduced the item and provided a summary of the success of the scheme.
2. Mr Grimshaw explained that the £175,000 interest free loan was for those utilising the scheme for the first time and if an applicant wanted to utilise the scheme for a second time this would be on interest bearing terms. The loans were typically offered over a three-year period, and it was a requirement that the loan was repaid on or before the anniversary date of the loan. There was no penalty for repaying the loan early.
3. Mr Grimshaw provided a summary of the report.
4. Mr Grimshaw responded to the following questions and comments from Members:
 - (a) Members asked how owners of empty properties were being encouraged to take up the scheme and whether some districts engaged more than others, Mr Grimshaw said the NUE team met with district colleagues on a quarterly basis. He highlighted that each housing team within the districts had different staffing levels that effected their ability to promote the scheme. Each year letters were sent to empty property owners highlighting the incentives the Council could offer with a short term secured loan. Council tax premiums were charged for empty properties and the scheme was publicised through press releases, estate agents and social media.
 - (b) Asked whether properties being brought back into use were used as an Airbnb, Mr Grimshaw said this had been discussed with district colleagues and it was agreed that the Council would not provide support where the intended use of the property was as an Airbnb. He clarified the initial remit was to bring residential properties back into use.
 - (c) Asked about rates charged for the New Builds NUE Scheme, Mr Grimshaw said they were in some way dependent on the rates charged by the Council's Treasury department. The rates varied, for example a higher loan would result in more risk and attract a higher interest rate.
 - (d) Members expressed their support for the scheme and paid tribute to its success. The involvement of other councils within the scheme was noted along with the source of employment it provided for local builders.
 - (e) Asked about the possibility of some properties, which were not suitable as homes, being used for community enterprise where appropriate, Mr Grimshaw said he would be happy to discuss this further.

5. Mr Rayner proposed, and Mr Holden seconded that the recommendations of the report be moved, and this was agreed unanimously.

RESOLVED to endorse the Cabinet Member for Economic Development to support:

- a) the continuation of the NUE initiative to at least 2027-28 with a further update to be provided at that time;
- b) how NUE is funded and seek the agreement of the Section 151 Officer or the Cabinet Member for Finance as appropriate for approval to spend; and
- c) for authority to be delegated to the Director of Growth and Communities to take appropriate actions including, but not limited to, KCC entering into legal agreements (loan agreements, legal charges, personal guarantees, equity loans, joint ventures, deed of priority, deed of postponement), consider and approve requests which may require KCC consent and discharge of legal charges, recovery of loans through legal action, as necessary to implement this decision.

125. 23/00024 - Kent Country Parks Strategy 2023-28
(Item 8)

Ms Isabel Shaw (Head of Country Parks and Partnerships) and Ms Kate Boorman (Head of Country Parks and Partnerships) were in attendance for this item.

Mr Rayner expressed an interest during the item that he utilised regularly the Kayaking Point at Grove Ferry Picnic Site.

1. Mr Hill introduced the item and said the country parks had provided an important lifeline to residents during the pandemic and continued to be busy. He said government funding had been used to restore the damage done during the pandemic and to provide new facilities such as playpark areas and disabled facilities.
2. Mrs Hohler provided some background to the work of the informal Members Working Group and thanked Members who were involved.
3. Ms Shaw responded to the following questions and comments from Members:
 - (a) Asked about access for mobility impaired visitors, Ms Shaw confirmed that maps were available which included accessible trails and disabled toilets.
 - (b) Asked about promoting the importance of Kent's Plan Bee to young people, Ms Shaw said a range of educational activities were being run in the parks including school sessions, informal walks and talks and events during the school holidays and noted the importance of connecting pollinator work with Kent's Plan Bee.
 - (c) Asked whether the Council was working with district councils as part of their local development plans to allocate green space for country parks and potentially increase the number of country parks across Kent, Ms Boorman said efforts were made to signpost people through social media to other facilities run by local authorities or other organisations, and where

developments were within the proximity of a country park engagement with colleagues took place to connect green space.

- (d) Asked about income generation and whether nature-based solutions would be considered, for example carbon dioxide or biodiversity net gain credits, Ms Boorman said income sources were varied and included car parking, wood products, education and learning, events and cafes. Ms Boorman said engagement took place with the Kent Environment Strategy and income generation and potential opportunities were constantly reviewed and explored.
- (e) Members expressed their gratitude and support for the work done in relation to country parks and recognised the importance of them in relation to the wellbeing of Kent residents.

RESOLVED to endorse the proposed decision to adopt the Kent Country Parks Strategy 2023-28 and to delegate to the Growth and Communities Director, in consultation the Cabinet Member, any further decisions that may be appropriate to deliver the Strategy as shown at Appendix A.

126. 23/00025 - New Contracts for the Provision of Post-Mortem Facilities for the Mid Kent & Medway, Northwest Kent, and East Kent Coroner Areas
(Item 9)

This Item was taken after Item 13 – Extension of Contracts with Locate in Kent and Visit Kent.

Ms Debbie Large was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Hill introduced the proposed decision to issue new contracts for the provision of Post-Mortem Facilities in Mid-Kent and Medway, Northwest Kent, and East Kent.
2. In response to a question from a Member, Ms Large explained that Section 24 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, implemented in 2013, placed a statutory obligation on KCC to provide the Coroner's accommodation, staff and resource required to fulfil the service's statutory functions. Ms Large said government had been clear that it would remain a locally delivered service.

RESOLVED to endorse the proposal that the Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services and South East Kent coroner areas agree to:

A) Issue new contracts, via direct awards, for the provision of Post-Mortem Facilities in Mid-Kent and Medway, Northwest Kent, and East Kent, to commence from 1 April 2023 for a period of 12 months with the option of extending for a further 4 years.

B) delegate authority to the Director for Growth and Communities, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Community & Regulatory Services, to negotiate, finalise and enter into the contracts; and

C) delegate authority to the Director for Growth and Communities to take other relevant actions, including but not limited to entering into required legal agreements and agreed contract extensions, as necessary to implement the decision.

127. Decisions Taken Outside of the Cabinet Committee Meeting Cycle
(Item 10)

This was taken after Item 8 - 23/00024 – Kent Country Parks Strategy 2023-28

1. Mr Hill introduced the report.
2. Members discussed and agreed that the short timescale put in place by government to accept funding resulted in reduced democratic oversight and asked for representations to be made to government to this effect.
3. Members congratulated officers involved for securing the funding.
4. Mr Rayner proposed, and Mr Holden seconded that the recommendations of the report be moved, and it was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that decision 23/0008: Gypsy and Traveller Service Improvement Project was taken between meetings of the Cabinet Committee in accordance with the process in Part 2 paragraph 12.36 of the Council's Constitution be noted.

128. Work Programme 2023
(Item 11)

RESOLVED that the Work Programme 2023 be noted subject to the following additions for consideration:

- Economy of agriculture and farming industry
- Gypsy site investment
- Banking hubs

129. Future Meeting Dates
(Item 12)

RESOLVED that the future meeting dates be noted.

130. 23/00031 - Extension of Contracts with Locate in Kent and Visit Kent
(Item 13)

Mr David Smith was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Murphy introduced the proposed decision to extend the contracts with Locate in Kent and Visit Kent for a further year and explained that both organisations were going through a period of transition following a reduction to funding. Mr Murphy reminded Members of the importance of the two organisations to the county and how they supported Framing Kent's Future in encouraging business and tourism.

2. Mr Smith introduced the report and summarised the contracts with Locate in Kent and Visit Kent and how the extension of the contracts for a year would allow time to explore how the reduced budget could be managed.
3. Mr Smith responded to the following questions and comments from Members:
 - (a) Asked what benefit there was in having an observer on the board as opposed to a board member, Mr Smith said a policy had been adopted by the Council to not have Council representatives on the boards of external companies financed by the Council due to a conflict of interest. Instead an observer would attend meetings and express their views as a stakeholder.
 - (b) A Member requested that Locate in Kent be encouraged to canvass businesses in Greater London that would be adversely impacted by the possible extension of the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) to the Kent boundary.

RESOLVED to endorse the Cabinet Member for Economic Development on the proposed decision to extend to March 2024 the current contract with Locate in Kent and the grant agreement with Visit Kent for the provision of inward investment services and the promotion of the visitor economy in Kent respectively.