

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

POLICY AND RESOURCES CABINET COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 18 January 2023

PRESENT: Mr R J Thomas (Chair), Mr P V Barrington-King, Mr P Bartlett, Mr T Bond, Mr A Brady, Mr T Cannon, Mr N J D Chard, Mr G Cooke, Mr M Dendor, Rich Lehmann, Mr J P McInroy, Mr H Rayner and Dr L Sullivan

ALSO PRESENT: Mr R W Gough, Mr P J Oakford, Mr O Richardson and Canon P Bruinvels

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr D Cockburn (Chief Executive), Mrs A Beer (Deputy Chief Executive), Ms Z Cooke (Corporate Director of Finance), Mr D Shipton (Head of Finance Policy, Planning and Strategy), Mrs R Spore (Director of Infrastructure), Mr B Watts (General Counsel), Mr H D'Alton (Investment and Disposal Surveyor), Ms K Frearson (Head of Property Strategy, Infrastructure), Ms R Kennard (Chief Analyst, Strategic Commissioning Analytics), Mr T Woolmer (Policy & Partnerships Adviser - Kent Public Services), Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer) and Miss K Reynolds (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

121. Membership

(Item 2)

It was noted that Mr N Baker and Mr H Rayner had joined the committee to fill the two Conservative vacancies.

122. Apologies and Substitutes

(Item 3)

1. Apologies for absence had been received from Mr N Baker. There was no substitute.
2. The committee noted that Mr A Hook was joining the meeting remotely.

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

(Item 4)

There were no declarations of interest.

124. Minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2022

(Item 5)

It was RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2022 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chair. There were no matters arising.

125. Annual Report on the Implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant in Kent (Item 6)

1. The Leader of the County Council, Mr R W Gough, introduced the report and emphasised the high value placed on the Covenant by the County Council and the importance of the Council's good relationship with the armed forces.
2. The Council's Armed Forces Champion, Mr O Richardson, advised that, although the Armed Forces Act of 2022 had placed on local authorities a legal duty to take account of the Covenant, the County Council already had an established relationship with the armed forces, and had signed up to and championed the Covenant since 2011. He summarised the activity in the last year to celebrate the role of the armed forces in Kent, to mark the anniversaries of major conflicts and to raise awareness of issues facing armed forces families currently serving, those leaving the services, and veterans. The 2021 census had included for the first time a question about service in the armed forces and had shown that 4.1% of the population of Kent were serving or had served.
3. The Covenant lead, Canon Peter Bruinvels, emphasised how much he valued the Council's support of the Covenant and of the armed forces and the close relationship they enjoyed. He advised that Council was one of the first signatories and was unusual in having its Covenant signed by both a County Council and a Unitary Authority. He emphasised that the Armed Forces Act had received cross-party support in Parliament and that support for the armed forces was very much unaffected by any party politics. He advised that many of the duties and requirements introduced by the Act were already in place and being met as part of Kent's regular practice. He then set out his wishes and aims for the future, to further improve the work being done and raise the profile of the Covenant, and encouraged all County Council Members to continue championing and supporting the armed forces in Kent. The Chair referred to the purpose of the Covenant set out in the report, to *'encourage support for the Armed Forces Community working and residing in Kent and to recognise and remember the sacrifices they have made for us to keep Britain safe and free.'* and added that all Members would surely endorse this aim wholeheartedly.
4. Canon Bruinvels then responded to comments and questions from the committee, including the following:-
 - a) the Covenant highlighted the debt of gratitude that Kent owed to its armed service personnel, past and present. The work being undertaken within the Covenant was described as inspirational;
 - b) Members who had attended events run by Canon Peter and the team commented that events had been well attended and supported;
 - c) the current Vice-Chairman of the Council, Mr G Cooke, stated that he would continue the current commitment to the Covenant when he became Chairman later in 2023;
 - d) asked how the Council could support the work being undertaken by Kent Hospital Trusts, Canon Peter advised that he was keen for all hospitals and

GPs' surgeries to have as high an awareness as possible of the issues facing ex-service personnel, veterans and their families. Current training initiatives should achieve a new level of awareness by March 2023, and it was hoped and planned that health premises would advertise their awareness and support of ex-service personnel and encourage them to feel more confident about raising wellbeing issues. Members were invited to check this awareness in their local areas. The committee was reminded that ex-service personnel did not tend to like to seek help;

- e) asked about the experience of children of service families in accessing school places and coping with regular school moves, he advised that each Directorate would include a Covenant Champion who would raise the profile of these issues, for example, in relation to SEND issues. The 'Pupil Voice' initiative of the Department for Education would help support these issues, and he urged County Council Members who served as school governors to check that their local schools were using this properly and not absorbing it into the Pupil Premium; and
- f) asked about casework with army reservists, he advised that this used the armed forces charities SSAFA across Kent, which provided volunteer caseworkers to visit families in their homes to advise on and help them apply for benefits, such as the Disabled Facilities Grant. The charity was short of suitable volunteer caseworkers and would always welcome more. It was known that as many as 4% of ex-service personnel could suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and some campaigners seeking to raise awareness of this condition, along with other funds such as Help for Heroes, had access to specific funds to help support those living with the condition. All cases would be considered on their individual merits.

5. It was RESOLVED that:-

- a) all that is being done to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant in Kent, and the County Council's continued commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant at both a county and district level, be noted and welcomed; and
- b) the future priorities set out in the report, including promoting the Council's ongoing work to continue being an Employer Recognition Gold Award exemplar, be agreed and committed to.

126. Draft Ten Year Capital Programme, Revenue Budget 2023-24 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2023-26

(Item 7)

1. Mr Oakford introduced the report and advised that, although the County Council had received more funding from Central Government than it had expected, it still had a funding shortfall in the current year. He reminded the committee that the Council had a legal duty to agree a balanced budget and would need to identify savings of approximately £40m and draw down from reserves, replenishing them in years two and three to maintain general reserves at 5%. The main areas of increasing demand were in Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) and Children, Young People and Education (CYPE). The current draft budget had assumed that the Council would

take the maximum possible precept from Council Tax, and he reminded the committee that 75% of the Council's income came from Council Tax.

2. Mr Oakford, Ms Cooke and Mrs Spore responded to comments and questions from the committee, including the following:-

- a) local projects run using the New Business Fund, to cover directions given by Central Government, would still continue, and assurance was sought that funding would continue, to allow such projects to be completed;
- b) more detail was sought on disposal costs, stated as £650,000 p.a. Mrs Spore advised that the issue was complex; disposal costs could include staff costs and the costs of applying for planning permission, depending on the disposal route taken. The Council could charge only a limited amount of these costs to capital receipts. The questioner asked that full detail on disposal costs, as well as full procurement costs, be included in all future reports to the committee;
- c) more detail was sought on the Capital Projects Asset Review. Mrs Spore advised that the asset utilisation line in the budget book covered investment to maintain the County Council's estate. This would go up in 2023/4 but would then reduce. This was the tail-end of funds made available to cover changes to the office estate, for example, leases ending, and was reviewed case by case;
- d) more detail was sought on the Strategic Reset Programme. Mrs Spore advised that the programme covered strategic ambitions, including technology and various other facets of activity and gave as an example the current consultation on Kent Community Assets;
- e) asked for how long the Council had been receiving insecure funding, Mr Oakford advised that the Council had always received this. Previously, it had diverted it into the base budget but this was not sustainable so the Council would seek instead to put it into reserves. Kent's current level of reserves, £55m, placed it near the bottom of the league table of local authorities. The Council would balance its budget this year and then rebuild its reserves;
- f) disappointment was expressed that the Council did not seem to invest more in preventative work, and a comment made that this was short-sighted;
- g) a view was expressed that the Council should seek to avoid closing its buildings but use them instead to group public services together, as this was what residents had said they wanted. More detail was sought on potential capital projects. Once the response to the Kent Community Assets consultation was known, the Council would need to look at long-term investment and solutions;

- h) a view was expressed that reserves were supposed to be for a rainy day. Mr Oakford advised that the Council would draw down reserves a lot in the future and they could soon become dangerously low;
- i) 5% in reserves would represent about £50m, and a question was asked about what level of reserve would keep the County Council viable. The deficit caused by an overspend must be taken from reserves, but this was not sustainable - £60m debt would cancel out £50m of reserves. It was surely expected that a Section 114 notice would shortly become necessary. The Council had failed to maintain sufficient reserves and needed to add to them now rather than later. The situation did not seem to have been properly monitored. Ms Cooke drew attention to the Council's Reserves policy, included as Appendix G of the budget book, and advised that 5% general reserve was a policy position which many local authorities used. Insecure funding was not used for non-recurring or time-limited activity, and reserves were earmarked to meet predicted risks. Management action would seek to bring down the overspend to as close to £25m as possible. Key areas of overspend, and ongoing pressures, were in ASCH and CYPE, in common with many other local authorities. Local authorities could not become bankrupt; a S114 notice meant that they would receive Government intervention to ensure that statutory service obligations were met. By the time of the budget County Council meeting, quarter 3 monitoring information would be available and officers would be able to give an update on reserves. The ability to achieve a balanced budget would depend on the ability to identify savings. The committee was reassured that monitoring was very tight, and its frequency would be increased. Mr Oakford added that all areas of the budget were impacted by ASCH pressures and that this situation would continue into the near future;
- j) a comment was made that no clear steps or detail was included to say how any savings would be delivered;
- k) Members needed to be clear about who was accountable for the policy which had led to the overspend;
- l) options for the future of the Chief Executive's Department Strategic Estate Programme stated an allocation of £6m, followed by £12m, but the spreadsheet did not give detail of what this would be spent on. Mrs Spore advised that full details of options for the future of Strategic Headquarters buildings would come to the next meeting of the committee;
- m) Members could not 'propose changes', as asked by the recommendation in the report, if they did not have a full picture. Mr Cockburn advised that it was key that all Members had all information in order to be able to make budget proposals; and
- n) asked if the reserves were sufficient to cover fluctuational spending, Ms Cooke advised that they were and that the situation was, and would continue to be, monitored regularly.

3. It was RESOLVED that Members' comments on the draft capital and revenue budgets relevant to this committee, including responses to consultation, be noted and reported to the Cabinet on 26 January 2023, before the draft was presented for approval at County Council on 9 February 2023.

127. Performance Dashboard for the Chief Executive's Department and Deputy Chief Executive's Department
(Item 8)

1. Ms Kennard introduced the report and, with Mrs Beer, Ms Cooke and Mr Watts, responded to comments and questions from the committee, including the following:-
 - a) asked about the sustained high volume of calls about the blue badge scheme, Mrs Beer advised that there was both a backlog of queries about the scheme and an ongoing challenge around the volume of calls received, which were both being managed through the Contact Point but being delayed by the volume of calls and the ongoing struggle, which the committee had heard about on previous occasions, to recruit, train and retain sufficient call centre staff. Members sympathised with the issues faced by call handlers coping with a demanding volume of calls;
 - b) asked if similar problems might be encountered when a large number of bus passes became due for renewal at the same time, Mrs Beer advised that this could be predicted so had been planned for, and managers would ensure that there was a mechanism to deal with questions effectively;
 - c) asked why the number of visits to the Kent County Council website had been 'above expectation', and what the expected level was, Mrs Beer undertook to check the target and advise the questioner outside the meeting;
 - d) the report referred to 'partnership' with Agilisys and the point was made that the Council commissioned a service from them and was therefore surely a customer rather than a partner. Mrs Beer advised that Agilisys provided the service but the company and the Council managed the impact of various issues together. It was up to the Council to help by doing all it could to deliver timely services and give clear information to minimise the volume of queries and complaints coming to the call centre. Call handlers were well supported to deal with angry and distressed callers and Agilisys had good customer satisfaction ratings;
 - e) asked about the level of overpayment to people in receipt of ASCH services, and how much it would cost to recover the overpaid money, Ms Cooke undertook to provide figures to the questioner outside the meeting. The cost of recovery was in terms of staff time, which would be absorbed by the team as part of daily work;
 - f) referring to target FN05, asked how the ability to collect funds was assessed, and if arrangements to recover any overspend were built into the process in advance, Ms Cooke advised that the overspend was an

issue of the timing of the transfer of funds and had arisen very recently. Monitoring of payments was rigorous but also necessarily sensitive when helping vulnerable service users to manage potential debt;

- g) asked about progress on target GL03, and when this might be brought back on track, Mr Watts advised that most subject access requests came from the CYPE subject area and undertook to liaise with the Director to discuss how this performance might be improved. He advised, however, that he had no spare resources available to address this immediately. The target response time assumed that the information requested would be easy to access, but many requests referred to historic information which needed to be found in paper files, and the nature of many such requests meant that sensitive information would also need to be reviewed by social workers before being released;
- h) one committee member advised that the legislation which established the blue badge assessment process gave rise to an anomaly which made applications complex. The process worked on a point system, with 10 points being the threshold. Applicants scoring 11 or 12 points, however, may not necessarily be eligible and would need to enter a separate stage of assessment. This may account for the high number of repeat calls, as applicants struggled to understand their eligibility. A simple re-wording of the legislation to set the threshold as '10 or more points' would remove this problem. Mr Watts undertook to look into this issue with officers and the relevant Cabinet Member, advise the committee of the outcome outside the meeting and assess the need for any further and more detailed report on the blue badge scheme;
- i) many people needing to renew a blue badge or bus pass would not have digital skills or access to computer equipment so would need to ring the call centre for help, and were likely to be frustrated and distressed by the time they did so. If access to the blue badge scheme could be improved, the number of complaints to the call centre about it would be reduced, addressing two performance targets in one. Mrs Beer advised that Council had digital champions who could help users to access systems. To reduce complaints, the Council would need to optimise access to its services via all possible routes, not just digital; and
- j) a view was expressed that the data presented in the dashboard would be more useful if there were a shorter time between it being gathered and being presented to the committee, and a suggestion that the dashboard be reported instead to every meeting to allow the committee to see more up to date information. Ms Kennard advised that most data would not change between meetings and a report to every meeting would therefore see the same data being repeated. The pattern of reporting had been disrupted a little by the postponement of meeting dates in autumn 2022 as a result of the period of national mourning. Mr Watts suggested that the issue of dashboard reporting be discussed at the next agenda setting.

2. It was RESOLVED that the performance position for the Chief Executive's Department and Deputy Chief Executive's Department be noted, with thanks,

and the issues raised about the blue badge scheme, set out above, be addressed as indicated.

128. 22/00115 - Disposal of Land and Buildings at Victoria Road/Park Crescent Road, Margate, CT9 1NB

(Item 9)

1. Mr Oakford introduced the report and, with, Mrs Spore and the officer team, responded to comments and questions from the committee, including the following:-
 - a) asked how much the County Council had paid for the site when it purchased it, Mr D'Alton advised that the site had been acquired in 2020, based on population projections which would have justified the creation of a new secondary school in the locality. Following subsequent updates to population projections, the school development was cancelled and the site had been declared surplus to the Council's operational requirements. He undertook to provide details of the price paid for the site outside the meeting. The Council sought to provide services in the best possible location for service users, not necessarily where its premises had become redundant;
 - b) asked what discussions had gone on prior to the site being declared surplus to requirements, Mr Oakford advised that, as was standard practice, the site had been declared surplus by the CYPE Directorate and had then been passed to the Infrastructure team for disposal. As part of the Council's disposals policy, alternative uses had been considered;
 - c) it was requested that future reports about property disposals include full details of the costs of disposal. Similarly, full details of the discussion about the business case, leading up to a disposal decision, should be included; and
 - d) asked if the Council could seek a partner with whom to develop the site, Mr Oakford advised that this option had been considered 2-3 years ago and a decision made that the County Council taking on a property development role was not an appropriate use of public money.
2. It was RESOLVED that the decision proposed to be taken by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services, to agree to the disposal of the property, Lots 4 and 5 of Land and Buildings at Victoria Road/Park Crescent Road, Margate, CT9 1NB, and delegate authority to:
 1. the Director of Infrastructure, in consultation with the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services, to finalise the terms of the disposal; and
 2. the Director of Infrastructure, to authorise the execution of all necessary or desirable documentation required to implement the above,be endorsed.

Mr A Brady, Rich Lehmann and Dr L Sullivan asked that their abstentions from this resolution be minuted.

129. Work Programme 2023

(Item 10)

It was RESOLVED that the committee's planned work programme for 2023 be noted.