



Lewes District Council

Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of meeting held in Ditchling Room - Southover House, Lewes on 13 September 2018 at 2.00 pm

Present:

Councillor Peter Gardiner (Chair)
Councillors Nancy Bikson, Joanna Carter, Nigel Enever, Ruth O'Keeffe, Sarah Osborne, Julian Peterson and Robbie Robertson

Officers in attendance:

Thomas Bilcock (Interim Customer Contact Manager), Natalie Carpenter (Planning Policy Officer), Jane Goodall (Strategy and Partnership Lead, Quality Environment), Jo Harper (Head of Business Planning and Performance), Catherine Knight, (Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services), Bryn Mabey (Customer, Communications and Engagement Lead), Bill McCafferty (Functional Lead for Thriving Communities), Millie McDevitt (Performance and Programmes Lead), Leigh Palmer (Interim Head Of Planning), Scot Reid (Head of Customer & Neighbourhood Services), Leighton Rowe (Development Project Manager), Tondra Thom (Planning Policy Lead) and Jazmin Victory (Committee Officer)

Others in attendance:

Councillors Stephen Catlin and Elayne Merry

13 Minutes of the meeting held on 28 June 2018

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 June 2018 were submitted and approved, and the Chair was authorised to sign them as a correct record.

Members noted the following updates:

Lewes Bonfire Celebrations – The Functional Lead for Quality Environment provided the following update following the recommendations that the Scrutiny Committee made to Cabinet on 28 June 2018:

The Tactical Co-ordination Group (TCG) which represented agencies including British Transport Police, South East Coast Ambulance Service, East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, Lewes District Council, East Sussex County Council, Southern Railway and Sussex Police, had noted the views of Scrutiny Committee. These views had been carefully considered, but the group as a whole still believed that the decision to bring in changes to transport and travel on 5 November 2018 was an appropriate and proportionate response to

the risks involved in Lewes Bonfire. They had listened to the views of those affected in the Cooksbridge area and have arranged for the 16:16 departure from London Victoria, to stop at Cooksbridge which arrives at 17:20 to allow some commuters to get home, albeit earlier. In addition The Chair of the TCG and the Chair of the crowd management group also had arranged a meeting with the University of Sussex later this month to see how the closure of Falmer Station can be mitigated.

The multi-agency group had considered a number of factors including an independent crowd safety review, carried out during the 2016 event when there were fewer attendees due to the train strike.

It concluded that: "Left unchanged, there was a very high likelihood of an incident occurring that could result in serious injury or death to one of more people in this event"

"Controlling the number of people at the event would help us to look after everyone involved."

North Street Quarter – The Project Manager had contacted councillors directly with further information regarding how the Council were supporting businesses/social enterprises that were currently on the site, as well as further details regarding the anticipated target completion date of April 2021.

14 Apologies for absence

An apology for absence had been received from Councillor Ient.

The Chair welcomed Councillors Robertson and Bikson at their first meeting as members of the Scrutiny Committee.

15 Declarations of Interest

There were none.

16 Urgent Items

There were none.

17 Written Questions from Councillors

There were none.

18 Local Plan Part 2

On 12 September 2018 a presentation and briefing was held for members regarding the changes to the Local Plan Part 2. Following this meeting, the Interim Head of Planning, Planning Policy Lead and the Planning Policy Officer attended the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 13 September 2018 to

participate in a Q&A session and answer any further questions. The Chair reiterated to members that this would be the last opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to make recommendations; the plan would however be presented to Full Council on 26 November 2018, where minor amendments could be recommended.

Members queried how the Council would facilitate the implementation of the policies once the plan had been approved, and were informed that the Council had already identified some actions such as; training being provided to officers, sustainability checklists, and training for members after the May election.

Members were pleased to note that policies regarding employment and biodiversity were strengthened in the plan.

Resolved:

1. That members noted the Local Plan Part 2 and were keen to see it progress; and
2. That officers would send an email to all councillors with a reminder of the deadlines for the plans submittal.

Reason:

To allow members to comment on the Local Plan Part 2 during its consultation period.

19 Benefits

Following a written request from the committee, the Functional Lead for Thriving Communities attended the meeting on 13 September 2018 to discuss the performance of benefits, answer members' queries, and find out how the committee would like to progress with the issue.

Members were informed that the Council were aware that claims were not being processed as quickly as in the past, and that the majority of the delays could be attributed to the following reasons:

- Loss of experienced staff (incl. maternity leave);
- 6 new employees who were undergoing training;
- staff assisting the Customer Contact Centre with answering phone calls; and
- staff learning a different system.

Members were pleased to note that the delay reported was not a reflection of residents waiting for payment, as officers reported that the Council had approved a pre-payment option for accounts which were missing information. The performance indicator only measured how quickly a benefits claim was fully processed, however officers could not fully process a claim until all information had been received. Members requested that at future meetings the Scrutiny Committee could receive figures regarding how many pre-payments had taken place.

Members were informed about plans for an electronic claim form for housing benefits, which would prepopulate forms and release officer time for other tasks. The Council were optimistic that electronic claim forms would eventually allow for claims to be processed automatically without human involvement, which would further speed up the process. Officers noted concerns that not all members of the community were computer literate or had access to the internet, and reiterated that filling out a claim form electronically would be an option available, but not mandatory.

Officers anticipated a difficult period following Universal Credit being rolled out in Lewes on 26 September 2018, but had been working closely with Job Centres so that the transition period could run as smoothly as possible.

Members were pleased to note that there were no appeals outstanding and that staff were improving with their process time and decision making skills.

Resolved:

That members noted the update provided by the Functional Lead for Thriving Communities regarding benefits.

Reason:

Demonstrating the Scrutiny Committee's capacity to invite any senior officer to attend before it to explain in relation to matters within their remit, the committee had requested that the Functional Lead for Thriving Communities attend the meeting on 13 September 2018 to discuss the performance of the Council's benefits system.

20 Communications

Following a written request from the committee, the Head of Customer and Neighbourhood Services and the Customer Communications & Engagement Lead attended the meeting on 13 September 2018 to discuss the performance of the Council's Communications, answer members' queries, and find out how the committee would like to progress with the issue.

Contact Centre – The Head of Customer & Neighbourhood Services informed members that in addition to there being a 12% average vacancy rate in the contact centre, When we compare Q1 2017 and Q1 2018 customer contact then there had been a 49% increase in calls, 14% increase in emails and 93% increase in web enquiries. The number of customers visiting our 3 reception centres has also increased by 5% this period. Although the department had an agreed headcount of 45 FTE staff, when taking into account vacancies, annual leave, sickness and training it left approx. 19 FTE staff to deal with all customer contact calls, online transactions and social media interactions, and subsequently this staff shortage had contributed to delays.

Members queried why there was a high staff turnover in the Customer Contact Centre, and were informed that this was an entry level job which meant that there was often movement to different jobs within the Council. Due

to the high staff turnover, the Council had recently held an open day at which they handed out job packs to interested parties with the intention of over-recruiting and backfilling posts.

Members suggested that the department should have more than 45 FTE, whether that was on a permanent or a temporary basis, especially considering the anticipated additional impact with the Universal Credit roll out on 26 September 2018.

The Cabinet Member for People and Performance, Councillor Merry, informed members that she had been working closely with officers and the leader of the Council to address these problems and make improving the Customer Contact Centre a priority. There were currently alternatives which were being discussed, such as reconsidering how many FTE staff the Customer Contact Centre needed, having group training sessions, and creating a bank of staff to backfill posts.

Members commented that they had received feedback from the public praising the reception staff for their patience and helpfulness.

Website – The Customer Communications and Engagement Lead informed members that comments from previous Scrutiny Committee meetings were taken into consideration, and there was a huge amount of work taking place to improve the Council's website accessibility and usability including:

- An improved search function on the website;
- an improved phonebook on the Hub (intranet);
- fewer steps to complete tasks; and
- the shortening of URLs.

Officers recognised that the channel shift was not as progressed as they had anticipated at this stage; however they were working on identifying problems and responding to feedback and hoped that continued improvements being made to the website would encourage more users to go online.

Members noted the excellent response time for social media.

Resolved:

1. That members noted the update provided by officers regarding communications; and
2. That members **recommend** to Cabinet that the number of FTE staff required in this department be reconsidered and increased, whether than be on a temporary or permanent basis.

Reason:

Demonstrating the Scrutiny Committee's capacity to invite any senior officer to attend before it to explain in relation to matters within their remit, the committee had requested that the Head of Customer and Neighbourhood Services and the Customer Communications and Engagement Lead attend

the meeting on 13 September 2018 to discuss the performance of the Council's communications.

21 Affordable Housing

Pursuant to the following minute extract from the Scrutiny meeting held on 19 April 2018, the Development Project Manager and the Interim Head of Planning attended the meeting on 13 September 2018 to provide a verbal update.

“The Chair brought to the Committees attention that, whilst being briefed on the performance targets for 2018/19, he recognised that the target for Affordable Homes Delivered was not consistent with the target that had been recommended by Scrutiny and agreed by Cabinet following a Scrutiny Review Panel which took place in 2013. The Chair therefore requested that an officer attend a future Scrutiny Committee meeting to provide an update regarding Affordable Housing across the District.”

Officers informed the committee that Affordable Housing was an umbrella term which incorporated social rented, affordable rented, temporary accommodation and intermediate housing which was provided to eligible households. There were currently 3 ways that the Council could develop Affordable Housing, and that going forward the Council would be reporting figures under the following 3 headings.

- Affordable Housing developed through the Council's development company;
- Affordable Housing developed through S106 obligations of planning applications processed by a 3rd party; and
- Affordable Housing developed through the Council stepping into the shoes of the third party developers and taking over their S106 obligations.

Modular Housing – Since the Full Council meeting held on 19 February 2018, 6 sites had been identified; however infrastructure costs, planning, and viability issues had made the sites financially unviable. There was still 1 potential site which had been identified, and this site would be presented to Cabinet on 29 October 2018, after which a briefing would be held for Lewes District Councillors and Newhaven Town Councillors with more details of the plan.

Members were informed that one reason the delivery of Affordable Housing was delayed was because the Council had no enforceability over housing developers to start work. Members suggested that the Council write to the companies that were causing a delay, and asked for the project(s) to be expedited. Members also suggested that the Council write to central government to point out that the shortage of Affordable Housing was not due to any fault of local government, but because of developers causing delays.

Resolved:

1. That members noted the update provided by officers regarding Affordable Housing;
2. That members **recommend** to Cabinet that the Council write to the companies that were causing a delay and asked for development projects to be expedited; and
3. That members **recommend** to Cabinet that the Council write to central government to point out that the shortage of Affordable Housing was not due to any fault of local government, but because of developers causing delays.

Reason:

To comply with the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 19 April 2018; that officers attend the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 3 September 2018 and provide more information regarding Affordable Housing.

22 Sustainability Policy

The Scrutiny Committee considered the report of the Director of Planning and Regeneration regarding the development of the Sustainability Policy for Lewes District Council.

Observations submitted in response to the draft policy included:

Environmental impact

- That sentences beginning with 'we will seek to deliver' are changed to 'we will deliver' where reasonable, to be more positive;
- That example environmental initiatives are included;
- That climate change be mentioned; and
- That environmental resilience be mentioned.

Sustainable economic growth

- That the word facilitate in the title 'We will facilitate sustainable economic growth...' was replaced with a more optimistic word;
- That Green Growth be mentioned; and
- That an example regarding what small businesses and the self-employed need to facilitate sustainable economic growth was included.

Thriving communities

- That sustainability of an aging demographic be mentioned; and
- That planning considerations be linked to the policy; such as identifying sustainable locations for homes.

Officers noted members' suggestions, and commented that the policy was intended to be high level and therefore officers did not intend to include details such as specific initiatives that the Council were running.

Resolved:

That members had considered the proposed Sustainability Policy and referred their observations to Cabinet.

Reason:

To support the development of the Sustainability Policy for Lewes District Council.

23 Chair of the Council's Annual Business Report

The Committee received the report of the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services which detailed the Chair's 2017/18 civic programme and the civic programme for the forthcoming year and budget provision.

Resolved:

That members note the report.

Reason:

To note the outgoing Chair's civic programme and the civic programme for the forthcoming year.

24 Corporate Performance Report - Quarter 1

The Scrutiny Committee considered the report of the Deputy Chief Executive regarding Quarter 1 2018/2019 performance against the Corporate Plan priority actions, performance indicators and targets.

Key discussions and officer actions arising from the report were detailed below:

Planning Appeals – Members noted that there was no commentary regarding planning appeals rejected by officers or members and that the reason for this was because there had been no appeals during Quarter 1.

Sickness – Members noted that the Corporate Management Team had revised the sickness target from 9 days to 8 days, with the view to it being reduced to 7 days next year. The current target was in line with the public sector generally and, specifically, local government.

Rent Collection – Officers clarified to the committee that 96% was the annual target, and that in future reports this item would include an additional column for the quarterly target.

Property re-let time – Members questioned what the delays were and officers responded that during June, 18 properties were re-let, 2 of which needed major works including extensive repairs and adaptation installations.

North Street Quarter – Members questioned how much money the Council were putting in and how much was from Private companies.

Council Tax – Officers informed members that the low council tax collection rate was largely due the new ways of working and staff transitioning to the new structures. Officers would incorporate comparisons with the previous year into future reports.

Fly tipping – Members noted that from 1 October 2018 East Sussex County would be implementing a charge for disposals, and anticipated that this would encourage more occurrences of fly tipping. Members' comments would be passed to the Head of Customer and Neighbourhood Services regarding the importance of communicating with residents and minimising the potential increase in fly tipping.

Resolved:

That the Scrutiny Committee note the achievements and progress against Corporate Plan priorities for 2018/19, as set out in the report.

Reason:

To demonstrate the discharge of the Scrutiny Committee function to monitor all aspects of performance management activities, as required by Part 3 section 2.2 (7) of the Constitution of the Council.

25 Safeguarding Policy

The committee noted the report of the Director of Service Delivery regarding the proposed joint Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults Policy.

Members questioned whether residents were actively encouraged to use Clare's Law (The Domestic Abuse Disclosure Scheme); officers responded that housing staff receive training which includes advising residents about a range of services which were available to them, including Clare's Law.

Members questioned whether more staff should be receiving a Disclosure and Barring Service check, just in case they potentially come into contact with children or vulnerable adults. Officers reported that a Disclosure and Barring Service check was only required when the position that was applied for was listed as an exception under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974.

Resolved:

That the Scrutiny Committee endorse the proposed Safeguarding Policy.

Reason:

To enable the previous policy to be updated and brought into line with the recommended practice and with current pan-Sussex policies and procedures.

26 Scrutiny Annual Work Programme 2018/2019

The committee considered the Annual Scrutiny Work Programme for the forthcoming year.

Members noted some changes to the Annual programme, including:

- The Transport Panel Final report being delayed until 7 February 2019;
- the Affordable Workspace Final report being delayed until 21 March 2019; and
- the Performance Monitoring 2018/2019 Quarter 3 report being presented to the Scrutiny Committee on 21 March 2019.

Members requested that Recruitment be added to the work programme for the meeting on 29 November 2018 as a potential Panel and that the relevant officer(s) be invited.

Resolved:

1. That the Annual Work Programme, as set out at Appendix A of the report, be recommended to Cabinet on 29 October 2018 and sent to Full Council for approval on 26 November 2018.
2. That the relevant officer be invited to the scrutiny committee meeting on 29 November 2018 for the committee to discuss recruitment and clarify their intentions before a formal report is written, a review is undertaken, or some other course of action is to be followed.

Reason:

To discharge Scrutiny Procedure Rule 7 to prepare and submit the Annual Work Programme to Full Council.

27 Forward Plan of Decisions

The committee received the Forward Plan for the period from 1 September to 31 December 2018.

Resolved:

That the Forward Plan of the Council for the period from 1 September to 31 December be noted.

Reason:

To demonstrate the discharge of the Scrutiny Procedure Rule 9 (d) to have regard to the Forward Plan of Decisions.

The meeting ended at 4.45 pm

Councillor Peter Gardiner (Chair)