

Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of meeting held in Ditchling Room at Southover House, Southover Road, Lewes, BN7 1AB on 12 September 2019 at 2.00 pm

Present:

Councillor Joe Miller (Chair)

Councillors Robert Banks, Nancy Bikson, Liz Boorman, Roy Burman, Isabelle Linington, Milly Manley, Christine Robinson, Adrian Ross and Steve Saunders

Officers in attendance:

Jo Harper (Head of Business Planning and Performance), Millie McDevitt (Performance and Programmes Lead), Gary Hall (Head of Homes First), Catherine Knight (Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services), Nick Peeters (Committee Officer), Leighton Rowe (Development Project Manager), Tim Whelan (Director of Service Delivery) and Simon Watts (Interim Lead, Homes First)

1 Appointment of a Vice-Chair

The Chair, Councillor Joe Miller, proposed Councillor Liz Boorman as Vice-Chair and this was seconded by Councillor Nancy Bikson.

RESOLVED – that Councillor Liz Boorman be appointed as Vice-Chair of the Scrutiny Committee.

2 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 June 2019 were submitted and approved, and the Chair was authorised to sign them as a correct record.

3 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Christine Brett.

4 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Steven Saunders declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 10 on the agenda, Scrutiny Seaford Health Hub Panel Update, as a member of the Wave Leisure Trust. It was noted that Councillor Saunders had no involvement in the Panels's work.

5 Urgent Items

There were no urgent items.

6 Written Questions from Councillors

There were no written questions from Councillors.

7 Quarterly Performance report - Quarter 1

Millie McDevitt, Performance and Management Lead, introduced the report which provided detail of the Council's performance in Quarter 1 2019/20 (1 April – 30 June 2019). During discussion the following points were highlighted:

Target completion dates for Council projects – the Committee sought clarification on a number of completion dates for projects included in the Regeneration and Business, and the Finance and Corporate Projects and Programmes sections of the report. Officers agreed to discuss the issue with the relevant project managers and where available to provide detail on interim milestones/dates and on the status of those projects.

Calls to the Contact Centre – Officers advised Members that during quarter 1 the volume of calls to the Contact Centre had increased significantly, generated predominantly through the issuing of council tax, business rate bills and election related enquiries. There had also been two elections in May (European and local elections). The performance indicators for this area were under review and would in the future look at the quality of the call response as well as the speed of the response. Members suggested that the volume of calls answered during peak times be analysed.

Homes First presentation – Simon Watts, Interim Lead, Homes First Property Services, updated the Committee on the work being undertaken towards managing void properties and re-let times 'Key to Key'. During discussion the following points were highlighted:

- The charge-back process allowed the Council to recover costs for voids and all other day-to-day repairs where tenants caused damage. The Homes First team was responsible for managing void repairs and Mears managed day-to-day repairs. Collection rates were currently low and work was being done towards improving the monitoring of the process. A sundry debtor's account would be set-up and tighter control would be introduced to ensure tenants took more responsibility for any damage. The main incentive for tenants who left properties in a poor condition was that, at some point, they may need to join the property list again. There would also be opportunities for money orders (through the County Court) to be included in cases of repossession.
- The void timetable had been officer led using good practice. The opportunity for Member input into the timetable would be suggested to the Council's Corporate Management Team.

- Each void property was pre and post inspected and a number of properties were turned around in five days. However, there were properties requiring significant refurbishment, modernisation and investment, increasing the average cost across all void properties. There was not currently sufficient data across the Council's stock to determine the condition of the properties, including the presence of asbestos, requiring the Council to undertake full refurbishment and demolition (R&D) surveys. As an organisation, Mears sub-contracted any work involving asbestos, which extended the period of re-let time and added to the overall costs. Existing contracts would be reviewed and where possible value-for-money would be improved.
- Homes First was using a new IT system and efforts would be made to look at the void property spend in previous years, particularly on the individual elements such as electrics/rewiring, boiler repairs/replacements. Benchmarking with other organisations (including those that used Mears) would be undertaken, following the design of the 'schedule of rates'. This would allow consideration of different delivery models.
- Lewes District Council had a capital budget of £4.8 million for housing repairs (major, planned and cyclical). The response rate of 13000 over 3,000 properties (an average of approximately 4 per property) did not vary to any great extent from the average. Eighty percent of the data used to monitor repairs was from a two year old, twenty percent survey. Newer surveys would be undertaken.
- The Committee requested that the Homes First Team report back in a year's time with an update on the voids/re-letting position.
- The change of categories for 'priority need' within the 2007 Homeless Reduction Act had contributed to an increase in the numbers of households in emergency accommodation. There was a work-stream now ongoing dedicated to reducing the current figure.

Planning performance – the performance indicators for planning applications were subject to fluctuation from quarter to quarter, however, the current targets for major and minor planning applications had been exceeded. New ways of working, including new IT systems, would need to be embedded before staff resources were looked at.

RESOLVED

- a) To note the progress and performance for Quarter 1 as well as the overall performance for 2019/20; and
- b) Recommend to the Cabinet that the target dates and interim milestones for Council projects be reviewed.

8 Request for a Climate Change Scrutiny Panel

Jo Harper, Head of Business Planning and Performance, introduced the report which requested the Scrutiny to consider the establishment of a Scrutiny Panel on Climate Change in line with resolutions made by both the Cabinet and Full Council (following the declaration of a climate change emergency).

During discussion the following points were highlighted:

Members agreed that appointing a Panel was a positive step towards supporting the Council in addressing climate change issues and a composition of five Members was appropriate. It was further agreed that, in principle, the Panel would operate until 2030 (the duration of the Council's Climate Change Strategy), but that a more practical approach was for an annual review of the Panel's duration to be undertaken.

RESOLVED by a majority vote that:

a) A Climate Change Scrutiny Panel, comprising five members of the Scrutiny Committee, be established to fulfil the tasks set out at para 2.1 in the report as follows

- To scrutinise the progress of work being undertaken by the council in tackling climate change.
- To receive progress reports on the strategy, policy and actions enacted by the council to address the climate emergency.
- To monitor the implementation of recommendations made by the Climate Action Group, agreed by Cabinet on 1 July 2019.
- To undertake policy development activities assisting in the formulation of climate change mitigation and adaptation proposals.
- To invite appropriate experts to provide advice and information to help inform policy development work in relation to climate change.
- To promote the council's work in this area, engaging with and building partnerships, alongside the Cabinet Member for Sustainability; and

b) That the Panel meet at regular intervals on an annual basis, with the duration of the Panel to also be reviewed on an annual basis.

9 Request for scrutiny of Cabinet decision on the demolition of offices and construction of housing at 20 Fort Road, Newhaven

Leighton Rowe, Housing Policy and Development Manager, introduced the item and provided a summary of the scheme:

The decision to progress the scheme for 13 flats (7 one bedroom and 6 two bedroom) had been taken by the Full Council in February 2018 and focused on reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation.

Several other sites in the district had been considered (Lewes, Peacehaven). The Seaford site had been identified as one where the scheme could be built out expediently, in order to respond to the need for housing.

The Council's Regeneration Team had looked at alternative uses for the building and when the original report was produced it had been determined that there was an oversupply of office and employment space.

A development opportunity to include the wider site (including the neighbouring fire station) had been considered. However, there were a number of issues that made this a complicated option.

The Newhaven Neighbourhood Plan had identified the site as suitable for six homes (as part of renovation scheme); however, it was considered that the site would have more potential following a full demolition and the building of 13 flats.

The contract had been looked at again as the costs had risen and the current overall estimate was £2.9 million. The scheme was for modular housing and a local supplier/builder, based in Newhaven, was being considered. Several specifications that met the Council's sustainability and fire safety requirements had been built into the scheme and had been costed for.

The scheme build had a 60 year life-span and had originally been promoted as a temporary accommodation development to reduce the numbers in bed & breakfast. However, there was also the opportunity for the whole scheme to be delivered as the Council's own housing stock.

- Councillor Saunders had asked for the scheme to be considered by the Scrutiny Committee. His concerns were:
 - A reason had not been provided for not considering sites in other areas where demolition would not be needed.
 - There had always been a need for office and business start-up space in Newhaven. The Council Offices were suitable for conversion to this type of space.
 - The demolition of the council offices site would be costly, including removal of asbestos if it was present.
 - The land value, when added on to the overall costs made the scheme unviable and was not the best use of the Council's funds.

During discussion the following points were highlighted.

- Had Lewes District Council borne all the costs to date for the scheme?
- The Council had paid the architects fees. Other work had been undertaken by officers and was part of Council's own staffing costs.
- What was the square meterage of the units?
 - The two bedroom units were 70 square meters and the one bedroom units were 50 square meters. The average cost was £223,000 per unit (£3436 per square meter, including communal spaces). The current estimate for the value of the built-out development was £2.7 million. An independent valuation would be undertaken as part of the process.
- Members expressed a preference in the development being made available under general market rent.
- What were the rental values of the units?
 - The one bedroom flats would have a rental value of up to approximately £145.00 and the two bedroom flats would have a rental value of up to £166.00. The rental value was 80 percent of the market level.
- The proposals provided an opportunity for the Council to demonstrate its support of green technology. Should the development proceed, a review of the scheme could be undertaken to better inform future sites where similar schemes could be considered.
- How much extra had the green technology added to the overall costs and what would happen to the office building if the proposals did not move forward?
 - The additional costs for the sustainability measures were £314,000. The costs of ground works would be provided to the Panel after the meeting. Some of the cost savings would be to the benefit of tenants rather than the Council.
 - In terms of the site's future if left as it was, there were two possible options: either it would remain empty until the town council and fire and rescue sites became available (which could be ; or there would be a relook at the costs of refurbishing the building for residential or office space.
- What specifications would the modular builds have that traditional builds did not?
 - The Council was looking to improve the specification of its traditional builds, with a higher quality fabric. The modular build

was chosen because the build time was quicker and there was less disruption. The sustainable infrastructure in the modular builds would include mechanical ventilation systems, and less heating would be required.

RESOLVED by a majority that:

1. The scheme be supported;
2. It be recommended that the units be made available for permanent accommodation, through the Council's Housing Service; and to those with a local need.
3. The adjoining sites be monitored and the Council explore opportunities for development if and when they become available; and

The costs of the development (and similar schemes) be reviewed as part of the Committee's work programme.

- The Council was looking to improve the specification of its traditional builds, with a higher quality fabric. The modular build was chosen because the build time was quicker and there was less disruption. The sustainable infrastructure in the modular builds would include mechanical ventilation systems, and less heating would be required.

RESOLVED by a majority that:

1. The scheme be supported;
2. It be recommended that the units be made available for permanent accommodation, through the Council's Housing Service; and to those with a local need.
3. The adjoining sites be monitored and the Council explore opportunities for development if and when they become available; and
4. The costs of the development (and similar schemes) be reviewed as part of the Committee's work programme.

10 Scrutiny Seaford Health Hub Panel - update

Councillor Christine Robinson, Chair of the Scrutiny Seaford Health Hub Panel, updated the Committee on the Panel's work. Councillor Robinson highlighted the following points.

- The Panel, comprising Councillors Robinson, Liz Boorman, Brett, Burman and Clay (as a substitute for Councillor Ross), had been established to look at the implications of the Seaford Health Hub proposals.

- The “Downs Development Neighbourhood Voice” had presented a petition containing in excess of 1,500 signatures to the 15 July Full Council meeting asking for a halt to the Development on the Downs Leisure Centre site. The Petition was referred to the 25 September Full Council meeting for debate. The Scrutiny Seaford Health Hub Panel was asked to consider the petition also.
- The Scrutiny Committee was requested to approve the Panel’s terms of reference and upon conclusion of its work the Panel proposed that its recommendation(s) would be made directly to the Cabinet. The Committee was asked to agree this course.
- The Panel did not feel It was appropriate to comment at the time on any of the representations as it had not heard from all those who had made representations and been invited to respond.

Catherine Knight, Assistant Director Legal and Democratic Services, advised Members that there was a likelihood that there was a Scrutiny Committee meeting scheduled for 28 November

During discussion the following points were highlighted:

- There had not been any clear evidence provided as to why the Dane Road site could not be reconfigured to meet the requirements of the GPs.
 - The issue had been discussed at the Panel’s most recent meeting and would form part of the final report and evidence gathering.

RESOLVED to note the Panel’s update and agree that the final report and recommendations be presented to the Cabinet for consideration.

11 Chair of the Council's Annual Business Report

Catherine Knight, Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services, introduced the report which provided details of the work of the Chair of Lewes District Council, Councillor Stephen Gauntlet and the Vice-Chair, Councillor Johnny Denis, throughout 2018/19. The report also detailed the engagements attended by the Chair and Vice-Chair during the period.

There was no discussion on this item.

RESOLVED to note the report.

12 Forward Plan of Decisions

The Chair, Councillor Miller, introduced the report and advised Members that it was a standing item on the agenda for noting.

There was no discussion on the item.

RESOLVED to note the Forward Plan of Decisions.

13 Scrutiny Work Programme

Catherine Knight, Assistant Director, Legal and Democratic Services, introduced the report which included a draft of the Committee's work programme for 2019/20. The Committee was advised that some of the topics already discussed in the meeting could be considered for inclusion in the work programme. The Committee was also advised that, where it proved to be useful, presentations on topics could be provided prior to the start of Scrutiny Committee meetings.

During discussion the Committee requested that the following items be considered as part of its work programme:

- Waste and Recycling in the District, information for residents on recyclables to include levels of fly-tipping and enforcement.
- The setting up of the Scrutiny Climate Change Panel which, in part, may also to the Planning policy for alternative energy supplies for new housing (Private and Lewes District Council Provision) and impact on build costs.
- Annual Lewes District Community Safety Partnership Report to include anti-social behaviour in the District.
- Tourism in the District.
- Sustainable Transport and supporting the economy, which could include cross-border work looking at park-and-ride, the A259 and A27
- Supporting Young people in the District, including youth services, how to get young people on the housing ladder.
- Briefing on Newhaven developments and more broadly the approach to development on small sites and sustainability.

RESOLVED to agree the Committee's draft work programme..

The meeting ended at 4.15 pm

Councillor Joe Miller (Chair)