

Policy and Performance Advisory Committee

Minutes of meeting held in Room 209/210 Marine Workshops, Railway Quay, Newhaven BN9 0ER on 19 September 2024 at 5.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Christine Brett (Chair).

Councillors Janet Baah (Deputy-Chair), Ciarron Clarkson, Graham Clews, Ezra Cohen, Paul Davies, Nikki Fabry, Charlotte Keenan, Paul Keene and Daniel Stewart-Roberts.

Officers in attendance:

Philip Brown (Property Lawyer), Luke Dreeling (Performance Lead), Nick Peeters (Committee Officer), Linda Farley (Assistant Director, Customer Service and Delivery), Jo Harper (Head of Business Planning and Performance), Christopher Bibb (Specialist Advisor Green Consultancy (Projects)), Marie Cooper (Interim Housing Property Services Lead), Nathan Haffenden (Assistant Director, Property and Development), Steven Houchin (Deputy Chief Finance Officer), Lynn Ingram (Interim Head of Financial Planning), Peter Jenion (Project Manager - Community Wealth Building), Lee Banner (Assistant Director, Neighbourhood and Transformation), Nadeem Din (Planning Policy - Lead), Lee Michael (Neighbourhood First Operational Manager) and Jane Goodall (Environment Lead).

Also in attendance:

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25 Minutes of the previous meeting dated 11 July 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on the 10 July 2024 were submitted and the Chair was authorised to sign them as a correct record.

26 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Mellor and Councillor Boniface was a substitute.

27 Declarations of Interest

There were none.

28 Urgent Items

There were none.

29 Written Questions from Councillors

There were none.

30 Review of the Council's grounds maintenance contract - verbal update

Lee Michael, Neighbourhood First Operational Manager, Chris Bibb, Neighbourhood First Team Specialist Advisor (Green Consultancy) and Lee Banner, Assistant Director - Neighbourhood and Transformation, provided a verbal update on the Council's Grounds Maintenance Contract. The following points were outlined during the update:

- The warm, wet spring and wet summer season had impacted on a number of authorities, with shared experiences in terms of grounds maintenance. However, the impact in Lewes District had been particularly acute. There were commercial sensitivities around the contract that prevented release of some of the contract detail, however, the existing contract was being managed within the parameters set, and the Council was actively working with the provider and where issues have been identified, the Council has worked to resolve them. A rectification plan was put in place which resulted in significant improvements.
- The Council was aware that in its existing form, with like-for-like services and parameters, the contract would cost considerably more if retendered. This raised the issue of affordability and the ability of the contractor to meet the terms of the current contract. The Council did not have the resources available to terminate the contract prior to the agreed end-date and a balance was being sought between ensuring the contractor was being held to account for any areas of the service that were under performing and still being able to meet the requirements of the service.
- There was no option to extend the current contract, and a project was underway to establish what the Council needed when it came to an end in March 2026. There were a number of options available to the Council including a new contract that included the separating of the various components of the service or bringing the Service back in-house. A further alternative was an arms-length, local authority-controlled company that would work with the Council. With all options, affordability and providing a logistically deliverable service were key factors.
- The option of working alongside Eastbourne Borough Council was included as a potential model for delivery of the service. All options would have regard to economies of scale. Members from Lewes and Eastbourne Cabinets had met to discuss future options.
- Improvements had been made in communications with residents in areas of the District where issues with grounds maintenance services had been identified. Residents and ward councillors would be kept up to date with any future issues if and when they arose. The current contractor had responded positively to the issues raised and had made efforts to provide additional recourses. There were no current concerns and the Council would address

any further problems that arose as the contract neared its end date. Residents and ward councillors would be kept up to date with any future issues.

- Challenges with recruitment and retention of staff reflected a national picture, with a shortage of skilled applicants. Some areas of the contract involved direct contact with residents, with mixed views being presented on levels of grass cutting needed, for example. Providing a customer friendly service was one of the skills required by staff.
- Adhering to the grass-cutting schedule was determined more by the length of the grass, maintaining it between minimum and maximum levels, than keeping to fixed dates for visiting areas. The schedule would be impacted on by periods of particularly dry and particularly wet weather. The aspiration for the future was for real-time monitoring that provided live updates on schedules as work was being undertaken.
- Both the delivery model for the contract and what was being delivered as a service would be included in the review. A large majority of the grounds maintenance work undertaken by the Council was discretionary and the cost of providing these services was a key consideration. There were biodiversity factors to also consider. The Council would provide policy direction for whatever form the new contract took.
- The Council managed grounds for a number of town and parish councils in the district, as well as some church grounds. The option of an in-house contract and then providing a service to other potential customers as a revenue stream would form part of future discussions.

Resolved to note the update.

31 Social housing stock repairs update - presentation

Marie Cooper, Head of Housing Property Services, gave a presentation to Members on the Council's social housing stock repairs. The presentation covered the following areas:

- The Housing Repairs Team was responsible for maintenance of the council's combined housing stock. The service had faced many challenges over recent years including historic underinvestment in social housing stock, the variety of stock in the district, providing a service during Covid 19 and managing new regulatory directives.
- Internal and structural work was being prioritised, including combatting damp and mould. Other areas such as fencing, gates, sheds and garages, would be kept in safe condition. The system of prioritisation had been communicated to tenants on the Council's website and at the beginning of the answer-phone system.
- Savings and efficiencies in service delivery were needed while ensuring

that residents of the district continued to receive a fair and proportional service.

- A report to Government in July 2024 setting out the solutions for stability and investment for HRA's received the support of Leaders from Lewes District and Eastbourne Borough Councils who also wrote to the relevant Minister supporting the initial report and calling for the safeguarding of council housing.
- In terms of combined revenue and capital expenditure, The Council was working to a budget of approximately £16million in the current financial year.
- Expenditure against budgets was in line with budget-setting as a result of systems put in place that included new controls on spending for high value repairs and weekly monitoring meetings with the Council's Finance team.
- An independent review of the structure and functions of the service was carried out, resulting in restructure proposals which would take effect in October 2024. The proposals brought together all property-led functions across the organisation including each Surveyor covering a range of programme types within a dedicated geographical area. The new structure centralised administration functions into a single place, benefiting customers.
- Regulatory Compliance would continue to be the key priority in all areas with a health and safety management focused team for homes a paramount factor
- in the Service Improvement Plan. The Customer Experience and Homes First teams were working hard to reduce complaints and improve the level of service.
- Achieving zero-carbon in the Service was an ongoing process and £2 million was secured earlier in 2024 to decarbonise 267 council homes in Lewes town. after successfully bidding for the SHDF Wave 2.2 government funding, as part of a consortium bid with Eastbourne Borough Council. There would be further opportunities to apply for grant funding.
- The current Repairs & Maintenance Contract would end in March 2026 and the contract size necessitated an immediate start to the re-procurement process. A series of workshops would be held with all stakeholders involved including Members of the Committee. Value for money was an important consideration and all opportunities to provide this would be explored as the procurement process progressed.

During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The Housing Repairs Service received a high level of complaints and was working towards addressing the levels. The service had performance indicators for areas of its work and again, it was working on improving these levels. Reducing the number of complaints and improving performance

levels would need to be considered as part of any future contract, including possible penalties for suppliers who were unable to meet targets. Workshops were being held to get tenant input and help shape elements of the service such as prioritising repairs. Essential repairs would be still be maintained.

- Surveyors would be appointed to geographic areas in order to provide continuity for tenants and a recognisable point of contact. The change would also be beneficial on the contract side of the work. It was expected that a future contract would place tenants and their needs as a core priority.
- It was expected that Member representation would be included in the workshops and further discussion was being held to determine what form the representation would take.
- The aim of any grant funding would be to bring properties to the Energy Performance Certificate C rating and the work required to achieve this varied across the Council's housing stock. Under certain criteria, elements of a grant funding bid could be used specifically for air-source heat pumps and solar voltaic panels.

Resolved to note the presentation.

32 Summary of requested reports due for consideration by the Cabinet on 26 September 2024

This report was for information purposes only.

32a Portfolio progress and performance report Quarter 1 - 2024-2025

Luke Dreeling, Performance Lead, presented the report which provided detail on the Council's progress and performance in respect of service areas for the First Quarter of the year (April – June 2024) as shown in Appendix 1 to the report. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- An increase in the availability of Council housing, through improvements in move-on to housing allocations and temporary accommodation voids, had significantly reduced the number of households living in temporary accommodation.
- Further work with the supplier of the Council's online chatbot, ELLIS, was being undertaken. It was recognised that performance levels for the system were not as expected, and the system would be reintroduced once the expected levels had been reached.
- There were duplicates in the performance indicators for the number of complaints received and resolved. This occurred when people used more than one form of communication for the same complaint, often at different stages. Complaint panels had been established to review complaints, measure trends and seek improvements to the process. The Council had

a 'unreasonably persistent and unreasonable behaviour' policy that was used to deal with vexatious or unreasonably persistent complainers.

Resolved to support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report, in full.

32b Finance update - performance Quarter 1 - 2024-2025

Steve Houchin, Deputy Chief Finance Officer and Lynn Ingram, Interim head of Financial Planning, presented the report which provided an assessment of the Council's financial performance against its approved 2024/25 budget, incorporating key financial risks, issues and opportunities for the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- A review of the Neighbourhood First budget had been undertaken in 2023/2024 which identified pressure on a number of areas including the Council's car parks. Proposals for funding areas of Neighbourhood First and improving car park income were being brought forward and would be included in a future report to the Cabinet.
- The conditions of grant funding included a requirement for the Council to update the relevant government department of any unspent funding. There was no requirement for the Council to return any funding as long as it was consistent in providing an update on its activity and providing sufficient justification for delays on spending in any particular areas.
- The financial pressure on bereavement services was a result of under recovery of income set against the budget. There would be a four-week review of all budget on a line-by-line basis and the Service and efforts would be made to bring it back in budget or provide further financial support.
- Food waste became a statutory service in October 2023 and although a budget for the service had been provided it was £105,000 below what was required, resulting in significant pressures on the Environment First. Proposals for meeting the required budget or providing additional funding would also be considered by the Cabinet.

Resolved to support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report, in full.

32c New Homes Principles: Building Better Council Housing

Nathan Haffenden, Assistant Director Property and Development, presented the report which detailed the Council's implementation of the New Homes Principles which underpinned the Council's housing delivery programme. During

discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- A review mechanism of the new homes principles was not included in the document itself, however they would be reviewed when looking at each housing development to see if they have been achieved. Specific recommendations to whether schemes were achieving the principles would be made as they progressed. A 12-month overarching review could be considered.
- The reference in the document to ‘Secure by Design’ for housing was around providing secure doors and locking mechanisms and safety catches to mitigate the risks of intruders or attempted burglary. There was more focus on specification in housing. Many of the principles within the document were already included in the Council’s housing schemes. The New Homes Principles was an opportunity to formalise them into a single context.

Resolved to support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report, in full.

32d Supporting Authority Approval for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) currently being prepared by the Responsible Authority, ESCC

Jane Goodall, Environment Lead, presented the report which addressed requirements of the Environment Act 2021 relating to the Council’s Supporting Authority role in reviewing both the pre-consultation draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and the final pre-publication LNRS. East Sussex County Council was the Responsible Authority and would provide the draft and final pre-publication documentation. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The Council’s Planning Policy team was developing a Green and Blue Infrastructure study that it was anticipated would feed into the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. The degree of consultation and engagement with communities and landowners has been exemplary. The weight given to the LNRS in plan-making is yet to be determined.

Resolved to support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report, in full.

32e Community Wealth Building update

Peter Jenion, Project Manager – Community Wealth Development, presented the report which provided an update on the progress of the Community Wealth Building programme. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- It was recognised that a more regional appraisal of spend should be carried out. The opportunities more locally were limited in terms of what could be procured. A retrospective analysis would be challenging given

the level of manual resources needed.

- The one remaining action from the 2020 diagnostic report was to consider the lobbying of East Sussex County Council to invest the pensions fund more locally. The initial work would include a feasibility study. The recommendation was in line with best practices elsewhere in other areas of the UK. Officers advised that caution would be used to address concerns at the risk to those people in the pension fund from potentially under-performing investments.
- Under normal circumstances, the Council would meet the requirements for it to be considered a living-wage employer, however, as the majority of the staff were in shared services across Lewes and Eastbourne Councils, the accreditation could not be provided. This only applied to a small number of staff in Eastbourne, and it was expected that compliance would be achieved by April 2025.
- Discussion on economic strategies taken place with East Sussex County Council and Wealden District Council. Collaborative work had been undertaken with the University of Sussex, resulting in workshops at a Greater Brighton level.

Resolved to support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report.

33 Forward Plan of Decisions

The Chair, Councillor Brett, introduced the Forward Plan of Cabinet decisions which outlined those reports due for consideration by the Cabinet at its future meetings.

Resolved to note the Forward Plan of Cabinet decisions.

34 Policy and Performance Advisory Committee Work Programme

The Chair, Councillor Brett, introduced the Committee's work programme, which detailed the items due to be considered at future meetings and provided an opportunity for Members to request any areas or issues they wished the Committee to look at in further depth. Members discussed the following items:

- The Chair provided an update on the Lewes Farmers Market petition, which had previously been included on the Committee's work programme – specialist software was required for the CCTV that would support the survey. As a result the survey had not yet taken place. The Chair expressed her disappointment at the length of time it was taking to implement the survey.

Resolved to note the Committee's work programme.

35 Date of Next Meeting

Resolved to note that the next meeting of the Policy and Performance Advisory Committee was scheduled to be held on 31 October 2024, 5pm at Marine Workshops, Railway Quay, Newhaven, BN9 0ER.

The meeting ended at 7.00 pm

Councillor Christine Brett (Chair)