

Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of meeting held in Court Room - Town Hall, Eastbourne on 10 July 2023 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Kshama Shore (Chair).

Councillors Alan Shuttleworth (Deputy-Chair), Kathy Ballard, Ali Dehdashty, Nigel Goodyear, Amanda Morris, Hugh Parker and Robert Smart.

Officers in attendance:

Luke Dreeling (Performance Lead), Nick Peeters (Committee Officer), Becky Cooke (Director of Tourism, Culture and Organisational Development), Linda Farley (Head of Customer First), Steven Houchin (Interim Deputy Chief Finance Officer (Corporate Finance)) and Parmjeet Jassal (Interim Head of Financial Planning).

Also in attendance: Anna Hastings (Project Manager – Innovative Flood Resilience) and Nick Claxton (Flood Risk Manager) East Sussex County Council.

1 Minutes of the meeting held on 6 February 2023

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 6 February 2023 were submitted and approved and signed as a correct record by the Chair.

2 Apologies for absence / declaration of substitute members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Lamb. Councillor Smart declared he was substituting for Councillor Lamb.

3 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs) by members as required under Section 31 of the Localism Act and of other interests as required by the Code of Conduct

Councillors Parker, Smart and Dehdashty declared a personal interest in item 8 on the agenda – Blue Heart Project Update, as a result of their positions as Directors on the Pevensey and Cuckmere Water Level Management Board.

4 Questions by members of the public

There were none.

5 Urgent items of business

There were none.

6 Right to address the meeting/order of business

There were no requests to address the meeting and no changes to the order of business.

7 Blue Heart Project update

Anna Hastings, Blue Heart Project Manager and Nick Claxton, Flood Risk Management Team Leader, presented an update on the work of the Blue Heart Project. The following points were highlighted:

- As the lead local flood authority, East Sussex County Council has an interest in the management of surface and ground water flooding and management of flooding from ordinary water courses. ESCC was not directly involved in the management of sewage flooding resulting from the overflow of the 'foul network', as this was the responsibility of water companies. Coastal protection was the responsibility of borough and district councils with the Environment Agency monitoring coastal erosion.
- The Blue Heart Project had secured £4.4 million of funding from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) as part of the Flood and Coastal Resilience Programme. The ethos of the programme was around innovative approaches and concepts with evidence gathering and the ability to test new methodology.
- The three themes looked at by the programme covered:
 - Improving the understanding of the water catchment
 - Engaging with communities and stakeholders
 - Creating a dynamic risk management system
- A key, early project, which dealt with removing surface water from Southern Water's network and had been successful was the Sustainable Urban Development System (SuDS) in Schools project. The project secured funding for 7 schools in Eastbourne, with a bid for funding for a total of 35 schools over a three-year period. A mixture of techniques was being used to reduce the amount of surface water going into Southern Water's system and improve water quality.
- The Blue Heart Project aimed to have a platform in place to forecast events that could result in significant flooding and provide mitigation. Trial sites had been installed with sensors in water courses and boreholes. A contract was being awarded for a further 52 sensors, which would significantly improve the data available.

During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The Blue Project approach to stakeholder engagement involved cross-

sharing of information. The approach was more community based and not reliant on traditional consultancy-based engagement.

- The data and modelling used by the Project was being shared with the planning teams at both Eastbourne Borough and Wealden District Councils. The Project was not involved with the special planning, however, ESCC as the lead flood authority was a statutory consultee on planning matters and was kept up to date with the work of the Blue Heart Project.
- The Blue Heart Project was a partnership that included decision making authorities with responsibility for water. The mandate for the project was to deliver change. The evidence gathered in the current stages of the project would help inform the second and future stages of the project. Southern Water was contributing to the Project and the SuDS already mentioned were preventing surface water entering the combined sewer system – it was suggested that Southern Water be invited to discuss its work the Committee.
- ESCC as the lead local flood authority, did comment on most planning applications. Recommendations would look to ensure that development did not create flood-risk, either at the development site or elsewhere. It was in the interest of developers to retain water in permeable areas as far as possible onsite, and SuDS was a component of this. The imminent integrated surface water and Fluvial model would contribute to the Local Plan process.
- Concern was expressed by Members that the level of investment into the project should be producing more focused results with a greater impact. Members were also concerned at the lack of investment by Southern Water in existing infrastructure, and the increased pressure resulting from development. Additionally, Members questioned the operations of the Environment Agency and the lack of direct deliverables or real solutions following the provision of funding. Members strongly suggested that a scheme which looked at the separation of rainwater from sewage and the separation of the combined system must be a key deliverable. Members agreed that Southern Water should be invited to a future meeting of the Committee to explain what work it was undertaking to upgrade infrastructure, particularly in Eastbourne.
- The Blue Heart Project was innovation based and limited by the terms of the funding provided by Defra, which involved starting with case studies, and providing evidence and new knowledge to look for additional schemes that could become part of the Project. The Project was looking at the partnership as a vehicle to seek further funding.
- The integrated model being progressed by the Project would provide a baseline that could then be used to measure rainfall run-off. The SuDS in School was part of this work – approximate volume calculations would be provided.

Resolved to note the update from the Blue Heart Project and request that:

- 1) The Blue Heart Project provide an update in the future on its progress; and
- 2) Southern Water be invited to a future meeting of the Committee to discuss ongoing issues with combined sewer overflows and their impact on water quality in Eastbourne and the coastal areas.

8 Scrutiny Work Programme

The Chair, Councillor Shore, introduced the Scrutiny Committee Work Programme and asked Members if there were areas or issues that they wished to be included for future scrutiny. Members requested that the following items be considered:

- A report presented by the Consultants on Licensable Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO's)
- An update on the Council's Ground Maintenance Contracts
- An update on potholes and the condition of roads in the Borough

Resolved to note the Scrutiny Committee Work Programme.

9 Corporate Performance quarter 4 - 2022-2023

Luke Dreeling, Performance Lead, presented the report which provided an update on the Council's performance against Corporate Plan priority actions, performance indicators and targets for the fourth quarter of the year 2022-23.

During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- It was confirmed that the performance indicators for the Planning Service were based on National targets. Members noted that the targets were being met.
- With regard to the Corporate Plan Progress Update and the Council's approach to Commercialisation and increasing Revenue, an interim follow-up assessment had been undertaken in April 2023 by Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), and although a written response had not yet been provided, CIPFA acknowledged that the Council had a project plan in place and advised that the Councils' direction of travel was acceptable.
- The newest members of the Customer Contact Team started in May and were undergoing a lengthy training programme – there remained two vacancies in the Team. Improvements were due to be made to the digital assistant 'Ellis' which it was anticipated would improve the level of service provided. The performance levels for the first quarter of 2023-2024 were similar to those in quarter 4 of 2022-2023.

- Any staff working remotely who may have issues with Wi-Fi bandwidth were receiving support to ensure that Internet connections were as reliable as possible. The cost-of-living crisis had resulted in far more complex enquiries which in turn meant lengthier calls and more time required for noting the calls once they had finished. Requested changes were also being actioned as part of the process.
- Members questioned the length of time taken to both note the details of the more complex calls and then action any changes, and that these factors could be contributing to longer wait times.
- The digital assistant, Ellis, was handling 25 percent of out-of-hours contact, resulting in a reduction of those types of calls during the day. Ellis was being used to handle a small proportion of calls for enquires that were not the responsibility of the Council. A project was due to be launched that would allow the chatbot to respond to more basic, frequently asked questions that would speed up response times. The system would include key words that would result in the caller being transferred to the appropriate Team, to speak to an adviser.
- The average speed of answer for June was 388 seconds and 404 seconds for the whole of the first quarter. The figures for the longest waiting times could be provided. A call-back facility was included as part of the phone system, however, given the current capacity, it was not being utilised at this time.
- Qualitative rather than quantitative checks were being focused on. Members were able to sit with the Team if they wished to enable them to see real time interactions.

Resolved to note the report.

10 Revenue and Capital Outturn - 2022-2023

Steve Houchin, Deputy Chief Finance Officer, presented the report which provided an update Members on the provisional outturn for 2022/23. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The report was being brought before Members to ensure that due process was being followed and Members were being provided with adequate opportunities to scrutinise the detail in the report.
- The Council's budget was revised on a quarterly basis, allowing a good understanding of where the Council's finances were due to land. With regards to the Capital Programme, it was not unusual with local government financing for there to be slippage. The Council was attempting to indicate its financial position upon the Budget being approved by the Full Council, in February 2024. A new Officer Board had been established that will look to review the Capital Programme and attempt to mitigate slippage. The review

would also look at what programmes the Council wished to continue with from year-to-year.

- Further detail would be provided on the current rates of actual interest charged and the current rates of interest charged for the Council's short-term debts.
- The areas and types of items that would need adjusting through the delegated authority requested would be any errors identified during the external audit. The provisions made would form part of the external auditor's report. It would allow the adjustment to be made at the point at which the errors were highlighted. The figures involved would not be known until the errors were identified.

Resolved to note the report.

11 **Stability and Growth Programme**

Jo Harper, Head of Business Planning and Performance and Becky Cooke, Director of Tourism, Culture and Organisational Development, presented the report which sought to inform Members of the Stability and Growth programme, which replaced the previous Recovery and Stabilisation programme in driving improvement and efficiency within the council. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- A range of options was available in terms of how the venues at the Devonshire Quarter would be run. The options included going out to procurement, leasing or retaining management of the venues in-house. It was important that the option chosen involved people with the right skills and knowledge.
- The measures in the report related solely to the Congress Theatre and Devonshire Park and did not apply to conferencing more widely. Members were assured that the Company being worked in partnership with to improve the offer in the Devonshire Quarter, had some experience in the conferencing sector.
- Once the follow-up Assurance Review response was provided, a report on the Council's response to both the LGA Peer review and the CIPFA review would be provided to the Scrutiny Committee, ahead of the Cabinet.

Resolved to note the report.

12 **Sovereign Centre Arrangements**

Becky Cooke, Director of Tourism, Culture and Organisational Development, presented the report which asked Members to consider future operation and interim management arrangements for the Sovereign Centre. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- A number of Members felt that a five-year business plan should be provided prior to any level of delegated authority being agreed.
- It was confirmed that the work carried out through reviewing and compiling a business case would be to ensure that the Council would be no worse off financially and that an agreement with Wave Leisure would be reached, that allowed the Council to receive a percentage of any profits from new memberships. Wave Leisure was a charitable organisation and would look to return any profits back into the business.
- It was confirmed that a future update could be provided to the Committee.

Councillor Smart proposed the following amended recommendation (2) for the Cabinet's consideration and was seconded by Councillor Goodyear.

- 2) That Cabinet does not agree delegated authority for the Director of Tourism, Culture and Organisational Development in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Tourism & Culture to negotiate and conclude detailed arrangements with Wave, including authorising the signature of all associated Documentation until a Business Plan over a five-year period, with agreed objectives and priorities, highlighting the financial implications for the Council, is provided to the Cabinet.

Members voted 3 in favour and 5 against the proposed amended recommendation and the proposal fell.

Councillor Shuttleworth proposed the following amended recommendation (2) for the Cabinet's consideration and was seconded by Councillor Morris.

- 2) Agree delegated authority for the Director of Tourism, Culture and Organisational Development in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Tourism & Culture, once a full business case is understood and considered to be satisfactory, to negotiate and conclude detailed arrangements with Wave, including authorising the signature of all associated documentation including a Business Plan with agreed objectives and priorities.

Members voted unanimously in favour of the proposal.

Resolved to note the report.

13 Forward Plan of Decisions

The Chair, Councillor Shore, presented the Forward Plan of Cabinet decisions. Members requested that the following reports be included on the agenda for the Committee's meeting on the 11 September 2023.

- Corporate performance - quarter 1 - 2023/24
- Housing Delivery & Asset Update

Resolved to note the Forward Plan of Cabinet Decisions.

14 Date of the next meeting

Resolved to note that the date of the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee is scheduled for Monday 11 September 2023, in the Court Room, Eastbourne Town Hall, Grove Road, Eastbourne, BN21 4UG.

The meeting ended at 8.45 pm

Councillor Kshama Shore (Chair)