

Policy and Performance Advisory Committee

Minutes of meeting held in Room 209/210 Marine Workshops, Railway Quay, Newhaven BN9 0ER on 26 November 2024 at 5.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Christine Brett (Chair), Janet Baah (Deputy-Chair), Ciarron Clarkson, Graham Clews, Ezra Cohen, Paul Davies, Nikki Fabry, Charlotte Keenan, Paul Keene, Paul Mellor and Stella Spiteri.

Officers in attendance:

Luke Dreeling (Performance Lead), Nick Peeters (Committee Officer), Nadeem Din (Planning Policy - Lead), Steven Houchin (Deputy Chief Finance Officer), Lynn Ingram (Interim Head of Financial Planning), Nick Ducatel (Assistant Director, Revenues and Benefits) and Lisa Rawlinson (Head of Regeneration)

46 Minutes of the previous meeting dated 31 October 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on the 31 October 2024 were submitted and the Chair was authorised to sign them as a correct record.

47 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Stewart-Roberts. Councillor Spiteri was a substitute for Councillor Stewart-Roberts.

48 Declarations of Interest

There were none.

49 Urgent Items

There were none.

50 Written Questions from Councillors

There were none.

51 Report of the Southern Water Panel

The Chair of the Southern Water Panel, Councillor Keene, presented the report which detailed the work of the Panel and its recommendations. It was explained that the Panel had met on eight occasions since October 2023 including two meetings with Southern Water representatives and three meetings with a wide range of stakeholders. The input from stakeholders at these meetings had been extensive and informative, with each meeting

producing further questions around the actions of Southern Water and the water industry as a whole. The groups and individuals spoken were listed on page 5 of the report.

The Panel had looked at the following areas:

- local water quality and the work of campaign groups
- The regulatory environment within which water companies operate.
- The framework for legally challenging water companies on environmental issues
- The work of groups lobbying for public ownership of utility companies
- Work carried out on alternative sustainable financial models for delivering and maintaining water networks and water as a utility.

The report also highlighted that the wider scene for water as a utility was in a state of transition and the impact of the actions of water companies on the environment was very much in the public eye. The Government was talking about water companies and the regulatory environment.

There were a number of recommendations which reflected the wide-ranging impact Southern Water, along with other water companies, was having on the environment, on customers, and the health and wellbeing of people in the Southeast and in the whole of England. The recommendations also reflected the depth of work and levels of discussion the Panel has undertaken. The Panel looked to the Committee to support its work and the recommendations included in the report. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

A Member suggested that recommendation A. 1. b).....'To support the Government's expressed intention to reform or replace Ofwat with a fit for purpose regulator capable of prioritising the public interest over company profits or financial viability, and of ensuring the environmental sustainability of water companies' whole operations.' Also included reference to public health and wellbeing. The amendment was accepted by the Committee.

Resolved to support the recommendations of the Southern Water Panel.

52 Summary of requested reports due for consideration by the Cabinet on the 5 December 2024

The Chair, Councillor Brett, introduced the report and advised Members that it was for information purposes only and provided a summary of the recommendations in the Cabinet reports included in the agenda.

52a Greater Brighton Economic Board - Admission of New Member to the Board

Lisa Rawlinson, Head of Regeneration, presented the report which sought Cabinet's approval for the NHS Sussex Integrated Care Board (ICB) to

become a member of the Greater Brighton Economic Board (“the Board”). There was no further discussion on the report.

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

52b Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2025/26

Nick Ducatel, Assistant Director Revenues and Benefits, presented the report which sought to gain the Cabinet’s recommendation to Full Council that the 2024/25 Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme is adopted as the 2025/26 scheme. During discussion, the following points were raised:

- Safeguards were in place to protect the scheme from ineligible or fraudulent claims. A quality assurance process was also in place which provided a random check of claims, and the Council’s Fraud Team investigated cases of fraud which had been referred to it.

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

52c Portfolio progress and performance report quarter 2 - 2024-2025

Luke Dreeling, Performance Lead, presented the report which provided detail of the council’s progress and performance in respect of service areas for the Second Quarter of the year (July – September 2024) as shown in Appendix 1 to the report. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- It was confirmed that, in terms of performance through the Council’s phone lines, the chatbot ‘Ellis’ was under review. The challenges being experienced were through recognising language and identifying the questions being asked. The web chatbot, delivered through the same provider, was performing well and dealing with a large number of low-level enquiries.
- The customer contact centre experienced a high turnover of staff which was primarily members of the team moving internally to other positions. Further detail on how staff who performed well were encouraged and retained, would be provided.
- With regard to the performance indicator for the average number of days to process changes of circumstances for housing and council tax benefit claims, a backlog had been created as a result of a system migration, with a complete system unavailable for one month. The Team was working diligently towards the quarterly target of 17 days. Additional temporary staff had been brought in to support the Team’s work in dealing with the backlog. The target reflected national levels, and it was anticipated performance levels would improve significantly after December 2024. The performance indicators as a whole were benchmarked against other authorities and best practice was used to improve performance.
- It was hoped that a recent review of the contract management for housing

repairs would improve tenant satisfaction. Multiple contractors were now being used to speed up repair times. A number of properties were in poor condition when voided and due to the amount of work required, there was often a lag in the time taken to bring council properties back into a satisfactory and habitable condition.

- Although there was no particular trend for the levels of waste recycling collected, Communications around recycling had been promoted in the first quarter of 2024 which may have contributed to improved collection rates. The impact on fly-tipping levels as a result of potential operation changes at the Newhaven waste and recycling site, were not yet known. An update would be provided to the Committee.
- There were no specific areas of concern around the increase in the number of days of sickness for staff. Human Resources monitored sickness levels and provided support where needed.
- The time taken to process housing and council tax benefit claims had been impacted by a number of complex cases. The Team continued to work on existing claims as well as prioritising new claims.

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

52d Lewes District Local Plan - Update and plans for public consultation - Appendices to follow

Nadeem Din, Head of Planning Policy, presented the report which provided an update on the Local Plan and sought Cabinet approval to commence the first of a two phased approach to the statutory public consultation on the Local Plan 'defining our policies and early site allocation proposals' under Regulation 18.

- The Committee received a presentation which outlined the current and further stages of the Local Plan, local plan themes and the challenges being faced by the Council to meet the housing need determined by government. The presentation also outlined the Council's work on early site allocations and the consultation process. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:
- The South Downs National Park Authority was a sovereign authority in terms of planning and was working on its own plan. Those councillors in the district had received notification of potential site allocations. The planning team liaised with the Authority on an officer-to-officer basis as part of the duty to cooperate regulations.
- Once agreement had been reached to start the work, the county-wide transport modelling element of the plan would take between 8 and 12 weeks to form. Following the consultant's work the planning team would refine the model, and introduce and test necessary mitigations. East Sussex County Council was the responsible transport authority and

planning officers would be working with the County Council and the consultants on the modelling. A piece of interim transport modelling had been carried as part of the previous consultation which identified junctions and areas within the transport infrastructure that were under pressure.

- All of the sites identified would be reappraised for both transport modelling and for overall viability and deliverability. The transport modelling would need to take into account sites outside of Lewes District as part of the countywide view.

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

52e Finance update - performance quarter 2 - 2024-2025

Steve Houchin, Deputy Chief Financial 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. There was no further discussion on the report.

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

52f Council tax base and non-domestic rate income for 2025/26

Steve Houchin, Deputy Chief Finance Officer and Lynn Ingram, Interim Head of Financial Planning, presented the report during discussion, the following points were raised:

- Information on council tax and the relevant charges would be included on leaflets sent out as part of the annual billing process. The information would also be included in the published budget setting report ahead of the February 2025 Full Council meeting.

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

52g Interim medium term financial strategy - presentation

Steve Houchin, Deputy Chief Finance Officer and Lynn Ingram. Interim Head of Financial Planning provided a presentation which highlighted the key Medium Term Financial Strategy and budgetary implications in preparation for setting of a revenue budget and associated Council tax for the forthcoming financial year. The presentation also outlined the Council's statutory responsibilities in setting a balance budget within a national context. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- A fundamental budget review was undertaken which identified a significant

amount of savings specifically for Eastbourne Borough Council. As a result, officers had identified efficiencies and savings for both authorities and it was for Lewes District Councillors to determine how best to utilise those savings.

- It was not expected that the policy statement in November by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) would refer to the Government's announcement of a devolution programme for local government. The statement expected would relate to areas such as grant funding, changes to business rates and confirming the council tax limit.
- An overview of potential areas of concern included the continuing impact of homelessness and the provision of temporary accommodation, and financing the Council's capital programme over the next 3 – 4 years.
- It was expected that, following a fundamental review of local government funding in April 2025, the Government would commit to multi-year settlements. It was anticipated that multi-year settlements would enable the Council to more clearly identify areas of concern. Additional funding opportunities could also be available.
- Although a continued pressure, the Council's funding commitment to homelessness prevention was comparatively low. The expected homelessness prevention funding from Government was welcome.

Resolved to note the presentation.

53 Forward Plan of Cabinet 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.

54 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.

Resolved to note the Committee's work programme.

55 Date of Next Meeting

Resolved to note that the next meeting of the Policy and Performance Advisory Committee was scheduled to be held on the 30 January 2024, 3.30pm at Marine Workshops, Railway Quay, Newhaven, BN9 0ER.

The meeting ended at 6.46 pm

Councillor Christine Brett (Chair)