

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2023 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Esler (Chairman)

Cllr. Penny Cole (Vice Chairman)

Cllrs. Baker, Ball, Haslam, Horwood, Leaman, Manston, Robinson and Williamson

An apology for absence was received from Cllr. Skinner

Cllrs. Maskell and Thornton were also present.

12. Minutes

Resolved: That the Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 6 July 2023, and the Special Scrutiny meeting on 27 September 2023, be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

13. Declarations of Interest

There were none.

14. Responses of the Cabinet to reports of the Scrutiny Committee

There were none.

15. Actions from the Previous Meeting

The actions were noted.

16. Kent Police

overview of the changes made over the past year in the District's policing including the neighbourhood policing model and victim based crimes. She also gave an overview of 'County lines', performance statistics and some examples of recent successes.

In providing the overview, The Chief Inspector detailed that the new Neighbourhood policing model provided dedicated ward officers, in addition to the local policing teams, which resulted in more policing powers on the streets and a named officer. In regards to victim based crime team would investigate PIP level 1 investigations that affect the community on a daily basis. The benefits included residents knowing who

Scrutiny Committee - 21 November 2023

their local named Police Officers were for continuity and powers of arrest. The Neighbourhood teams worked during the evenings and weekends meant they could be present when Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) was happening. The benefits of the Victim Based Crime (VBC) included swifter investigations and the focus on those repeat offenders.

She reminded Members that the Kent Police Control Strategy was for violence against women and girls was at the centre.

In response to questions, Members were advised that the Police only measured on charges, as it was the Criminal Prosecution Service who were responsible for prosecution rates.

It was questioned how communities, Councillors and local parishes and towns could support the Police, especially with known anti-social behaviour taking place. The Chief Inspector advised that reporting ASB was very important, particularly if it could be reported at the time of the incident taking place. She advised that it was important not to put anyone's self in danger, but photographs were very helpful as many were already known or an AI system could help identify. In regards to Town Centres where they were high levels of ASB and shoplifting/retail crime. Police had been successful in issuing criminal behaviour orders (CBO) to certain individuals which would exclude someone from a particular areas/shops and this was particularly used for adult offenders. In terms of young people there was a child centred policing unit and work was undertaken with social services to get to the root cause. This was also similar with gas canisters, and in response to questions the Committee was advised that the law had changed and it was now illegal. However, there was a focus that with young people to create diversions and demonstrate the risks of them, especially that having a criminal record could affect their changes of employment. It was important to look at the bigger picture and make sure outreach workers were there working with the young people. However, if powers of arrest were required to be used, then this would be done.

CCTV was key, particularly for those sites that were monitored as they would be on the radio systems and would be able to look and see what was happening. As lots of shops and people had cameras all the videos could be used together as evidence and can help to solve high level crimes. There was a portal called cams which allow people to upload their CCTV.

In response to further questions, it was explained that grip areas were decided by the Home Office based on the statistical crime information. Some boroughs or districts could have more than one grip area and this area would get extra money for policing and so there was an obligation to patrol areas for 15 minutes and this was fed back to the Home Office. If high levels of crime increased elsewhere it would be reassessed and the grip area could change yearly.

In response to a question regarding anti-social behaviour at Hewitt roundabout, the Health and Communities Manager advised that there was a consultation for a PSPO

Scrutiny Committee - 21 November 2023

going through the committee process and joint meetings had been taking place with MET police and Bromley Council.

A Member asked for further details regarding the Neighbourhood policing model and Members were advised that the new model was not at its fully capacity yet and was going through a phased uplift, with the next uplift in January. There was meant to be 12 named Neighbourhood Police Officers in the district, but this was alongside the local policing teams as well. This approach was going to be very data-driven which would detail where the crime was happening and Officers would be directed to those areas.

In response to a final question, the Chief Inspector advised that there had not been an increase in hate crimes in the area following the conflict in the Middle East.

The Chairman thanked the Chief Inspector for her attendance at the meeting.

17. Performance Monitoring

Members considered the report which summarised performance across the Council as at the end of September 2023. Members were asked to consider 8 performance indicators which were performing at 10% or more below their target with a commentary from officers explaining the reasons and detailing any plans to improve performance.

Members asked questions around a number of performance indicators, and requested further information regarding PI LPI_DS Clean 003- and the number of abandoned vehicles on the Council's land.

Action: For Chief Officer – Finance & Trading to provide further information around PI LPI_DS Clean 003.

Members discussed the PIs concerning recycling rates and missed collections. In response to questions, The Chief Officer Finance & Trading advised that the figure was based at year to date at 57 missed collections per 100,000 collections. Staffing continued to be an issue and agency staff were required to provide cover most weeks and so with the quantity of waste continuing to be at Covid levels this had an impact. It was also highlighted to Members that the figure could include households who put their rubbish out after the collection time, but reasons were not asked when a report of a missed collection came through.

Members further asked questions surrounding planning appeals, and a response would be provided from the Chief Officer Planning and Regulatory Services

Action: For Chief Officer Planning & Regulatory Services to provide further information regarding planning appeals, refusals, dismissed at appeal, number of successfully appealed and information around costs with a comparison against national and Kent averages.

Scrutiny Committee - 21 November 2023

Members discussed staffing levels and in response to concerns raised the Chief Officer Customer & Resources advised that as an organisation the Council was operating with a very lean workforce and so as there was not surplus capacity within the teams, when sickness or staff turn-over arose it impacted on the services. Figures around sickness and staff turnover was reported monthly to Management Team to ensure that there was sufficient support in place for staff with sickness but also for developing staff, which the Council was well recognised for through IIP.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

18. Questions for the Portfolio Holder for Improvement and Innovation

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Thornton, the Portfolio Holder for Improvement & Innovation to the meeting. The Portfolio Holder provided an overview of her remit including policy & performance, communications, customer service, business transformation, special projects, digital workforce, economic development and regeneration, equalities, Members and well-being. Some highlights included the IIP Platinum award which was key to attracting and developing staff to exceed their potentials. There were a lot of other projects being undertaken including meeting point, work within the economic development team including the West Kent Rural Grants Scheme. She was proud that Sevenoaks were one of the first local authorities to allocate the funding.

In response to questions Members were advised that following feedback from the last Scrutiny Committee the performance indicator around Customer Solutions was being developed to provide more meaningful data. It was important that there was the opportunity to follow up with customers and their interactions with Officers, not just through telephone calls, but web chat and emails. This data would be provided to the Committee once there was sufficient data. Customer Satisfaction Surveys were carried out every couple of years and another one would be due shortly. However, historically the Council had always performed very well and was higher than national averages.

In response to questions, which focused on staffing and retention, Members were advised that during the pandemic many people stayed and were not looking at new jobs due to the high levels of uncertainty. However, around 2022, there was movement and a lot of new people in a quick timescale and it was only now settling down. When staff left, they were invited to attend an exit interview which asks for reasons of leaving and it was recorded so that if trends occur, they could be addressed. Often reasons for leaving included moving to the private sector, as in general they paid higher salaries and the council was limited in financial terms. She noted there were still retention issues with Direct Services and the refuse teams. Long term sickness could not be planned for when this happened and could only work on estimations for the impact it may have to a service. However, she did not think that the Council was so lean that services could not be delivered, especially when the majority of performance indicators reflected that targets were being met.

Scrutiny Committee - 21 November 2023

In regards to questions on digital services, she advised that many were online already but this was something that was continually reviewed. It was though, important to note that not everyone wanted to solely use online services and so there had to be a balance but there was room to improve across all portfolios.

In response to a further question regarding policies and economic development and regeneration, the Portfolio Holder advised that she would provide a written response to the Councillor.

The Portfolio Holder responded to a question regarding innovation. In response she advised that it was important to be realistic in terms of what could be achieved and the local plan set out the clear objectives. Diving further into what innovation looked like it was important to continually strive to look for the new and different and see what was happening out there and it was important to balance this for the District. Some of the economic and regeneration projects could lead to the most innovation as far as touching on people's lives by bringing something different to the District.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for her attendance.

19. Questions for the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Investment

The Chairman welcomed the Portfolio Holder for Finance & Investment to the meeting and he presented key successes and challenges within his Portfolio. Successes included that by starting the budget process earlier than normal, the budget gap had been able to be addressed earlier on and the gap was starting to close.

Other successes included the budget training sessions for Members which were well attended and were a very important part of the budget process as it enabled improved understanding and engagement from Members. There were still some areas to improve to ensure the effectiveness of Members in terms of the budget and finances. However, Members of the Finance & Investment Advisory Committee had encouragingly engaged with the reports and conversations had taken place to ensure that Officers were supported by outside experience in terms of bringing and widening the scope and opportunities that the council could engage with. There had been an excellent growth of investment income and the property investment strategy income was continuing to support the budget.

The Counter Fraud Team had been working extremely hard and to date this financial year had recorded £227,000 in council tax savings and £272,000 in business rate savings. Council tax collection continued to perform well, with 57.8% collected as at 30 September 2023 and collecting £66.7m of the £115.4m collectable debit so far.

With regards to arrears collection from last year, collected 28.5% of a 30% target as 31 March 2023 had been collected. 16.5% of a 20% target as at 31 March 2024 would be collected.

The Portfolio Holder went onto further explain that the biggest challenge ahead was the budget and this was the most challenging budget process that the Council had

Scrutiny Committee - 21 November 2023

faced for many years. There remained many challenges that were impacting on the Council's finances, some of those included high inflation and the increased demand for services, staff sickness and Government limitations on financing new investment, and delivering a viable and sustainable capital programme in line with the Council's ambitions.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for his comprehensive update and welcomed Members questions.

In response to questions Members were advised that there was a recruitment freeze for non-critical posts, but this did not equate to the £400,000 savings that had been suggested through the financial monitoring. There was currently no budget to implement a food waste collection service and as central government were working through new legislation. Any changes required to the service would have to be considered when further information was available and currently there was no funding from central government to make changes. In response to questions concerning agency staff costs, particularly for the refuse collectors, Members were advised that a lot of the agency staff costs were down to recruitment, but it was vital to ensure that the service continued. It was looked at regularly and recruitment continued.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for his attendance.

20. Interim Update of the In-depth Scrutiny Working Group

The Chairman of the Working Group updated Members on the work of the group and advised that they had met once focusing on the area of homelessness and the approach to homelessness. There were a couple of case studies presented to the working group which highlighted the homelessness pathway that residents go through. It was anticipated that the working group final report would come to January's meeting.

21. Review of Constitution - Scrutiny

The Chief Officer Customer and Resources presented the report which advised Members that Part 5 and Appendix C of the Constitution which referred to the Scrutiny Committee would be reviewed by the Governance Committee. As any changes would affect the Scrutiny Committee, he welcomed feedback on those areas, which would be collected into a final report for the Governance Committee to consider.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

Scrutiny Committee - 21 November 2023

22. Work Plan

The work plan was discussed with the following additions:

January 2024

- Setting up of In-depth Scrutiny Working Group

Summer 2024

- Sevenoaks District Arts Council
- Sevenoaks District Sports Council

Autumn 2024

- KCC Highways

Other topics for consideration included Youth provision

Staff wellbeing

Climate change

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.15 PM

CHAIRMAN