

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 27th January 2015 at Pippbrook, Dorking from 7.00pm to 9.43pm

Present: Councillors Stephen Cooksey (Chairman), Lucy Botting, Margaret Cooksey (substitute for Raj Haque), Mary Cooper (substitute for Paula Hancock), Clare Curran, David Draper, Mary Huggins, Howard Jones, Paul Potter and Peter Stanyard.

Also present: Councillors Stella Brooks, Roger Hurst, Simon Ling, Vivienne Michael, John Northcott, David Preedy and Chris Townsend

73. Minutes

The minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held 6th January 2015 were agreed as a correct record.

74. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Lynne Brooks, Paula Hancock and Raj Haque. An apology was also received from Rowan Munson (Youth Voice).

75. Disclosure of Interests

Councillor Stephen Cooksey declared a non pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 7 as he was an elected Member of Surrey County Council.

Councillor Clare Curran declared a non pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 8 as she was a member of both the Bookham Residents Association and the Bookham Community Association.

Councillor Peter Stanyard declared a non pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 8 as he was a member of the congregation at St Giles Church in Ashted, who had applied for a Council grant.

76. Voluntary Action Mid-Surrey

The Committee received a presentation on the work of Voluntary Action Mid-Surrey (VAMS) from their Chief Officer, Sally Dubery. This was the final of four presentations in 2014/2015 from those organisations in receipt of Council grants of £10,000 or greater. During the course of the presentation the following points were noted:-

- One of the core functions of VAMS was to provide services and support for the volunteer sector. This included signposting funding streams, providing advice on grant applications, governance advice, the provision of training for volunteers and providing access to back office functions such as photocopying and Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks.
- Another core function of VAMS was to act in a liaison role for local voluntary groups and to facilitate networking between individuals, groups and the statutory and private sectors.
- Within the local area, VAMS had been working with both the Dorking and Leatherhead Community Centres to assist them with reviewing their constitutions to ensure that they were fit for purpose. VAMS were also involved with the Circle Housing Funding Panel, which provided funding to groups that served Circle Housing residents.
- The advice provided by VAMS to local voluntary groups on funding streams included directing organisations to available grants, helping organisations to complete application forms and also acting as a referee to support bids when required.
- VAMS also assisted volunteer organisations to develop new work streams and in particular tried to identify gaps in the market where new services were required. At present VAMS were working with a local organisation to develop a mentoring service for young people.
- Over the past 9 months, VAMS had interviewed 122 people in Mole Valley for volunteer placements, resulting in these people being referred to 197 groups for placement. Of these people referred for placement, 60 had received a placement of 6 months or more.
- The volunteer hub, known as The Point, had opened at the Mayflower Centre in Dorking in 2014. This facility was open four days a week as a resource for local volunteer groups.

The Chairman thanked Ms Dubery for her attendance at the meeting and extended an invitation for her to return before the Committee to provide a further update next year.

77. Service Update: HR

The Committee received a presentation on the HR Service from Kate Ivackovic, the Council's HR Manager. During the course of the presentation the following points were noted:-

- The current structure of the HR team consisted of the HR Manager, two HR Advisors, two HR Officers and an additional HR Advisor, who was seconded from Surrey County Council (these did not represent Full Time Equivalent posts in many cases).
- The team had three main work streams, these were Transactional HR (including payroll liaison between our external providers and individual employees, generating contracts, maintaining and enhancing HR systems and other general individual enquiries), Advisory HR (including recruitment, preliminary advice and casework) and Organisational Development (supporting Service driven change and delivering HR priorities).
- Current priorities for the HR team included upgrading the HR systems, updating and streamlining the policy framework, providing skills development and training programmes for staff and providing support for employee wellbeing and staff engagement.
- The HR team helped to support organisational change by working alongside managers to deliver business plans, promoting smarter working practices such as facilitating and supporting changes in working practices due to the Pippbrook refurbishment, ensuring mechanisms were in place for appropriate staff engagement during change, helping to ensure managers had the skills to lead staff through change and supporting and advising on culture change and improvements to enhance leadership right across the organisation (distributed leadership).
- The current median age for the workforce at Mole Valley District Council was 49, rising to 52 for Business and Senior Managers.
- The average number of sick days for Mole Valley staff was 4.8 days in quarter 3 of 2014/2015. This was against a Council maximum indicator of 7.8 days and a shire district local authority average of 8.3 days. Short term sickness was also lower than our maximum indicators and industry average (3.2 days per fte against an average of 4 days).
- Turnover at the Council currently stood at 10% against a target range between 6 – 13%. HR encouraged managers to carry out exit interviews with employees to help to establish whether there were common reasons for leaving. So far no worrying trends had been highlighted from exit interviews, but the HR team will continue to monitor and raise the profile of the value of conducting exit interviews as Council turnover increases.
- The HR team worked in partnership with other local authorities including with Epsom & Ewell Borough Council who ran the Council's payroll, Tandridge District Council who hosted the Council's HR systems and Surrey County Council, who the Council used to request specific advisory support as needed. HR also specifically prioritised working in partnership with those managers who had been identified as crucial to enhanced employee engagement (and therefore productivity, quoting ACAS), and with all staff, in order to ensure that wherever possible changes made through business need carried weight and credibility with the people that are required to deliver these services as this would ultimately impact outcomes to residents.

Upon questioning it was confirmed that the two HR Officers employed within the team had originally been appointed as apprentices. As a result, Members asked whether there were any plans to employ further apprentices within the team in the future. It was advised that at present the office space allocated to the team meant that there was limited room for additional staff. However once the refurbishment of Pippbrook was complete there may be more space available and it was possible that a young worker would be taken on for a short period of time.

Some Members questioned the structure of the HR team, as it had been their understanding that following the Business Process Review (BPR) in 2010, it had been the Council's intention to

outsource the HR function to Surrey County Council. In light of the presentation that had confirmed that most of the employees within the HR team were now employed directly by Mole Valley District Council, it was also questioned how this had impacted upon the Council's budget. It was confirmed that it was the initial plan that the HR service would be delivered by Surrey County Council, but in 2012 this changed and it was decided that there were significant benefits (and very little additional cost) from having HR based within the Council. As the Council would have paid Surrey County Council for using their HR service, there had only been a very slight increase to the HR budget from bringing the service back in-house. The questioning concluded with the comment that it was felt vital that HR should continue to be based within Mole Valley.

The session concluded with the Chairman thanking Mrs Ivackovic for her attendance at the Committee meeting.

78. Homelessness Review 2014 and Homelessness Strategy 2015-2020

The Committee received an Executive report setting out the Council's Homelessness Review and Homelessness Strategy 2015 – 2020, which had been based upon the findings of the review. This report had previously been included on the Scrutiny Committee agenda for 6th January 2015 and had been revised as a result of comments made by Members at that meeting. Members were asked for their comments which would be submitted to the Executive during its consideration of the item at its meeting on 3rd February 2015.

It was confirmed that in light of the comments made by the Scrutiny Committee on 6th January 2015, the following changes had been made to the document:-

- The executive summary had been moved to the start of the document,
- A reference to the Amber Foundation as a accommodation provider had been added,
- The results of the previous Action Plan now included the reasons why any actions had not been achieved,
- The report confirmed that three local authorities had completed stage 1 of the process toward implementing the ten principles set out in the strategy,
- The document had been amended to make clear the different mechanisms through which people threatened with homelessness could access the service,
- The target for the length of time in which 16-17 year olds could spend in bed and breakfast accommodation had been replaced by a target aiming for no time being spent by this age group in this type of accommodation.
- A reference to the recently launched Surrey Nightstop service had also been incorporated within the report.

It was requested that the reference to increases or decreases in the number of homeless households with dependent children being accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation be reported in actual terms rather than as a percentage, because the relatively small numbers involved meant that it could be misleading if reported as a percentage.

As it was advised that the 10 principles set out in the standard would be achieved over three stages, Members questioned whether the schedule for this had been decided. It was confirmed that the exact sequence had not yet been finalised because the Council benchmarked its progress against other local authorities and needed to ensure that they were working towards the same standards at the same time to achieve this.

In general the Committee were happy with the revised version of the report being presented to the Executive for approval. The Chairman also commented that by allowing an earlier consultation with the Scrutiny Committee, it demonstrated the benefits of pre-Scrutiny.

Recommendation to the Executive: That the recommendations set out in the report be accepted, pending the minor amendment noted above.

79. 2015/2016 Budget and Council Tax Resolution

The Committee received an Executive report setting out the Administration's Budget proposals and

the Council Tax resolution for the forthcoming year. Feedback was also received from the Standing Budget Panel who had scrutinised the budget setting process in detail. Members were asked for their comments which would be submitted to the Executive during its consideration of the item at its meeting on 3rd February 2015.

The Chairman of the Standing Budget Panel, Councillor Stella Brooks, reported back to the Committee with the findings of the Panel and confirmed that overall the Panel Members were satisfied that the Budget proposed was achievable and that the Executive had taken into account potential risks where possible. The main risk identified by the Panel was the forthcoming General Election in May, as the outcome could have a significant impact on the Council's funding streams from central Government, but the Panel felt that the Executive had taken account of these where possible.

Other concerns for the Panel included the proposal to continue freezing parking charges at 1p per minute, as this had required the allocation of £35,000 in the 2015/2016 budget to accommodate the shortfall created by the freeze. It was suggested that the Executive needed to consider alternative charging options for car parking in future years. The Panel were also pleased to note the on-going reduction in the subsidy for Dorking Halls, but felt that a long term business plan was required if any further significant reduction was to be made to the subsidy.

It was noted from the Standing Budget Panel's report that the Executive Member for Assets had confirmed that the increased hire charges for Dorking Halls would not be applicable to community groups. However the fees and charges schedule made available for Members at the meeting indicated that the fee for hiring the Halls for community events would increase. It was agreed that clarification would be sought from the Executive Member when this report was considered by the Executive on 3rd February.

In regard to parking charges it was questioned whether there had been any communication with local businesses to find out their views, as any changes to parking charges would have an impact upon their livelihood. It was agreed that the Executive Member would also be asked to clarify the current status of any on-going dialogue with local businesses when the report was considered by the Executive.

Members also noted their concern that cemetery fees and costs for services particularly used by elderly residents, such as for day centres, were being increased by significant amounts and it was agreed that this concern would also be reported to the Executive.

Resolved: That the comments of the Scrutiny Committee will be reported to the Executive during their consideration of this item.

80. MVDC Grant Aid Applications

The Committee received an Executive report setting out the details of the Grant Aid applications made to the Council for funding in the forthcoming year. Members were asked for their comments and/or recommendation which would be submitted to the Executive during its consideration of the item at its meeting on 3rd February 2015.

In response to a question about how the Council publicised the availability of its grants, it was confirmed that grant information was promoted on the Council website, through social media and also through external groups such as Voluntary Action Mid-Surrey. The Council's partnership team also had strong links with many of the organisations that had applied for Council grants.

A number of Members voiced their concern about the ability of the Dorking and Leatherhead Citizens Advice Bureau to cope with the demand on its services, given the current level of funding provided by the Council. The Leader and the Executive Member both advised the Committee that regular meetings were held with the CAB and confirmed that it had not been raised at these meetings that CAB services were being adversely affected by level of grant awarded by the Council. Instead the CAB management seemed to have a positive outlook on potential new funding streams. It was agreed that Member's concern would be reported to the Executive.

Resolved: That the concerns of the Scrutiny Committee will be reported to the Executive during their consideration of this item.

81. Transform Leatherhead Town Centre Project – Appointment of Masterplanning Advisors

The Committee received an Executive report which set out the recommended appointment of a Masterplanner for the Transform Leatherhead project, following a procurement process. Members were asked for their comments and/or recommendation which would be submitted to the Executive during its consideration of the item at its meeting on 3rd February 2015.

It was noted that local Members and community groups had been consulted as part of the procurement process and had helped to shape the questions asked of the three shortlisted bidders. The Committee welcomed this approach to procurement and felt that it would also be beneficial to have increased Member involvement in the contract specification stage of the process in the future.

The Committee also welcomed the Council using a 50/50 split between cost and quality to score bidders rather than placing a greater emphasis on the cost of a bid. This was felt to be especially important because of the significance of the Transform Leatherhead scheme and the need to ensure that the winning bidder had the required qualities to undertake the project.

Overall the Committee accepted the suggested course of action set out in the report and agreed to highlight to the Executive its support for further Member involvement in the procurement process.

Resolved: That the views of the Scrutiny Committee will be reported to the Executive during their consideration of this item.

82. Outside Organisation Review

The Committee received a report setting out the findings from a review of the Council's appointments to outside organisations. The report asked the Committee to review the information provided and decide whether it wished to make any recommendations to the Council on future appointments to organisations and whether to recommend a mechanism for ensuring that Members receive a briefing from officers prior to meetings and also report back the results of any meetings.

On the whole Members were supportive of the recommendations set out in the report, but there were concerns that while being briefed prior to a meeting may be appropriate for those Members sitting on more formal, strategic level organisations, it would not necessarily be required for less formal local groups where Members acted as a link between the Council and the group. As a result it was agreed that the recommendation would be amended to take into account the need for different approaches depending on the type of organisation to which Members were appointed.

Resolved: That the recommendations set out in the report be revised to reflect the comments of the Committee.

83. Motion 5/2014

The Committee had been asked by the Council to consider Motion 5/2014 and report back to the next Council meetings with a recommendation as to whether the motion should be accepted, rejected or to accept an amended version of the motion.

During the discussion of the motion, there was a difference of opinion amongst the Committee with some Members supporting the principle of the motion and felt that it was important for Mole Valley District Council to express its support for the devolution of powers to a local level where appropriate. Other Members took an opposing view and felt that given that there was a General Election in May 2015, which brought quite a lot of political uncertainty, it was the wrong time for the motion to be approved.

Following a counted vote with 6 Members in favour of refusing the motion and 4 in favour of approving the motion, it was agreed that the Committee would recommend to the Council that the motion be refused.

Recommendation to the Council: That Motion 5/2014 be refused.