

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 28th January 2014 at Pippbrook, Dorking from 7.00pm to 9.55pm

Present: Councillors Stephen Cooksey (Chairman), Lynne Brooks, Margaret Cooksey (substitute for Raj Haque), Clare Curran, Paula Hancock, Phil Harris, Dave Howarth, Chris Hunt, Roger Hurst, Paul Newman and Paul Potter

Also present: Councillors Tessa Hurworth, Bridget Lewis-Carr, Simon Ling, David Preedy, Caroline Salmon, Chris Townsend and Charles Yarwood.

60. Minutes

The minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 10th December 2013 were approved as a correct record.

61. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Raj Haque

62. Surrey Wildlife Trust

The Committee received a presentation from Mark Pearson, Director of Countryside Management and Nigel Davenport, Chief Executive for the Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT), which covered the work of the Trust in Mole Valley.

During the course of the presentation and the following discussion, the following points were noted:-

- SWT had been in existence since 1912, when it was initially set up as the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves.
- SWT employed 120 members of staff and had 30,100 members which equated to 3% of the population of Surrey. The services provided by SWT relied upon volunteers providing their time in both office-based and outdoor roles. The past year had seen a 15% increase in the number of volunteers with 10,129 being involved in 2012/2013.
- The area of land managed by SWT equated to 8326 hectares, which was equivalent to 5% of land in Surrey. This made SWT the largest Wildlife Trust in the country and generated an income of £5,000,000 per annum.
- A five year plan covering 2013 to 2018 had recently been published. This document set out the key themes of SWT, which were land management, education and science.
- The sawmill operated by SWT at Norbury Park had been struggling to break even over the past 10 years, but following a recent restructuring it had made a profit in the past year.
- SWT were awarded the contract with Mole Valley District Council in 2007 on a 50 year lease. As part of this contract SWT reported against key performance indicators on an annual basis, provided the onsite presence of a ranger and supported and developed volunteering in the district. As a result of this contract with the Council, SWT had been able to access an additional £68,000 of external funding.
- SWT worked with 10 out of the 11 local authorities in Surrey to provide advice on planning applications and actually employed two full time members of staff for this purpose. SWT advised on the potential ecological affects of a development, rather than giving an opinion on whether a development should proceed or not.

In response to a question about the removal of trees from a section of land at Ashted Park, it was advised that the trees in question had been removed because that presented a health and safety risk. Since this work had been completed the land had been planted with new trees. It was suggested that when SWT undertook similar work in the future it would be beneficial to keep local residents and councillor informed, in order to allay any concerns about the site in question. This was acknowledged as a learning point by SWT.

In response to a question about whether SWT worked with the National Trust to share volunteering, it was advised that in a lot of cases people tended to volunteer for both organisations, but there was not an agreement in place to share volunteers. However both of these organisations and other charitable groups in Surrey had good communications between themselves and tried not to work in competition with each other.

Now that the Sawmill in Norbury Park had achieved a profit it was questioned whether its future could now be considered to be safe. It was advised that although the business had achieved a profit there was still an issue regarding the lack of capital in the venture to reinvest. SWT were in talks with SCC about the long term future of the sawmill, but it was confirmed that in the short term at least the business was safe.

The issue of how SWT managed to maintain its land with only a limited number of wardens was raised and in response it confirmed that SWT operated a very proactive inspection regime across its landholdings.

The Chairman of the Committee thanked Mr Pearson and Mr Davenport for their presentation and advised that he hoped this would be the start of open communications between the Council and the Trust.

63. Planning for 2014/15 – Corporate Plan and Budget Proposal

The Committee received the Executive report which set out the proposed Corporate Plan and Budget proposals for 2014/2015. 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 4th February 2014.

During the consideration of this item the Committee received the final report from the Standing Budget Panel, who had met with Portfolio Holder to discuss their budget proposals in detail. The Panel made the following comments on the budget:-

- The Panel questioned the validity of the performance indicator used for the day centre which was based upon the responses to a questionnaire given to service users. Although the Council was performing well in this area it was felt that this did not cover factors which might have led potential users not to attend. It would be useful for the success of the Service to also be based upon the number of people visiting the day centres as well the experience of the users.
- The Panel had quite a lengthy discussion about the usefulness of the performance indicator measuring the amount of local business being scored at three stars out of five or higher by the Environmental Health team, as there was a feeling that as some businesses may not necessarily be inspected each year it would not actually be worthwhile. As an alternative it was suggested that the performance indicator should be based on the net number of businesses that had improved their scores.
- The Panel were please to note that the Parking team had been working to improve monitoring in the Council's car parks and that going forward it would be easier for officers to forecast predicted use for each car park at different times of the year. It was felt that the improved forecasting could be used by the Council to plan when to offer incentives such as free parking afternoons at car parks.
- Although it had previously been removed, it was felt that a performance indicator on the outcome of appeals should be developed, as the Council's performance in this area should be monitored.
- The performance indicator for the availability of the Planning portal on the website showed that availability had been good, but it was suggested that some testing should also take place on the availability of actual planning documents within the site, as anecdotal evidence suggested that there may still be an issue in this area.

- It was explained that the proposed new resource for planning enforcement would be provided by using pooled resources with Tandridge; when discussions with Tandridge had started they had surplus capacity in this area, but it was suggested that this might no longer be the case.
- There was an acknowledgment that salaries offered by the Council may not be as competitive as other local authorities and there was a concern amongst the Panel that this would lead to the loss of talented employees, particularly amongst middle management where there was little room for progression in a small authority such as Mole Valley. It was felt that it would be useful for Members to be provided with a summary of staff turnover at different levels of the organisations in order to find out if this was a significant issue. It was also suggested that it would be good practice for the Council to benchmark staff salaries every three years to ensure that they were competitive.
- The Panel noted that the budget report included a summary of the Council Tax Freeze Grant the Council was currently receiving from central government. It was felt that it would also be useful for the report to confirm when these grants would be ending as it was advised that the first of these would end in 2015/2016.
- The Panel also suggested that it would be helpful for the costings of holding a referendum to be prepared prior to the Council meeting on 18th February, in order to inform Member's decision making on Council Tax levels
- As a general comment on the format of the Fees and charges information provided, we agreed that it would be useful if details of the volumes for each item could be included as this would help to place some of the increases into context.

It was noted that there was a general consensus amongst the Panel and the Portfolio Holders who had been involved in the process that the Panel had been worthwhile this year with a greater focus, provided in part from the introduction of a template used by Portfolio Holders to summarise their budget proposals. As a result it was agreed that the same format should be used 2014/2015 Standing Budget Panel.

The budget proposals set out provision for a 1.9% increase to the Mole Valley District Council portion of Council Tax. As it was possible that the Government may restrict the level of increase to 1 – 1.5% before triggering a local referendum, it was questioned whether there were alternative proposals should this be the case. It was confirmed that alternatives were being considered, but it was possible that the Government would not confirm its intentions until after the Council sets its budget on 18th February 2014. If it was the case that the Government did choose to restrict the level of Council Tax increase to a level lower than the proposed 1.9%, a Special Council meeting would be arranged to consider an alternative proposal.

It was requested that a copy of the fees and charges proposals of the Administration that had been previously scrutinised by the Standing Budget Panel be made available for all Members. It was agreed that a copy of these would be made available on the Members Extranet.

In response to a question about the provision within the budget for extra resources for planning enforcement, it was confirmed that plans were being developed by officers, which would improve the Council's performance in this area. Members would be informed of the final proposals once these had been confirmed.

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

64. Recommendations of the Pippbrook Working Group

The Committee received the Executive report which set out the proposals of the Pippbrook Working Group concerning the future of the Pippbrook site. 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 4th February 2014.

The Committee had a lengthy discussion on the contents of this report with differing views expressed. Some members of the Committee agreed with the recommendations set out in the report and were happy for the consultation to proceed along the lines set out. However there were other members of the Committee who had significant concerns with the proposed consultation.

One of the main concerns of these Members related to the issue of enabling development and how it should be dealt with within the planned consultation. There was a suggestion that it would be useful for enabling development in both Pippbrook House and the grounds of Pippbrook to be treated as two separate considerations in the consultation, as there were different issues involved in these two options which needed to be made clear to public when responding.

There were also a number of questions about the need for soft market testing of the site to establish the potential options for enabling development and how this would relate to the consultation, but the need to undertake this exercise for Pippbrook House was accepted by most Members as it would inform the final decision to be taken later in the year.

There was also disappointed expressed by some Members that a draft of the consultation document was not available as it made it difficult to comment on what should or shouldn't be included. However it was suggested that the consultation should be separated into three sections, namely – What to do with Pippbrook House, What is the best option for office space and how any project should be funded?

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

65. Draft Housing Allocations Scheme

The Committee received the Executive report which set out the draft Housing Allocations Scheme. 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 4th February 2014.

It was noted that as part of the Governments welfare agenda, local authorities were now able to develop their own Housing Allocations Scheme, tailored to meet local needs. The proposed scheme for Mole Valley District Council had been developed by officers in consultation with a Working Group of Members and also a wider public consultation, which had received 60 responses.

It was agreed that the Committee were happy with the content of the draft Housing Allocations Scheme and to recommend that the Executive should accept the recommendations set out in the report.

Recommendation to the Executive: That the recommendations as set out in the report be accepted.

66. Open Spaces and Letting Policy

The Committee received the Executive report which set out the proposed Open Spaces and Letting Policy. 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 4th February 2014.

It was noted that it was the intention of the Open Spaces and Letting Policy to allow local groups the opportunity to take on the management of Council land in their area. Any groups wishing to pursue this policy would need to enter into a legal agreement with the Council and the letting of the land would need to be managed in line with Council policies.

There was concern expressed across the Chamber about the proposed policy and how it would work in practice and whether it would make the hiring of Council facilities more complicated for the public, who would need to make arrangements with local groups rather than the Council.

It was agreed that the policy needed further refinement and that the Executive would be encouraged to delay the approval of this policy to allow for further work to be undertaken.

Recommendation to the Executive: That approval of the report be delayed to allow for further development of the proposed policy.

67. Adoption of Community Asset Transfer Policy

The Committee received the Executive report which set out the proposed Adoption of Community Asset Transfer Policy. 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 4th February 2014.

It was noted that an Adoption of Community Asset Transfer Policy was a statutory requirement for the Council as set out in the Localism Act 2011. The key intentions of the policy were to provide a consistent approach to asset transfer, provide guidance for applicants and also safeguard the value of assets.

There was concern express over the possibility of the Council transferring the freehold of an asset to a local group, as this would give the Council limited control over the future use of the asset. It was confirmed that the freehold would only be transferred in exceptional circumstance and that any transfer would more likely be as a lease.

Recommendation to the Executive: That the recommendations as set out in the report be accepted.

68. Leatherhead Pools Allotments

The Committee received the Executive report which set out a proposal to allow new allotment holders at the Leatherhead Pools Allotments. 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 4th February 2014.

It was agreed that Members supported this proposal and that the Executive should accept the recommendation set out in the report.

Recommendation to the Executive: That the recommendations as set out in the report be accepted.

69. Review of Appointments to Outside Organisations

The Committee received a report providing information on the Outside Organisations to which the Council appoints Members. This report was received as part a review being undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee on the value of these appointments.

It was noted that this report would be followed by a second report providing Member and officers view on the value of these appointments.

Resolved: That the contents of the report be noted.

70. 2014/2015 Council Meeting Schedule

The Committee received the Executive report which set out the proposed meeting schedule for 2014/2015. 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 4th February 2014

Resolved: That the content of the report be noted.

71. Scrutiny Work Programme 2013-2014

It was confirmed that a Service Update from Dorking Halls would now be provided at 1st April meeting of the Committee.

Resolved: That the Work Programme be noted.

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Chairman
4th March 2014