

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 16 October 2018 at Pippbrook, Dorking from 7.00pm to 08.11pm

Present: Councillors David Draper (Chairman), Joe Crome (Vice-Chairman), Rosemary Dickson, Mary Huggins, Duncan Irvine, Malcolm Ladell, Stephen Cooksey, Garry Stansfield, Michelle Watson.

Also present: Councillors David Hawksworth, Corinna Osborne-Patterson, Patricia Wiltshire, Simon Budd and Alan Reilly.

24. Minutes

The minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 16 September 2018 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

25. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Tim Ashton.

26. Disclosure of Interests

None.

27. Annual Complaints Report 2017-18

The Committee were presented with the complaints monitoring report for April 2017 to March 2018.

Members were informed that the Council were performing at a good level compared to other local authorities.

Members highlighted the increase in complaints in 2017-18 compared to 2016-17. The Customer Services Manager advised that the low figures in 2016-17 were an anomaly and that the 2017-18 figures were more consistent with previous years.

Members queried why there was an increase in complaints from last year. Members were advised that residents were exercising their right to complain more.

The Committee were informed that although complaints figures had increased on the previous year, 15-16 and 16-17 figures were lower compared to 13-14 and 14-15.

Members noted that the Council learnt from complaints and feedback received implemented improvements accordingly. Staff vacancies had affected both the Planning and Revenues teams which led to service issues turning into complaints. A number of measures had been put in place to help address these issues. For example, HR had recruited an expert in recruitment. A newly designed jobs website had been launched. Departments including Revenues, which were number 3 on the list of complaints, had started to recruit apprentices. Furthermore, a new Development Management Manager and new Assistant Revenues Manager were now in place. The Customer Service Manager had been able to speak to the service areas in question and present them with the figures so that improvements could be made.

Members heard how various departments within MVDC were assessed on the customer service excellence (CSE) accreditation. To gain this accreditation, departments had been assessed on various criteria, each requiring evidence. This had provided an opportunity to explore their processes and identify areas for improvement. Eight service areas had achieved accreditation so far including the Planning Policy and Planning Support teams. Customer Services would consider a corporate accreditation scheme in future to assess other teams which had not yet been assessed.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and Customer Services Manager for their presentation.
AGREED: That for future reports, comparison figures for complaints received in the preceding five years be included.

28. Progress update on the Mole Valley rural community strategy

The Cabinet Member for People and Rural Mole Valley provided the Committee with an update on the strategy and action plan. It was broken down into 6 priority issues, as detailed below:-

Digital connectivity - MVDC were working on initiatives to provide super-fast broadband to rural parts of Mole Valley including the Surrey Hills, which Guildford Borough Council had contributed £10,000 to. Several businesses had already received fibre broadband connectivity within the district.

Rural housing – The development of the new local plan would look into the provision of affordable housing in Mole Valley.

Community safety - Rural councillors were working with police in local areas. Surrey Police had contributed to a small grant to support the establishment of a Joint Enforcement Team (JET) which would have powers to tackle environmental crimes such as littering and fly tipping.

Members asked how MVDC would engage with Surrey Police to provide the public with information to understand anti-social behaviour and how to tackle it. It was advised that Surrey Police would attend the annual rural community summit in February 2019 to address this area.

It was asked if there were any other outcomes from the most recent rural crime panel.

ACTION: The Cabinet Member for People and Rural Mole Valley would look into outcomes from the most recent rural crime panel and advise the Committee at a later date.

Visitor economy – Funding was in place to secure development of the destination management plan which looked into branding and marketing of the district. Work had also been carried out to understand visitor economy and how this links into employment and income generation.

The Executive Head of Service advised the Committee that more focus would be put into the Surrey Hills website as this brand is widely recognised. It was highlighted that the Visit Leatherhead website had a 'coming soon' message for some time and should be taken down altogether if more focus was put into the Surrey Hills. The Committee raised concerns that the identity of local towns would be lost if the Dorking and/or Leatherhead webpages were to be taken down as the Surrey Hills is a vast area. It was suggested that a singular Visit Mole Valley/Surrey Hills website be used, with sub-sections for the different towns within the district.

Members asked if there were plans to use other forms of communication other than websites such as leaflets. The Executive Head of Service acknowledged that not every person used websites and that when running communication campaigns, all methods were considered. It was advised that the destination management plan is currently in draft form and would be shared soon.

Community assets – The Committee were advised that information would be made available to residents on the process of assessment of community value. It was asked what plans were in place for this and to promote assets of community value effectively. Members were informed that this would be brought to the rural summit. Officers would attend parish council meetings and speak to resident associations to promote the application process further.

Rural based businesses – Funding was available to businesses in rural areas and a number of successful applications had been received. The Committee heard how the funding streams had now

ended and MVDC are waiting for the government to announce what will replace them. More information would be made available at Rural Summit in February 2019.

It was asked what the role of a growth navigator is. The Committee were informed that this was to assist a business's capability in moving forward. An example given was Coast 2 Capital.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and the Executive Head of Service for their update to Scrutiny Members.

29. Financial assistance policy for disabled facilities adaptations and private housing improvement

The Committee received an introductory presentation from the Cabinet Member for Environment.

It was confirmed by the Environmental Health Team Leader that any unused funds within the budget would be carried over to the next financial year.

Members asked what would happen to any outstanding work if the budget was spent before the end of the financial year and would MVDC approach the housing associations for assistance. It was advised that the department would constantly monitor the budget. If it appeared that the budget was nearly spent, then outstanding grant applications would be put on hold until the following year. If there was an urgent adaptation required, MVDC would approach the housing association, although there was no legal requirement for them to assist.

Members questioned the means testing process. The Committee were advised that information would be collected on a person's income and fed into computer software by a member of staff which would then show the contribution that the person was eligible to receive towards the cost of the work.

It was asked what the MVDC's budget was for discretionary awards. The Environmental Health Team Leader advised that no specific amount was currently allocated for this as it was close to the end of the current year. It was anticipated that approximately £50,000 would be allocated next year as a starting point, subject to being agreed at Cabinet. Mandatory disabled facilities grants would take priority. If mandatory disabled facilities grants used the majority of this budget, then the budget available for discretionary assistance would be reduced.

30. Permission to appoint a provider to deliver a home improvement agency service and a handy person service

The Committee heard how the current contract had expired and that the new contract was currently being procured and led by Reigate & Banstead Borough Council.

The contract was advertised on the procurement portal, a website where potential service providers receive information on contracts being tendered and they can submit interest. Four tenders had been received, and a preferred bidder had been agreed. It was intended to award a three contract on 31 October 2018 to commence on 7 January 2019 for an initial period of 3 years.

It was asked how many people were employed in delivering these services. The Environmental Health Team Leader advised that there were seven members of staff, some of whom were part time, who delivered the service across three councils (MVDC, Reigate & Banstead and Tandridge) and this formed majority of their business.

Members asked why MVDC did not keep the service in-house. The Strategic Partnership Manager advised that the procurement process permitted various companies including MVDC to tender bids for the service but MVDC had opted not to do so.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and the Environmental Health Team Leader for their update.

31. Urgent Items

None

Chairman: Date: