

Overview Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 9 June 2016

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr John Burden (Chair)
Cllr David Hurley (Vice-Chair)

Cllrs: Les Howes
 William Lambert
 Sara Langdale
 Brian Sangha
 Derek Shelbrooke
 Makhan Singh
 Michael Wenban

Note: Cllrs John Cubitt (Leader of the Executive) and Cllr Leslie Hills (Cabinet Member for Performance and Administration) were also in attendance.

Stuart Bobby	Director (Corporate Services)
Mike Bytheway	Service Manager Revenues & Benefits
Jackie Baker	Assistant Manager Revenues & Benefits
Chris Wakeford	Committee Services Officer (Scrutiny)

38. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Lee Croxton. Cllr Brian Sangha appeared as his substitute.

39. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7 April 2016 were signed by the Chair.

40. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

41. Scrutiny Reviews: Housing Repairs & Planning Applications - Oral Update following consideration at Cabinet

The Leader of the Executive advised the Committee that the recommendations in respect of the Housing Repairs and Planning Applications reviews, as shown below, were agreed at Cabinet on 6 June 2016, with one minor tweak to the third Planning Applications recommendation to allow Parish Councils to have the option of purchasing copies of planning applications/documents.

Housing Repairs

- The council should change the way in which it undertakes fencing repairs (not necessarily using fence panels but considering wire fences too).
- A review of the new arrangements including any unintended consequences upon tenants or upon the council's overall expenditure be undertaken in 12 months and a report be submitted to Overview Scrutiny Committee.
- Adequate resources be made available to ensure that the proposed Tenancy audit project is fully supported and that any actions identified as a result of the visits are completed as required.

Planning Applications

- The topic review sub-group continue to receive performance updates
- The format of planning reports be updated to provide a one-page summary which is then supported by more detailed information within the report
- The findings of Overview Scrutiny Committee that the provision of hard copy applications to the Parish Councils cease be supported but that parishes be given the option of purchasing copies if they choose to.
- The thoughts of Overview Scrutiny Committee in respect of the consultation and that, where appropriate, these be included in the final submission to government on the Implementation of Planning Changes consultation currently in progress.

The Leader of the Executive advised the Committee that Cabinet fully support the direction and essence of the recommendations and believe they will act as a catalyst for departments to look at what else needs addressing.

Resolved that the Committee note the approval of the recommendations, with one minor amendment, by Cabinet and look forward to a report back in 12 months.

Note: Cllr John Cubitt (Leader of the Executive) spoke with the leave of the Chair on this item

42. Item called in from the Cabinet meeting of 9 June 2016: Item 10. Council Tax Reduction Scheme Review.

The Chair explained that he had called in this item to examine the nature of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Consultation and the reason for the changes to the discounts.

The Service Manager Revenues & Benefits updated the Committee on the progress made with the review of the Council Tax Reduction scheme and the next steps it was proposed be taken to move it forward.

Although the overall number of applicants to benefit from the scheme since its introduction in 2013 had reduced and the average collection rates stood at 80%, the council was still facing a greater share of the costs burden.

The Kent-wide local authority group working on the scheme had concluded that it would be best to align the scheme with that already in place for Housing Benefit with an increase in the minimum contribution rate from the current 18.5% to a level somewhere between 20% to 25%. Other potential modifications to the scheme included amongst other suggestions the

introduction of a band cap at a band D; removing the second adult rebate and reducing the capital limit to £6,000.

The Service Manager Revenues & Benefits explained that the Kent-wide local authority group have agreed a common consultation format which is designed to look at the cost and efficiency of scheme.

The consultation will be presented online but paper copies will be available on request. Social Media will be used to publicise the consultation, all those in receipt of support from the current scheme will be invited to respond and a random sample of 5,000 Council Tax payers will also be invited to complete the consultation questionnaire. Key stakeholders will also be notified.

The Leader of the Executive advised the Committee that £125,000 assistance from Kent County Council may not be forthcoming if the council doesn't proceed with the consultation.

Following questions from the Committee, the Director (Corporate Services) and Service Manager Revenues & Benefits highlighted the following:

- This consultation will last for 12 weeks, this is best practice.
- The 14 options may seem large but this was agreed to be the best approach by the Kent-wide local authority group and a task group was used to provide the format of the questions.
- The results of the consultation will be carefully analysed and a full equality impact assessment undertaken before a final decision is made.

The Service Manager Revenues & Benefits advised the Committee that he would look into and report back on the following question:

Under option 13 'To limit the number of dependant children within the calculation for Council Tax Reduction to a maximum of two' would this include Foster children?

The Leader of the Executive explained that the consultation will go to Cabinet in November 2016 and Full Council in February 2017.

The Leader of the Executive advised Members that he would be happy for the Overview Scrutiny Committee to be involved in the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Consultation.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Executive and officers for attending the Committee

Resolved that the Committee note and support the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Consultation and request that the Overview Scrutiny Committee are involved in the consultation process.

Note: Cllr John Cubitt (Leader of the Executive) spoke with the leave of the Chair on this item

43. Review of Gravesham Gateway - Oral Update

The Vice-Chair updated the Committee on the progress with the first two meetings of the sub-group for the review of the Gravesham Gateway:

18 April 2016

The sub group consisting of Cllr Hurley (Chair), Cllr Croxton and Cllr Craske convened a meeting with Anita Tysoe (Service Manager Customer & Theatre Services), Daniel Laws (Gateway Manager) and Ben Clarke (Committee & Scrutiny Assistant). Cllr John Burden gave his apologies.

Cllr Hurley outlined the objectives of the Gateway review to the group:

- What are the aims of the Gateway?
- How is the Gateway performing?
- What ties does it currently have with KCC?
- Are we looking at other Partners?
- How much does it cost to run?
- What savings need to be made?

Anita Tysoe gave a brief overview of the Gateway to the group:

- The Gateway was formed in 2010 with KCC as the main partner and is the eighth to be opened in Kent
- The Gateway provides services that involve both KCC and Gravesham; these include services that members of the public may not be able to easily access e.g. finance advice, housing, HMRC etc
- KCC picked up the capital cost of creating the Gateway
- There is a KCC officer based in the Civic Centre; KCC pay a rental fee which covers caretaking, space and heating etc
- GBC would lose a significant sum a year if KCC pull out
- There are currently sixteen organizations in the Gateway that hire out multiple desks

Daniel Laws explained how the Gateway could make up the money, if KCC pulled their funding:

- At the moment 50% of the rent income is kept by GBC and the other 50% is kept by KCC, so if they pull out GBC will retain 100% of the rent profit made.
- Some of the space within the Gateway is unused; there are twenty two spaces which can be hired every day, currently only seventy eight and half are used a week (out of a potential 110)
- If the twenty two desks were hired all week, annually it would bring in a good income
- More desks and approximately three POD's could be fitted into the upstairs part of the lobby if equipment was moved around
- Local companies can pay the Gateway to advertise their business on monitors in the Gateway as well as leaflets

Daniel Laws and Anita Tysoe also advised that:

- KCC would need to give the Gateway a full financial years notice before they could pull their funding completely
- Anita Tysoe still liaises with the customer service group which consists of customer service manager and the various Gateways around Kent
- The Town Hall would be an unsuitable place to have the Gateway and the Gr@nd is too large to become a part of the Gateway
- KCC paid for the brand but GBC will be able to keep it should KCC pull out; this could be rebranded to the 'Gravesham Gateway'

Daniel Laws and Anita Tysoe agreed to provide the following information:

- The full list of Gateway partners
- The footfall figures for each partner
- The cost of renting a desk for a full day
- The above information will be circulated to the sub-group Members

24 May 2016

The sub group consisting of Cllr Hurley (Chair), Cllr John Burden and Cllr Craske convened a meeting with Anita Tysoe (Service Manager Customer & Theatre Services), Daniel Laws (Gateway Manager) and Ben Clarke (Committee & Scrutiny Assistant). Cllr Les Howes and Cllr Lee Croxton gave their apologies.

Anita Tysoe and Daniel Laws updated the group on the progress made:

- Two extra TV screens have been gifted to GBC which can be used in the Gateway
- KCC have contacted GBC to discuss a possible rental of the Gateway after the contract ends, if they are able to retain their services there
- Extended opening hours have been looked into for after 5pm weekdays and weekends – a document can be distributed to the group showcasing the predicted results of opening during those hours
- The pods at the back of the Gateway are permanently hired so regardless of if they are being used or not the max possible rental cost is achieved
- There are already strong organizations that deal with apprenticeships and career advice like CAS Training Solutions and Pinnacle People who have strong ties with JobCentre Plus
- Two previous partners, Porchlight (Homelessness Charity) and MCCH, (Learning Difficulties Charity) wish to come back to the Gateway
- Relate (Relationship Counselling) have also expressed a desire to hire the desks out in the week nights which links in with looking at having the Gateway open for extended hours

Cllr John Burden suggested the idea of moving Towncentric into the Gateway and highlighted the following:

- By moving Towncentric to the Gateway it can be downsized
- The Gateway is an ideal spot for people to find and use Towncentric
- It would deliver GBC a significant saving.

Anita Tysoe also gave the group an indication of the staff that would be needed to open on weeknights:

- One Management post
- Two Customer Service Officers
- One Security Guard

Anita Tysoe advised she would review staffing costs for the next meeting but clarified that whilst initial returns appeared attractive, Saturday and evening opening was unlikely to be an option due to diminishing returns once staffing costs and minimal demand for the space at those times had been applied.

Cllr Hurley outlined the action points of the meeting:

- Anita Tysoe and Daniel Laws to go to Melanie Norris to talk about how Towncentric could be downsized and placed in the Gateway and report back to the group

- Pinnacle People and CAS Training Solutions need to be highlighted more clearly to the public so they know what services are available regarding career advice/apprenticeships
- The TV's located in the Gateway can be used to advertise the services that are available or any other organization that pay to have their ads displayed
- Cllr Craske to find out who is a Member of the Relate Charity Committee and find out more about their views on hiring desks out in the evening at the Gateway

The Committee discussed the review and requested that the following areas are considered:

- The value of the Gateway to the people of Gravesham
- Improving signage to the Gateway and in relation to Gravesham Tourism opportunities.
- Ensure the Gateway has proper facilities for privacy and security.

The Vice-Chair noted the suggested areas and advised that he will pass on the Committee's views.

The Gateway Review sub-group will meet again on Monday 4 July 2016.

Resolved that the Committee note the progress with the review.

44. Scrutiny Topic Reviews - Future Work Programme

Members of the Committee were invited to consider what topics they would like to put forward to be reviewed.

The Committee considered the following topics that had been put forward by officers:

- Public Conveniences
- Council Tax exemptions and discounts
- Kingdom Enforcement Contract
- Housing Repairs (Part 2)
- Business Rates
- Land Asset Use
- GBC Assets

Resolved that the Committee agreed to undertake the following reviews:

1. Housing Repairs (Part 2)
2. Kingdom Enforcement Contract

The Chair and Vice-Chair will provide the names of the Members who will sit on each review sub-group (2 Members from each party) to the Committee Services Officer (Scrutiny) in due course.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 9.22 pm