

Overview Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 15 September 2016

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Cllrs: Gurdip Bungar
Les Howes
Sara Langdale
Brian Sangha
Derek Shelbrooke
Michael Wenban

Note: Cllr Leslie Hills (Cabinet Member for Performance/Administration) was also in attendance in the absence of Cllr Sandra Garside (Cabinet Member for Community Services).

Stuart Bobby	Director (Corporate Services)
Nick Brown	Director (Environment & Operations)
Stuart Alford	Assistant Director (Environment)
Chris Wakeford	Committee Services Officer (Scrutiny)
Sarah Arding	Committee Services Officer

49. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Lee Croxton and Makhan Singh. Cllrs Brian Sangha and Gurdip Bungar attended as their respective substitutes. An apology was also received from Cllr William Lambert.

50. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2016 were signed by the Chair.

51. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

52. Service Review - Timeline for discussion and identification of options

The Committee considered a report from the Director (Corporate Services) and Corporate Change Manager setting out a suggested timeline and process to be followed for the discussion and subsequent adoption of Service Review options.

The Director (Corporate Services) informed the Committee that over recent years, the Council had seen a significant decrease in the levels of government funding it receives. As a result of this, at the end of 2013, the Council's Management agreed a Service Review process whereby a team (the Service Review Team) was formed to review the services the Council currently provides in order to address some of these financial issues.

It is anticipated that an estimated £1.43m savings will need to be found through progression of the options identified through the Service Review process.

As a result of the reviews that have been undertaken, the Service Review Team have produced a list of options for each service area.

In order to ensure that the process for selecting the options to be progressed is robust, the options will be presented to Members in a 'staggered' approach. This will provide Members with sufficient time to discuss and debate the options put forward.

It was important that both Cabinet and the Overview Scrutiny Committee are involved in budget saving decisions and discussions had been held with the Leader of the Council and Chair of the Overview Scrutiny Committee to apprise them of the proposed process.

As set out in the Table (para 3.2) the initial review process would conclude in March 2017 but consultation could extend beyond that date.

The Chair requested clarification of the 'alternative delivery mode' (para 2.2.2). The Director (Corporate Services) advised that the Service Review Team considered all available options during the service review – including the opportunity to secure a service via shared delivery or outsourcing and all alternatives were examined in detail eg the cost of private sector food safety inspections had proved more expensive whilst shared working typically provided savings of 10% to 15%. It was also confirmed that there is an option to withdraw a contract from existing service providers if failings in service delivery are identified.

Officers were asked for an assurance that the Overview Scrutiny Committee would have access to the same background information as Cabinet to facilitate decisions. This was confirmed. It was clarified that the final report would include the overall estimated changes in income together with options available: to cease the service, continue with the service as before or continue the service but change the delivery model.

Members expressed concern about the pressure on officers and the public due to the timescale outlined in the Timetable and were advised that staff were fully engaged in the process via the newly-formed Staff Forum/staff briefings/intranet and public consultation would be clear and accessible. The Corporate Change Manager had mapped out a comprehensive communications plan to support the Strategic Review Timetable.

The Chair asked if the Timetable needed to be extended beyond March 2017 to ensure reports were received to assess whether the management structure of the Council was still fit for purpose. The Director (Corporate Services) replied that the impact of options would be included within the reviews and follow up reports would be provided as necessary.

Resolved that the Committee noted the report and timetable for presenting options to Cabinet/Overview Scrutiny Committee.

53. Topic Reviews Update

a) Kingdom Enforcement Contract Scrutiny Review

The Director (Environment & Operations) provided the Committee with an update on the outcomes of the last meeting of the Sub-group held on 12 September 2016.

The Chair commented that the meeting had been extremely useful and a complex issue had been scrutinised well. He emphasised that this was not a profit generating service and any surplus was being re-invested to promote and provide a cleaner Borough; this should be clearly reflected in the Council's publicity.

There had been considerable discussion about the impact of fines and costs of the court process for recovery where necessary. It had been agreed that fines had a positive impact and provided a preventative mechanism.

Members expressed concern about the relationship between the contractors and members of the public as there had been a perception of over-zealousness. The Director (Environment & Operations) advised the Committee that re-training and monthly performance reviews with Kingdom should ensure consistent performance. He explained that areas outside the town centre could be targeted and other Councils had seen the benefits of a rotational effect to enable efficiency and it was also noted that the procurement process would ensure that alternative service providers were considered and would be a good test for Kingdom.

The Committee considered in detail the problems arising from dog fouling within the Borough. Initiatives implemented by other Councils were mentioned including fining dog owners without the appropriate bag and DNA testing to identify canine offenders. Any proposed new measures would be referred to the Council's Legal Team for advice. Members emphasised the need for this problem to be effectively addressed as it is a serious issue with public health implications.

The Director (Environment & Operations) advised the Committee that initial feedback indicated that the town centre was cleaner. The Assistant Director (Environment) also reported that street cleaning had been pulled forward to a 07.00 start (previously 07.30) and the main shopping areas were now visited seven days a week to improve cleanliness. The possibility of a poster campaign with Primary Schools was discussed and Officers agreed to build in litter awareness into a current project proposal for Schools.

The Chair enquired if the Council captured information regarding the age/sex of individuals fined for dropping litter and if a profile of offenders could be included in the final report. The Assistant Director (Environment) replied that this data was available and would be included as requested.

The Director (Environment & Operations) explained that the review report and recommendations would be presented to the Overview Scrutiny Committee on 20 October 2016 before going to Cabinet on 7 November 2016.

b) Housing Repairs (Part 2) Scrutiny Review

The Director (Environment & Operations) provided the Committee with an update on the outcomes of the last meeting of the Sub-group held on 12 September 2016.

The Chair reported that this had been an effective meeting. The Sub-group had received a detailed pack with a flow chart used to determine major work programmes. There had been an excellent discussion regarding the use of the DSO for major work and the possibility of undertaking re-active works as well as planned repairs. A Surveyor was used to assess all major works and this had resulted in a reduction in the number of properties in the programmes for roofing and kitchen work. More detailed information would be included in the final report.

The Sub-group had also considered the impact on the Housing Revenue Account and suggested that the Council should promote what has already been achieved in this area at a reduced cost, without affecting the quality of service.

The Vice Chair congratulated the Director (Environment & Operations) on what had been achieved. He considered the Council was moving forward with a logical and sensible plan building a solid foundation for possible expansion of the DSO.

The Committee noted that the Sub-group will meet again on 24 October 2016.

Resolved that the Committee noted the progress with the two Scrutiny Reviews

54. Item called in from the Cabinet meeting of 05 September 2016: Item 13 Kent County Council Soft Landscape Maintenance Contract.

The Chair explained that he had called in this item in order to understand the alternative arrangements proposed in the urban and rural areas of the Borough, the cost implications and how the street scene will be left if this contract is terminated. In particular he required clarification on Option One.

The Assistant Director (Environment) advised the Committee that Gravesham Borough Council provided the highways soft landscaping service under a contract on behalf of Kent County Council and also maintained its own areas of land. KCC had proposed a 45% reduction in the contract fee (to 4 cuts per annum) which would result in GBC effectively providing a £53k subsidy if the maintenance programme was retained at current levels (up to 15 cuts per year) and a shortfall in GBC's budget. The Cabinet had considered three options as outlined in the report:

- Option One: Cease the soft landscaping contract with KCC.
- Option Two: Continue with the current level of service and agree to subsidise the funding shortfall of £33,755.
- Option Three: Continue with the soft landscaping contract with a reduced level of service to reflect the reduced funding from KCC.

The Chair asked for clarification of the decision taken by Cabinet and was advised by the Assistant Director (Environment) that the soft landscaping contract would be ceased (Option One). A decision was still to be made on the possibility of enhanced provision of landscaping in some areas.

Members expressed their concern at the high impact this decision would have on the visual amenity within the Borough and requested that residents are made aware that this is a KCC statutory responsibility not a GBC service. They asked for assurance that GBC Officers would not be dealing with complaints regarding the highways verge maintenance. The Assistant Director (Environment) assured Members that a dedicated telephone number for highways complaints would be available and would be channelled direct to KCC. A press release had already been issued and he was working closely with the Communications and Digital Teams to minimise any impact on GBC Staff and promote the message that verge maintenance including highway grass cutting and weed spraying were KCC functions.

The Chair asked for an assurance from the Performance Portfolio Holder that a uniform approach to verge maintenance would be taken throughout the Borough. The Cabinet Member advised that areas for enhanced maintenance would be key areas (town centre and entrances to the town).

Concern was expressed about the adverse impact on highway safety of reduced verge maintenance and health and safety implications particularly with regard to sight lines at junctions and obscured road signs. The Assistant Director (Environment) replied that KCC is aware of visibility issues and some areas are already cut more frequently. Any areas of concern observed by GBC Officers would be reported to KCC.

The Committee commented that if GBC continued to enhance the KCC maintenance programme in some areas it could cause confusion as residents will assume that GBC is solely responsible for the soft landscaping. This was acknowledged as a possibility by the Director (Environment & Operations) although areas with enhanced maintenance are less likely to generate complaints.

The Director (Environment & Operations) was asked if the schedules of maintenance and details of ownership of land in the Borough could be given to the Committee. He replied that currently these were in the form of a large number of hard copies and therefore could not be made available en masse. However any Councillor was welcome to visit the Brookvale Depot to view the maps and schedules for their Ward. In due course all the information would be inputted on a Geographic Information System (GIS) and made available on the GBC website.

The Committee expressed concern about the adverse impact of the cessation of the contract in rural areas of the Borough and the Assistant Director (Environment) agreed to send out information about the Cabinet decision to all Parish Councils. He advised that no public consultation had been required prior to the cessation of this service as GBC was merely a contractor; the statutory responsibility for the service was with KCC.

Resolved that the Committee noted the Cabinet decision that Gravesham Borough Council ceases the soft landscaping contract with KCC on 31 March 2017.

Note: Cllr Leslie Hills (Cabinet Member for Performance/Administration) spoke with the leave of the Chair on this item.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm