

Overview Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 9 July 2020

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Jordan Meade (Chair)

Cllr Steve Thompson (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Conrad Broadley
Dakota Dibben
Sarah Gow
Elizabeth Mulheran
Alan Ridgers
Christina Rolles
Peter Scollard

Note: Councillors: John Burden and Shane Mochrie-Cox were also in attendance

Melanie Norris Director (Communities)
Sarah Parfitt Director (Corporate Services)
Ben Clarke Committee & Scrutiny Assistant

8. Apologies for absence

Apologies of absence were received from Cllr Leslie Hills and Cllr Emma Morley. Cllr Dakota Dibben and Cllr Sarah Gow substituted respectively.

9. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview Scrutiny Board held on 11 June 2020 were signed by the Chair.

10. To declare any interests which members may have on the items contained on this agenda. When declaring an interest members must state what their interest is.

Cllr Jordan Meade and Cllr Shane Mochrie-Cox both declared an interest in item 5B – Youth Concordat 2020 as they were both previously Chairs of Gravesham Youth Council

11. Call in - Corporate Debt Strategy

Further to minute 15 (Cabinet 29.06.2020) Cabinet made an executive decision (reference 14/C/2020) with regard to the Corporate Debt Strategy which was called in for scrutiny by this Committee.

The Committee was presented with a report which sought Cabinet's agreement to endorse the principles of the Corporate Debt Strategy (attached in full at appendix two to the report) and asked Cabinet to note the Vulnerable Persons Policy and Vulnerable Persons

Assistance Groups documents that accompanied the strategy (attached in full at appendices three and four).

Cabinet had resolved that:

- the principles of the Corporate Debt Strategy across the Council as set out in appendix two to the report be **endorsed**
- the supplementary information on Vulnerable Persons as set out in appendices 3 & 4 to the report that accompanies the Corporate Debt Strategy be **noted**

The Director (Corporate Services) introduced the report informing Members of the Corporate Debt Working Group and the development of the Corporate Debt Strategy. The Strategy was also submitted to the Performance & Administration Cabinet Committee where it was discussed in detail and amended before being submitted to Cabinet where it received executive approval.

The Chair thanked the Director (Corporate Services) for her introduction and asked her to further elaborate on the recovery process, how officers engaged with residents in debt and the methodology used by officers to determine if a resident was choosing not to pay or physically couldn't make the payments due to extenuating circumstances.

The Director (Corporate Services) further explained the process behind debt recovery and she drew attention to the following:

- Before any formal action is taken, an informal route is followed once a resident has missed their first payment; an informal reminder will be sent to the resident informing them of the payment they missed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the difficult situations many residents faced, it was intended to issue 'soft reminders' before the recovery process was started, encouraging those owing monies to the Council to actively make contact and enter into a dialogue regarding payment.
- Following the informal reminder if no further engagement was received from the resident or they were clearly demonstrating no intention to pay the money owed then they were formally followed up through the debt recovery process
- Where officers have information on certain resident's situations, they will take that into account when dealing with any missed payments and work towards a solution that works best for the resident and the Council. A number of options are available to assist residents struggling with debt; the Council can issue a variety of payment methods to suit the resident's situation such as a payment instalment plan or an arrangement to pay their most recent arrears off first. The Council regularly reviews its available payment methods.
- In addition to support with payments, officers will also review the resident's situation and offer advice or signpost them to organisations such as Citizens Advice that offer specialised advice for different debts and how to prioritise debt repayments. Officers will also highlight to the resident any entitlements or benefits that they may be entitled to but weren't previously aware of or have not claimed
- A cornerstone of the Strategy was to create a consistent approach to debt recovery across the Council to ensure officers acted fairly and equally with all Council customers to maximise collection rates and reduce bad debts where possible. In certain cases, the Council would look to combine resident's debts to ensure that the resident only had one point of contact. That single point of contact allowed residents to deal with all of their debt through one process instead of having to repeat assessments or conversations with numerous officers.

Members of the Overview Scrutiny Committee thoroughly scrutinised the information contained in the report and had their questions, comments and concerns answered or addressed by the Director (Corporate Services).

The Committee made several recommendations:

- The report had already been submitted to the Performance & Administration Cabinet Committee prior to its submission and subsequent approval from Cabinet. The report was discussed at length at the Performance & Administration Cabinet Committee meeting and several amendments were made by the Committee. In future, to ensure the Overview Scrutiny Committee was fully apprised of previous discussions and agreements the minutes of the relevant Cabinet Committee meeting should be attached to the Call In pack within the agenda
- As part of the social media campaign, to spread awareness and advise the public of the Corporate Debt Strategy Member should be included as many requests for help were received through social media platforms such as Facebook Messenger. The Chair requested that Members were sent the relevant links to direct members of the public to if they had a Council debt issue and to reemphasise to Members who the main officer point of contact was for when a resident reached that stage of the debt recovery process
- An email to be circulated to Members with the Corporate Debt Strategy attached and an explanation of the stages of the Corporate Debt Process

The Chair agreed that the minutes of the Performance & Administration Cabinet Committee should have been included and promised to submit any relevant minutes to Called In decisions in the future.

Following a suggestion by a Member, the Chair invited Cllr John Burden to speak as the relevant Cabinet Member and the Leader of the Executive regarding the proposed suggestion to the report.

Cllr John Burden addressed the Committee explaining that the report had already been through the full democratic process, debated at length several times by Members and approved by Cabinet. Cllr John Burden felt that the report shouldn't have been called in but advised Members that he had listened intently to the suggestions and they would be considered. Although Cllr John Burden stated that it was unlikely anything would change as the report had already been through the democratic process but the suggestions could be considered further at the time of the next review of the Corporate Debt Strategy.

The Chair responded to Cllr John Burden regarding his decision to call in the Corporate Debt Strategy.

The Chair thanked the Director (Corporate Services) and the Leader for their comments.

Resolved that the Overview Scrutiny Committee:

- Noted the Corporate Draft Strategy and the Cabinet decision and further requested that the Cabinet Member reflected upon the above-mentioned recommendations of the Committee

12. Call In - Youth Concordat 2020

Further to minute 19 (Cabinet 29.06.2020) Cabinet made an executive decision (reference 18/C/2020) with regard to the Youth Concordat 2020 which was called in for scrutiny by this Committee.

The Committee was presented with a report which sought Cabinets agreement to renew the Concordat pledge and contact the other representatives identified in the report to ensure they were also committed to the updated concordat.

Cabinet had resolved that:

- The Council committed to the renewal of the Youth Concordat pledge and that the other representatives identified in the report be approached to commit to the updated Concordat.

The Director (Communities) introduced the report and advised that the 20th anniversary of the Youth Concordat is this month but many of the planned celebrations had to be cancelled due to the outbreak of COVID-19. However, a Youth Recognition Award has been created for the event and a 'Where are they now' scheme which looks at previous Members of Gravesham Youth Council. Plans will be put in place, in agreement with the Cabinet Member for Community & Leisure, to mark its signing at an appropriate time to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Youth Council. When it is suitable, it is the aim of the Council that the planned programme of events will resume.

The Chair thanked the Director (Communities) for the introduction and stated that the reason for calling in the report were not negative; the Chair agreed with the work being undertaken and felt that the signing of the Youth Concordat 2020 was very important.

Member of the Committee asked their questions to Cllr Shane Mochrie-Cox and he explained the following:

- A number of informal conversations between the partnership organisations and the MP have already been initiated but the majority have remained informal due to the limitations caused by the pandemic and officer time being redirected to more urgent areas. The conversations that have already been had were positively received and the notion was clear that the voices of young people needed to be celebrated and supported as much as possible. When operations start to go back to normality, more formal arrangements will be followed up
- The new Chair of the Youth Council, George Duffort, has re-established the Youth Council and changed their image by using social media and enhancing the relationship between the young people of Gravesham and the Council. The Youth Council will be monitored closely by Cabinet to ensure the youth receive the utmost level of support; Gravesham Youth Council has already accomplished far more than other Youth Councils
- The Youth Council have a long standing invitation to attend all meetings of Community & Leisure Cabinet Committee and the new Chair of the Youth Council was recently reminded of that invitation. Back in February 2020, the participants in the Local Councillor Shadowing Award were invited to the Community & Leisure Cabinet Committee and gave their insightful views on the agenda items

- The organisations that were approached were part of the original signatories twenty years ago; that body has evolved over the last twenty years and gone through many changes; Kent Fire & Rescue Service sit on the body and Cllr Shane Mochrie-Cox advised that he was happy to approach them about signing the Concordat
- A constant dialogue is kept open between the Youth Council and local schools to encourage participation in the Youth Council and its activities. Local schools will continue to be worked with in the future and the Youth Council will be advertised at all local schools to ensure that new Members are accepted every year
- The report did not go through the Community & Leisure Cabinet Committee; it only went through Cabinet as it was considered an important report that affected all of the Executive and Cabinet allowed all Executive Members to have a full discussion on the report
- All Councillors are welcome to join the Zoom meetings for Community & Leisure Cabinet Committee and request to talk on an item if they feel that it is important

The Chair thanked Cllr Shane Mochrie-Cox for attending the meeting and answering all of the Committees questions.

Resolved that the Overview Scrutiny Committee:

- Noted the Youth Concordat 2020 report and the Cabinet decision
- Requested that Cllr Shane Mochrie-Cox contacted the Kent & Fire Rescue Service to join as one of the signatories of the Youth Concordat 2020

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:26pm.