

Cabinet

Monday, 21 February 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr John Burden (Chair)
Cllr Lee Croxton (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Shane Mochrie-Cox
 Lenny Rolles
 Lauren Sullivan
 Narinderjit Singh Thandi
 Jenny Wallace

Note: Cllr Ejaz Aslam, Dakota Dibben, Gary Harding, Baljit Hayre, Leslie Hills, Bob Lane, Jordan Meade and Diane Morton were also in attendance.

Stuart Bobby Chief Executive
Nick Brown Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive
Melanie Norris Director (Communities)
Daniel Killian Director (Housing)
Julie Francis-Beard Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

15. Apologies for absence

No apologies for absence were received.

16. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on Monday 31 January 2022 were signed by the Chair.

17. Delegated Decisions - Cabinet Members

No decisions other than those already circulated had been made.

18. Minutes of meeting of Crime & Disorder Scrutiny Committee from 20 January 2022

The Cabinet were presented with the minutes of the Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday, 20 January 2022.

The minutes were noted.

19. Corporate Performance Update: Quarter Three 2021-22

The Chief Executive provided Cabinet with an update on the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Three 2021-22 (October to December 2021).

The Cabinet Members highlighted some of their Performance Indicators:

Cllr L Rolles informed Cabinet that PI47 would be updated in time for the Commercial Services Cabinet Committee.

Cllr L Rolles reported that PI54 had increased, which was good news and was aware of a few schemes that are run by the council to get more younger people into employment.

Cllr Mochrie-Cox explained that PI13, the number of environmental enforcement actions taken, was a continuing trend of 84 despite holding 2 vacancies during this period. This work will continue and will give out a clear message that the council will take action and will enforce notices and have successful prosecutions.

Cllr Mochrie-Cox reported that although PI42 was slightly down from the first quarter, attendance in Q3 had increased due to the pantomime. Due to Covid, performances had been severely affected but the council had recently seen a good upturn of numbers and hoped this trend would continue.

Cllr Sullivan informed Cabinet that the number of net additional homes had increased and affordable homes delivered had doubled since last year. Resident unemployment had fallen in Q3. An increase of active businesses increased and by the increase of business breakfasts, brunch and dinners there is a very strong, vibrant business network in the borough. Issuing the Covid funds to businesses from the Government had been well received.

Cllr Croxton highlighted that the council is getting closer to 45% and is striving to achieve 50% of recycled waste. The percentage had gone down slightly and that was linked to the residual waste. With Covid there was significantly more waste but the council is still managing comfortably at 43,44,45 % of recycled waste but more education is required. With the use of bin hangers, the council is encouraging residents to keep all their waste within one bin over the two-week period. The council had struggled with the % of unacceptable levels of littering but looking around the town centre and discussing with residents these areas are now looking much cleaner. The council employed another 6 posts and cleaning is now covered, within the town centre, 7 days a week from 7am – 6pm across the town centre.

Cllr Thandi explained that during the pandemic, housing benefits were being distributed to residents much quicker than nationally.

The Leader highlighted that Q3 had a good level of performance especially coming out of Covid and the council will keep challenging and pushing forward.

The Cabinet noted the information contained within the report.

20. Update on GBC response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Chief Executive provided Cabinet with an update on the activities of various council departments in the continued response to the COVID-19 pandemic since the last update in March 2021.

The Chief Executive guided Members through the report and highlighted the following key points:

- The overall financial support administered by the Council for local residents and businesses over the past year was just under £11m.
- The Woodville became a vaccination centre for the borough and over 104,000 vaccines were delivered.
- The council continued to support the NHS Test and Trace service in contacting over 600 cases who had tested positive and many of which required detailed record checks, door knocks and follow up calls to ascertain specific information.
- Procured and started running the Rough Sleeping Service which meant more overnight sleepers were taken off the streets.

The Leader thanked the Chief Executive and Officers for a detailed report. Covid has not gone away but we are going to have to learn to live with it. The report indicated that the council allocated a significant amount of government funds to residents and businesses within Gravesham. This report does not reflect the amount of time and effort that Officers have had to do on top of their day job and trying to keep within budget.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Chief Executive explained that:

- The rebate of £150 for Council Taxpayers living in Band A-D will not be easy to administer based on the limited amount of information received to date regarding the scheme. The expectation will be a direct payment made by Gravesham to all our council taxpayers in Band A-D on a day to be determined using bank details held for them. There are 34,000 A-D Band properties in the borough and only 14,000 of these pay by direct debit so the council holds their bank details. Once the information has been received from Government, the council will need to obtain 20,000 bank details from residents before the payment can be actually paid out. Nationally, this could introduce a significant fraud risk obtaining bank details and setting up a portal to administer this payment. The council and other local authorities / partners will experience a number of challenges including data protection information to overcome this, but more information will be received next week.
- The New Burdens funding could meet the costs of additional staff writing to residents to obtain the relevant information. The council currently does not know the quantum and so is unable to quantify what these costs will be.
- A portal will need to be developed for these repayments. It is unsure if each authority will need to develop this portal or whether it will be a Kent wide or national portal.
- As it stands at present, any resident living in a Band A-D property on the designated date will receive that payment even if they move out the next day which will mean the new resident will not receive the payment.
- Payments will be made to the named person on the council tax system. For example, for student accommodation the payment will go direct to the landlords not the students direct where rent is paid inclusive of Council Tax. Those occupants would not have an opportunity to claim the £150 but would have to liaise with their landlord.

The Leader thanked all the Officers involved and the council is appreciative of what they have done and will be doing.

The Cabinet were asked to note the updates provided in the report.

21. Cessation of the Revenues & Benefits Shared Management Arrangements

The Chief Executive provided Cabinet with information on the cessation of the Shared Management Arrangement with Medway Council for the Revenues and Benefits service.

Since October 2019 Gravesham Borough Council and Medway Council have operated a shared management arrangement in relation to the Revenues and Benefits services at both authorities.

In practice, this has taken the form of a shared Head of Revenues and Benefits and a shared Revenues Manager, both employed by Medway Council and shared 50:50 between the two authorities.

A review was undertaken in January 2022 and taking into account a number of challenges and the introduction of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) and Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT), Medway Council formally served notice to cease the shared management arrangement from the end of March 2022.

It is therefore intended to put in place a new management structure for Revenues & Benefits at Gravesham from 1 April 2022. The proposed arrangements are set out below:

- Re-introduction of a Service Manager (Revenues and Benefits) to manage the Revenues and Benefits Service.
- Re-evaluation of the Assistant Manager (Revenues and Benefits) post to take into account the responsibilities of the post holder in respect of the Revenues Team.

The Cabinet noted and agreed with the report.

22. KCC Kent Homeless Connect Service

The Director (Housing) informed Cabinet of a decision recently taken by Kent County Council to allow the Kent Homeless Connect contract, which provides specialist housing and support to vulnerable people and households, to come to its natural end in September 2022 and to outline the impact this decision is likely to have locally.

This will involve the removal of £5m funding from their budgets.

The current Kent Homeless Connect contract was established in 2019 by Kent County Council (KCC) to provide support to vulnerable adults at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness within Kent with complex needs such as mental health issues, struggling alcohol abuse and known difficulties.

If left unsupported by KCC, it would place a burden on other support services offered by KCC such as Specialist Children's Services, Adult Mental Health, and Safeguarding if no such service existed. In addition to this, other public agencies such as NHS, Probation Services, Community Safety, Public Health, etc. would also see additional burdens.

The current contract to set to come to an end in September 2022 and with no option to extend it. Throughout 2021, Gravesham Officers formed part of the working group established by KCC to create tender documents to re-procure the service. However, following some announcements from Government in late December 2021 KCC announced

they would need to make savings of £5m which would be taken from the budget and would not be replacing the Kent Homeless Connect contract.

Current services are delivered by two partners, Look Ahead and Porchlight. These agencies provide a significant amount of support in our borough most notably supported accommodation. We currently have 14 single people in supported accommodation and at this point it is unclear what the transitional arrangement will be put in place by KCC.

The removal of this service will leave a significant gap in the service provision, and it is likely to increase the number of people sleeping rough on our streets with complex health issues.

It is estimated the public sector will incur costs of £8m per year with the removal of this service.

KCC did not consult on its decision to cease the Kent Homeless Connect contract. Despite deciding to cut the funding, KCC have not yet undertaken a quality impact assessment or given its rationale to cut this service above the many other providers. They have not set out how they intend to mitigate the burden they highlighted in other services area in the original report.

The decision to remove the £5m was formalised by KCC at their budget setting meeting earlier this month and they now intend to complete risk assessments and quality impact assessments relating to the decision before the end of the contract.

The Director (Housing) is seeking Cabinet approval to agree to form a working group to engage with the current providers over the coming months to fully understand the impact.

The Leader thanked the Director (Housing) and Officers for a detailed report, but this is not good news for Gravesham. Gravesham found out about these changes at 5pm on New Year's Eve and Officers working within the Kent Homeless Connect Service were unaware. No District Leader, within Kent, supports this change. There has been a lack of consultation and understanding for residents throughout Kent.

As a borough we have a duty to the homeless, unfortunately we do not have the budget or resources for all the social services aspects. Kent have a legal duty to people under 25 where there are complex needs and vulnerabilities but Gravesham are not equipped to deal with the necessary support for people with acute mental health and dependency issues, that is Kent's role. This service will be phased out from September onwards and the council hopes that a way forward will be found.

The Leader informed the Cabinet that Kent had not yet considered the environmental and equality impact and had not completed a risk assessment. The Leader hopes that people in Kent will not suffer with the service being cut.

Following questions and comments from Members, the following was discussed:

- Members of the Cabinet expressed their anger and dismay at the decision being made by KCC and the fact that no equality and impact assessment had been undertaken.
- Members asked whether other agencies could provide a joint and cohesive response to work together in partnership rather than only one unitary authority in Kent. The Director (Housing) explained the council was going to ask for an impact assessment

to be completed and the third sector partnership to continue to protect the service without any additional cost to the council.

- In the report from 2017, there was a recognition of duplication and gaps in the service but no recommendation that there could be a better service or a refunder of the service.
- The Leader felt that a judicial review of the decision was unlikely.
- Members said they hoped Kent Leaders would respond and if the point could be made to local residents as to where the decision was made.
- The decision to cease this service will hit the most vulnerable people sleeping on the streets, with nowhere to go.

The council has a duty to the homeless and the council will do their duty as this group of people are the most vulnerable, but Kent also has a duty to fulfil to protect and safeguard them and hopefully move them back into normal society. There needs to be a way of solving this, the Government will need to be involved.

Cabinet noted the KCC decision and agreed to form a working group to engage with the current providers over the coming months to fully understand the impact locally and explore the potential of protecting the current service provision through alternative ways of working outside of Gravesham Borough Council funding.

23. Queens Platinum Jubilee Celebrations

The Director (Communities) provided the Committee with an update on the events that will take place to mark the occasion of the Queens Platinum Jubilee.

In 2022, her Majesty the Queen has become the first British Monarch to celebrate a Platinum Jubilee, marking seventy years of service to the country.

As part of those celebrations, there will be year-long Platinum Jubilee celebrations planned and there is an extended bank holiday, from Thursday 2 to Sunday 5 June. It is an opportunity for communities and people to come together to celebrate.

Working in conjunction with the horticultural team and the housing directorate the Queen has asked that the country celebrates through the Queen's Green Canopy which is encouraging organisations, businesses, voluntary groups and councils to create a network of trees that will help support the environment and fight the climate crisis.

As part of that the council has an extensive scheme for Woodlands Park including a sensory garden which will be the first sensory play equipment supplied by the council within the borough and that will replace the broken and unused crazy golf course in Woodlands Park.

Planting of trees in Windmill Hill and the beacon will be replaced and reinstated with a flower bed around the base of the beacon along with new seating in that area and a tree will be planted at the top of Windmill Hill.

Further tree planting schemes will be at Istead Rise and Camer Park.

Thousands of spring bulbs will be planted across the borough and in addition to what we have done during the Remembrance period the horticultural team will be spraying on 80 crowns which will appear in greens spaces around the borough.

The council will also be working with Parish Councils and communities to plant trees at a location of their choice. We are also working with the Social Housing team to find suitable gardens in which to plant a tree.

The council will host a large street party on 26 May on Community Square. Primary Schools will be invited and residents who were born in 1952 can apply to be invited. The council will be taking part in the beacon lighting at Windmill Hill and will also light the mobile beacon at the Civic Centre.

The town will be dressed with union flags and bunting as normal for St George's Day and then further official Platinum Jubilee flags will go up in May. The Community Square will be decorated for the occasion. All planters and hanging baskets will have a red, white and blue theme and a local group, the community group of knitters will be knitting corgis and Queens and they will be left around the borough as little gifts for residents.

There will be a month-long celebration at St George's Arts Centre with a workshop where residents can learn how to make things for their own street parties.

Members would like to pay tribute to the Queen's long service on behalf of the borough. That length of service is commendable, and all these events will celebrate the occasion.

The Leader and Members thanked the Officers for all their work developing the Queen's Green Canopy it will be a real asset to the borough and will create useable space and will fit in with the council's climate change activities.

The Committee noted the report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.40 pm