

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on 25 May 2021 at 7.00 pm in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent.

Present: Councillor Robert W Bayford (Chair); Councillors Rev. S Piper, Austin, Boyd, Coleman-Cooke, Huxley, Keen, Moore, Paul Moore, L Piper, Scott, Tomlinson and Towning

In Attendance: Councillors Ashbee and Whitehead

306. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from the following Members:

Councillor Currie;
Councillor Rattigan, substituted by Councillor Towning.

307. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

308. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Paul Moore proposed, Councillor Coleman-Cooke seconded and Members agreed the minutes as a correct record of the meeting held on 20 April 2021.

309. CALL-IN OF CABINET DECISION: THE FUTURE OF EAST KENT HR (EKHR)

Councillor Bayford introduced the item and made the following comments:

- Panel Members called in the 29 April Cabinet decision on this issue, as there was a feeling among Members that there was not enough discussion about the alternative proposals;
- However, from further discussions with senior officers particularly Ms Madeline Homer, CEx and Ms Estelle Culligan, Director of Law and Democracy, there was now an understanding that the decision which Cabinet was asked to take, was part of a wider decision, together with Canterbury and Dover, to disband the EK HR service and take back the services in-house;
- These decisions were in accordance with the Collaboration Agreement which governs the EKHR service and mean that, essentially, once one Council takes the decision, the others must follow;
- Beyond that, how the services are organised internally, is a matter for the Chief Executive, as Head of Paid Service;
- It was reported that Canterbury City Council took the decision to disband the service on 19 April and Dover District Council had recently taken the decision on 17 May;
- Therefore, in reality, Thanet District Council could not change that decision;

- However, it was useful for the Panel to understand more about the background and the reasons for the decision.

Ms Culligan set out additional background and said the following:

- At the Strategic board meeting in Autumn, each council expressed a desire for a service which was aligned more to their respective internal needs;
- East Kent HR was governed by a collaborative agreement;
- EKHR service was managed by East Kent Services;
- Dover District Council was the host to EKHR, as part of the delivery arrangement;
- The collaborative agreement sets out what would happen if a particular service was disbanded. Each council would take back its staff on the same conditions;
- As to how these employees would be deployed in-house was for the CEx to determine as Head of Paid Services.

Councillor Ashbee spoke under Council Procedure 20.1.

Members made comments and asked questions as follows:

- Will there be a policy framework for the General Purposes Committee that would be in the Committee's terms of reference?
- How long would this process take to bring in the HR service in-house?
- Will the budget to be used be part of the EKHR Reserves?
- Were there any potential jobs at risks for the staff affected by these changes?
- The council may end up paying more for the staff whose lifestyle may be impacted as a result of relocating to come and work in Thanet (at the Council Offices because some of the employees may be Dover locals);
- The part of the councillor involvement in HR matters in the report is weak. At what point do Members get involved in staff matters?
- Will the GPC be making employment policy?

Ms Homer and Ms Culligan responded as follows:

- The appropriate committee to deal with staff matters was the GPC;
- Nothing yet had been done to set that out the GPC role in relation to in-house HR service;
- Nearer the time to move the service in-house, discussions would be had for the new structure and terms of reference. The General Purposes committee would be involved in that process;
- The Strategic Board expressed that each council had different priorities and were moving in different directions;
- The role of the GPC was in policy direction;
- The setting up of staff structure was the responsibility of the Head of Paid Services;
- The transfer of HR service in-house was planned for September 2021;
- Discussions had been conducted with staff and the Union;

- TDC had made a commitment to take back in-house its staff from EKHR;
- It should be noted that at this point in time any future plans have not yet been considered;
- All staff would be considered as TUPE staff and will therefore be moved in-house on TUPE conditions;
- Staff would be given first, second and third preferences of where they would like to be redeployed. This was all set out in the staff consultation document;
- TDC adopted Flexible Working Policy for its staff, which has seen staff choosing to work either in the office (office based), at home (home based) or a combination of home and office working;
- Whilst GPC would set out future staff policy, the CEx would be responsible for implementing it.

Thereafter the Panel agreed to take no further action.

310. REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC: THE COMMUNITY HUB AND ENGAGEMENT WITH THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Madeline Homer introduced the report and said the following:

- The fairly detailed report before the Panel highlighted TD's response to the pandemic;
- When the national lockdown was put in place the council had already started working to provide support to local communities;
- Effective networks had been set up with third sector organisations. This had improved the council's engagement with communities, including parish and town councils;
- The council would like to continue with this engagement approach.

Members made comments as follows:

- The work done by the Council in response to the covid pandemic had been brilliant;
- The level of vaccination take up by the vulnerable groups had been of concern nationwide;
- Some frontline working staff had struggled to get vaccinated especially those that fell into the young age groups;
- The CEx and her team worked very well with parish and town councils as regular conference calls were held to provide updates on how the council was managing the situation in the district. Margate although not a parish/town council was also invited into those update meetings;
- These meetings have been excellent;
- The helpline was very helpful;
- Members thanked the council staff for the work they did in response to the pandemic;
- The council stepped up to the plate on this significant challenge.

Members agreed that these compliments by councillors for the excellent work done by the council staff in response to the pandemic should be on record.

Thereafter the Panel took no further action and agreed to note the report.

311. DECARBONISATION OF THE KENT INNOVATION CENTRE

Chris Blundell, Finance introduced the report and gave a PowerPoint slides presentation. He made the following points:

- These proposals were in line with the objectives of the scheme;
- The Kent innovation Centre building had very high usage and reducing its carbon footprint would assist with the council's overall objectives of a reduction in the council's footprint to carbon neutral by 2030;
- A bid made by the council was successful and £1.1million had been paid by the end of March;
- A Cabinet Member decision had been made to add the project to the council's Capital Programme for 2021/22;
- There was a September 2021 to get the project underway;
- The building would be insulated to make it energy efficient;
- The aging gas heaters would be replaced with air source heat pumps;
- Renewable electricity will be installed;
- The project was being financed from external sources;
- There were some risks that would need to be managed;
- TDC would like the way in order to motivate the community.

Members asked questions and made comments as follows:

- This was a good project. Will the LED lights to be installed controllable and consideration be given to people with disabilities?
- Was this planned to be a major construction that would later be used by organisations that could include TDC?
- It was said that air source heat pumps only work if the if the walls were insulated;
- There was Member support for this work;
- This was a good example of incorporating ecological concerns on major construction works and this would be beneficial to the council;
- The project cost would be £1.236million against a grant of £1.1million. Could officers assure Members that the project costs would stay within the fund limit?
- If there were anticipated costs overruns, why not get a fixed cost tender?
- Would any cost overruns be reported to the Panel?

Mr Blundell and Ms Homer responded as follows:

- This was the first of many more projects to come. The council had committed £3million for council offices and green criteria would be considered when sourcing for these offices;
- Currently there are tenants in the KIC building. The council was in the process of reviewing its council base (offices) and reviewing its future options for efficient working;
- KIC had an 85% occupancy of the building;

- There was some substantial work being done to the wall insulation and these works were being carried out around the organisations currently suing the office space;
- There were risks for cost overruns of the projects. There was therefore a need to keep an eye on that. The project had a 10% contingency built in;
- Although there was a main contractor, there were several suppliers involved in the project. It was therefore not possible to get a single fixed cost tender due to the nature of the project;
- Officers would be reporting to the Panel on any overruns.

After the discussion, Members noted the proposals.

312. TENANT AND LEASEHOLDER SERVICES - QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT

Councillor Whitehead, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing and Community Services introduced the performance report. She commented as follows:

- The decision made by cabinet to bring back in-house the housing services was a significant decision made by TDC;
- Since the transition, the Housing team had settled well and was getting support from tenants and leaseholders' group;
- The group dynamic was positive;
- There was also ongoing support from the Housing Cabinet Advisory Group which was invaluable;
- The Team was communicating with tenants and leaseholders through the Newsletter;
- The new compliance team had made significant progress in ensuring compliance in relation to gas provision, asbestos and water. These were now working according to business practice;
- East Kent Audit had since been invited to come and check in order to confirm whether TDC was ready for the Regulator's inspection.

Ms O'Sullivan, Tenants and Leaseholder Services Manager made these additional comments:

- The Housing Services Team was continuing to improve its performance;
- Although the Income Team had not reached the target, they were working very well;
- The Transactional Team also worked incredibly hard in the period under review;
- Many of the legacy issues had been resolved.

Members made comments and asked questions as follows:

- What was being done regarding the Decent Home Standards?
- With regards to arrears from previous tenants; did the council recover the arrears or were these debts written off?

- Would the council receive some recompense in instances where MEARS did not reach the agreed performance targets?
- When was the MEARS contract coming to an end and were there any likely potential competitors?
- Would Housing be taking any new apprentices this year or was the previous intake a one off project?

Ms O'Sullivan responded as follows:

- The issue regarding the Decent Homes Standards was a complex one due to asbestos found in some of the properties;
- The Service was working on decamping some of the households from these buildings in order to remove asbestos;
- Some of the arrears would be recovered but there was going to be a write off of some of the debts. The debt off would be in accordance with the TDC policy;
- There was no recompense received by TDC if MEARS did not reach its performance targets. However Mears were working on improving their service;
- The council was recruiting a new contracts manager who would be monitoring the performance of various housing service contracts;
- The MEARS contract was coming to an end in 2025;
- With regards to the Decent Homes Standards, the Team was working on a number of repair models and would be going to tender for that which hopefully would improve the performance of repair works;
- Currently there were three apprentices in the Housing team and if the placements were successful, the placements would be turned into officer roles;
- Once opportunities for more placements arose in the future, the council would consider recruiting to those roles.

Members noted the report.

313. ESTABLISHING THE OSP WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2021/22

The Panel Chair led the discussion and reminded Members on the main issues that were regular agenda items and advised the Panel to take note of these items when considering taking on new work. Councillor Bayford said that when discussing any new work the Panel should consider what they are setting out as potential scrutiny topics which were identified in the previous municipal year. The regular agenda items were as detailed below:

- Corporate Performance reports (*this was previously a quarterly report, but now with the approach, a timetable still needs to be agreed*);
- Crime and Disorder Partnership Performance (*at least once a year*);
- Fees and Charges (*once a year in October/November*);
- Council Budget (*once a year in January*);
- Policy Framework items (Local Plan/Local Development Framework);
- Key Decisions on the Forward Plan (as requested by OSP);
- Any other Forward Plan items as requested by OSP;

- Any other items referred to OSP by Cabinet for pre-decision scrutiny (e.g. *the Decarbonisation of Kent Innovation Centre report which is on this May Agenda*).

Of the scrutiny review topics which are highlighted in Annex 2 to the panel report, Members had reviewed to completion the topic on Street Scene (in relation to abandoned vehicles). The Planning Enforcement Review was still in progress whilst the work of the Memorials Working Party had been kept in abeyance until the Planning Enforcement Review had been concluded.

The Panel agreed the Work Programme and noted the report.

314. FORWARD PLAN

Members noted the report.

Meeting concluded: 8.00 pm