

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on 15 March 2022 at 7.00 pm in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent.

Present: Councillor Rev. Stuart Piper (Chair); Councillors Fellows, Austin, Bambridge, Currie, Keen, Rattigan, Tomlinson and Wright

In Attendance: Councillor J Bayford

364. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from the following Members:

Councillor Boyd, substituted by Councillor Bambridge;
Councillor Coleman-Cooke, substituted by Councillor Wright;
Councillor Lynda Piper;
Councillor Huxley.

365. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations made at the meeting.

366. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Fellows proposed, Councillor Austin seconded and the Panel agreed that the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 17 February 2022 were a correct record.

367. CABINET MEMBER PRESENTATION BY CLLR PUGH ON INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

Councillor Pugh made a presentation at the Panel meeting. As part of the presentation Councillor made the following points:

- The council had built some resilience that would ensure business continuity when faced by challenging emergencies;
- One way of building that resilience by moving to Google Workspace;
- This had worked well as it enabled council staff and councillors to work remotely (work from home);
- This worked very well during the height of the covid pandemic as council continued to conduct its business and deliver services to residents with minimum interruption;
- Council meetings were conducted remotely and livestreamed to the public;
- Council still live streamed meetings and informal meetings were now being conducted virtually as formal meetings were now back to in person attendance;
- There was a 35% increase in traffic on the council's website;
- Real time information on the pandemic was provided to residents through the website;
- The telephony system was upgraded;
- E-signatures and online payments were introduced to expedite business transactions;
- A new waste management portal was set up;
- There was a new online sign up facility introduced for garden waste services;
- Other councils were now learning from TDC.

Members commented and asked questions as follows:

- Some Members were concerned about those residents who were unable to access the council's website for information. How was the council ensuring that such residents could still access council information?
- How was the council making sure that residents read formal documentation easier?
- When the council tax bill was sent out for the coming year, was it possible to include a tear off slip that residents could complete and return to the council to indicate if they were happy to receive information online? Was this a workable thought?

Councillor Pugh and Hannah Thorpe responded as follows:

- The last residents survey showed that 83% of respondents said that they used the TDC website, which was an increase from the previous year;
- The pandemic had spurred more people to use digital services;
- The council used visuals to put across information;
- However it was important to ensure that key information was in all documentation being shared with the public;
- There were statutory regulations on access to information that the council followed in order to meet the compliance requirements for providing accessible information the public;
- Tear off slip: Officers would look into that suggestion;
- Residents who cannot access the council's website could still use the Thanet Gateway, post office or direct debit to pay council tax.

The Chair thanked Councillor Pugh and noted the presentation.

368. TENANT AND LEASEHOLDER SERVICES KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - QUARTER 3

Bob Porter introduced the report and made the following comments:

- Eighteen months from when the housing service was brought back in house, there had been significant improvements in service delivery;
- Safety standards compliance was now being attended to through an established dedicated team;
- The team was reporting monthly to the Regulator;
- On 24 February 2022, the Regulator removed the compliance notice;
- The council was still working attaining full compliance;
- The council was now in compliance regarding asbestos surveys;
- Work was in progress and on time regarding refurbishments;
- Water safety: the number of repairs still be done had been reduced;
- Electrical certification – At the time of producing the report there were 777 properties with non compliance. However that figure had since gone down to 600;
- An additional contractor had been taken non board to help with the certification;
- All fire risk assessments were now being carried out by an external specialist;
- The report indicated that there were 237 fire risks to be done. That number had now gone down to 180;
- Capital Programme: Royal Crescent in Ramsgate – Specifications were now being put in place for the project. Project tender will be done in the next quarter;
- Churchfield – The council had consulted with residents on what needed to be done. Fire safety matters were the main priority for this project;
- Voids turnaround times: A new team had been set up to improve the times;
- Rent Arrears: This was a significant risk moving forward due in part to inflation.

Members asked questions and made comments as follows:

- A number of households were currently facing a lot of financial pressures;
- Had staffing issues during the pandemic not affected the work of the Housing Service, particularly relating to officer visits to tenants in council housing;
- The performance report showed some very impressive results. Could a glossary be provided for the acronyms used in the report?
- A few years ago there were concerns regarding the lack of fire, gas and electric certification on some of the council houses. Has this issue been resolved?

Bob Porter and Chris Blundell responded as follows:

- Early intervention to support struggling families was always the council's policy;
- The Wellbeing Team provided support to households so that families can maximise their income;
- The team provided advice on livelihoods and secure employment;
- The focus by the team was on prevention;
- There was a discretionary housing payments facility of £460k to support households in difficulties. This year the council had used £430k of the funding to date of that fund, with the remainder expected to be used by the end of the year;
- Regarding officer visits to residents; the plan was to have more officers working from the office and have contact with households where required;
- Remote working has brought its own challenges and benefits as well. The hybrid approach to working had also been quite beneficial;
- Officer were going to add a glossary for the acronyms used in future performance reports;
- Data on certification of houses that was received from East Kent Housing had been in a very bad state. The housing Team had since cleansed the data, using True Compliance, a new electronic system being used by Housing;
- The new system identifies properties not in compliance and flags them up and this was making a huge difference;
- Using True Compliance had freed up officers to then go out on property visits.

Councillor Jill Bayford thanked officers for the hard work to improve service delivery in Housing.

Members noted the report.

369. ADOPTION OF REVISED TENANCY STRATEGY & TENANCY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Bob Porter led the discussion and made the following comments:

- The 2011 Localism Act gave councils a range of powers including the requirement to have a tenancy strategy and ability to vary the tenancies including fixed tenancy;
- Thanet District Council introduced fixed term tenancy and this covered all of the social landlords in the district;
- However social landlords take this as advisory rather than mandatory;
- The management strategy provided a framework for managing the tenancy strategy;
- There were some landlords that had ended the use of the fixed term tenancy after the fixed term tenancy had expired;
- The challenge posed by this type of tenancy was stability of tenancy and neighbourhoods;
- TDC was now going back to lifetime tenancy with a one year introductory tenancy.

Members asked questions and made comments as follows:

- What would happen in instances where a tenant had lived at a lifetime tenancy property with disability facilities for a long time and then passed away? Would the children continue to live there even if they did not need the use of disability facilities?
- Would it be easy for TDC to move such a household to a different property so they can give this property to a family that needed the use of such a property?
- Where did social landlords stand with such changes being proposed? Would they continue to operate like the council?
- Was succession to a property handed once?

Bob Porter responded as follows:

- Issues of inheritance were set out in law;
- The individual inheriting would have had to be someone who ordinarily lived in that house for at least 12 months. However this had to be a suitable property;
- If the property was not suitable the council have to provide a suitable alternative suitable option;
- Most social landlords offered lifetime tenancy arrangements as opposed to fixed term ones;
- TDC would also be moving to providing assured lifetime tenancy;
- Succession can be handed only once. Before the 2011 Localism Act it could be handed twice.

Members noted the report.

370. NEW TLS POLICIES FOR ASB, ADAPTATIONS, INCOME COLLECTION AND RECHARGEABLE WORKS

Bob Porter introduced the report and said that the four policies were being reviewed by the council on 17 March 2022, having been inherited from East Kent Housing. The Panel was being asked to review the draft policies before they were considered by Cabinet. The Thanet Leaseholder Group and the Housing Cabinet Advisory Group had also reviewed the proposed policies.

There being no further comments, the Panel noted the report.

371. REVIEW OF OSP WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2021/22

Members noted the report.

372. FORWARD PLAN

Members noted the report.

Meeting concluded: 7.55 pm