

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on 20 February 2020 at 7.00 pm in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent.

Present: Councillor Robert W Bayford (Chairman); Councillors Boyd, Coleman-Cooke, Hopkinson, Huxley, Moore, Paul Moore, L Piper, Roper, M Saunders and Scott

In Attendance: Councillors Whitehead, D Saunders, Rattigan, Wright and Yates

224. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The following apologies were received:

Councillor Campbell;
Councillor Parsons, substituted by Councillor Mave Saunders;
Councillor Rusiecki.

225. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations made at the meeting.

226. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Mave Saunders proposed, Councillor Paul Moore seconded and Members agreed the minutes as a correct record of the previous meeting that was held on 21 January 2020.

227. NO PRE DECISION ITEMS ON THIS AGENDA

There were no Pre Decision items on this agenda.

228. CABINET MEMBER PRESENTATION - THE FUTURE OF COUNCIL HOUSING STOCK MANAGEMENT - AN UPDATE REPORT

Councillor Whitehead, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing & Safer Neighbourhoods, presented an update report on the future of East Kent Housing (EKH) and highlighted the following points as part of the update:

- Thanet Council was to be 'Landlord' again of the council's housing stock. There was a need to increase our housing stock and support local residents, many of whom were vulnerable;
- Cabinet agreed to bring the management of its housing back 'in-house' at the extraordinary Cabinet meeting on the 17th February 2020. There was overwhelming support from Members to do this, in order to deliver on the capital programme and the corporate improvement plan;
- In the future, Thanet would be focused on improving health and safety standards, spending more on vital building maintenance and maintaining the quality of services our residents already expected from East Kent Housing;
- Members were aware of the risks regarding staffing, performance dips, increased costs during the transition period and reputational risks;
- However this should be seen as an opportunity for greater control and scrutiny, enhanced resident involvement, easier decision making and more local procurement,

which would enhance the housing experience for the tenants who rely on council services.

Further details from the presentation can be found in the slides attached as an annex to these minutes.

Members asked the following questions:

- How many staff members would be moved over? How would we ensure their welfare, and could we be selective in our future recruiting process?
- How would this impact the current funding for the housing service?
- Why was the response rate from the consultation so low, and did this really mean there was overwhelming support to bring the service back in-house?
- Could we have conducted better scrutiny on the performance of EKH?
- When do we expect the housing stock maintenance to be taken back in-house?
- Would there be an extensive quality control scheme?
- How would tenants be involved in the maintenance process?
- What were the priorities of the new East Kent Housing interim Chief Executive during this transition period?

Councillor Whitehead, Mr Bob Porter, Head of Housing & Planning and Mr Tim Willis, Deputy Chief Executive responded as follows:

- It was difficult to work out how many staff members from East Kent Housing would be TUPE'd to Thanet, as it was at the individual employee's choice to make amongst the four partner councils;
- It was also important to work out a local arrangement for those staff members not protected by TUPE;
- TDC would identify the skills set required for potential staff
- TDC would take legal advice on the process. The Council had not started engaging the EKH staff. Staff retention was a key principle of the council on such matters;
- There would be a potentially good transfer rate of officers willing to join TDC to a point that there might even be vacancies that would still need to be filled;
- The council would aim to minimise redundancies and support staff during this difficult time by recruiting a Transition Manager to oversee the process;
- The only possible impacts on the General Fund would be secondary and they relate to the balance on share of costs due to staff transfer;
- There would be one-off transition costs, the details of which were outlined further in the minutes of the Cabinet meeting held 17th February 2020;
- Although there was relatively a small number of responses to the consultation; the response was overwhelmingly in agreement to move the service back in-house;
- Consultation response figures regarding the setting up of the ALMO (Arms Length Management Organisation) in the original 2010 survey (for comparison) would be circulated after the meeting. However a interim check during the meeting had confirmed that a report back presented to Cabinet on 23 September 2010 indicated that 966 respondents indicated that they agreed to TDC working with partner councils to run the council's housing stock;
- There have been previous performance reports on EKH – but Thanet's working relationship has not always been strong with them. When there have been problems identified, TDC had struggled to improve their performance and effect change;
- The transition period would take up to one year to complete fully. It was hoped that the new arrangement would be fully operational from the 1st of April 2021;
- It was essential to ensure that quality control measures were in place for the future. This would need to include effective internal audit, management controls of key processes such as rent collection, works ordering and invoicing. That would also include routine reconciliation procedures, post inspection of completed repair works,

- effective sign-off of capital works and technical auditing of health and safety compliance;
- Residents would be more involved in the maintenance process through a Thanet tenants and leaseholders group, who will regularly meet and communicate through many different outlets;
- Ms Vivien Knibbs, the new East Kent Housing Chief Executive had committed to work with and support TDC through a smooth transition;
- Ms Knibbs undertook to supporting various work streams and ensuring service continuity throughout the transition period;
- Ms Knibbs and TDC were aware of the need to ensure that there was no slippage in service quality or difficulty accessing the service whilst at the same time planning for the future provision of housing services to residents.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Whitehead for the presentation and noted the update report.

229. EAST KENT HOUSING PERFORMANCE REPORT Q3 2019/20

This report was presented by Mr Porter, outlining performance between October and December 2019. Crucially that:

- Rents arrears continued to increase. EKH explained that it was largely due to the roll-out of Universal Credit. However the data also seems to indicate that even rent arrears by individuals not on Universal Credit was increasing. This issue required further investigation;
- Capital Programme delivery was a long way short of the target as in previous years, with some significant projects that remained un delivered;
- Performance on Voids had been deteriorating. EKH explained that the properties affected by asbestos required asbestos surveys and major asbestos removal works. This issue also needs further investigation in order to improve Voids performance;
- Health and Safety issues were highlighted by Internal Audit. They pointed some areas that required improvement and there were now some measures in place to address those concerns;
- EKH had started providing a monthly update on Health and Safety. The most recent report provided this week still reflected some areas that were still non compliant;
- The performance improvement action plan was being updated. This Plan (a voluntary undertaking by TDC) would be discussed and agreed with the Regulator before it was published;
- Data integrity was previously a big issue. However reasonable assurance had been received from Internal Audit. The integrity performance rating had since moved up significantly;
- Gas safety which previous had limited assurance had now been moved to substantial assurance by Internal Audit;
- Water safety had moved to reasonable assurance;
- An external consultant had been recruited to conduct spot checks which could be compared to the contractor's data;
- Quarterly performance reports would continue to be presented to the Panel.

Members responded with the following questions:

- Were rent arrears rising because of universal credit?
- Did other councils respond similarly to the gas safety checks information?
- Tenant repairs were low, but should they not be done by the external contractors?
- Why was there a significant lag on the number of complaints closed on time?
- How could we ensure there wasn't a slip in performance? What specific measures could be put in place?

Mr Porter responded as follows:

- East Kent Housing did make contact with people moving on to Universal Credit. It was not as a result of a shortage of staff struggling to collect rent payments, but it is harder for universal credit tenants to meet payment commitments;
- All other councils in the East Kent Housing group responded the same as Thanet to the reports on gas safety checks;
- The question on low tenant repairs would best be directed to East Kent Housing. There had been a recent change in their gas contractor. While EKH advised that they were getting through their workload, that seemed not to be the case;
- The significant time lag in complaints being closed on time should be acknowledged as not being good enough;
- TDC was committed to continuing the services that were currently being provided by EKH;
- Senior officers met monthly with EKH officers to monitor performance;
- The Chief Executives of all four partner councils now made up the East Kent Housing Board membership. This ensured that EKH performance was discussed at a senior level;
- A Transition Manager had been recruited, and an external consultancy firm recruited to carry out extra health and safety checks;
- A transitional budget had been agreed and set aside by Cabinet;
- With the above arrangements in place, TDC was watching the impact of service delivery carefully. Additional resources could be put in if performance did slip, in line with the Cabinet agreement.

The report was noted.

230. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT QUARTER 3 2019-20

Ms Hannah Thorpe, Head of Communications introduced the report and made the following comments:

- The Council was currently in a transition period where, as a result of the new corporate plan with new corporate priorities (focussing on Growth, Environment and Communities) that was introduced in October last year, new performance targets and indicators would be used as of 1 April 2020;
- The new form of data analysis would allow for easier explanation of performance figures and this would include information on public opinion;
- Quarter 3 and Quarter 4 performance reporting would continue to use the current reporting format;
- 16 targets out of 24 were at or exceeding target. Three were at amber and five were below target;
- The report generally showed improved performance, although there were eight targets of concern;
- The public perception regarding satisfaction levels for street cleansing had gone down. On the other hand recycling satisfaction levels had increased;

- Days in hotel accommodation had gone down, which reflected good performance, by the Housing Team;
- Sickness stats were below target but was moving in the right direction;
- Council tax and business tax collection was within target;
- Officers were working on improving performance in those areas whose performance indicators were amber and red;
- A vehicle procurement process was currently underway to replace the aging waste & recycling collection fleet. It was hoped that the new fleet would be in place by October this year.

Members responded by asking the following questions:

- Indicators were about to be rewritten – was there any opportunity for Member involvement and how were the targets set?
- Can the Council improve recycling rates even more?
- What was the cause of the rising number of empty properties?
- Were waste collection rates below targets because of parked cars blocking waste vehicles or were there additional challenges faced by the service?

- When recycling collection was missed, were residents affected advised why their recycle was missed?
- Why was domestic clinical waste collection being carried out monthly as opposed to the weekly collection?
- Would there be a charge for domestic clinical waste collection?
- What new targets would be included and how else would they change?
- Could more information be provided about the education enforcement officer's role?

Ms Thorpe, Mr Porter and Mr Willis responded as follows:

- The council used a performance management framework, which sets out how it should manage its performance;
- A lot of the targets were previous statutory requirements which the council was required by government to report on a national level;
- TDC decided to carry on with those targets, as it set its own benchmarking;
- The changes coming in April would provide an opportunity to refresh how performance data could be better presented;
- Some of the data currently collected did not accurately present a valid representation of our successes and failures. There was therefore a need to capture meaningful data to enable Members to hold corporate services to account for performance and to reassure the public that the council was responding and tackling their concerns;

- Members were welcome to be a part of the future performance management process;
- With regards to recycling, TDC would like more residents to get involved;
- The question regarding informing residents about missed recycling would be responded to by the appropriate service after the meeting;
- Intervals for domestic clinical waste collection would best be directed at the portfolio holder during the presentation at the March Panel meeting;
- With regards to charging for domestic clinical waste collection, a decision was made last year not to impose a charge;
- Recruiting an education enforcement officer would assist in educating the public about the benefits of recycling, which in turn would improve the council's recycling and waste collection performance targets;
- It was worth noting that Thanet had some of the least contaminated recycled waste in the region;
- The Housing Team had been working hard to target the number of empty properties in the district and bringing them into use;

- TDC brought more empty properties back into use than any other council in Kent;
- It was worth noting though that a number of properties in the district were being turned into second homes and this number was gradually increasing;
- The Housing Team was working on an 'Empty Properties Plan'. Once ready, the Plan would be shared with Members in due course;
- With regards to inconsiderate parking, the aim was to increase awareness of where cars were inconsiderately parked, and how this could prevent waste and emergency service vehicles from accessing streets to provide services to residents. Officers also sent out letters to the car owners and targeted specific problem areas;

- With regards to clinical waste collection; there were no plans on charging for residential clinical waste. There would be a waste collection discussion at the Overview and Scrutiny Panel on the 17 March 2020 as part of the Cabinet Member presentation. This issue could be considered further during that presentation;
- Additional information regarding the education enforcement officer would be circulated to Members once it was available.

Councillor Bayford proposed, Councillor Hopkinson seconded and Members agreed to a request for a Member/Officer panel to allow Members the chance to input into the review of future performance targets.

Councillor Bayford proposed, Councillor Lynda Piper seconded and Member agreed that the Empty Properties Action Plan be presented to Overview and Scrutiny Panel once it was ready.

Thereafter Members noted the report.

231. REVIEW THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2019/20

The Chairman reminded the meeting of the need to get updates on all recommendations that were awaiting implementation. These were highlighted in Section 3.0 of the work programme report.

Mr Porter advised Members that officers were still following up on a letter sent to KCC by the Cabinet Member for Housing & Safer Neighbourhoods in August 2019, regarding the Disability Facility Grants (DFGs) as reported in Section 3.5 of the Panel report. The Panel had requested that “KCC ring fenced the £405k (Top sliced/payment to KCC projected for 2019/20) for use by Thanet residents”.

The Chairman acknowledged the need for a future scrutiny work programme that reflected more Member generated items, rather than those that just come out of the processes of conducting council business. Councillor Bayford suggested that the Panel should perhaps hold a workshop soon to identify topics that Members could examine as part of scrutiny review projects. The workshop could also look at scrutiny items from neighbouring seaside authorities to see how TDC could conduct better scrutiny.

Members noted the report.

232. FORWARD PLAN & EXEMPT CABINET REPORT LIST

Members noted the report.

Meeting concluded: 8.35 pm