

Overview & Scrutiny Panel Chairman's Report to Council

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| Council | 25 February 2021 |
| Report Author | Committee Services Manager |
| Status | For Information |
| Classification: | Unrestricted |
| Key Decision | No |
| Reasons for Key | N/A |
| Ward: | Thanet Wide |

Executive Summary:

This report highlights some of the key activities that have been planned for by the Overview & Scrutiny Panel during the course of this municipal year and progress to date regarding implementation of the Panel's work programme.

Recommendation(s):

Members are asked to comment on and thereafter note the report.

Corporate Implications

Financial and Value for Money

There are no financial implications directly arising from this report. The report provides a briefing to Full Council about the current work activities of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel.

Legal

There are no legal implications directly arising from this report. A presentation of the Panel Chairman's report to Full Council enables the Chairman to fulfil their duty as is required by the Council's Constitution.

Corporate

There are no corporate risks associated with this report. The report enables discussion by Members at Full Council on the activities of the Finance Scrutiny Panel.

The debate on the Panel Chairman's report contributes to open communication across the council. A strong scrutiny function contributes to an open democratic process for decision making and delivery of value for money services as council decisions are interrogated by Members before they are implemented. In instances where such decisions are interrogated after implementation, there will be lessons to learn for future policy development.

Equality Act 2010 & Public Sector Equality Duty

Members are reminded of the requirement, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) to have due regard to the aims of the Duty at the time the decision is taken. The aims of the Duty are: (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act, (ii) advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it, and (iii) foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

Protected characteristics: age, sex, disability, race, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion or belief and pregnancy & maternity. Only aim (i) of the Duty applies to Marriage & civil partnership.

This report relates to the following aim of the equality duty: -

1. To eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
2. To advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it
3. To foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

No implications arise directly but the Council needs to retain a strong focus and understanding on issues of diversity amongst the local community and ensure service delivery matches these.

It is important to be aware of the Council's responsibility under the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) and show evidence that due consideration has been given to the equalities impact that may be brought upon communities by the decisions made by Council.

Corporate Priorities

This report relates to Communities.

1.0 Introduction and Background

- 1.1 At each ordinary Full Council meeting, the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel presents a progress update report on the activities of the Panel since the last Council meeting.
- 1.2 Such a report would be subject to comment or debate by Members. This is in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 15.1 of Part 4 of the Council Constitution.
- 1.3 This report updates the Council on the work of the Panel since the last Council meeting and allows for discussion of the work undertaken, therefore strengthening the Council's scrutiny function.
- 1.4 This report follows on from the one presented at Full Council on 12 October 2020. The Panel met on 27 October and received reports regarding its work programme.

- 1.5 The work programme for 2020/21 is detailed in Annex 1 to the Council report. This schedule is subject to amendments during the course of the year as Members may add more items for reviewing.
- 1.6 Members may also wish to reflect and comment on the content in Annex 2 which provides an opportunity to review and keep track of the spread of the scrutiny review work, particularly between pre and post decision scrutiny activities.
- 1.7 Annex 3 is a summary of the prioritised scrutiny review topics for 20/21. This work is not necessarily confined to this municipal year, but could well be taken into subsequent years if the priority order remains generally the same for the Panel.

2.0 Current Situation

- 2.1 The Panel met on 25 November and reviewed its work programme during which they received an update report from the Chairman of the Memorials Working Party. The main points from that report were as follows:
 - a. The working party was joined in the discussions by a member of the public;
 - b. Members agreed to seek some lessons from other council that have had to address similar issues, including from Liverpool City Council;
 - c. On 17 January 2021, Community Secretary Robert Jenrick announced a change in law to protect public monuments;
 - d. The Secretary said that the public should have a chance to be consulted on such matters, before statues and monuments were removed;
 - e. Thoughtful considerations should be given before such decisions were made to remove status and monuments from public view;
 - f. When coming with its own policy, the council would always need to use the proper process when making future decision on statues and monuments;
 - g. The new law would require that any future decisions to remove heritage monuments, would need to go through the planning process and public consultation in accordance with the constitution of the local council;
 - h. The Secretary of Communities would retain the right of veto power on such decisions, which could used to overrule any local decisions;
 - i. The working party was now waiting for the lead officer to draft the policy document for review by Members before reporting back to the Panel.
- 2.2 The working party was working a new date for a meeting that hopefully would lead to members coming up with recommendations to forward to the Panel for onward submission to the Executive.

Review of the budget Proposals for 2021/22

- 2.3 At the January 2021 Panel meeting, Members considered budget proposals for 2021/22 and the following observations were made:
 - a. The proposed budget was drafted in the context of significant changes on local government financing;
 - b. Covid-19 had forced local authorities to focus on short term issues. This had drained the council reserves, council finances and council staff reserves;

- c. The budget gap in the proposals was largely due to factors internal to the council like pay and contractual inflation and an increase in cost of waste disposal.
- d. The Finance team had worked to host Members briefing sessions to update Members on the budget process.

2.4 After making comments the Panel did not take any further action as no forward recommendations were forwarded to Cabinet. This meant that the recommendations agreed by Cabinet on 14 January were forwarded to Full Council on 11 February.

Performance Review

2.5 The Panel reviewed the performance of the council and highlighted the following:

- a. This year has been particularly hard on the waste collection teams, especially considering that agency staff had to be contracted as some permanent staff had to shield or self isolate due to the pandemic;
- b. As many more people were working from home, the vehicles have experienced significant issues passing through certain areas where cars were parked on either side of the roads;
- c. Despite all those challenges, senior management was proud of the achievements of the waste collection teams;
- d. The amount of residual waste was significantly higher this year. This was largely due to the number of people being at home most of the time due to the national lockdowns;
- e. With regards to the improving living conditions target – Officers anticipated this indicator to go down slightly. This was because the government funding for the Rogue Landlords Project had finished and as the current Selective licensing scheme ends in April this year, so there was projected to be less activity. The teams have also been affected by the lockdown restrictions. However the licence was valid for 5 years which means the council would still be able to enforce the conditions of the previous scheme;
- f. Officers had been looking at what the new selective licensing designation could look like. The Housing CAG was looking into this and the council had held early discussions with MHCLG and they had been supportive and were open to hearing what the proposals looked like. It was therefore reasonable to be optimistic about the options for the council to designate a new area of selective licensing and use that as a tool for improving living conditions in private rented housing.

Tenant and Leaseholder Services Transition Review

2.6 Members received an update on the transition of the housing services which was brought in house as from 1 October 2020 and the following update comments and observations were made:

- a. Since the transition, a number of liaison meetings with tenants and leaseholders had been held which the portfolio holder had attended;
- b. The new service was 15 weeks into the new in house arrangement and the team was settling in well;
- c. There were 58 posts in the new structure. Of that number only three were covered by agency staff and another one would be going out for recruitment;
- d. Twenty eight of the fifty eight posts came from East Kent Housing, with the remaining ones being new recruitments;

- e. New contact arrangements, including new email details for the service had been introduced and shared with every tenant and leaseholder;
 - f. newsletter with a fridge magnet that contained all details including telephone numbers was sent out in the first week of the service;
 - g. New generic neighbourhood housing officers had been introduced to the service. This was something that tenants and leaseholders had always wanted;
 - h. The service has had to deal a lot with legacy issues, but relatively few new complaints;
 - i. Contract management - Now every contract had a named lead officer (contract administrator), whose responsibility was to ensure that invoices and orders were coded in the right way against the coding structure.
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- j. This could be a reflection that the new contact arrangements set up were effective in addressing issues as they arose;
 - k. The first report of the new service included a position statement, health and safety report and performance data for the first two months of the service;
 - l. With regards to the health and safety update, the council had meetings regularly with the regulator for social housing. The regulator agreed the council's voluntary undertaking and action plan (that covers the period up to April 2021), relating to tenant and leaseholder health and safety matters;
 - m. The council hoped to have an East Kent Audit Partnership review conducted in May to assess the new position on health and safety. This would then be reported to the regulator in June, hoping to then get the regulatory notice on the council removed;
 - n. Gas Safety – The current position was now very positive. There was one resident who was refusing to give engineers access to the property. The council was currently working with other agencies to resolve that issue;
 - o. Electrical compliance – the performance figures were quite low at when the new service started. The team had since carried out a line by line review of the data of all of the certificates for domestic and communal areas and the work was due to be completed in December 2020. The work had since been completed. The level of compliance had increased;
 - p. The service would be reporting quarterly to the OSP and Cabinet. The council would continue to report to the regulator monthly on health and safety matters;
 - q. The capital programme – a significant amount of slippage was anticipated from this year to next year, as 13% of allocated amount had been spent as at 1 October 2020. The team was working on correcting some coding in a number of capital expenditure areas against revenue codes;
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- r. The service has had some success with securing new procurement contracts for decorations and repairs. A contract had been let for refurbishment of 14 lifts in 6 tower blocks and other blocks;
 - s. A contract had been let for structural and mechanical surveys for 6 tower blocks. These survey would including getting advice on what other works were needed including external cladding and assisting the council with the procurement that would come out this piece of work;
 - t. Satisfaction with repairs – This was one area that most impacted tenants and leaseholders. The serviced had worked hard to improve the relationship with key contractors to implement new contract management arrangements;

- u. Void performance and rent collection – This area needed improvement over the coming months, particularly to support the business plan for the future;
- v. Communication – A number of bespoke newsletters to each of the tower blocks and a generic one to all tenants had been sent out. In the last newsletter there was a survey about residents priorities for improvements over the next 12 to 18 months;
- w. The response was already looking good. The results of the survey would be used to guide some discussions at the Housing Cabinet Advisory Group. Any improvement updates resulting from these surveys would be shared with the Panel.

New corporate Performance Reporting

2.7 Members discussed the ideas for the new corporate reporting framework and followings summarise the discussion:

- a. The new approach would link corporate performance monitoring to the current corporate objectives which are Growth, Environment and Community;
- b. This would also focus on what matters most to residents and the process would be more transparent and engaging;
- c. Performance indicators would be reduced from the current numbers whilst improving the quality of the data. The data would be more contextual;
- d. Most of the reporting would be live data on the council website, which residents can track easier as the information would be available to the public 24 hours each day. This would help demonstrate that the council was achieving what it had set out to do in the corporate objectives;
- e. Panel Members were going to give feedback comments to officers about the new approach;
- f. Final proposals were going to be presented at a Panel meeting before 1 April 2021.

3.0 Panel Recommendations to Cabinet - Implementation Monitoring

The Panel keeps a watching brief on all the issues in this section, until the executive decisions are fully implemented.

Adoption of a new Housing Assistance Policy

- 3.1 At the July 2019 meeting, the Panel considered a report on the “Adoption of a new Housing Assistance Policy” and recommended to Cabinet that Council writes to Kent County Council requesting that “KCC ring-fenced the £405k (Top sliced/payment to KCC projected for 2019/20) for use by Thanet residents”.
- 3.2 Cabinet forwarded the request to KCC via a letter sent to KCC by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Neighbourhoods on 12 August 2019. The Panel is awaiting a response from KCC.

Travellers Review Recommendation

- 3.3 After a scrutiny review conducted by a working group, the Panel recommended to Cabinet that “further work be undertaken including extensive public consultation to assess the feasibility and cost implications of establishing temporary tolerated sites in the district.”

- 3.4 Having considered the Overview and Scrutiny Panel recommendations on 16 December 2019, Cabinet agreed to the following:

“That further work was undertaken to assess the feasibility and cost implications of three temporary tolerated sites in the District, at Potten Street, St Nicholas at Wade, Tivoli Brooks and Ramsgate Port, with a view to using them on a rotational basis”. Members are maintaining a watching brief on the issue.

- 3.5 Cabinet further considered this matter at the meeting on 17 September 2020 and agreed the following:

1. That the identification of appropriate tolerated stopping sites becomes part of the Local Plan review;
2. That Officers continue with an officer and partner group, working with known groups of gypsies and travellers to address site access and behaviours.

- 3.6 The Local Plan Review Cabinet Advisory Group met on 16 November and recommended to Cabinet that “the Local Plan update should extend the Plan period to 2040,” and address among other issues “The provision of Gypsy & Traveller sites to meet identified requirements.” It is anticipated that Cabinet would be considering these recommendations on 17 December 2020.

- 3.7 The main watching brief on this issue is for the Panel to satisfy itself that during the review of the Local Plan, this issue is addressed as per the decision made by Cabinet.

4.0 Options

- 4.1 Members are asked to note the report.

Contact Officer: Charles Hungwe, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Reporting to: Nick Hughes, Committee Services Manager

Annex List

Annex 1: Overview & Scrutiny Panel Work Programme for 2020/21
Annex 2: Scrutiny Review Scoring table
Annex 3: Record of OSP Pre and Post Decision Reviews for 2020/21

Background Papers

None

Corporate Consultation

Finance: Chris Blundell, Director of Finance

Legal: Tim Howes, Corporate Director of Governance & Monitoring Officer