

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on 20 April 2021 at 5.30 pm in by Video Conference.

Present: Councillor Robert W Bayford (Chair); Councillors Currie, Boyd, Coleman-Cooke, Huxley, Keen, Moore, Paul Moore, L Piper, Rattigan and Roper

In Attendance: Councillors Garner and Rev. S Piper

296. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Scott and Councillor Hopkinson.

297. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest received at the meeting.

298. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Coleman-Cooke proposed, Councillor Currie seconded and Members agreed the minutes as a correct record of the meeting held on 18 February 2021.

299. MINUTES OF EXTRAORDINARY MEETING

Councillor Coleman-Cooke proposed, Councillor Currie seconded and Members agreed the minutes as a correct record of the extraordinary meeting held on 17 March 2021.

300. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THANET - HOW KENT POLICE ARE ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Chief Inspector Rhiannan Pepper led the discussion and made a presentation in which she made the following comments:

- In November 2020, she had dedicated an officer to look into domestic violence;
- There had been a significant jump in domestic violence in the district, as demonstrated by the stats in the PowerPoint slides;
- The arrests that the Police were making in reported cases, were enabling them to talk to victims;
- Using the Eight Point Plan Kent Police were looking at best ways of ensuring that prosecutions were made for the reported cases;
- The Police were now taking the initiative to take a report rather than ask the victim if they wanted to make a report. This involved one officer being the point of contact with victim to gain their trust;
- Police were now staying with the victim in any reported domestic violence case and getting the best evidence at the time. This had increased the charge rate;
- There were a lot of repeat victims in Thanet. 72-76% of the reported cases involved intimate victims;
- Drug and alcohol tests were now conducted for offenders to determine whether these were part of the domestic violence problem;
- Kent Police were working well with other agencies to tackle domestic violence in the district.

Members asked questions and made comments as follows:

- There were increased arrests for domestic violence in 2020/21 compared to 2019-20. Were there any circumstances that would explain this rise in stats?
- Was there a pattern of where there is this pattern of the increase in victims of abuse in the district?
- Was this abuse more physical or coercive abuse?
- What could be inhibiting the charge rate?
- Would Kent Police consider providing training to tradesmen who work in homes to be more observant of signs of abuse when they are out working in those environments?
- Where there were children involved, would the Police automatically refer them to Social Services?
- Domestic violence was normally associated with the females being victims. Were there any stats that showed male victims?

Chief Inspector Pepper responded as follows:

- The Police had focused more on the victims. This had assisted in an increase in arrests;
- The increase in domestic abuse was widespread across the district;
- Most of the abuse was coercive behaviour (control behaviour). This was not recorded before, but now it was being recorded;
- The biggest inhibitor was the fear of the offender by the victim. This was the fear of repercussions;
- The idea of training tradesmen was a good one. Raising awareness of this problem would likely improve policing;
- The Police would normally refer cases to Social Services and advise schools if children were involved in domestic violence cases;
- Whilst most victims were females, there were also to a lesser extent, male victims of domestic violence;
- However male victims were reluctant to come forward and make reports because of how this would be perceived by society.

The Chair thanked Chief Inspector Pepper and thereafter Members noted the report.

301. MEMORIALS WORKING PARTY UPDATE

Councillor Stuart Piper, Chairman of the Memorials Working Party gave a brief update of the activities of the working party and advised the Panel that it would be best to wait for the upcoming new legislation on monuments before advising cabinet on a council policy on this subject. The new legislation would provide government guidance that would help shape the council policy on how to manage memorials, plaques and monuments in the district.

Councillor Bayford proposed, Councillor Coleman-Cooke seconded and the Panel agreed to keep the Memorials Working Party activities in abeyance until the new government legislation on national heritage monuments has been passed by Parliament.

302. PLANNING ENFORCEMENT REVIEW

Councillor Bayford introduced the item and proposed that the Panel set up a working party with a membership of seven. The working party would have a single meeting to consider how best the Overview and Scrutiny Panel could inform the review of planning enforcement protocol.

Councillor Garner spoke under Council Procedure 20.1.

Members made comments as follows:

- There were a number of climate emergency policies being adopted by Thanet District Council;
- These policies had implications for planning permission compliance for any planning applications being submitted in the district;
- Currently officers made follow ups only when there were complaints received regarding a development;
- The current enforcement team was not resourced enough to be proactive in monitoring compliance;
- The review of the current enforcement protocol should be open to the public;
- It was suggested that the working party being proposed should have a wider remit that would include meeting with managers and inviting stakeholders before proposing any changes;
- There was a need to know more about how other similarly sized councils were managing this issue.

Councillor Bayford and Madeline Homer, CEx responded as follows:

- Scarcity of resources was the reason why the Panel would be suggesting this time around for a single meeting by the proposed working party;
- This approach had been agreed with the officers;
- Once it was viewed necessary and appropriate at a later stage, a working party with a bigger remit could be set up;
- It was important to manage the public's expectations from such a review;
- The work of the panel had been finely balanced with the finite resources that the council had;
- Consideration had also to be given to the fact that officers would need to set aside time to support this work stream.

Members agreed to set up a Planning Enforcement Review Working party with a membership of seven to consider how best the Overview and Scrutiny Panel could inform the review of planning enforcement protocol. The working party would have a single meeting before reporting back to the Panel.

Thereafter the Chair called on volunteers to be on this working party and the following Members volunteered:

Councillor Huxley;
 Councillor Coleman-Cooke;
 Councillor Lynda Piper;
 Councillor Rattigan;
 Councillor Paul Moore;
 Councillor Currie.

303. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON BUSINESSES AND COMMUNITIES IN THANET

Madeline Homer, CEx introduced the item and said that it 2020/21 had been a year like no other in terms of challenges for the public sector and that local government was no exception to that. Ms Homer then gave an overview of some of the achievements made by Thanet District Council as part of the response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Ms Homer said that the Council was already dealing with the pandemic prior to the national lockdown at the end of March 2020. Prior to that, the council had already conducted the following:

- reviewed and refreshed our business continuity plans in light of coronavirus;
- provided capacity for home working including training sessions and crib sheets for access;

- provided staff with regular updates on the situation and included access to frequently asked questions;
- Established an officer group including all senior management who met regularly to review the situation and what may be required by us.

The CEx said that when the national lockdown was introduced; whilst for most industries this meant reduced work; for TDC it meant everyone stepping up and working that little bit harder. Within the first week the council had:

- Reduced access to the offices, put in increased cleaning regimes and hand sanitisers;
- Established back office support for those working from home such as scanning and printing assistance;
- Closed off public spaces such as playgrounds;
- Maintained refuse collection services;
- Allowed residents with parking permits to park in council car parks free of charge and suspended parking charges for all NHS and social care workers;
- Set up and staffed a dedicated 7 day a week phone line to support our vulnerable residents access supplies;
- Worked with partners to provide these essential supplies;
- Contributed to a Kent wide dedicated business support line;
- Provided temporary housing for all those who were sleeping rough.

This set the pattern for how the council would be responding to the challenges posed by the pandemic, for 2021 as TDC responded to the announcements from the daily government briefings. The council carried out the following activities:

- Telephoned or visited over 6000 extremely vulnerable residents;
- Emailed, messaged and telephoned again over 6000 extremely vulnerable residents;
- Distributed £92K worth of support for the extremely vulnerable through food provision;
- Distributed £113K in support for those in fuel poverty;
- Issued warnings and prohibition notices to businesses who have flouted the restrictions
- Responded to the biggest influx of visitors to the coast in a long time;
- Increased toilet cleaning regime;
- First council in Kent to hold an online licensing sub-committee;
- Used innovative antibacterial coatings on high touch points such as parking machines;
- Temporarily closed roads to support the reopening of high streets in July;
- Distributed discretionary test and trace support funding;
- Set up an enforcement team specifically for covid business enforcement and advice;
- Provided a door knocking service for track and trace;
- Introduced covid wardens for the high street;
- Created a beach management plan to respond to higher than usual visitor numbers;
- Provided sites for two drive in testing facilities and Kent's first walk in testing site;
- Worked with partners to ensure our homeless population had access to vaccines as a vulnerable group;
- Worked with local GPs on how to get vaccinations to the populations where take up was low.

Business stats on enforcement work

Since January 2021 the Enforcement Team had:

- Responded to 186 requests for advice;
- Investigated 89 complaints of non compliance;
- Undertaken 597 compliance visits;
- Given 57 informal written notices;
- Given 195 verbal warning.

Covid wardens

- Since 26th October 2020, 4 covid wardens were assigned to patrolling the towns and open spaces 7 days a week between the hours of 10-6pm;
- Since the 6th November 2020 to 19th April 2021;
- 851 businesses were spoken to (For guidance or non Compliance advice);
- 1861 members of the general public had been spoken to (For guidance or non Compliance advice);

Interactions with the public had increased over the last month, particularly in the last week in line with the roadmap changes, as expected. Over the last month, interactions with the public had doubled. Typical issues encountered daily were non compliance with social distancing and people not wearing masks. Large groups gathering on open spaces and drinking alcohol and general antisocial behaviour (ASB). Wardens would advise and report through to Police where needed.

Officers had also been key in the Kent Wide Response, (which Ms Homer chairs), the vulnerable people and communities cell, while officers were key players in the enforcement, environment and finance cells as well as various task and finish groups. This enabled the council to drive the best interests of Thanet at the county level as well as shape the county response.

The following Business Grants were administered by the Council:

- Last Spring/Summer the council administered business rates relief to retail, hospitality & leisure businesses, worth £22 million;
- The council also paid (mandatory) business grants to retail, hospitality & leisure businesses, worth £32 million, and via a discretionary grants scheme worth £1.6 million;
- During the lockdowns from November 2020, TDC paid £16 million in “mandatory” grants (LRSGs), £4 million in discretionary grants (ARGs) and £127,000 in wet pub payments;
- The ARG scheme alone was enormously demanding - it has generated some 5500 emails over the last three months;
- The new Restart Grants went live on 9 April 2021 and will be worth around £11 million, with another discretionary (ARG) scheme worth £750,000 which went live on 12 April 2021;
- That’s around £70 million of grants and £22 million in rates relief to support businesses through Covid.

Ms Homer then set out the review options for the Panel to consider if the Members still wanted to pursue review work on this topic. These are set out below:

OPTION 1 - The Panel could receive a presentation on ‘Our Response to COVID’ March 2020 - March 2021.

OPTION 2 - The Panel could undertake a ‘How did we do’ review of TDC initial response to the first lockdown March 2020 - June 2020 including continuation of service delivery and our engagement with Kent Resilience Forum as part of the emergency response.

OPTION 3 - The Panel could how we have managed the government’s COVID funding streams including Business Grants; Safely Opening High Streets; CEV funds.

OPTION 4 – The Panel could review our Community response during the pandemic specifically the work of the Community Hub and our engagement with the voluntary sector.

Councillor Lynda Piper proposed, Councillor Paul Moore seconded and Members agreed Option 4.

The Chair requested that at the next Panel meeting, the CEx could suggest the terms of reference and an approach to tackling Option 4. Members could still request support at a later stage to consider Option 2.

304. REVIEW OSP WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21

Members noted the report.

305. FORWARD PLAN

Members noted the report.

Meeting concluded: 6.25 pm