

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on 18 January 2022 at 7.00 pm in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent.

Present: Councillor Rev. Stuart Piper (Chair); Councillors Fellows, Austin, Boyd, Currie, Everitt, Keen, Paul Moore, L Piper, Rattigan and Tomlinson

In Attendance: Councillors Ashbee, Bailey, R Bayford, Garner, D Saunders, M Saunders, Whitehead, J Bayford and Green

349. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from the following Members:

Councillor Huxley, substituted by Councillor Everitt;
Councillor Pat Moore, substituted by Councillor Yates;
Councillor Coleman-Cooke.

350. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

351. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Rattigan proposed, Councillor Austin seconded and Members agreed the minutes as a correct record of the meeting held on 23 November 2021.

352. KENT POLICE PRESENTATION - MODERN SLAVERY IN THANET

Temporary Chief Inspector Matthew Smith made a presentation to the Panel and made the following key comments:

In combating crime in the county, Kent Police adopted the Kent Control Strategy. This strategy focuses on four main areas:

- Exploitation;
- Serious violence;
- Abuse;
- High
- Counter terrorism.
- Local cases were investigated by the local CID teams;
- There was a knowledge hub that officers use;
- Training was provided to Kent Police Officers on modern slavery;
- Modern slavery was identifiable through a number of indicators that included:

1. Domestic Environment
 - Poor living conditions;
 - Personal documents withheld;
 - Poor/low pay;
 - Working long hours.
2. Forced Criminality
 - Children were most vulnerable;
 - County lines;
 - Bag snatching;

- Pick pocketing;
 - Cannabis selling.
3. Labour Exploitation
 - This was mostly prevalent in agriculture and manufacturing;
 - The victims had to pay never ending debts.
 4. Organ Harvesting
 5. Sexual Exploitation
 6. Forced Prostitution
 - 11% of Kent reported cases took place in Thanet;
 - Kent Police worked through multi agency partnerships to tackle these criminal activities;
 - Different agencies in this arrangement used their respective powers to tackle crime;
 - Police trained staff from other agencies that included the DWP to help detect criminal activities during the course of their everyday work.

More details are included in the attached annex to this minute item.

Members made comments and asked questions as follows:

- Were car washing businesses around the district operating legally?
- How did the Police work with victims with mental health problems?
- During lockdown, there was an increase in domestic servitude. How did the Police handle such cases?
- How can neighbours/witnesses be more aware and help report cases of domestic servitude.

Temp. CI Smith responded to member comments and questions as follows:

- Kent Police were not aware of any current cases of exploitation at car wash business across the district;
- However car wash business nationally have been known to have exploitation problems;
- Police would normally refer victims with health problems to social services (adult protection referrals);
- Domestic servitude were difficult cases to report and were therefore under reported;
- The national crime agency runs awareness campaigns to advise the public about various forms of domestic violence and servitude and how these cases can be report to the Police;
- The same awareness campaign material could be refreshed and used for Thanet purposes. C.I. Smith would be taking this idea up with the Press Office
- Community intelligence helps police tackle modern slavery cases;
- There was a modern slavery helpline, and a messaging service called "My Community Voice" that the public could call on to report crime, in addition to calling directly to Kent Police or Crime stoppers.

The Chair thanked Temp. Chief Inspector Matthew Smith and Members noted the report.

353. BUDGET 2022-23

Councillor David Saunders introduced the report and made the following comments:

- Cabinet had come up with a planned and cautious approach that combined with an efficient savings plan, thereby enabling Cabinet to produce a balanced draft budget. This would ensure that the Council would provide services and care for the most vulnerable members of the local communities;
- By planning Council finances in this way it meant the Council was on the right track for balancing the budget in the coming years;
- In coming up with a balanced budget, cabinet had to save jobs;
- A balanced budget position was supported in-part by the very welcome additional funding that was provided by Government the 2022/23 financial year;
- However, much of this funding was temporary and therefore careful consideration would be given to its use;
- Cabinet identified £250,000 savings from vacant posts and a further £400,000 savings efficiencies and income generating opportunities;
- Cabinet would consider recommendations coming from the Panel.

The following Members spoke under Council Procedure 20.1:

Councillor Bailey;
Councillor Whitehead;
Councillor Garner.

They made the following key points:

- The Finance Team have done a great job in drafting a balanced budget;
- Members appreciated the budget briefing sessions that were conducted by officers;
- Money should be allocated in the budget for bringing back into use the Viking Bay Lift, as it provides an essential services to residents;
- An investment of the majority of the New Homes Bonus should be made into the purchase of property to extend our in house temporary accommodation service, on several grounds and all costed within the proposed 2022/23 budget, with no extra expense;
- At the 13 January meeting proposed ring-fencing of money to pay down non urgent debt as the most fiscally responsible thing to do. However fiscal responsibility is more complicated than simply looking at debt;
- It should be noted that there was currently some significant pressure for temporary accommodation and homelessness in Thanet;
- It was important for the council to address the district's needs for temporary housing and homelessness services long term;
- The £549,000 from the New Homes Bonus was a significant amount that has come in part due to the extraordinary work of Housing. Housing brought 252 Empty Homes back into use;
- Thanet tops the chart in Kent for empty properties being brought back into usage;
- It seems only right that the money that Housing have brought into the Council went towards alleviating some of the extraordinary pressure on housing, particularly for supporting the council's in-house temporary housing accommodation service;
- This should help reduce the costs of using private providers for our temporary accommodation needs and enable the council to make savings that could then be used to pay off debts;
- Continued reliance on private providers for temporary accommodation would lead to significant current costs and future costs;
- Members also thanked the Cabinet Member for Finance for working with officers to bring forward a balanced budget;

- Had the council started any work to come up with a business case for setting up the infrastructure for supporting the use of electric vehicle fleet when the council decided to replace the current fleet?
- This approach would go some way towards achieving the objectives of the green agenda that was adopted by TDC. Other councils like Swale had already started;
- The council should consider generating income from other sources like seeking greater contributions from Southern Water to fund some infrastructure;
- The council should also identify other self funding activities;
- Bristol Council set aside £100,000 to train staff to install solar panels on council buildings. The intention is to grow this function to become self funding and grow new jobs.

The Panel deliberated on the budget proposals and made the following key points:

- The new Homes Bonus could be invested in new in-house temporary accommodation;
- £125,000 should be used to fix the Viking Bay and Ramsgate lifts;
- There should also be some investment into the climate emergency agenda from the New Homes Bonus. This would attract future grant funding;
- The various Member Briefing sessions that were hosted by the Finance team were most welcome as they provided a forum to inform Members about the budget framework during the budget building process;
- There had been a lack of commitment by the council to fund the repairs of the coastal lifts and bring them back into use. Panel proposals to fund these repairs should be considered by Cabinet;
- Part of the problem for repairing these lifts particularly the Ramsgate one was the issue of costs;
- The Ramsgate lift was an iconic structure and important to the local community, as can be witnessed by the petitions submitted about it;
- It was important for the council to come up with a concrete budget for bringing the coastal lifts back into use;
- It was worth considering the emotional cost to families particularly children when households are moved to temporary accommodation outside the area. To avoid this, the council should consider investing in its own temporary accommodation service and not rely on private temporary accommodation;
- Regarding generation of income: TDC could explore ways of working with parish and town councils. This could include delegating some of the TDC functions to parish/town councils;
- Delegating some functions to parish/town councils with a view that such services could be provided at a cheaper cost than is currently the case. This proposal would require further exploration.

Councillors Saunders responded to Member comments and said that:

- Cabinet was currently in discussion with Corporate Director of Communities to explore how TDC can better work with parish and town councils;
- The Leader of Council had been working hard on some of the issues that had been raised by the Panel;
- However all these issues would need to be considered in the context of the budget gaps that were anticipated for future years;
- Cabinet was going to consider the suggestions that had emerged from the Panel discussion as recorded in minutes above.

Councillor Yates proposed, Councillor Everitt seconded and the Panel agreed to forward the following recommendations to Cabinet:

1. To allocate up to £125,000 from the New Homes Bonus allocation for the capital works required to the Ramsgate Eastcliff and Viking Bay coastal lifts to ensure they are in full working order for the foreseeable future;
2. To allocate the full remainder of the New Homes Bonus allocation as capital to provide additional in-house temporary accommodation;
3. To transfer £200,000 from the risk management reserve to a new climate risk and opportunity reserve.

354. HRA BUDGET 2022-23

Councillor David Saunders introduced the report and made the following comments:

- The budget was underpinned by the 4.1% in rent increase for 2022/23; most of which will cover by increased benefits and the Universal Credit payments;
- Rent increase being proposed in the HRA budget was required to get a balanced and sustainable financial position for the HRA;
- The increase was also required to fund HRA activities, particularly the house building programme and housing investment plan;
- Cabinet would consider any views from the Panel.

There being no further discussion, Members noted the report.

355. REVIEW OF OSP WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2021/22

Members noted the report.

356. FORWARD PLAN & EXEMPT CABINET REPORT LIST

Members noted the report.

Meeting concluded: 8.10 pm