

BOROUGH OF REIGATE AND BANSTEAD

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at the New Council Chamber - Town Hall, Reigate on Thursday, 20 January 2022 at 7.30 pm.

Present: Councillors Blacker, Buttironi, Cooper, Elbourne, Essex, Harp, Harrison (Chair) Moses, Parnall, Sinden, Tary, Turner, Walsh Whinney. Also J. Baker (Substitute)

Also present: Councillors Ashford, Brunt, Neame, Sachdeva, Schofield

57. MINUTES

The Minutes of the previous meeting on 9 December 2021 were approved.

58. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor A. King who was substituted by Councillor Baker.

59. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interests.

60. PEOPLE PORTFOLIO HOLDERS UPDATE

The Committee received presentations and briefings from the three Portfolio Holders responsible for the following areas of the Council's services: Housing & Support, Leisure & Culture and Community Partnerships.

Portfolio Holder for Housing & Support, Councillor Neame, gave the first presentation and overview of work over the past year and challenges to come. There had been an increase in homeless approaches but there was a high percentage of positive outcomes for homeless people. A number of government grants had been secured including a £190k grant from Homes England to support the capital build ringfenced for single homeless applicants in Lee Street. Six homes in Pitwood Park, Tadworth development were sold using Help to Buy Scheme and 11 houses to Raven Housing Trust for shared ownership. Many of the 32 flats on Cromwell Road were to be let at sub-market rents and the remainder at market rent via a RBBC wholly owned company. All this had been achieved during a difficult and unprecedented year.

Committee Members asked questions in the following areas:

Use of private sector – Members asked how many homeless households were assisted into private sector accommodation and what the proportion was in the Borough compared to using social housing. It was noted that due to the lack of social housing, the Council had to use the private rented sector and assist tenants applying for help with housing benefits and to secure deposits and rents in advance. The Head of Housing would follow-up the numbers in the private sector with a written answer. The Council placed more people in the private rental sector than the social rental sector.

Asylum Seekers and Refugees – Members asked for further information on the legal definitions and differences between Asylum Seekers and Refugees. The Head of Housing would provide more details in a follow-up written response.

Afghan refugees resettlement – Members questioned if Afghan refugees were in temporary accommodation locally while they waited for appropriate housing or if they would need to move into other areas once accommodation was found which could disrupt children's education. Councillor Neame confirmed that until the properties were available, the Home Office was responsible for the refugees who were housed away in bridging hotels. This was an ongoing challenge. The locations were arranged by the Home Office. In response to Member questions, it was confirmed that there were no bridging hotels for Afghan refugees in Reigate and Banstead although there were three hotels providing initial accommodation in Horley and Reigate for 341 asylum seekers. There was one bridging hotel in Mole Valley and one in Tandridge (within East Surrey). It was confirmed that private rented properties were being sought so this would not necessarily affect local residents or homeless applicants.

Maternity health for pregnant refugees was discussed. There was a lot of pressure on health colleagues, but they were supporting all the pregnant women and looking after the general health of refugees such as providing vaccinations.

The work with Syrian refugees was highlighted and successes achieved such as the well-attended Syrian feasts at the Harlequin and the Syrian cookbook. Officers would look at ways to promote these events further.

Homelessness statistics – the numbers of homeless people were discussed. It was confirmed that these reflected initial approaches to the Council – some of which were just one phone call with little casework and others which required more work.

Marketfield Court, Redhill – there were 7 submarket private rented homes delivered in this development with vacancies taken by households on the housing list. This is fully private rental accommodation, and these were offered at the same rent as affordable housing. This was not subsidised by the Council as the landlord covers the costs in lieu of section 106 obligations. This was not shared ownership or market sale as it was a rental scheme.

Horley car park site – Members asked for a status update. It was confirmed that work was ongoing to assess the viability of the site. A business case had been written and further information would be provided once there was a viable proposal.

Allocations for housing – it was noted that the number of properties allocated for housing was dropping and residents were spending longer on the housing waiting list. The waiting list for social rented housing had been increasing by around 100 households each year for three consecutive years. How could the Council start to get back on track? Councillor Neame said they were working on projects with partner organisations to increase social housing in the Borough and were looking at affordable housing and Help to Buy schemes. This would provide more than one option – either social housing or rental schemes.

An update on the **Revenue, Benefits & Fraud and Intervention work** was given in the presentation slides. Members raised questions on the following service areas:

Discretionary housing payments – as of 31 December 2020, the Council had paid out 78% of the government funding. It was managed well so very unlikely to exceed the government funding. If there were any unused funds these will be returned to the Department for Work and Pensions.

Complexity of cases – the complexity of family cases continued to increase. Members asked how the offer was changing as the type of work changed. The pandemic had made cases more challenging with changing social circumstances and family need. Working intensively with families often uncovered more problems. The service was reviewing the team's work and working closely with family centre partners to support families and working with Surrey County Council colleagues.

Refugee Resettlement – it was confirmed that the Council had made a new commitment to resettle 3 households as part of the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy. It was running the scheme for South East Surrey councils including administration for Mole Valley and Tandridge for the Afghan households to be settled in their districts.

Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Culture, Councillor Sachdeva, gave a presentation and overview on her service area which supports residents in improving their physical and mental health as well as providing a preventative approach to obesity and diabetes. The Borough owns three leisure centres operated by GLL under the Better brand and the contract is coming up for renewal in 2024. The closure of the leisure centres during the pandemic created an immediate loss of income and RBBC supported GLL by waiving the management fee to support with income losses. Since then membership numbers have been rising and the Council had reinstated management centre fees. Other activities in the Borough included community games and holiday activities for children and young people.

The Harlequin had had a challenging year, but it had secured a £107k government grant which had gone to mitigate the losses in revenue over the last 24 months due to the pandemic. The Waller studio had screened over 80 films this year and the pantomime ran 43 shows without interruption.

Members asked questions on the following areas:

Horley Leisure Centre – Members asked if the pre-Covid trial of opening up slightly earlier at 6am or 6.30am as people got back to normal work patterns could be revisited. Councillor Sachdeva confirmed that this could be discussed with GLL in future meetings and plans going forward.

Marketfield Way development and the Harlequin – as this new development in Redhill included a cinema, Members questioned how this would impact on the Harlequin which was seen as underused. How would this help it to break even and, in future, become profitable. Councillor Sachdeva said that the Harlequin would work with the Marketfield Way cinema operator and help Redhill to become a cultural hub. The Harlequin would not compete on showing the latest films but show classic films and children's films, for example. The recovery plan was for the Harlequin to be self-sustainable and create revenue in other ways with new sources of income. For example, the first ever wedding reception was held earlier this year.

Members suggested pop music events and daytime conferences. Responses to an Advance Question on holding conferences at the venue had been emailed to Members. Councillor Sachdeva urged Members to become involved and attend events at the Harlequin to support it as a business. She was asked by O&S Chair to email the Committee to invite ideas. Information could also be publicised to Members through the weekly newsletter ReMember. The Harlequin had a marketing and promotions budget and a new staircase wrapping promoted events to improve High Street visibility; internal signs had had a refresh.

Publicising children's events to schools – Councillors asked how the sports and activities for children and young people were publicised to schools. Officers said that work was ongoing with the marketing team and digital communications. They were also building up a network of key teachers to promote these activities.

Working with local sports clubs – Members highlighted further work that could be done with local football and sports clubs in the community such as Merstham Football Club. Executive Members encouraged Councillors to contact the Head of Wellbeing & Intervention to discuss further.

Leisure & Culture Strategy – Members asked about the Leisure & Culture Strategy which was being worked on to look ahead three to five years and to provide high quality services to residents. Members expressed an interest in taking part in formulating this strategy.

Subsidies and losses – Members asked what the level of subsidies and losses were over the last two years. This would be provided by a follow-up written answer. Plans were in place on post recovery work with the theatre to stabilise income streams and reduce the subsidy in future years.

The Portfolio Holder for Community Partnerships, Councillor Ashford, gave the final People Portfolio Holders presentation and update to the Committee. The presentation slides published in the agenda pack included updates on: Covid welfare calls and support, strategic partnership work (including forging links with the health services), community development, Community Centres, partnerships with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and a community safety overview.

Councillor Ashford highlighted the successes of the five food clubs which had been set up by volunteers throughout the Borough with support from the Council's Community Development Team. The food clubs are aimed at residents on low incomes as an alternative to using food banks regularly as well as reducing food waste. He also highlighted the ongoing work and new activities in the three Community Centres in the Borough which were now bright and welcoming with a

steady increase in centre usage by people of all ages. Each centre was focusing on their own communities. He thanked staff across the whole of the service, many of whom had been engaged in Covid welfare work as well as their main jobs.

Member engagement – O&S Chair, Councillor Harrison, suggested that local Community Centre staff reach out to local councillors in their area so they can visit their local centres and find out about the changes. There was also an all-party working group that advises on the centres and these Members had had a guided tour. These Members could report back to the Committee as well.

Food clubs – Members praised the work of the food clubs which were very popular and appreciated by residents as well as the work to reduce food poverty.

Community Centres – the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Turner, said she had attended the Woodhatch and Banstead Community Centres at Christmas sessions and praised the work of the volunteers as well as the fresh food that was prepared now for meals in the centres.

Fuel poverty – Members asked about support for people in fuel poverty. Councillor Ashford said a pilot scheme was up and running to support those with key meters who pay the highest energy tariffs. Emergency top ups were offered last winter to those referred through partner organisations. Conversations were continuing with Surrey County Council and the utility companies to try and influence policy on the cost of prepayment meters. Partnership working with Horley Lions is helping to reduce fuel poverty for residents in Horley and the centre of the Borough.

Engaging with local schools – Members highlighted that local schools could identify families who need additional help. For example, one school in the north of the Borough had directed people in need to the Banstead Community Centre for support. At the Woodhatch and Horley Community Centres, groups for parents/grandparents and under fives had been set up.

Local plans – Members said that the older generation were delighted the community centres were back up and running but cautioned against changing them completely and advised building on already positive services. Councillor Ashford stressed that all centres worked with existing users and there was clear evidence that the community centres benefited from younger people attending events if this was managed well. Councillor Ashford explained that each centre has its own delivery plan from which new services are being developed and piloted.

RESOLVED – that the Committee:

1. Noted the People Portfolio Holder Updates and made observations for consideration set out in the Minutes by Executive Members.

61. LEADER'S UPDATE - JANUARY 2022

The Leader, Councillor Mark Brunt, gave his six-monthly update to the Committee. He continued to work with Portfolio Holders and reach out to the community and partner organisations such as meeting the new Chief Executive at East Surrey Hospital recently. The health service recognised that district and borough councils had valuable local networks and residents wanted joined up services.

This time last year the Harlequin was shut and there was no pantomime with a lot of services still focusing on dealing with the pandemic. The focus now was learning to live with Covid while continuing to support those who had been affected by it.

Highlights from last year included the Marketfield Way development in Redhill with the topping out ceremony last September and the units now being fitted out. Contracts had been signed with a new cinema operator which will be announced in due course. There was still a way to go to market the Harlequin. It was an excellent business meeting venue.

The transformation of the Community Centres was ongoing, with activities for all ages and bringing the communities together. The local walking and cycling infrastructure plan with Surrey County Council was being adopted to encourage people to look differently at the way they travel and to use the train and bicycles more often.

The Council was keeping a close eye on the consultation plans to expand Gatwick Airport and working with other districts and borough councils to make sure concerns were properly considered and not just dismissed.

Commercial activities included making better use of the assets already owned by the Council. Using assets to deliver the different types of housing needed such as emergency or short-term accommodation was being considered. The Council tax or government grants did not cover all the Council's costs so additional revenue was needed.

Members asked the Leader questions on the following area:

20 mph speed limits – Members asked about the proposal to bring in 20 mph speed limits which had been rejected by Surrey County Council at a recent meeting. The Leader said there was a need to reduced speeding in communities and increasing levels of enforcement and improved education was also important to make speeding socially unacceptable. CIL funding was also useful to help with engineering changes to reduce speeding.

RESOLVED – that the Committee:

1. Noted the Leader's update and made observations for consideration by the Leader.

62. **BUDGET AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2022/23 - UPDATE FOR OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Members received a briefing on the updated elements of the Budget 2022/23 and Capital Programme 2022 to 2027 proposals which was published as an Addendum to the agenda pack on the Council's website.

Councillor Schofield, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance, gave an update to the Committee. A great deal of work had been carried out since November to close the budget gap for 2022/23 of £700k. The update report showed the extent of the changes. The result was a balanced budget for 2022/23.

Chair of the Committee, Councillor Harrison, said the Committee had asked the Executive to reconsider some of the savings proposed, for example, to retain the taxi voucher scheme. He was pleased to note that £10k that is spent each year within the taxi voucher scheme would be retained. He noted the ongoing work on commercial ventures to aim to bring in additional revenue.

Councillor Schofield confirmed that the work on the financial sustainability plan was ongoing and on track. The finance team and Executive Members were working to develop the priorities and would share these with Overview & Scrutiny Committee when ready.

Members had questions and made observations on the following:

Inflation and impact on Council services – Members asked about rising inflation costs and the impact on services. Assumptions in the budget had been made that forecast inflation to continue as 2 per cent. Councillor Schofield confirmed that the Council would manage its costs as closely as possible throughout the year.

Income expectation – Members questioned if the Council had been too pessimistic about the economy and as a result expectation of predicted income. Now the economy was recovering how would this be reflected in financial planning? Could Members have quarterly forward-looking updates that set out any revised forecasts/year to date comparisons? It was noted that the Committee already received quarterly budget monitoring reports that include forecasts of the year-end position. Councillor Schofield said they would look to increase income in some areas such as parking and the Harlequin.

Public consultation – Members asked for more details about the responses to the public consultation on the budget and to share these. It was confirmed that the full outcome would be shared with the budget papers once analysis had been completed as the consultation had only just closed. The responses made up less than 0.5 per cent of the borough's residents.

Fuel prices – Members questioned what the impact of rising fuel prices may have on the Council's own utility costs and the pressure on those paying council tax who may default on their bills in response to rising fuel costs. Councillor Schofield said the finance team was looking at the potential impact on fuel bills and the costs of running the Council's buildings and offices. An update would be provided to the Committee.

Parking income loss – it was confirmed that the reduction in parking income loss was £200k.

Business rates and Council Tax – the Council's share of the National Non Domestic Rates (NNDR) was set to reduce. It had gone down by £109k. It was confirmed that the total amount of Council Tax to be collected will increase by £850k due to more properties in the Borough and the proposed £5 increase for the average Band D property.

Financial resilience – it was confirmed that although the pandemic and impact on finances had been difficult, it had sharpened the focus of the Council and all services had been reviewed thoroughly to make sure that the budget balanced.

Banstead Commons Conservators – Members asked about the budget for the Banstead Commons Conservators grant. The Leader confirmed that there had been no increase to the £84k budget as this had not been possible at the moment. The Council was working with the Conservators and the Leader was due to meet the new Chair shortly to go through future plans and options.

Flats recycling – Members questioned the breakdown on flats recycling and asked about the current programme. Work in this area had slowed during the pandemic which was also due to increased levels of waste. The programme had not been halted and the service was working through the 6000 flats that did not yet have a full recycling service. Further flats continued to be added and further work was needed.

Councillor Harrison, O&S Chair, thanked the Interim Head of Finance, Pat Main, her team and the Executive Member, Councillor Schofield, for their work on identifying ways to close the budget gap which included calling on the reserves set up for COVID-19 and funding from government for losses for income during the pandemic. He asked for further information to understand the likely impact of inflation on utility costs and associated risks before the final Budget 2022/23 came to Full Council on 10 February.

RESOLVED – that the Committee:

1. Noted the updated elements of the Budget 2022/23 and Capital Programme 2022 to 2027 proposals set out in the briefing and report.
2. Provided observations set out in the Minutes to the Executive meeting on 27 January.

63. CALENDAR OF MEETINGS 2022/23

The Committee received the Calendar of Meetings 2022/23 and cover report. This would go to the Executive for approval by Full Council on 10 February 2022.

Members made no comments or observations.

RESOLVED – that the Committee:

1. Noted the Calendar of Meetings 2022/23 for approval by Full Council on 10 February 2022 and made no observations.

64. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2021/22

The Committee received the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme.

It was noted that the IT Strategy would come to the Committee for its March meeting.

Following a request from Members, Officers would find out the timeline for the Horley Business Park Supplementary Planning Document and use the Local Plan Scrutiny Panel to scrutinise this document when it was ready.

Members asked if the work of the Banstead Commons Conservators could be scrutinised by the Committee in the next Municipal Year. A review of how greenspaces across the Borough were managed, such as the SSSI on Reigate Heath was requested. It was noted that the Place Portfolio Holder presentations in March would include an update on greenspaces work.

O&S Chair, Councillor Harrison, said the Committee would be considering the future work programme at the meeting in March and to send suggestions for items that could be included for 2022/23.

RESOLVED – that the Committee:

1. Noted the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme 2021/22 and the Action Tracker.

65. EXECUTIVE

It was reported that there were no items arising from the Executive that might be subject to the 'call-in' procedure in accordance with the provisions of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules.

66. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of urgent business.

The Meeting closed at 10.17 pm