

BOROUGH OF REIGATE AND BANSTEAD

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at the Remote - Virtual Meeting on Thursday, 21 January 2021 at 7.30 pm.

Present: Councillors N. D. Harrison (Chair), S. T. Walsh (Vice-Chair), M. S. Blacker, G. Buttironi, J. C. S. Essex, R. J. Feeney, K. Foreman, J. Hudson, N. C. Moses, S. Parnall, J. Paul, J. E. Philpott, K. Sachdeva, S. Sinden and R. S. Turner

Also present: Councillors T. Archer (for Item 65), R. Ashford, M. Brunt, A. Horwood, G. Knight

57. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no apologies for absence.

58. MINUTES

The Minutes from the previous meeting were approved.

59. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

60. LEADER'S UPDATE

Members received an update from Councillor M. Brunt, Leader of the Council, which highlighted the Council's continuing ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Council had been in a good position to respond to the third national lockdown thanks to its pre-planning work. The Council had offered volunteer support for the public health and primary care rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination centres which had been well received.

The Leader highlighted the work of the community development teams on addressing food poverty, supporting food banks and setting up local food clubs for residents. Three food clubs in Merstham, Woodhatch and Horley had been established (where residents can pay an annual subscription of £1 to join and then pay £2 a week for a bag of food). Two further food clubs were due to be set up in Redhill and in the north of the borough.

He thanked the waste and recycling teams for continuing to operate normal services and clear huge amounts of additional waste. This included extra work over the Christmas period to clear the waste dumped at the Council's bring sites. The record amounts of recycling put out by residents meant that the Council had received additional revenue from paper recycling.

Other areas highlighted were the continued high standards of maintaining the Borough's green spaces, the work of the housing and homelessness teams to support residents, including young people, and the Revenue and Benefits teams' work to support businesses and help residents with Council Tax payments,

For future plans, the Leader looked to the continuing investment in the Borough and town centres, such as Marketfield Way development in Redhill and housing projects in Cromwell Road, Redhill and Pitwood Park. He welcomed the input of the Commercial Strategy Scrutiny Panel to scrutinise the Council's commercial approach. The environmental sustainability strategy was developing well with the support of a full-time project officer and the Council was working closely with Raven Housing Trust on zero carbon housing projects. The Council was also in a good position financially even after drawing on some of its reserves.

Members discussed the following areas:

- **Vaccinations update and local data on roll-out** - Members highlighted the work of the Council's volunteers in the Borough for the vaccination programme. They asked how many people in the first four vulnerable categories had received their first and second doses and if local data figures on vaccinations received by residents going out of the borough for their vaccinations. The Leader confirmed that NHS figures were broken down by health authorities using a central database. As soon as a more local breakdown was available this information would be shared with Members.
- **Volunteering** – Members praised the work of the thousands of volunteers in the Borough during the past year and discussed ways to thank them for coming forward and recognising their hard work and gaining their support for future volunteering. One idea was to light up the Town Hall with a thank you message as part of the forthcoming Volunteers Week.

Councillor N. Harrison, Committee Chair, thanked the Leader for his update to the Committee and his work in leading the Council through the COVID-19 emergency response.

RESOLVED – that the Leader's Update and the observations of the Committee be noted.

61. PEOPLE PORTFOLIO HOLDERS UPDATE

Members received a briefing and update from the three People Portfolio Executive Members for Housing & Support, Leisure & Culture and Community Partnerships.

Councillor G. Knight, Portfolio Holder for Housing & Support, highlighted areas of work in the context of the considerable COVID-19 pandemic pressures and support for residents. Areas highlighted on presentation slides and written answers to the Committee included work with rough sleepers, housing benefit and Universal Credit claims, housing delivery in Tadworth and Redhill, continued development of affordable homes, work with Raven Housing Trust, numbers in bed and breakfast (emergency accommodation) and temporary accommodation, family support programme and money support teams' work.

Members raised questions on the following areas:

- **Achieving net zero carbon targets** – Members asked about the steps taken by the Council to encourage developers and social housing providers to achieve a target of net zero carbon by 2050. It was noted that the Council was working towards this target on current developments in the borough and was working closely with Raven Housing Trust on grant applications as well as planning work on future joint projects with significant investment in existing homes. Members highlighted the Surrey County Council ‘Green Jump Surrey’ project funding which was available to support low income households to install energy efficiency improvements.
- **Emergency and temporary accommodation** – Members noted relatively low number of families in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation. With temporary accommodation, the Council has access to 124 designated self-contained temporary accommodation units each year. Members asked for a written answer on how the average number of households in i) temporary and ii) emergency accommodation has changed in the last three years, and also what the average length of stay in emergency and temporary accommodation was currently broken down by different bedroom size properties.
- **Family Support Programme and Money Support team** – the Committee heard access to both critical services was under pressure due to COVID-19 challenges. There were waiting times of 12-14 weeks for family support referrals from Surrey County Council. However, three new staff had started on the County Council-funded programme and urgent cases were prioritised. The Money Support team had seen an increase in the number of referrals by 83% year on year due to redundancy/loss of employment, anxiety/depression or loss of family members among residents. A third member of staff had been redeployed to join the team, and they were working hard to reduce the waiting time, with priority cases allocated as soon as possible.
- **Additional Council Tax Hardship funding** – additional government funding of £754,507 was received with £430,988 awarded to 3,331 households. It was confirmed that money left over from this funding could be carried over to 2021/22 financial year.

Members agreed to invite Raven Housing Trust representatives to Overview & Scrutiny Committee in the next Municipal Year, with this noted in the Committee’s Future Work Programme 2021/22.

Councillor A. Horwood, Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Culture, highlighted areas of work which included use of the Harlequin as a community support centre for food distribution in lockdown one, providing meals for people in desperate need, housing local charity ‘Stripey Stork’ for their Christmas campaign (instead of the annual pantomime) and social media campaigns to promote digital content. In a difficult year, 125 shows and events and 44 pantomime performances were cancelled. Councillor Horwood thanked Harlequin staff for their versatility in their redeployment to support the Council’s emergency welfare response as well as the support from Councillors Michalowski, Ashford and Turner on the Harlequin Working Group and senior managers. The Council had worked with the leisure centre operator GLL to understand the impact of the pandemic, lockdowns and changes to the operations of the three leisure centres in the last year (including financial), as well as future recovery plans.

Members discussed and asked further questions on the following areas:

- **Marketing the Harlequin and Waller Studio after lockdown** – Members asked about future plans to attract the audiences back to the theatre and cinema. It was confirmed that in the near future social media campaigns showing material from previous performances would continue. Once restrictions were lifted and the buildings could open, plans were in place for a refreshed café, community arts centre and theatre to encourage customers back to a safe place to visit to watch high quality entertainment. Members asked for a written answer on plans for raising the profile of future Harlequin events and Waller Studio films not only on social media but how event times/prices could be publicised more prominently in Redhill town centre.
- **Leisure centres** – Members said they would like to be involved and views taken into account when renewal of the future contract for managing the Borough's leisure centres was due.

Councillor R. Ashford, Portfolio Holder for Community Partnerships, highlighted areas of work including the emergency welfare response to the COVID-19 pandemic and continuing support for residents from emergency food packs, prescription delivery advice and referrals made to food bank partners and managing volunteers. From March to December, a phone-based COVID-19 welfare response service (involving redeployed Council staff at peak times) made a total of 11,467 calls with 27 volunteers making befriending calls, and 130 welfare visits. Calls had dropped in the second wave: to date over 950 calls have been made, some of which are to the most vulnerable residents with complex needs.

Community Development Workers had led regular, highly valued, COVID-19 welfare response locality meetings working with schools, officers and voluntary groups to help vulnerable households with issues such as domestic abuse, social isolation, mental health problems, as well as families struggling with children at home who were digitally excluded from online school and homework with no laptops and unable to afford broadband. It had been a particularly challenging time for officers working at the sharp end of this pandemic fallout. Community Development Workers were now working with a network of Community 'Covid' Champions of local residents, closely engaged in their communities, to help disseminate accurate public health messages.

An all-party Member consultative working group on the three Community Centres in the Borough was meeting regularly; services for older people included regular virtual Zoom exercise classes which were well attended.

- **Supporting vulnerable people in the borough** – Members thanked Councillor Ashford and officers across the Council for their work in supporting vulnerable residents in addition to keeping Council services and operations running during the pandemic.
- **Volunteers and recognition of their work** – Members asked if there was local data to capture the work of all the active volunteers in their wards at street level who had given their time to cook and deliver meals, shop for neighbours and pick up their prescriptions or hearing aid batteries. It was noted that the council website included the directory of local services, but retrospective local data would be time-consuming to collate. There were

ongoing discussions about how to recognise community voluntary efforts in addition to the Mayor's Volunteer Awards.

- **Protecting vulnerable residents** – reported scams included fraudsters early on in the pandemic offering to buy older people their shopping and then disappearing with the cash. Members asked how volunteers were validated so vulnerable people had confidence about receiving support. It was confirmed that RBBC volunteers have identity documents on them when they visit. Also, supermarkets were better at promoting pre-paid cards so older residents who rely on cash can give these to local people doing their food shopping.

Councillor N. Harrison, Committee Chair, thanked the Portfolio Holders for their presentations, and their updates to the Committee.

RESOLVED that the presentations and briefings from the People Portfolio Holder Executive Members for Housing & Support, Leisure & Culture and Community Partnerships and the observations of the Committee be noted.

62. BUDGET & CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2021/2022

Members considered the updated elements of the Service and Financial Planning 2021/22 reports following the Budget Scrutiny Panel report and recommendations to the Committee at its 17 December 2020 meeting.

Councillor T. Schofield, Portfolio Member for Finance, introduced the summary update. This highlighted improved information on government grants, particularly for COVID-19 costs and income losses, an update on council tax and business rates collections, and the central budgets. The Treasury management budget had been significantly lowered. The bottom line of all adjustments was a £235k budget call on the general reserve, lower than the £530k forecast in the preliminary budget reviewed in December, although some funding would also be drawn from specific risk reserves.

Councillor N. Harrison, Committee Chair, welcomed the report and update to the Committee. It showed that the Council had a well-planned and effective budget in the coming year particularly given the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Members commented that good progress had been made which was set out in the summary update report. Members noted the proposed full and final pay offer of 1.3 percent to staff and unions and asked to be kept updated.

Members thanked Councillor Schofield, the Interim Head of Finance, Pat Main, and the Finance team for their work.

RESOLVED – that the updated elements of the Budget and Capital Programme 2021/22 and the observations of the Committee be noted at the Executive on 28 January 2020.

63. RECOVERY SCRUTINY PANEL UPDATE

Members considered the Recovery Scrutiny Panel report and recommendations to the Committee.

Chair of the Panel, Councillor N. Harrison, introduced the item. The Panel had met on 15 July and 14 October 2020, and 14 January 2021 and reported after each meeting to the Committee and the Panel had completed its work. The recovery work that the Panel had scrutinised would continue with regular updates to the Committee. The Panel had sought assurance that the work will continue to ensure that the Council's communications strategy to residents is effective, especially in relation to messaging on COVID-19 issues.

Members noted that the Recovery Scrutiny Panel had been set up following the first lockdown in 2020, resulting from the global pandemic, and the Council's emergency response to it. As the pandemic lingered into 2021, the Panel also reviewed the second wave response of the Council in tandem with the ongoing recovery work. The second wave response included support to the most vulnerable residents.

Councillor R. Ashford, Portfolio Holder for Community Partnerships, underlined that the welfare response was now targeted towards those with the most complex needs, assisting with shopping, prescriptions and emergency calls but society had changed and many families and elderly and vulnerable people now had improved support networks or the Council could call on volunteers to assist. There was increased need due to isolation, depression and mental health issues.

It was noted that social media and email communications were important in communicating the Council's messages, but a proportion of residents did not have access to email addresses or virtual meeting applications such as Zoom, particularly elderly people. Telephone contact was also important. Social media such as What's App and online neighbourhood groups were now vital communication streams. Members stressed that being proactive in these areas to disseminate factually accurate and clear messages was important.

Members continued to be updated with fortnightly briefings from the Leader of the Council, Councillor M. Brunt.

Mari Roberts-Wood, Interim Head of Paid Service, confirmed that the Council used its email database, in accordance with data protection rules, as a way of reaching residents with regular updates. The Council was very aware of digital exclusion among residents; the communications strategy could be shared more widely in the future with Members.

Councillor T. Schofield, Deputy Leader and Executive Member reporting to the Panel, recognised that when the first lockdown was called it had been a very challenging time for the borough as an unprecedented event in all our lifetimes. He was proud of the Council's response and the way it had been handled showed the strength of the officer teams in the borough, working closely with Members, to serve the residents in a time of need. Any lessons learned would be incorporated into what had been achieved. He thanked the Head of Corporate Policy, Cath Rose, for the support she had given to the recovery programme and Recovery Scrutiny Panel.

RESOLVED - that the Committee (i) Notes the observations of the Recovery Scrutiny Panel in relation to the progress of the Recovery workstreams and the proposals for future recovery (ii) Agrees that the Recovery Scrutiny Panel be wound up and that future oversight of this activity takes place via the usual mechanisms with regular updates to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (iii) Considers the

Recovery Scrutiny Panel's recommendations that: (a) Assurance is sought that work will continue to ensure that the Council's communications strategy to residents is effective, especially in relation to Covid messaging; and (b) Recognising that new ways of working established during the pandemic will become business as usual, the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Policy & Resources is requested to review relevant ICT arrangements and provide an update to the Committee in due course.

64. CALENDAR OF MEETINGS 2021/22

Members discussed the Council's proposed Calendar of Meetings 2021/22.

It was noted that Overview & Scrutiny Committee would meet later in July 2021 (15 July) to allow more time between June and July Committees.

The Budget Scrutiny Panel would meet on 1 December 2021 to allow more time to consider report and recommendations before Overview and Scrutiny on 9 December 2021.

Members asked if Planning Committee meetings could be moved forward to avoid two major Committee meetings on consecutive evenings in the same week. Officers would take this away to consider.

RESOLVED – to note the Calendar of Meetings 2021/22 and the observations of the Committee.

65. CONSTITUTION OF COMMERCIAL STRATEGY SCRUTINY PANEL

Clerk's note – this agenda item was taken before Minute item 60.

Members considered the scope of work, membership and draft timetable for a proposed Commercial Strategy Scrutiny Panel.

Councillor T. Archer, Portfolio Holder for Investment and Companies, introduced the report and draft terms of reference. He welcomed the proposed Member scrutiny and added that the timetable was indicative at this stage. It was noted that the final Commercial Strategy would be agreed by the Executive.

Members discussed whether it should be a Panel made up of five or seven Members. The Committee agreed that the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny, Councillor N. Harrison, would finalise this with other Group Leaders.

RESOLVED – that the Commercial Strategy Scrutiny Panel be constituted to support the ongoing development of the Council's Commercial Strategy.

66. FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered and noted the Committee's Future Work Programme.

Members asked for an update at the next meeting on the ongoing complex legal work on Trust Funds including the Reigate Baths.

67. 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 Committee Procedure Rules.

68. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of urgent business.

The Meeting closed at 9.32 pm