

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 6th January 2015 at Pippbrook, Dorking from 7.00pm to 10.00pm

Present: Councillors Stephen Cooksey (Chairman), Lucy Botting, Clare Curran, David Draper, Paula Hancock, Raj Haque, Mary Huggins, Howard Jones and Paul Potter.

Also present: Councillors Margaret Cooksey, Valerie Homewood, Roger Hurst, Bridget Lewis-Carr, Vivienne Michael, John Northcott and David Preedy, Chris Townsend and Charles Yarwood.

Also present: Rowan Munson – Mole Valley Youth Voice.

61. Minutes

The minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held 2nd December 2014 were agreed as a correct record.

62. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mary Cooper and Peter Stanyard

63. Disclosure of Interests

Councillors Clare Curran, Stephen Cooksey and Chris Townsend declared a non pecuniary interest in Agenda Items 8 and 9 as they were elected Members of Surrey County Council.

Councillor Mary Huggins declared a non pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 7 as her relatives were involved with one of the football clubs who may benefit from the new facilities being proposed in the report.

64. Places for People Leisure

The Committee received a presentation on the Dorking Sports Centre from representatives (Mr Steve Warriner – Area Manager & Mr Geoff Evans – General Manager) of Places for People Leisure (PPL), which detailed activities at the facility since their organisation was awarded the management contract for the centre in 2013. During the course of the presentation the following points were noted:-

- PPL operated as a social enterprise which meant that any profits raised by the company were reinvested in back into the business and the sports centres managed by PPL. It also meant that the ethos of the company retained a social as well as a commercial purpose.
- PPL entered into a 10 year contract with Mole Valley District Council to manage the Dorking Sports Centre (DSC) in November 2013. Since that time PPL had invested £700,000 into the centre to improve the facilities on offer, to recruit additional staff and improve staff training. The improvements made to the centre included £450,000 to purchase new gym equipment, increase the floor space in the gym and the provision of a cycle studio. Other improvements included the café being rebranded as a coffee shop with a greater emphasis on healthy products and the installation of 18 cameras in the swimming pool area, including underwater, improving customer safety.
- Since PPL had taken over the management of the Sport Centre, customer participation had increased by 6% which equated to approximately 30,000 additional visits to the centre. New schemes such as the Gym Only membership had proved to be particular popular with customers, with 900 of the 2500 members of the Sports Centre opting for this type of membership.

During the presentation it was noted by Members that although there had been an additional 30,000 visits to the Sports Centre, the vast majority of these were through more people using the gym. As a result it was questioned why participation had increased dramatically in this area, when pool usage had remained static. It was advised that increased participation was linked to the additional investment in the gym over the past year and now that the improvements were complete, focus would be placed on ways to increase usage of the pool.

PPL carried out monthly surveys with randomly selected users of the Sports Centre. Over the course of the past year PPL had achieved on average an overall score of 7.6 out of 10 from users

who had completed the survey. It was agreed by PPL that this score left room for improvement and that the feedback derived from these surveys was used to target future improvements to the facilities on offer and the customer experience.

It was confirmed that Dorking Sports Centre continued to be rated as 'Good' by the Quest scheme, which was used to rate sports and leisure facilities across the UK. In order to improve this rating to 'Excellent', the Sports Centre needed to ensure that the facilities provided were of a consistently high standard, as 25% of the rating was based on mystery customer visits. The Sport Centre also needed to demonstrate that they proactively used the data received, such as from the customer surveys, to target improvements.

It was advised that PPL provided the Council with a breakdown of participation rates at the centre as part of a monthly report of key performance indicators, which was required as part of their contract. It was suggested that it would be useful if a method could be found to share this information with Members on a regular basis.

Members wanted to know whether Dorking Sports Centre offered specific schemes for either elderly residents or children with mental health issues. It was advised that there were a range of schemes offered for young people and in general it was found that Dorking had an active elderly population with over 40% of members at the sports centre aged over 50. However it was advised that PPL would be willing to look at offering other schemes for the elderly should they be identified.

The cleanliness of the café area was raised as an issue, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that the area needed to be tidied on a more frequent basis, particularly as it was at the front of the venue. It was agreed that these comments would be taken back to the staff involved for discussion. It was also noted by another Member, that as a frequent user of the Centre, there had been a marked improvement in the facilities since PPL had taken over the management.

The Chairman thanked Mr Evans and Mr Warriner for their attendance at the meeting and extended an invitation for them to return before the Committee next year.

65. Service Update: Benefits

The Committee received a presentation on the Benefits Service from Rob Boxall, the Council's Benefits Manager During the course of the presentation the following points were noted:-

- The Benefits Service was responsible for the administration of both Housing and Council Tax benefit, including payment, the reclamation of overpayments and the investigation of fraudulent claims. The team also administered the Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), which was a pot of money provided to the Council by central Government to help people adversely affected by the welfare reforms.
- In 2013/2014 the Council have been given £98,000 by central Government as a contribution towards the DHP, of which £93,000 had actually been awarded to residents in need of financial assistance. The process to apply for a DHP was fairly complex and required the applicant to provide a significant amount of detail. As this fund was intended to be a short term solution, the team also helped to signpost applicants to other solutions which could improve their circumstances in the long term.
- The Service was also responsible for investigating fraudulent applications and used a number of different streams to identify possible cases of fraud including reports from members of the public, discrepancies when processing applications and through data sharing with the Department for Work and Pensions.
- Future challenges for the team included the possible reduction of the benefit cap from a maximum claimable amount of £25,000 to £22,000, the possible removal of benefits for claimants under 25, the proposed Single Fraud Investigation scheme (which would centralise fraud investigations) and the introduction of the Universal Credit scheme.

Following the presentation, Members were given the opportunity to ask Mr Boxall questions about the Benefits Service. One question concerned the impact for Mole Valley of the recently introduced under-occupancy rules for Housing Benefit claimants, which targeted those residents who had what were considered to be spare bedrooms. It was advised that these rules had initially affected 160

residents in the district, some of whom had to apply for DHP as a result. However the team had been working with these residents and local Housing Associations and as a result some had been able to downsize to smaller properties.

Members also wanted to find out what powers the Council had to reclaim benefits that had been overpaid to claimants. It was advised that the two routes used by the Council were either to deduct any overpayment from on-going benefit payments or to issue a debt summons and come to an arrangement with the person in question. During 2013/2014 the Council had successfully prosecuted 3 people for making fraudulent benefit claims and currently had 4 cases in progress at the time of this meeting.

The Chairman thanked Mr Boxall for his attendance at the Committee meeting and extended an invite for him to return at a later date.

66. Homelessness Review 2014 and Homelessness Strategy 2015-2020

The Committee received an Executive report which set out the Council's Homelessness Review and also the Homelessness Strategy for 2015 – 2020 which had been based upon the findings of the review. Members were asked for their comments which would be taken away by the officers and incorporated in a revised version of the report that would be considered by the Executive on 3rd February.

Members noted that the previous strategy had ended in 2013 and queried why there had been a gap of a year before the new strategy was been produced. It was advised that in the past year the Housing Service had dealt with a higher than anticipated number of people threatened with homelessness and resolving these issues had been treated as a priority by officers, which meant that resources were diverted away from producing the new strategy.

There were some targets in the previous strategy that had not been achieved and it was confirmed that this was due to a combination of some targets being overambitious and also insufficient resources within the team to complete others. It was agreed that officers would provide Members with a breakdown of the reasons why targets had not been achieved.

Members questioned the accessibility of the Housing Service and how residents who were unable to get to Pippbrook could access the Service. It was advised that contact could be made through a number of different channels including the telephone, internet or home visits which could be arranged if required.

The new strategy had been divided into ten principles with actions points for each principle. Principle 9 related to not placing 16-17 year olds in bed and breakfast accommodation. Members welcomed this target, although it was acknowledged that in certain circumstances there may be a need for a young person to be placed in bed and breakfast accommodation on a temporary basis. It was suggested that the action point should be amended from a 'minimum of 14 days use where possible' to a 'maximum of 14 days use where possible'.

It was also suggested that it would be beneficial if the summary of the key points of the document could be included at the beginning, rather than at the end.

It was advised that the Council did have communication with the Amber Foundation, who offered accommodation for young people, but as the accommodation offered was fairly communal, it was not suitable for all young people who required housing.

It was queried whether any other local authorities had implemented the ten principles set out in the strategy and whether they had been successful. It was confirmed that the ten principles for dealing with homelessness had only been launched in 2013, but a number of authorities had successfully implemented certain of these principles. It was agreed that Members would be provided with information to confirm whether any local authorities had achieved all ten principles.

The Chairman advised the Committee that their comments would be used by the Officers to produce a revised version of the report, which would be brought back before the Committee on 27th January, before going to the Executive for final approval.

Resolved: That the comments of the Committee be noted and used to produce a revised version of the documents, which will be brought back to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 27th

January 2015.

67. Meadowbank

The Committee received an Executive report which set out new proposals for the Dorking Football Club site at Meadowbank, Dorking. Members were asked for their comments and/or recommendation which would be submitted to the Executive during its consideration of the item at its meeting on 13th January 2015.

There was support across the Chamber for this report, with the general view being that the proposal presented an exciting opportunity for a much needed community sporting facility in the centre of Dorking. However a number of Members were concerned about the relatively short timescale for completing such a large project, with the deadline being the start of the 2016/2017 football season. Assurance was given that the both officers and the Executive Member were aware of this risk and agreed that the project needed to be managed carefully to ensure it was completed on time.

It was confirmed that talks were on-going with local football clubs concerning the use of the new facility, but the decision to move ahead with recommended course of action set out in the report, was not dependent on the outcome of these talks.

Overall the Committee were very supportive of the proposals and agreed that the Executive should accept the recommendations set out in the report.

Recommendation to the Executive: That the recommendations set out in the report be accepted.

68. Thames River Basin draft Flood Risk Management Plan

The Committee received an Executive report which set out information on the Environment Agency's consultation about their Flood Management Plans for the Thames River Basin area which included the River Mole. Members were asked for their comments and/or recommendation which would be submitted to the Executive during its consideration of the item at its meeting on 13th January 2015.

In response to a question about why the report did not give any consideration to surface water flooding issues, it was advised that the Environment Agency were only responsible for fluvial water sources, such as the River Mole and as such the report set out their proposals for managing the flood risks from these sources. Surface water flooding would either be the responsibility of Surrey County Council or in some cases the relevant landowner.

Overall the Committee were supportive of the response to the consultation set out in the report and were happy for the Executive to accept the recommendation.

Recommendation to the Executive: That the recommendations set out in the report be accepted.

69. Consultation on the draft update to the River Basin Management Plan for the Thames River Basin District

The Committee received an Executive report which set out information on an Environment Agency's consultation about their River Basin Management Plan. Members were asked for their comments and/or recommendation which would be submitted to the Executive during its consideration of the item at its meeting on 13th January 2015.

Members noted their surprise that the water quality in Mole Valley was considered to be relatively poor and questioned whether there was anything in particular that caused the water quality to deteriorate. It was advised that one of the main contributing factors came from the farming industry and the use of agricultural chemicals, which were washed from fields into the water system.

It was noted that the Environment Agency were concerned with the over-abstraction of water in the Brockham area, which related to the quarry works in that area and Members questioned whether this might have an impact on flooding in the area. The Committee were advised that any concerns about over-abstraction may be allayed as the sand working on the Buckland Estate was due to finish. However it remained to be seen how this would affect the water table.

Overall the Committee were supportive of the response to the consultation set out in the report and were happy for the Executive to accept the recommendation.

Recommendation to the Executive: That the report be accepted

70. Meeting Schedule 2015/2016

The Committee received an Executive report which set out the proposed meeting schedule for 2015/16. Members were asked for their comments and/or recommendation which would be submitted to the Executive during its consideration of the item at its meeting on 13th January 2015.

The Chairman advised Members that this item had been included on the agenda for their information and although given the opportunity to comment on the document, no concerns were raised.

Resolved: That the content of the report be noted.

71. Motion 5/2014

Due to the lateness of the meeting, it was agreed that there was insufficient time to debate the motion, meaning that it would be referred back to the next meeting of the Council on 20th January 2015.

Resolved: That motion 5/2014 be referred back to the Council for consideration at its next meeting.

72. Outside Organisation Review

Resolved: The Committee agreed to defer the consideration of this item until its next meeting on 27th January 2015.