

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HELD ON THURSDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2014 AT 4.00 P.M.
IN THE CIVIC CENTRE, BEECROFT ROAD, CANNOCK

PART 1

PRESENT:
Councillors

Toth, J. (Chairman)

Anslow, C.	Freeman, Miss M.A.
Bernard, J.D.	Gamble, B.
Burley, Mrs. J.L.	Pearson, A.
Buttery, M.	Todd, R.

16. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Mrs. S.M. Cartwright, J.T. Kraujalis (Vice-Chairman), P.A. Snape and P. Witton.

17. Declarations of Interests of Members in Contracts and Other Matters and Restrictions on Voting by Members and Party Whip Declarations

No declarations of interests or party whip declarations were received.

18. Minutes

Minute No. 14 – Quarter 1 Performance Report 2014-15

In respect of the query raised regarding 'Home Security Grants', the Environmental Protection Manger circulated a short briefing paper for Members which provided further details about the scheme and recurrent underspend of the budgeted grant funding.

Councillor Pearson queried if the underspend was partly caused by residents being put off by the cost of having security improvements made to their homes and whether residents knew if the funding was available.

The Environmental Protection Manager replied that as the majority of improvements could be met from the individual grants allocated, cost was unlikely to be an issue. In terms of awareness of the funding, it was only offered once notification had been received from the Police that a burglary had taken place.

Councillor J. Bernard queried if forensic marking/'smartwater' kits were included as part of the security improvements.

The Environmental Protection Manager replied that he would have to seek clarification on this and report back.

Councillor Anslow commented it was hard to understand why offers of the grant were not being taken up given the list of improvements that were offered.

The Environmental Protection Manager replied that the main issue was down to residents not responding once the Council had initially made the offer.

Councillor Burley queried whether the amount of funding offered was based on maximum household income.

The Environmental Protection Manager replied that this wasn't the case.

The Chairman commented that tight criteria would need to be put in place for allocation of grant funding should the Council decide to expand the scheme as had been suggested.

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 6 October 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed.

19. Q2 Performance Report 2014-15

Consideration was given to the Report of the Chief Executive (Item 4.1 – 4.57 of the Official Minutes of the Council).

Corporate Improvement Portfolio:

'Office Accommodation – move to open plan offices – implement phase 2 of office moves'

In the absence of the Chief Executive, the Corporate Director clarified that neither Staffordshire Police or 'Families First' from Staffordshire County Council (SCC) would be moving into the Civic Centre, however 11 staff from the Cannock Chase Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) were due to move into the first floor of the building in early December, and the SCC Registrars Service were due to come in January 2015.

Councillor J. Bernard queried what was going to happen to the Registrars Service current premises once they had moved into the Civic Centre.

The Corporate Director replied that he would have to put this question to the Chief Executive for a response.

Councillor Gamble queried if the Council could ask the CCG to make payment of rental income and provide clarification of invoicing arrangements up front, given the current and ongoing financial problems they were facing.

The Corporate Director replied that he was unsure of the funding arrangements which had been agreed, so would also need to put this question to the Chief Executive for clarification.

Councillor J. Bernard commented that the Chief Executive had advised the CCG would be paying less rent following their move than what they were paying when located in Cannock Hospital.

The Chairman queried why some performance indicators which had been included in the quarter one report were then not shown in quarter two, such as the 'partnership concordat'.

The Policy & Performance Manager replied that it was not necessary to report all indicators each quarter, so only indicators where progress had been made or were relevant to the specific quarter had been included.

The Chairman replied that it would be preferable to have all performance indicators included in each quarterly report, whether progress had been made or not.

The Corporate Director replied that all necessary updates would be included in the quarter 3 report.

Councillor Burley requested that an update for the 'partnership concordat' be definitely included in the next report.

The Chairman queried why the performance indicators for the office accommodation moves had been upgraded from red to green status when all work had not yet been completed.

The Policy & Performance Manager replied that ratings were set by the relevant lead officers and not the Performance Team.

The Corporate Director commented that he would also raise this as a query with the Chief Executive who was the relevant lead officer.

'Community Forums – review use and format of community forums for engaging with the public'

The Head of Governance advised that this would be covered as part of the agenda later on in the meeting.

Crime and Partnerships Portfolio:

'Manage delivery of 'Love Your Street' campaign'

The Corporate Director advised that he would ask the Chief Executive to provide an update on this indicator.

Environment Portfolio:

'Manage and deliver 'Heath Week' campaign'

The Head of Commissioning reported that due to an officer within the Countryside Team being on long-term sick leave, it had not been possible to achieve this indicator and nor would it be achieved by the end of the year.

Councillor Burley queried if there was a specific budget allocated for this campaign.

The Head of Commissioning replied that the campaign was funded through normal service budgets, so no funding had been 'lost' as a result of the campaign not going ahead.

Health & Wellbeing Portfolio:

'Number of health & safety interventions undertaken in accordance with national priorities and local intelligence'

Councillor J. Bernard queried what the target was for this indicator as it had been given green status although no target was shown.

The Environmental Protection Manager replied that he would find this out and report back to the next meeting of the Committee.

Housing Portfolio:

'Review the effectiveness of the Council's policy changes to mitigate the impact of the Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC)' and 'Place (Housing) 9 – current tenants' arrears – target £290,000'

The Head of Housing & Waste Management advised that due to sickness within the Tenancy Services section, it would not be possible to achieve this indicator in the current year and requested that it be deferred to 2015/16.

Councillor Burley commented that it should be retained in the current year and made a priority to achieve, due to the subject being a political football across all parties and its importance to those affected by it.

Councillor J. Bernard queried if it was possible to determine whether the impact of the SSSC was due to the 'bedroom tax' or other factors such as property downsizing by elderly tenants.

The Head of Housing & Waste Management replied that this could be determined, but to do so would require a lot of work and mean that other priority work, such as the collection of rent arrears, would have to be delayed.

Councillor R. Todd commented that the Council ran a tight ship in terms of its

staffing resources, but queried if it was possible to source additional employees to support delivery of the SSSC work.

The Corporate Director replied that this was a reflection of the pressures the Council had on officers to deliver targets where possible, but long term sickness could have an adverse impact on being able to achieve these targets.

Councillor J. Bernard queried if there was anything additional the Council could do to collect more rent arrears.

The Head of Housing & Waste Management replied that since quarter 2, the amount of rent arrears owed to the Council had further increased to £343,000, but on an annual basis, the Council collected over £19.5m in rental income. As a percentage figure, the current level of arrears equated to 1.76% of the total collected. In the summer, the number of officers undertaking rent arrears work fell by half, as two were on sick leave and had gained another post. A replacement appointment had since been made, however there was still a lot of work to catch up with.

Councillor Anslow queried how performance was likely to progress between now and the year end.

The Head of Housing & Waste Management replied that there was normally a peak in arrears owed around Christmas time, however there was an expectation that the amount would reduce by year end. Achieving the £290,000 target may not happen, but the aim was to decrease arrears at the year end.

Councillor Burley queried if there was any data available for how the Council fared in terms of level of arrears compared to other local authorities.

The Head of Housing & Waste Management replied that the Council was a top performing authority in this respect, hence why the increase in arrears was disappointing.

Town Centre Regeneration Portfolio:

'To work with the County Council to commission research to inform future investment needs of Cannock Town Centre'

The Corporate Director advised that as the relevant officers were unable to attend the meeting, a written update had instead been issued by the LEP Consultant:

“The Prosperity: Economic Resilience Priority Delivery Plan indicated that this action was to due to take place in Q2, but the work was actually commissioned during Q1 with the expectation that the report would have been completed in Q2. However, the range of issues to be considered through the work has been greater than anticipated at the outset, for example issues associated with the relationship with the Mill Green Designer Outlet Village and changes in property ownership in Cannock Town Centre. The result of this being that the final report was now expected during Q3.

As the work was already commissioned during Q2 it was debatable whether the current amber rating should be changed to green.”

‘To achieve a reduction in the number of vacant ground floor retail units in the District’s principal town centre shopping streets’

As with the previous indicator, a written update was provided by the LEP Consultant:

“As the report notes, this was a particularly challenging performance measure because the number of vacant units in the District’s three town centres was influenced by factors over which the Council had little or no control or influence. For example, ‘Phones 4 U’ was forced into administration when two mobile networks decided to stop using them as agents. This decision resulted in the closure of their store in Hednesford which meant that there were 31 empty units in total at the end of Q2 across the three town centres, compared to 30 at the end of March, a marginal increase in overall vacancies of just over 0.3%. However, this marginal increase was sufficient to warrant a red ranking because it represented a net increase, albeit slight.

It should be noted that there was also 31 vacant units at the end of Q2 in 2013-14. In both cases the local average was lower than the national average which currently stands at 13.4% (14% in October 2013). Nevertheless, the Council will continue to work with key stakeholders on initiatives to secure new businesses and further investment into the District’s three town centres, thus maintaining the previous downward trend.”

General Fund Budget Monitoring – Quarter 2

The Corporate Director advised that there was nothing of major significance in the budget information to report. Overall, general revenue expenditure was on a downward trend, with the expectation that a six-figure underspend would be achieved by the end of the current financial year. Expenditure on vacancies and non-essential items was being kept tight to help achieve this underspend.

Councillor Anslow queried what plans were in place for the future of the Ballroom.

The Corporate Director replied that no specific plans were currently in place, but the Royal Wolverhampton Trust had indicated it may wish to transfer some of its support staff into the Ballroom, although these discussions were only at a very early stage and no detailed work had been undertaken.

Councillor Anslow then queried whether the Ballroom was still a licensed venue.

The Corporate Director that it was no longer a licensed venue as the previous licence holder was no longer based in the Civic Centre. When the Ballroom had been previously used for a variety of purposes it had not been a commercially viable enterprise, which had the effect of the Council providing subsidised funding to keep it operational.

The Chairman queried what the Cabinet's current position was with regards to future use of the Ballroom.

The Corporate Director replied that for the majority of 2014, the Cabinet's position was that the Ballroom had been 'reserved' for the Police to move into.

The Chairman further queried what then the future proposals were for the Ballroom now that it was known the Police would not be moving in.

The Corporate Director advised he would have to refer this question to the Chief Executive for a response.

Councillor J. Bernard queried if the budget for the Crime & Partnerships Portfolio would be overspent this year.

The Corporate Director replied that if the current expenditure trend on the budget was to continue, then it was likely the budget would be overspent.

Councillor J. Bernard then queried why there was also a projected overspend for the Culture & Sport Portfolio budget.

The Corporate Director replied that for the next meeting of the Committee, he would request a briefing paper be presented to provide more detail about the potential overspend on these two budget areas.

RESOLVED:

That:

- (A) The performance information and case studies relating to the Priority Delivery Plans (PDPs) be noted.
- (B) The actions and indicators rated red or amber, and the associated commentary/remedial action proposed by the Lead Officers be noted.
- (C) The General Fund financial performance against budget for the second quarter be noted.
- (D) For the future performance reports, information on all performance indicators and measures for each Portfolio be included to allow Members to see a full update on progress made each quarter.
- (E) The performance measure 'Review the effectiveness of the Council's policy changes to mitigate the impact of the Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC)' be deferred until 2015/16 for completion.
- (F) Cabinet, at its meeting to be held on 18 December, 2014, be requested to outline its proposals for future use of the Ballroom and/or what is already being done.

20. Air Quality Update

Consideration was given to the Briefing Note of the Head of Environmental Health (*presented by the Environmental Protection Manager*) (Item 5.1 – 5.7 of the Official Minutes of the Council).

Councillor A. Pearson left the meeting at the start of this item.

Councillor R. Todd queried if the section of the M6 Toll Road which operated through Norton Canes was subject to air quality monitoring.

The Environmental Protection Manager replied that it was not monitored as there weren't any residential properties situated nearby.

The Chairman queried whether the Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) monitoring station at Bridgtown had collected data for July 2014 when the Toll Road operator was allowing heavy goods vehicles to use the Toll Road for free.

The Environmental Protection Manager responded he was uncertain as to what data readings had been taken so would need to check and report back to the Committee.

Councillor J. Bernard queried if the Council was doing enough to improve air quality in the District in order to avoid being fined by the UK Government.

The Environmental Protection Manager replied that the Council was doing enough, but would continue to work with the Highways Agency and Toll Road operator and seek ways in which it could bid for relevant funding.

Councillor Anslow commented that the Council had a thankless task to try and improve air quality as most of the problems caused were as a result of the various haulage companies who needed to be better educated about the impact their vehicles were having on the environment locally.

The Environmental Protection Manager replied that alongside this, one of the challenges was trying to encourage companies to use alternative transport provision such as freight rail.

The Chairman then requested that the data from the Council's air quality monitoring stations be presented to the next meeting of the Committee for consideration, specifically including the July 2014 data.

21. Review of Community Forums – Input from Scrutiny

The Head of Governance was in attendance to seek the Committee's input into the review of the Council's Community Forums which was being undertaken as one of the priority outcomes for the Corporate Improvement PDP in 2014/15

Members were asked for their views on the following questions (using the Forums' Terms of Reference as an initial starting point):

Purpose of Forums?

- To give the Council the opportunity to listen to the public.
- To communicate with the community.
- To act as an 'open' forum.
- To be a forum for the public and not for the Council.
- Hold bodies to account – both public and private sector.
- Educate residents and raise awareness about provision of services.

What Works Well?

- Format – enables people to speak directly with individuals concerned on specific issues.

What Doesn't Work Well?

- Can become 'hijacked' by one or two individuals with a particular axe to grind.
- Agendas were too 'rigid' as items had to be set in advance.
- Items of business considered by some forums were not how people operated normally.
- Asking for questions to be set in advance.
- Attendance not good enough from some invitees.
- No opportunities for public debate; have reverted back to method of receiving written replies only.
- Lack of clout to get invitees to attend.
- Don't think many people know when forums were due to happen or what was to be considered on the agenda.
- Cannock forum – use of the Council Chamber as a venue – too 'formal'.

What Changes Could Be Made?

- Flexible agenda.
- More 'accessible' venues.
- Give more support and help to Members to distribute resources about the forums (flyers, posters, agenda etc.).
- Questions should be asked of councillors rather than officers – e.g. a 'question time' style format.
- Allow for local councillors/ward members to be questioned on ward specific issues.
- Less formal presentation of agendas.
- Should be advertised as an 'opportunity' for people to come and speak directly to the Council.
- Operate online/via Facebook as 'live' forums – e.g. Worcester council.

What Can Be Done to Improve Attendance?

- Newspaper and online advertising.
- 'Topical' issue pertinent to local area could be covered.
- Talks on how the Council functioned and what the differing responsibilities were of the Council and County Council.
- Has to be accessible and attendees need to feel 'satisfied' with attending.
- Manageable timescales need to be set for providing responses to questions if they can't be answered immediately.

- Recognition that each individual forum is different.
- 'Code of Conduct/protocol and guidance for Members on how to behave at forums – important to take 'politics' out of forums and focus on the 'community' role.
- Clarity was required on allowing representatives from media organisations to attend the forums and provide live Twitter updates.

The Corporate Director also provided the following feedback:

- The 'formal' structure of the forums should be removed.
- Need to acknowledge that there would be a limit on what could be answered in the meeting.
- Forums should be more Members led, but a level of neutrality would still need to be in force to avoid potential 'political issues'.
- Involvement of 'independent' bodies.
- Be clear about possible overlap of issues – what should/shouldn't be covered.
- Role and remit of parish and town councils, important not to step on their toes.
- Police & Crime Commissioner proposals for 'Safer Neighbourhood Panels', these could have an impact on future Police involvement with the forums.

The Head of Governance advised that alongside this input from Scrutiny, Democratic Services were conducting a survey with other local authorities to establish what arrangements they had in place, if any. Input was also being sought from the Community Engagement and Local Partnerships Teams. Once the review had been completed, a report would be written up and presented to Council for consideration.

22. Review of How Scrutiny is Undertaken – Feedback from Cllr. Kraujalis

Due to Councillor Kraujalis not being in attendance, the Chairman recommended that this item be deferred until the February 2015 meeting of the Committee.

The Chairman advised that he would ask Councillor Kraujalis to consider some questions for the review and circulate to Committee Members.

23. Date of Next Meeting

Thursday 12 February, 2015, 4:00pm.

The meeting closed at 5:50pm

CHAIRMAN