
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Virtual Meeting held via Skype on Wednesday, 24 March 2021 from 7.00 pm - 9.15 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Lloyd Bowen (Chairman), Richard Darby, Steve Davey, Mike Dendor (Vice-Chairman), Tim Gibson, Alastair Gould, James Hall, Carole Jackson, Denise Knights, Pete Neal, Hannah Perkin, Ken Pugh and Bill Tatton.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Anne Adams, Billy Attaway, Charlotte Hudson, Jo Millard, Larissa Reed and Nick Vickers.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Cameron Beart, Derek Carnell, Councillor Monique Bonney (Cabinet Member for Economy and Property), Councillor Roger Truelove (Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance), Alan Horton, James Hunt, Peter Marchington, Ken Rowles, Sarah Stephen and Tony Winckless.

582 INTRODUCTION

The Chairman explained that the meeting would be conducted in accordance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panel (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 No. 392.

The Chairman welcomed all Members, officers and members of the public to the meeting.

583 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 25 February 2021 (Minute Nos. 476 – 484) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

584 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

Part A Minute for Recommendation to Cabinet

585 SHEERNESS CLOCK TOWER RESTORATION

The Chairman explained that a report on the Sheerness Clock Tower Restoration project was considered at the Cabinet meeting on 17 March 2021 and he read-out the agreed recommendation. He acknowledged that the Clock Tower was in urgent need of repair and said that the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property, and officers, had been invited to attend the meeting to explain how the Council had reached the position of the urgent works and how community assets could be protected in the future.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property gave a short explanation and the Head of Property Services gave a presentation which outlined a 20-year inspection and maintenance history of the clock tower including:

- A 2007 condition survey which assessed the structure in good condition with slight deterioration of paintwork;
- a 2012 condition survey which highlighted small isolated areas down to bare metal and recommended a specialist survey to assess condition;
- works carried out to repaint the clock tower and replacement lamps to the clockface in 2002;
- new door lock and tower panels painted in 2004;
- six visits to reset the clock from November 2016 to March 2017;
- removal of asbestos in September 2007; and
- nine visits to reset the chiming mechanism between 2008 and 2013.

The Head of Property Services explained that the Sheerness Enhancement Association for Leisure (SEAL) carried out works in 2012 and records showed there was evidence of previous repairs, a structural engineer/professional fabricators appointed and limited repairs were carried out to allow repainting to proceed. She said that other adhoc repairs carried out since 2012 included rectifying the time and chiming mechanism, repairs to damaged lock, repairs to a hole in the floor inside and a fixed wire electrical test as well as remedial works.

The Head of Property Services said that a condition survey carried out in December 2018 recommended that a specialist survey be carried out to assess the condition but that repairs to the clock were considered urgent within two years (priority 2). It was intended that works be carried out as part of a planned maintenance programme in 2019/20 but this did not go ahead due to long-term sickness followed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the debate that followed Members asked questions and raised points including:

- What initial lessons had been learned and how would Swale Borough Council (SBC) ensure this did not happen again?;
- was the tower insured?;
- sought clarification on repairs carried out;
- had wind and stress calculations been carried out when wires for bunting and Christmas lights were tethered to the top of the tower?'
- stressed the importance of Swales Heritage;
- sought clarification on priorities of work and when a priority 2 became a priority 1;
- there needed to be better resilience for long-term staff absence to ensure that work was not overlooked;
- the Sheerness Town Team could advise on the testing capabilities of the wires which had annual testing;
- gave examples of specialist repairers that had carried out other work in the Borough;
- sought information on possible costs of repairs and whether specialist repairers worked on individual parts of the Clock Tower;
- sought clarification on the Contract Standing Orders;

- how would assets be preserved in the future?; and
- suggested a maintenance contract going forward.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property said the Clock Tower was one of many assets owned by the Council. She said that there was little detailed historical documentation and whilst a number of surveys had been carried out work was not followed up. She said that assets needed to be invested in and she shared the concern of tethering lights and bunting to a Grade II Listed Building and said that alternatives needed to be considered.

The Cabinet Member for Economy explained that if SEAL had not carried out work, the damage may have been worse. She said there needed to be a consistent approach in managing the Council's assets.

The Head of Property Services said that priority 1 work should be carried out within 12 months and priority 2 up to 2 years. In response to a Member's question on how much SEAL were paid, she agreed to find out.

The Chief Financial Officer said that it was not possible to insure against maintaining an asset.

The Head of Housing, Economy and Community Services said that the project, including all works and permits were expected to be in excess of £200k but because of the specialist nature of the work, 3 tenders might not be received.

In response to a Member's suggestion of using printed hoardings with photographs of the old clock once the clock tower was taken away, the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property explained that this was already being considered, along with information and photographs on the website as the restoration project progressed. She made a request for any photographs and history of the clock.

In response to a Member's question on how to ensure that SBC were resilient, the Chief Executive outlined the challenges faced in different situations of staff absence. She explained that Business Continuity Plans were reviewed regularly but SBC were a small organisation with many specialist roles. The Chief Executive said that the organisation could focus on what the tipping point was to bring in additional assistance and it needed to build in resilience. She said this was already being looked at, at senior level.

The Chairman proposed the following recommendation to Cabinet which was seconded by Councillor Ken Pugh:

That Business Continuity Plans be reviewed to ensure areas of work are able to be progressed regardless of staff's ability.

On being put to the vote, Members agreed the recommendation.

Recommendation to Cabinet:

(1) That Business Continuity Plans be reviewed to ensure areas of work are able to be progressed regardless of staff's ability.

Part B Minutes for information**586 FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT REPORT**

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance introduced the report which set out the revenue and capital project outturn position for Quarter 3 2020/21 as at the end of December 2020 and was considered by Cabinet on 17 March 2021.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said that the projected overspend had increased by £449k. He highlighted the loss of income in leisure centres and car parking, and the savings to members' allowances in Table 1. Table 2 illustrated the overall impact and the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance drew attention to the overspend of £2.25m in the Commissioning, Environment & Leisure service budget. He highlighted Government funding received in Table 5 and said effective negotiation had resulted in a £535,597 payment for loss of income to Swale Community Leisure (SCL), lower than expected. The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance drew Members' attention to the £250k loss in planning fees as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Finally, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said whilst the Council faced financial challenges, with government funding and effective internal financial management, it had not stretched the sustainable revenue budget and compared favourably with other local authorities.

The Chairman praised the Chief Financial Officer and his team for the prompt payment of invoices which was very important to businesses during the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Referring to paragraph 3.12 on page 11 of the report, a Member sought clarification on the percentage of reduction in income from Council Tax collection which was offset by Government grants. The Chief Financial Officer agreed to find out.

In response to a Member's question on the SCL contract, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said there was still over 4 years left on the contract. In the debate that followed, the Chief Financial Officer agreed to provide the Chairman with additional information on the negotiations with SCL. In response to a Member's question on the £340k funding received from the National Leisure Recovery Fund the Chief Financial Officer advised that £72k was allocated to Faversham Pools.

The Chairman went through Appendix 1 page by page and Members asked questions and made points on Table 8 which included:

- Explanation on the net underspend on Electoral Registration (page 15);
- clarification on the Rough Sleeper Initiative (Page 16);
- clarification on whether the £27k overspend on Conservation (page 17) included the funding from the Area Committee allocation; and
- was there an update on the Barton Hill appeal costs (page 17)?;

The Chief Executive explained that the Electoral Registration underspend was due to the postponement of the process during lockdown. She explained the Rough

Sleeper Initiative. The Chief Financial Officer agreed to find out more information on the £27k Conservation overspend. The Leader said the Barton Hill Drive high court challenge had not yet been settled.

On Table 10, Members raised points including:

- The Milton Creek Access Road scheme description was confusing and required updating (page 24);
- clarification and update on Swallows Leisure Centre Roof – internal/external and whether it was insured (page 25);
- were there any plans to demolish public toilets at The Forum, Sittingbourne?; and
- why were repairs and renewals costing (£30k) required to the new CCTV system?.

The Chief Financial Officer advised that previous information had been circulated to Members on the Milton Creek Access Road as it was complicated, and he agreed to update the wording. He explained that all SBC-owned buildings were suitably insured but the insurance company were not liable for repairs as buildings needed to be maintained. The Leader said there were no plans to demolish the amenities at The Forum. The Chief Financial Officer agreed to report back on the costs for the new CCTV system.

The Chairman thanked the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and the Chief Financial Officer.

Resolved:

(1) That the total projected revenue overspend of £3,768,000 (£3,319,000 as at end of September 2020) be noted.

(2) That the use of reserve funds as set out in paragraph 3.17 be noted.

(3) That the capital expenditure of £7,540,490 as detailed in paragraph 3.19 and Table 10 in Appendix 1 of the report be noted.

(4) That the additional Government funding received by the Council in response to the Covid-19 pandemic be noted.

(5) That a further payment to Swale Community Leisure of £535,597 to reflect leisure centre contractual commitments arising from the Covid-19 pandemic as detailed in paragraphs 3.15 and 3.16 of the report be noted.

587 CABINET FORWARD PLAN

A Member requested an update on the Beach Hut Policy which had previously been on the Forward Plan, had now been taken off but was still budgeted for.

Resolved:

(1) That the Forward Plan be noted.

588 WORD OF THANKS

As the meeting was the last scheduled Scrutiny Committee meeting in the current civic year, the Chairman thanked Members and officers for their attendance and work during the challenging year. He gave particular thanks to the recently retired Policy and Performance Officer.

589 ADJOURNMENT

There was an adjournment from 8.10pm to 8.15pm.

Chairman

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All Minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel