

DRAFT

FALKIRK COUNCIL

MINUTE of MEETING of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS, FALKIRK on THURSDAY 14 MAY 2015 at 9.30 AM.

COUNCILLORS:

Stephen Bird
Allyson Black
Steven Carleschi
Colin Chalmers
Cecil Meiklejohn (Convener)
Baillie Joan Paterson
Provost Pat Reid

OFFICERS:

Caroline Binnie, Communications & Participation Manager
Sally Buchanan, Welfare Reform Project Manager
Caird Forsyth, Corporate Policy Officer
Jack Frawley, Committee Officer
Lesley Macarthur, Corporate Policy Officer
Colin Moodie, Depute Chief Governance Officer
Jonny Pickering, Stakeholder Engagement Officer
Linda Scott, Corporate Policy Officer
Andrew Wilson, Policy & Community Planning Manager

S5. APPOINTMENT OF CONVENER

Colin Moodie welcomed members to the meeting. Council agreed on 13 May 2015 (ref FC10) that the Scrutiny Committee would consist of eight members with four drawn from the Administration and four not drawn from the Administration (subject to the proviso that no member of the Executive may be a member of the Scrutiny Committee). The Convener of the committee would be such member of the committee from the largest Opposition group as shall be appointed by the committee.

Colin Moodie sought nominations for the position of convener. Councillor Bird, seconded by Councillor Chalmers nominated Councillor Meiklejohn as convener. There being no other nominations Councillor Meiklejohn assumed the chair for the remainder of the business.

S6. APOLOGY

An apology was intimated on behalf of Baillie Buchanan.

S7. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

Baillie Paterson entered the meeting during consideration of the following item of business.

S8. MINUTES

Decision

- (a) The minute of the meeting of the Performance Panel held on 26 March 2015 was noted and the committee requested:**
 - (i) a report to the next meeting providing an update on attainment across Falkirk's schools, and**
 - (ii) a further report providing an update on attainment after the release of the 2015 exam results, and**
- (b) The minute of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 2 April 2015 was approved.**

S9. FOLLOWING THE PUBLIC POUND: ADVICE SERVICES

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Neighbourhood Services which provided an update on the work of external organisations in receipt of funding which provided debt and money advice services, and who fall within the Following the Public Pound (FPP) reporting and monitoring arrangements. The report provided information on the period 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015.

The report provided information on the context of the operation of advice services in Falkirk through the single outcome agreement and the poverty strategy. The report also provided an overview of the funding provided to the organisations and an assessment of each organisation's performance. An individual report was appended for each of the organisations which received funding, setting out the service provided, the agreed outcomes/objectives and performance information.

The committee heard from officers in relation to individual reports.

(a) Forth Valley Macmillan Money Matters Project

Linda Scott provided an overview of the report, advising that the organisation received £50,000 of Council funding. The service offered easily accessible information and advice on money matters and financial wellbeing to cancer patients, their carers and families living in the Forth Valley area and sought to increase income available to these client groups.

Members asked what the impact would be upon the service if Clackmannanshire Council withdrew its support. Linda Scott advised that the steering group would be discussing the issue and that in the short term NHS Forth Valley had covered the funding gap while a formal response to Clackmannanshire was prepared. The funding contribution of Clackmannanshire Council was £16,000.

The committee asked if the project could apply to Macmillan cancer support for additional funding. Linda Scott stated that the Money Matters Project was a separate organisation and that there had been no financial contributions from Macmillan cancer support to the project. It had previously been stated that Macmillan cancer support would only contribute to projects like this if they were doing new and innovative work. However, she advised that an approach could be made to cover this year's shortfall.

Members asked if there would be an impact to funding received from NHS Forth Valley due to the integration of health and social care. Linda Scott stated that the issue was set to be discussed at the next meeting of the steering group and that it was expected that support would continue as the project was highly valued by NHS Forth Valley.

In response to a question on the impact of welfare reform on the service, Linda Scott stated that it was difficult to assess the impact at this time as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had provided limited information. She advised that the project had supported a client through an appeals tribunal for the first time last year. Andrew Wilson stated that plans to bring a DWP representative onto the Community Planning Partnership Leadership Board would improve information sharing and allow for more effective planning.

Decision

The committee approved the report and acknowledged the progress made by Forth Valley Macmillan Money Matters Project in meeting Council priorities.

(b) Falkirk and District Credit Union

Linda Scott provided an overview of the report, advising that the organisation received £46,000 of Council funding. The service worked to promote savings and offer reasonable credit to its members and to help members manage their money.

The committee stated that in future all following the public pound reports should provide a breakdown of the Council's contribution by financial and in-kind.

Following a question regarding turnover of volunteers, Linda Scott advised that the turnover level of volunteers was in line with that expected and that the turnover of staff was very low. She stated that the volunteers were committed but subject to the normal pressures which volunteers are under such as availability. Training was being looked at in relation to the changes to service including the possibility of new loans and the move of services online.

Members asked for further information on the governance support given to the organisation and its long term projection. Linda Scott stated that business was growing, highlighting that new products were being launched and the adoption of the online system. In relation to governance she advised that the business plan was nearly complete and that this would free up the time of the development officer to support the organisation more broadly.

The committee asked for information on the work of the credit union with Falkirk's schools. Linda Scott stated that work with schools to build partnerships was planned and that there were collection points in: St Andrews RC primary school; Victoria primary school; Westquarter primary school, and Denny high school. The social work services debt advice team had been involved in educating senior primary school and junior high school pupils about personal financial management. Further, the credit union had worked with Education services and Community Learning & Development to ensure promotion within curriculum for excellence.

Members requested that a report was submitted to Scrutiny Committee (External) containing the organisation's accounts identifying the percentage contribution of Council funding to ensure that the organisation was not stretching itself too far.

The committee expressed concern that members who could not repay would be driven to use payday lender companies and asked what work was being done to prevent this. Linda Scott advised that the credit union worked closely with the social work services debt advice team and had a referral process to immediately direct clients to the team to find a solution if problems were arising. In cases where the individual did not want to deal with the Council the credit union would refer the case directly to the Citizens Advice Bureaux. The credit union was also looking at alternative avenues to high cost lending for people with poor credit ratings to ensure that they did not feel that they had to go to payday lenders as their only option.

Decision

The committee requested that a report providing the organisation's accounts is provided to Scrutiny Committee (External), highlighting what percentage of the organisation's income is from the Council's contribution.

(c) Falkirk Citizens Advice Bureaux

Lesley Macarthur provided an overview of the report. In the Falkirk area the Citizens Advice Bureaux runs three independent bodies, each with their own board of management – Denny & Dunipace, Falkirk and Grangemouth & Bo'ness. She advised that the organisation received £458,396 of Council funding along with £11,000 of in-kind support. Denny & Dunipace received £132,463; Falkirk £196,321, and Grangemouth & Bo'ness £129,612. The service provided independent information and advice in the Falkirk area, free of charge.

The committee sought further information on the joint action group. Lesley Macarthur advised that the joint action group met quarterly and worked together to access joint training and Scotland Excel funds using a greater economy of scale.

However, it was stated that audit costs could not be joined although the organisations could have the same auditor.

With reference to the case study in the report, the committee asked what steps had been taken to prevent such issues arising again. Lesley Macarthur stated that the workload issues present at the time had been addressed. Citizens Advice Bureaux, the Council and the DWP recognised gaps in service provision and that some people needed extra support. Work was ongoing to raise awareness of the services through improvements to the website and using leaflets. The Council had run a money advice campaign which signposted people to Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Members asked how people were reached when their life was in crisis. Lesley Macarthur advised that information was provided in hospitals, GP surgeries, dentists' surgeries, community centres and many other places as well as through work with women's aid.

The committee asked how many referrals to the Citizens Advice Bureaux were directly from the Council. Lesley Macarthur advised that the figures were not currently available but that the organisation held the requested information which would be included in future reports.

Members discussed the level of communication between the DWP and the Council and expressed concern that the Council were not informed when sanctions were being imposed on people. They requested that representation was made to the DWP to keep the Council better informed especially throughout the roll out of universal credit. Andrew Wilson stated that the dialogue with the DWP would improve through the intended inclusion of a DWP representative on the Community Planning Partnership Leadership Board. Lesley Macarthur advised that Citizen Advice Bureaux had worked with the DWP and this had been effective in helping people who were being or had been sanctioned.

Decision

The committee approved the report and acknowledged the progress made by Falkirk Citizens Advice Bureaux in meeting Council priorities.

(d) Falkirk Armed Services Advice Project

Caird Forsyth provided an overview of the report, advising that the organisation received £20,000 of Council funding. The service provided a bespoke advice service for veterans resident in the Falkirk Council area assisting them to access services provided by the Council or charitable services provided by veterans' charities.

The committee stated that the marketing of the service was important in ensuring that people knew what assistance they were entitled to access and asked if the service worked with the British Legion. Caird Forsyth stated that British Legion was a key partner and that locally the British Legion operated from Grangemouth.

Decision

The committee approved the report and acknowledged the progress made by Falkirk Armed Services Advice Project in meeting Council priorities.

Baillie Paterson left the meeting during consideration of the previous item of business and re-entered the meeting during consideration of the following item of business.

S10. SCRUTINY PANEL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: FALKIRK COUNCIL COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Neighbourhood Services providing the findings and recommendations of the Scrutiny Panel established to review the Council's participation strategy. The report provided information on the process undertaken and appended to the report information on evidence gathered at each of the panel's meetings.

Members highlighted the importance of having meaningful communication and reaching people in the community who did not traditionally engage with the Council. Caroline Binnie advised that the points had been considered at the panel, including discussions on the need to reach out to communities and engage in places where they were rather than expecting them to come to the Council.

The committee discussed that plain English should be used in all communications, although recognised that in some instances statutory prescriptions meant certain phrases or technical wording needed to be used. In these cases the committee suggested that explanatory text of "...which means that..." could be included to explain complicated legal phrases. Caroline Binnie stated that the point would be taken back to the corporate participation group and other appropriate forums. She advised that services were active in making their communications easier to understand and that recent plain English training had been helpful. The Council's website content had been rewritten in plain English and officers thought about how their communications came across from the public perspective.

Members asked what action was being taken to refresh the citizens' panel. Caroline Binnie advised that the corporate participation group would lead on this area. She stated that there were currently 1,600 members but that response levels varied depending on interest in the topic. The consultation on bereavement services had been particularly successful with extremely high levels of participation. In terms of representativeness, she stated that the panel was fairly reflective of the various demographics with the exception of young people. Jonny Pickering advised that a variety of sampling techniques could be used to target specific groups of people on the citizens' panel. Caroline Binnie stated that on issues important to young people different methods of engagement would need to be utilised to reach them and that this was a national issue.

The committee discussed consultation on the budget setting process. Members stated that it was a long complex process and that timing and methods could be improved. Caroline Binnie stated that the issue of consultation timing had been raised at meetings of the panel and that it would be preferable to avoid consulting during holiday periods where possible. She advised that previously public meetings had been held but that attendees were usually people who the Council already had good levels of engagement with. She stated that for large scale engagement such as the budget multiple methods would be used.

The committee requested that progress reports on the implementation of the panel's recommendations were provided to the committee.

Decision

The committee agreed to recommend to the Executive that the Council:

- (i) review the role, remit and membership of the Corporate Participation Group. This group has a central role in ensuring that there is a consistent approach to participation and engagement across the Council and promoting a best practice approach within Services;**
- (ii) develop a robust process for local community planning which sets out a defined process for the production of plans. This would include consideration of using 'place shaping' tools such as "Planning for Real" in a consistent manner;**
- (iii) develop a defined reporting framework for local community plans to ensure that reports on them are submitted to the Scrutiny Committee and then the Executive, prior to submission to the Community Planning Leadership Board;**
- (iv) promote Have Your Say, the Plan for Local Involvement, and the principles set out within it more effectively, internally to Members and officers, and externally to communities and partner organisations. This would include producing a concise summary of the plan;**
- (v) ensure appropriate training is put in place for officers to enable them to implement the principles set out in the plan, for example Plain English training, training in survey design etc;**
- (vi) record all consultation activity in a corporate database of consultation activities, drawing on Service Plans, Community Planning, to avoid duplication of consultation/engagement. The effectiveness and accessibility of the current database will also be reviewed;**
- (vii) provide information to the public/specific stakeholders prior to and after they have informed, consulted or engaged with communities, including feedback. There should also be a clear process for advising Members about consultations that are taking place and feeding the results back to them;**

- (viii) provide more information on consultations, community engagement and Local Community Planning in the consultation section of the Council's website;
- (ix) explore different digital means of engaging with local and thematic communities. This could include the potential for using a bespoke online consultation platform such as Citizen Space. It would also include a review of how the Council's use of social media platforms could be expanded to support its engagement activities;
- (x) provide guidance and training to Members and officers on the use of social media to ensure this is being used more actively but appropriately;
- (xi) ensure that appropriate methods are used to effectively consult and/or engage with hard-to-reach groups and consideration will be given to specific training on consulting and/or engaging hard-to-reach groups;
- (xii) consider the impact of the Community Empowerment Bill and the Council's response to this in August 2015;
- (xiii) consider different ways of consulting on the budget employed by other Council by August 2015 to inform the process going forward and include Councillors in this process, and
- (xiv) ask officers to report back to the Scrutiny Committee periodically on progress on the above.

S11. SCRUTINY PLAN

The committee considered a report by the Chief Governance Officer inviting the committee to agree the topic of the next Scrutiny Panel and to appoint members to the panel. The report provided information on the development of the annual scrutiny plan for 2015, Council had agreed on 11 March 2015 (ref FC78) to approve the following areas for scrutiny:-

- the operation of the complaint system within the Council, in particular, the extent to which complaint outcomes are considered and lessons learned for the future. The scope of the scrutiny panel would included customer feedback as well as formal complaints;
- outcomes for looked after children, and
- a third slot held vacant and that this area would be agreed by the committee with preference given to a subject suggested by members of the Opposition.

Following discussion the committee agreed to establish a scrutiny panel to scrutinise outcomes for looked after children comprising five members, with three drawn from the Opposition and two from the Administration. Nominations were to be provided to the Chief Governance Officer following the meeting.

The committee was invited to request reports on topics which they felt merited further consideration as potential topics for inclusion in the scrutiny plan, including issues which had been raised at the Performance Panel.

There was a suggestion that the committee receive a report on the impact of the decision to close the Rowans considering the impact of the replacement of the service and the consultation process undertaken. The committee's deliberations centred on the following points:

- whether or not the subject matter was too narrow in order to form a scrutiny panel;
- whether or not false hopes would be raised around revoking the Council's budget decision. It was stated that the report would examine how the decision had been communicated to service users and families, not attempt to reverse the Council decision;
- whether or not it was appropriate to establish a panel on the issue while consultation with affected groups was ongoing, and
- that there may not be the need to request a report as officers were in discussion with the service and the matter would be raised at the June meeting of Council.

Following a request for advice, Colin Moodie stated that the committee could not call-in decisions of Council or the Executive but did have scope to consider the impact of policies and decisions of those bodies. The scope of the requested report fell within the remit of the committee. He also reminded the committee that calling for a report with further information did not mean that a panel would necessarily be established and that the committee would have to take a separate decision to do so.

The committee considered a suggestion that a report be presented to the next meeting providing information on procurement and contract management processes.

Decision

The committee agreed:-

- (i) that a Scrutiny Panel be established on outcomes for looked after children;**
- (ii) that the panel would comprise five members with three places for members of the Opposition and two places for members of the Administration with names being provided to the Chief Governance Officer;**
- (iii) to request a report on the: impact of the closure of the Rowan's Centre; the impact of the replacement of the service with external providers, and the consultation process undertaken to the next meeting, and**
- (iv) to request a report on the Council's procurement and contract management to the next meeting.**