

FALKIRK COUNCIL

MINUTE of MEETING of the PERFORMANCE PANEL held in the MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS, FALKIRK on THURSDAY 21 MAY 2015 at 9.30 AM.

CORE MEMBERS: Stephen Bird
Cecil Meiklejohn (Convener)
Rosie Murray
Depute Provost John Patrick

MEMBERS
ATTENDING: David Alexander
Jim Blackwood
Steven Carleschi
Colin Chalmers
Tom Coleman
Gerry Goldie
Provost Pat Reid

OFFICERS: Fiona Campbell, Head of Policy, Technology and Improvement
Alex Finlay, Business Development Manager
Jack Frawley, Committee Officer
Rhona Geisler, Director of Development Services
Jennifer Litts, Head of Housing
Colin Moodie, Depute Chief Governance Officer
Stuart Ritchie, Director of Corporate and Neighbourhood Services

PP1. APPOINTMENT OF CONVENER

Colin Moodie welcomed members to the meeting. He sought nominations from the core membership for the position of convener. Following the decision of Council on 13 May 2015 (ref FC10) Councillors Meiklejohn and Bird confirmed that, having previously declined their positions as on the core membership, they now wished to take up their places.

Decision

The panel appointed Councillor Meiklejohn as convener.

PP2. APOLOGIES

An apology was intimated on behalf of Baillie Paterson.

PP3. MINUTE

Members requested that the name of the Education services teams involved in early identification of additional support needs with under 3 year olds and 3 to 8 year olds and their lead officers were provided after the meeting.

Decision

The minute of the meeting of the Performance Panel held on 26 March 2015 was approved.

Councillor Goldie and Provost Reid entered the meeting during consideration of the following item.

PP4. CORPORATE AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY REPORT

The panel considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Neighbourhood Services setting out the performance for the service from 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015. Stuart Ritchie gave an overview of the report.

The panel stated that the appendices to performance panel reports should be enlarged in order to be read more easily. Fiona Campbell stated that this would be revised.

Members asked for further information on the challenges of letting larger flatted properties, focussing on if the location of properties was an issue. Stuart Ritchie stated that there were a number of factors involved including welfare reform. He stated that the introduction of size criteria posed specific challenges. The service had carried out a review of its allocation policy and had taken a new approach to advertising and tenant incentives from 1 April 2015.

The panel asked how many council house buy back purchases were anticipated over the next three years. Stuart Ritchie advised that in the previous year approximately 70 properties had re-entered the Council's housing stock through the buy back initiative and it was expected that between 70 and 80 would be bought back per year.

Members asked what process was in place for reviewing the performance of the refuse collection service. Stuart Ritchie stated that he chaired an improvement group which met six weekly and involved full time trade union, workforce and management representatives. Through management and staff engagement better relationships had been built and this had led to service delivery issues being tackled proactively.

The panel asked if other Councils had adopted a similar three weekly cycle following the success of the service locally. Stuart Ritchie stated that Falkirk Council were the first Scottish Council to move to a three weekly residual collection and that following the decision of Council in February the service would move to being four weekly. He advised that a number of Councils were moving to similar collection cycles in order to increase recycling and reduce landfill costs.

Members asked if the percentage of rent loss due to voids of 1.72% equated to £1million and if this was an issue prior to welfare reform. Stuart Ritchie confirmed that the rent loss due to voids did equate to £1million. He stated that the situation had worsened as a result of welfare reform and that the service aimed to reduce void period lengths while using the opportunity to complete improvement works.

In response to a question on situations where tenants were waiting for entry to a property while work was ongoing, Jennifer Litts advised that a statement was included in adverts advising that the property may not be ready. She advised that tenants were told what work was going to be carried out and how long it was expected to take. However, additional issues needing addressed could be identified during the works which would extend the time the property was unavailable.

The panel asked what actions were being taken to mitigate the impact of welfare reform and the introduction of universal credit. Stuart Ritchie stated that a welfare reform update report had been presented to the Executive on 19 May 2015. The Council had signed a partnership delivery agreement with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Staff were being trained to support people through the changes and benefit applicants were able to complete forms online at libraries.

Members asked if there was funding from the Government or other sources to help mitigate the impact of welfare reform. Stuart Ritchie advised that funding had been received from the Government to support discretionary housing payment. He stated that 95% of the mitigation was related to size criteria. The Executive had agreed on 19 May 2015 (ref EX13) to make direct contact with the relevant Ministers outlining the damage done to the lives and well-being of some of the most vulnerable people in Falkirk district and pointing out that locally people voted decisively for an end to austerity on 7 May 2015.

The panel asked for information about the application of priorities in relation to the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 and if there had been changes to practice. Colin Moodie stated that priorities applied to a homeless person or a person threatened with homelessness. Jennifer Litts stated that there had been no change to practice and that cases were looked at on an individual basis.

Members asked if unfurnished properties could be made available to people who were made homeless but had their own furniture so that they did not need to pay to store their furniture while in temporary accommodation. Jennifer Litts advised that people who were priority homeless were able to have their furniture stored at low cost. The service had gathered information and found that there would not be sufficient demand to retain a number of unfurnished properties for this purpose. She stated that 63% of applicants were single people leaving a marital or family home.

The panel asked if the introduction of charges for special uplifts had resulted in a change to the level of usage of the service. Stuart Ritchie advised that there had been a reduction in the number of requests. When people requested special uplifts they were advised that the national re-use phone line collected certain items for free.

Members asked if, as a result of the charges for special uplifts, there had been an increase in fly tipping and bins being contaminated with the wrong waste put in them. Stuart Ritchie advised that there had been no increase in reports of such incidents. In response to a question on geographic differences in usage since charging was introduced, he advised that there had been no changes to uptake of special uplifts on a geographic basis.

The panel asked if any issues had been identified following the introduction of the three weekly refuse collection cycle. Stuart Ritchie stated that the service had been aware that encouraging recycling would be more challenging in some areas than others and that there had been varying performance across the Falkirk area.

Members asked if there were trends identified in relation to the percentage of missed bins or the percentage of contaminated bins. Stuart Ritchie advised that the number of missed bins for the current year had decreased from the previous year and that no increase had been found in the percentage of contaminated bins.

The panel sought further information on the outcome of the consultation exercise carried out following the policy development panel looking at bereavement services. Stuart Ritchie stated that the consultation response would be fully considered during the summer recess period. He advised that the service had written to families who had suffered a bereavement to see if they wished to give their views on the service and potential improvements. Three meetings had been held with representatives of families as well as a meeting with undertakers and one with religious groups. He further stated that information on upgrades to the crematorium would be provided in the panel's report to the Executive.

Members requested further information on sickness absence within the service and highlighted that previously they were provided with more detailed team specific information. Stuart Ritchie stated that Corporate and Neighbourhood Services covered a diverse range of staff including office based staff and staff who worked outdoors. Absence rates between these groups varied significantly.

The panel asked if all work had been completed in line with the Scottish Housing Quality Standard programme deadline of the end of March 2015. Stuart Ritchie advised that all work which fell within the March 2015 deadline had been completed.

Members asked for information on the allocation policy and the number of homeless presentations received. Jennifer Litts stated that the number of presentations had decreased by half. Further, more than 50% of band one priority homeless people were allocated a property within 0 – 6 months. Changes to the quota of properties for homeless applicants would be monitored month to month.

The panel asked for information on further initiatives related to refuse and recycling such as nappy collections. Rhona Geisler stated that the nappy collection system would be implemented shortly and that collections would be made along with collection of the black boxes. The contract was separate to the main refuse collection contract.

Members asked if people who sought to link their properties to the gas supply would have to pay for the works. Jennifer Litts advised that a grant was available for installation costs which was targeted for energy efficiency measures where mains gas could not be connected to.

The panel asked about the opportunity to keep non-standard fittings in properties during void periods rather than taking them out and replacing them. Jennifer Litts advised that the voids policy allowed for retention of non-standard fittings as long as they passed the relevant safety test.

Members asked about collaborative work with social work regarding adaptations to properties such as installation of stair lifts and if there was a strain of demand currently or projected for the future. Jennifer Litts advised that there was good collaborative practice between the services and that plans had been put in place with social work in advance of the introduction of health and social care integration. Further, the service had been working with NHS Forth Valley to support hospital discharges.

The panel asked about heating replacement in high rise flats and for information on combined heat and power (CHP). Jennifer Litts stated that the replacement was being looked at and the capital fund was being used to research whether the CHP system or an alternative was the best way forward.

Members expressed concern around the management of tenancies for people with known anti-social behaviour issues. Jennifer Litts stated that there were some cases of people who caused disruption even when moved to new areas. Temporary accommodation was reviewed monthly and people in temporary accommodation were allocated a case worker. The service took the issue seriously and where appropriate used anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) to take action, this approach was supported by Police Scotland.

In response to a question on the number of ASBOs filed and the cost of these, Jennifer Litts advised that she would provide the number after the meeting but that it was not a large amount. Colin Moodie stated that there was no substantial upfront cost involved. However, he advised that due to the intensive work required around ASBOs a lot of staff time was used to get sufficient evidence to satisfy the court that an ASBO was the appropriate sanction.

The panel asked how many ASBO requests were refused by the Sherriff and if the total number was similar to other Councils. Colin Moodie stated that the requests were broadly complied with due the amount of work put in to ensure that an ASBO was justified. Further, Colin Moodie could not confirm the position compared against other Councils but was not aware of Falkirk Council being outlier.

Members asked if savings were anticipated as a result of the launch of the reporting tool to allow services users to report faults directly through the website. Stuart Ritchie stated that savings would be made through time release rather than financial and that the new tool allowed people to report issues at their convenience including outwith office hours.

The panel sought further information on the main findings of the self assessments carried out by the service. Stuart Ritchie stated that building maintenance were going to review the schedule of rates, that a review of depot provision was being carried out and that street cleansing would review their fleet, routes and measure best practice against others.

Members asked for details of the number of no access calls to be broken down by those with a previous appointment and those which were cold calling. Further they requested how many appointments are offered and if the service telephoned/texted first to remind tenants they were attending. Stuart Ritchie advised that the information would be provided after the meeting.

The panel asked what actions were being taken to increase the rates of silver bin collection. Rhona Geisler stated that the presentation of the silver bins had increased since the three weekly cycle was introduced. The bins were regularly inspected to monitor how much recyclate was being included. Where high levels were found the service took action to encourage greater recycling through its waste advisors.

Members asked about the management of time slots at the crematorium, highlighting that if one or two services overran the programme for the rest of the day was thrown out of synch. Stuart Ritchie advised that a review had been carried out and that time slots had been increased from 30 to 45 minutes. In response the panel asked if lengthening the time slots had caused a decrease to the number of services per week. Stuart Ritchie stated that the same number of services were being carried out per week as before the time slot change.

Decision

The panel noted the performance statement.

Provost Reid left the meeting during consideration of the following item.

PP5. DEVELOPMENT SERVICES SCRUTINY REPORT

The panel considered a report by the Director of Development Services setting out the performance for the service from 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015. Rhona Geisler gave an overview of the report.

Members asked what had caused the delay to the application for European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). Rhona Geisler advised that the delay was caused by the structural fund process and so the date for lodging applications had been extended. The service was on track to submit its application on time.

The panel asked if opportunities to use European funding to advance the Grangemouth energy project were being investigated. Rhona Geisler stated that the service was keen to access all available funding and fully investigated what European funding was available. She advised that a report on the Grangemouth energy project and funding would be submitted to the Executive. She stated that the Council had contributed £25,000 toward the £200,000 business case cost and that Scottish Enterprise had funded the remaining amount. Once the business case was in place the proposals would be used to approach investors, which would include the European Union through its green initiatives.

Members asked for the breakdown of positive school leaver destinations. Rhona Geisler stated that the information would be provided after the meeting. She advised that a good number entered employment or apprenticeships and college. Further, the employment training unit's apprenticeship scheme had been identified as a national exemplar.

In response to a question on when the self assessment of the growth and investment unit would report and who was responsible for monitoring, Rhona Geisler advised that a report would be presented to the corporate management team in September or October 2015. She stated that the Business Gateway and Business Gateway Plus contracts were for the Scottish Government and were not specifically externally monitored.

The panel sought further information on the roads services collaboration programme. Rhona Geisler stated that it was a national programme which sought to improve services through learning from best practice. A work plan and progress reports had been created and the service was monitored against other Councils. She advised that Falkirk Council performed well in its peer group.

Members asked about work being carried out to address the identified shortfall in hotel accommodation in the area. Rhona Geisler advised that the service worked closely with existing hoteliers through the tourism strategy to allow existing businesses to expand. The local development plan included sites for hotel developments and interest had been received for a development near the Helix site.

The panel asked for an update regarding the Westfield roundabout upgrade through tax incremental financing (TIF). Rhona Geisler stated that the work was part of the next phase of TIF and would include more filter lanes to increase capacity.

In response to a further question on the Westfield roundabout upgrade relating to the Bog Road access points, Rhona Geisler advised that this would be picked up in the gateway development work.

Members asked about the approach to empty Council properties such as the former Victoria primary school site. Rhona Geisler advised that the service was looking to consolidate its position and highlighted that the new Council headquarters project would reduce three buildings to one. She stated that there was a particular challenge at Victoria primary school as the nursery on the old site was still in use. Therefore the future of the site was dependent on decisions taken by Children's Services.

The panel asked for further information on the services position relating to common good funds. Colin Moodie stated that the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill would require a clearer register of property on common good accounts. There were 7,000 separate titles held by the Council and it was a fine question of which were common good. He highlighted that there were particular issues around disposal of common good assets and that other Councils had been involved in complicated situations through trying to do so. Members discussed that a list of assets which had been gifted to the people of Falkirk could be compiled.

Members asked if the tourism action plan could be linked with the work of the Falkirk Community Trust (the Trust) in marketing and events functions. Rhona Geisler stated that the Helix Park was operated by the Trust for the Council. The Trust's business plan was approved by its board and by the Council, this set out what the Trust would deliver in exchange for its funding. The trust was recruiting an events officer and a further staff member specifically for the Helix. The visitor centre at the Helix Park was scheduled to open in August 2015 and would increase opportunities for events to be held at the site.

Decision

The panel noted the performance statement.