

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Minute of meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held in the Municipal Buildings, Falkirk on Thursday 17 November 2016 at 9.30 am.

COUNCILLORS:

Allyson Black
Stephen Bird (convener)
Steven Carleschi
Colin Chalmers
Joan Paterson
Provost Pat Reid

OFFICERS:

Tony Bragg, Education Team Manager
Fiona Campbell, Head of Policy, Technology & Improvement
Jack Frawley, Committee Services Officer
Kenny Gillespie, Property & Asset Manager
Elizabeth Hood, Neighbourhood & Access to Housing Manager
Frank Kennedy, Service Manager
Robert McMaster, Head of Roads and Design
David Mackay, Head of Education
Colin Moodie, Depute Chief Governance Officer

S16. Appointment of Convener

Jack Frawley welcomed members to the meeting and in the absence of the convener sought nominations for the position for the meeting. Councillor Carleschi, seconded by Councillor Chalmers nominated Councillor Bird as convener. There being no other nominations Councillor Bird assumed the chair for the remainder of the business.

S17. Apologies

An apology was intimated on behalf of Councillor Meiklejohn.

S18. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

S19. Minutes

Decision

- (a) The minute of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 15 September 2016 was approved;**
- (b) The minute of the meeting of the Performance Panel held on 29 September 2016 was noted, and**
- (c) The minute of the meeting of the Performance Panel held on 20 October 2016 was noted.**

S20. Rolling Action Log

A rolling action log detailing the status of actions arising at previous meetings was provided.

Decision

The committee noted the rolling action log.

S21. Scrutiny Panel Conclusions and Recommendations – Outcomes for Looked After Children

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which set out the work and recommendations of the Scrutiny Panel established to review outcomes for looked after children. The report set out: details of the scrutiny process undertaken by the panel, and the summary and conclusions reached. The report by the Scrutiny Panel was appended to the report which set out the panel's specific recommendations. Fiona Campbell provided an overview of the report.

Members commented that the report showed that the panel had undertaken a comprehensive review of the area and they thanked the panel members and supporting officers, external organisations and young people for their work and input.

The committee discussed that the panel, as part of its evidence gathering, heard that there had been instances of young people returning home from school to discover that they were being moved placement and that this had a very negative impact on emotional health and wellbeing. Members highlighted that this practice must not occur and that every young person in Falkirk should have equality of opportunity. Members highlighted the Champions Board as a key instrument going forward.

Regarding the panel's recommendation that the Children's Commission ensure that mental health services are aligned to meeting the needs of looked

after children, members highlighted that there was a national shortage of children's psychologists. This shortfall in provision was particularly acute in relation to those young people with learning disabilities.

The committee sought clarification on what was meant by a family firm approach. Fiona Campbell stated that the family firm concept meant that corporate parents across the community planning partnership would offer more opportunities to looked after children to be part of their organisations. This would be achieved in different ways including the provision of training, work experiences and modern apprenticeships. She stated that the Employment and Training Unit were involved in looking at how to support looked after young people. She advised that as the Council's workforce was reducing there would be a need to develop innovative ways to offer opportunities. It was important to raise the aspirations of looked after young people.

Members asked about the support available to foster carers and the work undertaken to recruit more foster carers. Frank Kennedy stated that all foster carers get allocated a social worker as their primary source of support and that this individual is different to the social worker dealing with any child in their care. In terms of recruitment, demographic pressures meant that new foster carers tended to be replacing those lost through retirement and that net gains were difficult to make. The service ran regular recruitment campaigns and had built up a relationship with Falkirk Football Club to advertise for new carers at their events. More recently the service had looked at innovative methods including the use of digital marketing to recruit more foster carers.

The committee discussed the role of scrutiny panels. It was stated that they were fulfilling their aim and looking at topics in a new way. Members also highlighted the work carried out by policy development panels as a good way of drawing thoughts together on complex issues.

Members discussed the work of the looked after children's psychologist who was funded by the Council but formed part of NHS Forth Valley's provision. David Mackay advised that this post was subject to ongoing negotiation between the Council and NHS Forth Valley. The post holder had been highly commended for her work by the Children's Commission. He stated that ideally there would be more of this type of provision.

Decision

The committee:-

- (1) noted the recommendations of the Panel, set out in appendix one to the report, section 10, and**
- (2) referred the Panel's recommendations to the Executive.**

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

S22. Education Scotland Inspection Report - California Primary School

The committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services which summarised the findings of Education Scotland's inspection of California Primary School and Nursery class, carried out in June 2016. A copy of the inspection findings and Education Scotland's published letter to parents were attached to the report. Tony Bragg provided an overview of the report.

The committee sought an explanation of the comments relating to curriculum development and reliance on resources. Tony Bragg stated that the school used Big Maths which was highly structured and included resources with frequent testing. However, this did not fully take account of the learning outcomes of curriculum for excellence (CfE). He advised that the complexity of CfE experiences and outcomes presented a challenge. Schools were working on how to pick these out while having a structured curriculum without having received much guidance from Education Scotland. The Significant Aspects of Learning had only been published recently and schools could now start to develop the curriculum around these.

Members asked why this resource was being used if it was incompatible with CfE which had been in place for many years. David Mackay stated that the school had implemented CfE and used Big Maths to complement this work but had become too focussed and needed to shift to include it in the wider learning journey. This would eliminate the overreliance on Big Maths.

The committee asked about the use of joint headship. David Mackay stated that the head teacher recognised the points raised by the inspectors and work was being undertaken to address these. He felt that the shared headship was positive for California Primary School as it helped to address the challenge faced by smaller schools to network with other schools. On a day to day basis it was now easier for colleagues at the schools to share practice and expertise.

Members asked about the role of continuous professional development in relation to CfE for staff. David Mackay stated that there had been a comprehensive offering available. It would be included in the school's action plan to look at the uptake of this from the school. The Council's Service Manager - Broad General Education would soon be in place and this would bring better support for schools. Tony Bragg stated that the membership of the Team Around the School was determined in order to provide support in key areas and that it was the first time a parent had been included on the Team Around the School.

Decision

The committee requested that the Director of Children's Services:-

- (1) reports back to the next Scrutiny Committee with a copy of the Action Plan, and**
- (2) provides a further report to the Scrutiny Committee following Education Scotland's further inspection which will take place within one year of the original inspection.**

S23. Standards of Gardens for Re-letting Properties

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided an update on the standard of gardens for re-letting properties. The report provided information on the voids standard; inspection criteria for gardens and common areas, and other works undertaken in gardens and common areas. Kenny Gillespie provided an overview of the report.

The committee asked for information about fencing around divisible space. Kenny Gillespie stated that the service were now installing dividing fences where possible and boxing in front gardens. Further work was required on this area to include back gardens. Over £1.5m had been spent on fencing and cases would be looked at individually where raised.

Members commented on the positives which came from using stones, gravel or chips and the removal of bushes. It was felt this was better for the long term as the gardens were easier to maintain.

The committee asked about the location of new pilot projects. Kenny Gillespie stated that there were two Grangemouth projects ongoing which should bring significant improvements and feel different for the tenants.

Members asked what happens where tenants leave an item such as a garden shed which is then not wanted by the incoming tenants and if the service charged the previous tenants in such circumstances. Kenny Gillespie stated that this was covered in the exit conversation and that if assets were in good condition the service could take ownership of them.

The committee, highlighting that tenants sign a missive to accept tenancy, asked how long term issues of poor garden maintenance were dealt with. Kenny Gillespie stated that if tenants do not comply with their conditions then they can be suspended from the allocations process. It was possible that after due process that the service could carry out garden tidying works and then charge the tenant and chase the debt. There was a dedicated team to chasing debts and the service tried its best to recoup funds. Direct intervention was preferred by the service and had led to a number of successes.

Members asked about the upkeep required to maintain fencing. Kenny Gillespie stated that the fences were pressure impregnated and would last for 7 to 8 years without a need to re-do them.

The committee asked that details of the pilot work were circulated to members; Kenny Gillespie confirmed that this would be done.

Decision

The committee noted the position regarding the standard of gardens when re-letting properties.

S24. Allocation of Council Properties

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided information in relation to the housing allocations position regarding owner occupiers and the level of applicants income. The report provided information on the legislative position and other considerations. Appended to the report was an extract from the Scottish Government "Social Housing Allocations – A Practical Guide". Elizabeth Hood provided an overview of the report.

Members asked about the legislative difference between Scotland and England in relation to allocation. Elizabeth Hood stated that in England social landlords were able to take account of an applicant's income and assets before allowing them onto their housing register. In Scotland the legislation sets out the need to be fair and transparent to those with the highest need. Those with the most significant housing need tended to be those on lower incomes. The service always assessed people based on housing need. She referred to legislation that would allow the ownership of property to be taken into account in allocation decisions that was yet to be brought into force.

The committee discussed instances they were aware of where properties had been allocated to applicants with high incomes. Discussion included comments that the system was open to abuse. Elizabeth Hood stated that the service ensured that allocations were made on the basis of greatest housing need and that the income of an applicant was not a factor. In cases where people presented as homeless a housing options interview was conducted. People with alternative options such as utilising a private tenancy tended to use them.

Members discussed that individuals who own former council properties could be allocated a tenancy and then sell the property they own which was initially purchased at a discounted rate.

Decision

The committee noted the position regarding property ownership and income in housing allocations.

S25. Review of Income and Charging

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided information on the fees and charges at the Council's discretion to set and those which are set nationally. Detail was also provided on the Council's concessions policy. The Falkirk Council Charges – Summary document was appended to the report. Danny Cairney provided an overview of the report.

The committee asked about the category of 'other' information in the charges summary appendix referred to and if benchmarking information would be provided. Danny Cairney advised that information on the detail of other charges would be provided to members after the meeting. Benchmarking information would be included in the local government settlement report to Council in December.

Decision

The committee noted the report.

S26. Road Asset Management Planning

The committee considered a report by the Director of Development Services which provided an update in relation to road asset management planning. Audit Scotland's "Maintaining Scotland's Roads – A Follow-up Report"; Road Condition Indicators, and Carriageway Spending Options were appended to the report. Robert McMaster provided an overview of the report.

Following a question on the suitability of surface dressing, Robert McMaster advised that in certain high volume areas a different solution to surface dressing would be used in order to last longer. In response to a further question, he confirmed that most other councils also used surface dressing as their default treatment.

The committee asked if capital funding could be used to improve the asset, as it would in the case of a building. Robert McMaster stated that capital funding was used for planned spend and was more than £2m per year. Revenue funding was used for reactive spending where necessary.

Decision

The committee noted the contents of the report.