

FALKIRK COUNCIL

MINUTE of MEETING of the PERFORMANCE PANEL held in the MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS, FALKIRK on THURSDAY 24 MARCH 2016 at 9.30 AM.

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

MEMBERS Brian McCabe
ATTENDING: Provost Pat Reid

OFFICERS: Fiona Campbell, Head of Policy, Technology and Improvement
Alex Finlay, Business Development Manager
Rhona Geisler, Director of Development Services
Rose Mary Glackin, Chief Governance Officer
Antonia Sobieraj, Committee Services Officer

PP14. MINUTE

Decision

The minute of the meeting of the Performance Panel held on 18 February 2016 was approved.

PP15. DRAFT PROGRAMME OF SELF ASSESSMENTS AND SERVICE REVIEWS/IMPROVEMENT GROUPS

The performance panel considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services setting out the recent work undertaken to develop a draft programme of self assessment and service reviews. This report was one of the actions identified in the Best Value Improvement Plan approved by Council on 7 October 2015.

The Members' workshop held in January 2016 had outlined the purpose of the self assessment performance management approach. This report provided progress in this regard. The self assessment and service review identification tool assisted the delivery of a consistent approach to these assessments.

Fiona Campbell provided an overview of the report.

Members of the panel welcomed the checklist process for self assessments, the adoption of which would minimise the time taken to undertake the assessments.

The panel discussed the full programme for self assessments and service reviews and proposals for undertaking strategic reviews for the four other areas identified in the report. They commented on the resource intensive nature of the Public Services Improvement Framework (PSIF) approach and the possible impact on services. Fiona Campbell stated that the process had been streamlined and much of it operated on an online basis. This meant that it was less resource intensive and enabled more participation in the process which should lead to demonstrable improvement.

Members welcomed the reduced amount of time staff needed to spend on the self assessment process, the potential benefit to service delivery and the establishment of additional improvement groups covering new areas including janitorial staff. Following a request for more information on the areas to be covered in the Locality Planning work, Fiona Campbell advised that a framework was currently being developed for use by community planning partners and local communities. The full development framework programme would be submitted to a future meeting of the panel.

Members asked why rent collection was the highest priority in Corporate and Housing Services rather than housing management? Fiona Campbell stated that the service was experiencing a significant level of rent arrears which needed to be addressed. A comprehensive scoping exercise was underway which would clarify why it was an area chosen for review.

The panel sought clarification on whether there was a role for external audit or peer reviews in the self assessment process. Fiona Campbell stated that support and challenge (including the role of “critical friend”) was available internally and external audit would not routinely be involved. The Council also participated in benchmarking groups which provided external comparisons.

Members sought clarification on whether there was a structured method of feeding the views of others, including service complaints, into the self assessment process. Fiona Campbell highlighted the distinction between self assessments which involve services looking at themselves and identify areas for improvement and service reviews which are more forensic and focused and aimed at driving change. The processes are complementary but different.

The panel requested information on membership of the Chief Officers Group. Fiona Campbell advised that the Group covered Public Protection and Community Justice and operated under the auspices of the Community Planning Partnership. The group is chaired by the Chief Executive and includes the Forth Valley Local Police Commander, the Director of Children's Services, the Chief Social Work Officer, the Chair of the Forth Valley Alcohol and Drug Partnership and the Chief Officer, Adult Services. Further information on the work of the Group would be provided to members on request.

As a general point, the panel requested that unexplained acronyms be avoided wherever possible.

Decision

The performance panel:-

- (1) approved the draft programme identified during the prioritisation workshop in January 2016; and**
- (2) agreed a final programme would be presented to a special meeting of the Performance Panel in April 2016 subject to the conclusion of the scoping exercise detailed in section 4.3 of the report.**

PP16. DEVELOPMENT SERVICES PERFORMANCE UPDATE

The performance panel considered a report by the Director of Development Services setting out a summary of performance for the period April to December 2015. The report provided information on key priorities, key areas for improvement, significant challenges, risks and changes in Service pressures since the last meeting, important indicators and engagement with customers. Appended to the report was the Development Services – Performance Panel Statement – April to December 2015.

Rhona Geisler provided an overview of the report.

Members asked about the two planning application legacy cases detailed in the report and requested details of the applications referred to. Rhona Geisler stated that the applications were:-

- (1) application P/10/0188/PPP – Residential and Mixed Development for the Whitecross SIRR including up to 1500 Residential Units, Community and Enterprise Facilities, Transport and Environmental Infrastructure and Employment Space at Manuel Works, Linlithgow; and
- (2) application (06/1099/FUL) Restoration of Dunmore Park House to Form 15 Dwellings, Conversion of Stables to Form 10 Dwellings, Erection of 45 Dwellinghouses, Associated Landscaping Works, Amendments to A905 and Site Access Road.

Applications such as these can be complex and take time to progress through the development stage. Some applications have also been influenced by the economy downturn. However, the Scottish Government is encouraging Councils to deal with legacy cases.

Members, whilst considering the Asset Management Plan, requested information on the amount of vacant land within the Council area which did not have associated property located within its boundary. Rhona Geisler advised that information could be provided to members. In relation to open space, the Open Space Strategy takes a more strategic approach to this category of asset. The importance of engaging with local communities in relation to the future use of open space has also been recognised. Feedback from the public consultation exercise on the Strategy will inform the Local Development Plan 2. In terms of Council assets generally, the updated Asset Management Plan will be submitted to the Executive on 16 August 2016. Furthermore, in line with the requirements of the Community Empowerment Act, a land register will be compiled.

The panel requested information on the engagement taking place with users of Dial-a-Journey. Rhona Geisler stated that there had been liaison with the Board of Dial-a-Journey on a questionnaire for users which was due to be issued shortly. Members would be provided with the results of this exercise in due course. Additional follow up with service users would also be undertaken. The Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment (EPIA) process would have an important role in identifying and measuring the impact and informing the decision making process.

Members requested clarification on whether an alternative to the tourist bus service which operated by First Bus during 2015 had been identified. Rhona Geisler advised that discussions were still ongoing with First Bus to continue the service but should this approach be unfruitful other alternatives would be examined including the option for a standard bus service to serve the route of the former tourist bus.

Members asked for information on the progress of the Falkirk Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) initiative. Rhona Geisler stated that a report had been submitted to the Executive on 15 March 2016 detailing the next phases of the development programme including the upgrading of Junction 5 (Phase 1) during 2016/2017.

In response to the request for an update on the progress of the River Carron Walkway Project, Rhona Geisler stated that good partnership working was taking place with the Communities Along the Carron Group to develop this project. A link between Grangemouth and Falkirk Town Centre was also being considered. Further information would be provided to members on the progress of both projects. Following a member's request the number of users of the John Muir Way would also be provided to members.

Members asked whether there were applications submitted for funding from the European Social Fund. Rhona Geisler advised that funding bids were submitted through Business Gateway e.g. for the Employment Training Unit. Funding was also sought from the INTERREG funding stream e.g. for renewable energy projects.

Members asked for progress in the implementation of the road safety scheme on the A706 - A993 Junction, Bo'ness. Rhona Geisler stated that information would be provided to members. Information would also be provided to local members at the end of March on the marketing of the INEOS site in Grangemouth. Members highlighted the importance of the appropriate involvement of the community in the future of the site. Rhona Geisler confirmed that every effort was being made to engage with local communities in this regard. In answer to members' questions on the estimated cost of the new INEOS Headquarters, Rhona Geisler thought it was in the region of £25m.

During discussion of the Land Asset Plan Register members sought clarification on the level of brownfield land within the Council area. Rhona Geisler advised that there was limited availability of brownfield sites suitable for development within the area and that it was mainly open space. The panel asked whether land was subcategorised according to the Service responsible. Rhona Geisler advised that as far as possible this had been done but in the event that the responsible service had not been determined, the land asset had until now been held in the Development Services account. This however required to be reviewed. Members would be updated on this work as part of the corporate asset review.

Members discussed the effect of the downturn in the economy and the consequences for the retail sector within Falkirk Town Centre. Members asked what measures were being put in place to address this. Rhona Geisler stated that the problems being experienced by the retail sector were national and international. She stated however that Falkirk Town Centre was fortunate in having a number of strong independent shops and the Council was striving to help them flourish. The Economic Development Team was working with a range of partners including Town Centre Management on various projects including utilising THI funding to enhance the built town centre through a range of public realm improvements. Alternative uses for the town centre however had to be found and the tourism sector had a major part to play in the creation of a new direction for the town centre. Discussions were, for example, taking place with Forth Valley College on the provision of student accommodation. Members raised concerns in relation to the growing number of empty properties within Falkirk High Street and stressed the importance of encouraging increased residential use of the town centre. Rhona Geisler concurred with the sentiments expressed and stated that, in order to facilitate the increase in residential use, the Council through the THI was involved in improving the fabric of a number of buildings within the town centre thereby enhancing the town's built heritage. Current projects included upgrading of the Falkirk Steeple. Discussions were currently taking place with developers on the opportunities for increased residential development within the town centre.

The panel expressed concern at the reduced service and staff reductions within waste services. Members highlighted that the Recycling Centre in Bo'ness had been unexpectedly closed the previous week. This had resulted in the Roughmote Recycling facility struggling to cope with the increased demand. Members questioned the merits of reducing service delivery in this way whilst recognising that the service was subject to budgetary reductions. They suggested that the waste services should closely monitor the service provided to ensure a minimal effect on the public. Rhona Geisler concurred in the importance of maintaining quality services but was not aware of the instance referred to. She undertook to investigate the matter and provide members with information following this meeting.

A Member raised concerns that the requirement for developer contributions in planning applications, with particular reference to the west of the Council area, was unfairly penalising a numbers of applicants and many were struggling to make these contributions.

The panel discussed the building standards outcomes and raised concern that the method of recording of third party/agent involvement could be interpreted as a criticism of the Council. Rhona Geisler agreed with this concern and advised that the point had been made to the Scottish Government. However, the methods used assisted the Scottish Government to assess what measures required to be put in place at Government level to ensure that building standards processes were accountable.

Members requested information on the number of visitors attending community engagement sessions concerning Denny Town Centre Regeneration which had been delivered by the Denny Regeneration Office. Rhona Geisler undertook to ensure this information was provided to members.

With regard to the Portfolio Management Plan members asked for an update on the programme of disposals of £1.2 million workshop units. Rhona Geisler stated that work was progressing to rationalise Council assets. This involved assessing which assets were incurring unnecessary expense to the Council and in these cases engaging with the private sector on their future use. The financial benefit from assets sold enabled the Council to support new developments and obtain rental income.

The panel discussed the impact on services of budgetary cuts. Examples were given of negative trends in terms of the following:-

- the cleanliness in public spaces (in accordance with the statutory Local Environmental Audit and Management System (LEAMS));
- the reduction in the number of unemployed people accessing jobs via the Council funded/operated employability programmes; and
- the reduction in the number of jobs created/secured through the Business Gateway with Council funded support and the reduction in the number of new businesses supported and sustained.

Members sought information on how the Service aimed to improve these figures, particularly in the case of the vulnerable unemployed, against a background of continuing budgetary reductions. Rhona Geisler stated that the Service was striving to maintain services in all areas but tightening budgets would have an inevitable impact. Services for unemployed young people were very much dependent on securing external income. The importance of preventing a major impact on local communities was paramount. Various initiatives were being developed and European funding was being accessed.

Members welcomed the production and implementation of the Falkirk Economic Strategy and requested information on the progress of initiatives. Rhona Geisler confirmed that the Strategy had been approved by the Executive and that early signs were that partnerships were being forged including engaging with business on opportunities for recruiting young people and involving communities in the implementation of the Strategy. The panel requested more detail in relation to the supply chain event for companies affected by the closure of Longannet Power Station. Rhona Geisler advised that this event was one of a number of similar initiatives designed to engage with local companies and help them to identify alternative markets. The recent Partnership Action for Continuing Employment (PACE) event had proved to be worthwhile and similar events and projects were envisaged for continuing support in the aftermath of the power station's closure.

Members discussed the Local Flood Risk Management Plans currently being considered for publication by Local Plan Districts (LPDs). The panel raised concern at the erosion of the local bunds to deal with water run off within the village of Airth. This issue had already been highlighted as an area of concern by the Royal Scottish Society for the Protection of Birds (RSSPB). The panel members asked for assurance that the Grangemouth Flood Prevention Scheme would not adversely affect the bund. Rhona Geisler stated that the scheme had been identified as a national priority due to flooding taking place on an annual basis. The signs were that in general the scheme was progressing well. Members would be updated on progress of the scheme and any related implications.

Members welcomed the Council's signing of the new Scottish Recycling Charter and the associated Code of Practice. They discussed the work of the Council's Policy Development Panel (PDP) and the current public consultation exercise seeking feedback on the options identified for the collection of household waste for implement during 2016. Rhona Geisler advised that as an organisation the Council was proud of the level of community engagement in waste and recycling matters and highlighted that the Council was the first in Scotland to sign the Charter. This therefore placed the Council in a good position to access funding to support compliance with the Charter. Members raised the positive benefit of encouraging householders to use compost bins. This would contribute to reduction in the content of the food waste bin.

The panel asked for an update on the timescale for completion of the work at Falkirk High Station car park as members were regularly receiving complaints from local residents. Rhona Geisler undertook to provide an update for members and for the information to be placed on the Council website.

With regard to Falkirk Town Centre, members queried whether there was potential to adopt a specific development plan for it, akin to those adopted for other areas some years ago. Rhona Geisler advised that there wasn't much Council owned land in the town centre and development would therefore need to be developer led. However, the market, which had been depressed since 2008, was again beginning to emerge again and, together with the THI initiative, may generate further interest.

Decision

The performance panel noted the report.