



Agenda Item 3

Minutes

Draft

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Minute of meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held in the Municipal Buildings, Falkirk on Thursday 16 June 2016 at 9.30 am.

COUNCILLORS: Allyson Black
Stephen Bird
Steven Carleschi
Colin Chalmers
Cecil Meiklejohn (convener)
Provost Pat Reid

OFFICERS: Jack Frawley, Committee Services Officer
Kenny Gillespie, Property & Asset Manager
Sara Lacey, Senior Service Manager
Carole McGhee, Capital Manager
David McGhee, Head of Procurement & Housing
Property
Colin Moodie, Depute Chief Governance Officer
Robert Naylor, Director of Children's Services

S1. APOLOGIES

An apology was intimated on behalf of Baillie Paterson.

S2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

S3. MINUTES

Decision

- (1) The minute of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 31 March 2016 was approved, and**
- (2) The minute of the meeting of the Performance Panel held on 24 March 2016 was noted and the committee requested:-**
 - (i) a report providing information on the impact of the special uplifts charge including information on contaminated bins and housing estate management.**

S4. SOCIAL WORK CHILDREN & FAMILIES UPDATED BUDGET POSITION

The committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services which provided an updated budget position for Children and Families Social Work. The report included information on budget expenditure, contextual information, actions commenced in 2015/16 to manage the budget, and actions planned for 2016/17 to manage the budget. Robert Naylor provided an overview of the report.

Members asked which actions the Service had taken to reduce the number of children and young people in residential care. Robert Naylor stated that a number of young people had left their residential placements having turned 18, while the Service had identified alternative placements for some younger children. In multi-agency meetings the Service was arguing strongly that there could be greater use of internal provision rather than external residential placements. Sara Lacey stated that there were focussed exit plans to get young people home with support packages rather than having them stay in residential placements.

Robert Naylor stated that he had previously met with the Reporter on the types of decisions being made by children's hearings. In particular he had focussed on instances where decisions did not match the recommendations from the Service. He advised the Reporter that Falkirk had appropriate alternative provision available to residential placement. He also attended a panel members training session. Panel members had commented that it was difficult to reach a decision when the child was not present and they had been advised as to why this was not always appropriate.

Members then discussed kinship care and payments to kinship carers. Sara Lacey stated that more information on payments would be publicised once the national guidance was clarified. She confirmed that the possibility of kinship care for a young person was made available to children's hearings. Further she stated that there were over 50 young people in kinship care. Robert Naylor stated that extra funding in this area would help with overall costs as it was another option of provision that avoided the use of external providers.

The committee asked about the typical length of stay in a secure unit. Sara Lacey stated that it would not be years, just for the required period of time to keep the young person safe if they posed a significant risk to themselves and/or others. The Service desired to have young people return to a community or alternative setting.

Members discussed a number of points including the appropriateness of the budget, whether the reduction in the number of children accommodated was sustainable, and the rates paid to foster carers compared to other areas. Sara Lacey stated that there was some variance to the costs in this area but that they were flattening out. Additional financial stability had been achieved through the contract negotiated with Care Visions and Focus Towards Successful Care. These contracted beds were similar to those available internally. In terms of the drop in the number of children accommodated, she

stated that the figure was open to variance but should be relatively stable. Robert Naylor stated that the Service had sought to identify why in Falkirk there was a higher proportion of looked after children in residential school placements. Team Managers had been challenged to provide alternatives in their recommendations to children's hearings.

The committee asked about the number of looked after children who had mental health issues or other additional support needs. Sara Lacey commented that looked after young people had often been through very traumatic early life experiences which could lead to significant mental health issues. The Looked After Children Psychologist made referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). She stated that there were good links with Adult Services Social Work to enable a smooth transition process.

The committee asked about the pilot of Self-Directed Support (SDS). Sara Lacey stated that this was an innovative way to provide support and that the developments nationally had been slower in relation to children and young people than with adult care. The Service would emphasise the opportunities of SDS, which included using resources creatively. In response to a question on kinship carers access to SDS, Sara Lacey confirmed that, as SDS related to the child, a kinship carer could use this approach.

Members asked why there would be an average 2.6% increase in the costs of secure placements in 2016/17. Sara Lacey stated that Scotland Excel operated a 3-4 year national contract within which suppliers could renegotiate in line with reasonable increases.

The committee asked for information on local population demographics and if they would affect social work spending. Robert Naylor stated that locally there had been a higher birth rate than that at a national level. The bulge resulting from this was about to pass through the high schools. More children were presenting with need, for example with autistic spectrum disorders.

The committee asked why £230,000 of £354,000 additional funding received for implementation of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 was not utilised. Robert Naylor advised that the need for guidance on kinship carer payments and delayed uptake in early years provision to two year olds had caused this underspend.

Members sought further information on the integration of the Education Family Support Service and the Social Work Intensive Family Support Service. Robert Naylor stated that each team had between 8 and 10 FTE posts and performed slightly different functions. The Education team had been more focussed on outreach to young people at risk of needing intervention from social work services. The Social Work team had been more involved with families who were involved in child protection or looked after child systems. He noted that external organisations also provided family support services. The funding to external organisations had been reviewed to identify best

practice; efficiencies were anticipated in this area. He advised that additional spending in family support services should lead to a reduction in spending on looked after children but that this was not an exact science.

Decision

The committee:-

- (1) noted the progress in achieving a significant reduction in the overspend outturn for 2015/16;**
- (2) noted the proposals for ongoing strategies for managing the 2016/17 budget, and**
- (3) requested a further update report to a future meeting of the committee.**

S5. REVIEW OF STANDARD FOR RE-LETTING PROPERTIES

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided information on the implementation of the new Standard for Re-letting Properties. The report set out the background to the introduction of the revised Standard, performance information, and information on other changes. A copy of the revised Standard was appended to the report. David McGhee provided an overview of the report.

Members asked for information on the number of properties which were rejected and the number of call backs which were made of the voids team. David McGhee stated that the data was not available but that the Service allowed a period for tenancy settlement of approximately one month. If recurring issues were identified in that period then they would be addressed. The inspection process which was in place reduced the number of points of contact for the tenant. The staff member who identified work was also responsible for the quality of it. In relation to the number of call backs to the voids team he stated that although the information was not collated currently, with there being no requirement to report it, it was good management data to identify where issues arise.

The committee discussed the average time taken to re-let a property and that this had increased to 50 days following the introduction of the new Standard. David McGhee stated that the Service worked to identify vacant properties early and reallocate them. He highlighted that early engagement with tenants was key. Kenny Gillespie advised that the new Standard was superior to that of other local authorities and that the level of work required impacted on the timescale to re-let. He commented that a full asbestos check was carried out and that the Service tried to do any capital works while void rather than during occupancy. The Service continued to look at ways to work smarter and targeted a reduction in the number of days taken to re-let.

Members stated that there was a need to improve the situation with gardens. They highlighted this was important and commented that this could be looked at during voids as it was a recurring issue. The committee requested a further report back on this area.

The committee sought information on the reasons for 9% of tenants not being satisfied with the condition of their home following the introduction of the new Standard. Kenny Gillespie stated that of those who were not satisfied about half tended to be dissatisfied that the general level of the Standard was not high enough. The other half were generally as the result of small issues like a leak in the heating system or certain aspects of fitting. He stated that some issues could only be identified through the property being lived in.

Members asked why some properties were left in a poor state when vacated, which resulted in a more lengthy time to re-let. David McGhee stated that the review of services to tenants sought to identify more opportunities for staff to identify and visit at risk properties where inspections or interventions were needed. One possibility was having neighbourhood officers attend more frequently. There was a principle to inspect high flatted properties once a year from a housing management perspective. There would be savings in the long term through more active engagement but neighbourhood officers would need sufficient capacity to do so.

The committee asked about the review of the offer process for applicants in the 'Home Seeker' banding. David McGhee stated that there was a desire to have more continuity in the process with accommodation officers carrying out engagement and sign ups which neighbourhood officers currently do. The aim was to have less points of the contact.

Members then asked about the approach to recharging and if this was sometimes pedantic for natural wear and tear. David McGhee advised that the approach to recharging was being unpicked and worked through. He noted that with older properties there were demands on condition.

The committee asked why, in some cases, existing fixtures and fittings were being removed. Kenny Gillespie stated that fixtures and fittings have to comply with all relevant regulations. Therefore if any existing fittings did not meet legal standards during, for example, the electrical check they were removed. Where possible the Service ensured that existing fixtures are left in place. There had been positive feedback from tenants where fittings and fixtures were left.

Members asked about the consultation undertaken with incoming tenants on the layout and style of kitchen units, where assessed as needing a new kitchen. Kenny Gillespie stated that the consultation work was carried out by the single point of contact and the Service sought as much tenant involvement as possible.

The committee asked to have the number of council house inspections included in reports to the performance panel. David McGhee stated that the Service could look to gather data and build an evidence base.

Decision

The committee:-

- (1) noted the position regarding the implementation of the new Standard Re-letting Properties, and**
- (2) requested a report on the standards of gardens for re-letting.**

Provost Reid left the meeting prior to consideration of the following item.

S6. PROCUREMENT IN COUNCILS – IMPACT REPORT

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided information on the Accounts Commission impact report on “Procurement in Councils”. The report also provided information in relation to the Public Contracts (Scotland) Regulations 2015. Appended to the report were documents providing information on both national and local progress on implementing the Accounts Commission’s recommendations. David McGhee provided an overview of the report.

The committee discussed the key changes under the 2015 Regulations and highlighted concerns around the volatility of the care home sector. David McGhee stated that the Council took part in the National Care Home Contract which was operated by Scotland Excel. Officers monitored the situation regarding residential care homes and engaged directly with them to identify any issues in the provision of service early. It was highlighted that issues could include management changes and difficulties with recruitment of staff. Officers would intervene in such situations where possible and appropriate. In response to a comment from the committee of concern relating to a change to a “new light touch regime for procurement of social/other services”, David McGhee stated that this related to advertising obligations and the selection of tenders.

Members asked if the Council provided support to small and medium sized enterprises to complete the online system. David McGhee stated that such an approach was at the heart of the Council’s practice and the Service worked closely with the Business Gateway. There was engagement with providers to help them trade locally and more widely. The Council also ran procurement clinics.

The committee discussed the impact of the living wage and when fair working practices might not be felt to be relevant and proportionate to include for evaluation. David McGhee stated that the living wage was a consideration across all procurement activity but could not be made mandatory. The Council could apply it higher criteria in evaluation terms. He commented that contracts for materials and services would be differently weighted. There was no blanket approach in place for evaluation and weighting.

Decision

The committee noted:-

- (1) the Accounts Commission Procurement in Councils impact report;**
- (2) the changes arising from the Public Contracts (Scotland) Regulations 2015 and the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, and**
- (3) the new procurement assessment regime and associated implications.**

S7. AUDIT SCOTLAND FOLLOW-UP REPORT – MAJOR CAPITAL INVESTMENT IN COUNCILS

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided information on the recommendations from Audit Scotland's national follow up report "Major Capital Investment in Councils" published in January 2016 and the Council's compliance with these. Carole McGhee provided an overview of the report.

The committee discussed the intention to undertake post project reviews and that this was a positive change to practice.

Decision

The committee noted that:-

- (1) post-project reviews will be undertaken for those projects which were completed in 2015/16 and going forward for completed projects valued at £1m or more, and**
- (2) additional financial information for projects which span more than one financial year will be included in future Capital Update reports to the Executive.**