

Draft

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Minute of Meeting of the Performance Panel held in the Municipal Buildings, Falkirk on Thursday 9 August 2018 at 9.30 am.

Core Members: David Balfour
Niall Coleman
Lynn Munro (Convener)
Pat Reid

Members Attending: Joan Coombes
Depute Provost Ritchie

Officers: Fiona Campbell, Head of Policy, Technology & Improvement
Rhona Geisler, Director of Development Services
Kenneth Lawrie, Chief Executive
Brian Pirie, Democratic Services Manager
Stuart Ritchie, Director of Corporate and Housing Services

PP11. Apologies

An apology was intimated on behalf of Councillor Murtagh.

PP12. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations.

PP13. Minute

Decision

The minute of the meeting of the Performance Panel held on 20 June 2018 was approved.

PP14. Development Services Performance Update – April – June 2018

The panel considered a report by the Director of Development Services setting out a summary of performance for the period 1 April 2018 to 30 June 2018. The Director of Development Services provided an overview of the report.

The report provided information on:-

- significant challenges, risks and changes in service pressures since the last update;
- relevant performance reports, audits and inspections

The Director of Development Services highlighted:-

- Revenue budget
- Severe Weather
- Strategic Property Review
- Supporting other services with fire safety investigation
- Supporting Children's Services with Cole Report responses (wall tie/header tie/fire stop matters in schools
- Waste recycling and compliance with the Household Waste Recycling
- Smart Working Smart Travel
- Falkirk Tax Incremental Financing/Investment Zone
- Welfare Reform/Fair Start
- External Funding

Members highlighted and praised the work done by Services during the severe weather at the start of the year and congratulated the Director on the awards for resilience and partnership planning which had recognised the development and implementation of a vulnerable persons database.

Following this members sought assurance that the performance reporting framework provided sufficient objectivity to allow the panel to properly scrutinise the performance of Services. The Director assured the panel that the reports here founded on a wealth of data and evidence and that Services welcomed detailed scrutiny from members. In response to a follow up question in regard to comparative information Mrs Geisler explained that benchmarking with other authorities allowed services to measure performance against similar sized councils. She cited the cost of planning as an example which allowed performance to be compared, although this also demonstrated that unless authorities used like for like data, benchmarking could not provide an exact measure. In the case of the cost of planning, work was being carried out at a national level to ensure that the indicator was measured consistently by each authority. The Service was participating on the national review which it was anticipated would inform guidance from the Scottish Government.

The Director of Corporate and Housing Services explained the various benchmarking processes at both local and national levels, citing the Local Government Benchmarking Framework at the national level and the use of 'families' of councils. Comparison with, for example, Glasgow City Council would not provide, in many cases, a like for like comparison. In regard to each Service, Mr Ritchie noted that reports provided comparison with previous years' performance in order in highlight trends against the targets.

The Director of Development Services explained that while performance was measured against performance indicators, the projects themselves could often set timescales and performance could be measured against these. In response to a question in regard to the Townscape Heritage Initiative work which had been completed ahead of the project timescale the Director explained that the timescale had been realistic and had been set by funders based on a reasonable expectation taking into account a number of complex factors. Funders had confidence in the Council because of its proven track record in delivering on time. Mrs Geisler then explained the program for delivering the flood defences project. Overall the project was estimated at £100m, with £10m to be provided by the Council. Grangemouth presented particular challenges, for example testing would be required on land not owned by the Council in order to map existing defences. Discussions were ongoing with the Scottish Government in regard to funding for the project.

The panel then discussed waste recycling. The Director explained, in response to a question, that the Council had been first in Scotland to sign up to the Household Waste Recycling Charter and that it was possible that these standards would become statutory. The Executive had, she explained, considered a series of reports on refuse collection options. She also highlighted restrictions, such as those on use of landfill and the costs incurred by the Council due to inefficient separation of waste in the household. In response to a suggestion that labelling would assist the public, the Director stated that the Council's website provided clear information which could be printed off by householders, or if in doubt there was also a helpline.

The Director then explained, following questions in regard to the Strategic Property Review (SPR), that the Executive would soon consider two reports on SPR projects. One was in relation to front facing office accommodation and the other, by the Leader of the Council, focussed on the Council HQ. Discussion in regard to the front facing offices would allow surplus property to be confirmed. The SPR was largely completed – however hard decisions would have to be taken in order to progress savings opportunities.

In regard to the proposal to create a hub at Falkirk Central Library, moving staff from Callendar Square One Stop Shop and the impact of this on the town centre, Mrs Geisler stated that strategically there was an imperative to move from leased property to owned property. Recent events, including the forthcoming closure of Marks and Spencer, would impact on the town centre but in regard to Callendar Square it was not a long term option to retain a presence there due to the condition of the accommodation and costs and therefore the Library proposal was preferable. However, she stated that there was huge potential to transform the High Street and the Council should lead the transformation, recognising that the traditional town centre was an outdated and unsuitable model. Innovative and bold thinking was required.

Members then sought an update on the Falkirk Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) projects. The Director confirmed that the next stage was works at Junction 5 of the M9 at Beancross. Works had been completed at Junction 6 at Earlsgate. The works had been postponed due to infrastructure issues but they had been resolved and the project was ready to start. It was intended that the completion of J6 would allow TIF funding to be utilised in the road improvements around the new college site. Mrs Geisler explained that a business case had been submitted to the UK and Scottish Governments for an Investment Zone growth deal package. The business case sought funding of £200m. Other bids, such as that of Stirling and Clackmannanshire Councils had been in the region of £90m, however the Council's bid was ambitious with Grangemouth's strategic importance being critical to the bid. The petrochemical complex was a national priority and accordingly the business case reflected this. In addition to infrastructure projects around Grangemouth the business case contained a large tourism element, reflecting the areas tourism opportunities and the benefits they bring. Mrs Geisler stated that she expected to have a view from the Scottish Government in the autumn on its position in regard to the business case.

Members then sought clarification on where Regeneration Capital Grant Funding of £972m related to opening of canal links. Mrs Geisler stated that although Scottish Canals were a partner the project was to regenerate the former Barrs Factory. Scottish Canals was aware of the Council's position in regard to maintaining open canal waterways (as expressed by Council in June) but this particular funding was not for such works.

Following a question the Democratic Services Manager confirmed that it was intended that Council would consider the Local Development Plan 2 before the end of August.

Following a further question on TIF the Director gave an overview of the programme and its background. It was, she summarised a £60m programme in which Local Authorities could borrow in order to invest in infrastructure projects with debts against the borrowing services by the increased business rates. The Council's programme comprised a number of phases with no phase starting until the previous one was completed. The focus of the works was Grangemouth although flood prevention and Avon Gorge were also included. The front project, at J5 facilitated the delivery of a new distribution centre in Earlsgate. The Investment Zone was a much larger project in size and scope which could involve funding from industry as well as the Scottish Government and could economically be worth billions to the area. It would not be restricted to the Gateway area. This was, she stated, a massive plan for the area and Mrs Geisler anticipated that a report on proposals for the Gateway area which would include housing, commercial and retail development would be submitted to the Executive in September. In response to a question, Mrs Geisler explained that the retail units would not draw shoppers from the town centre, as the units would not be traditional high street establishments.

The panel then discussed Falkirk town centre. Recent newspaper headlines had reported that Falkirk town centre had seen the largest decline in retail employment in Scotland and had fallen from the top 10 town centres.

The Director concurred that there had been a down turn in the fortunes of the town centre, reflecting a national trend and that had become more pronounced with the announcement that Marks and Spencer would close its town centre store in August. The Director stated that the Administration's proposals, which would be considered by the Executive on 14 August, for the town centre, set out a vision for the town centre. She stated that a re-thinking of the design and offer of the town centre was required and that the Council should lead on its regeneration. It had been built and redesigned over the years but new thinking was required. It was not fit for purpose as it was. Members concurred remarking that it was a town centre of two halves with a traditional centre and a retail park. There were opportunities to re-design and re-invigorate, citing Oban and Pitlochry as positive examples of re-invigorated town centres. The Director gave examples where Townscape Heritage Initiative funding had been used to improve storefronts. Funding for heritage projects was limited and had to be used for specific projects. It was her intention to seek and use any available funding which would improve the area. However she reiterated that retailing had changed forever and it was necessary to respond to the challenges and to reshape the town centre with a focus on tourism and cultural heritage.

In response to a question on proposals in regard to the Steeple Mrs Geisler advised that there was a proposal on the table that the Local Historical Society would take over the Steeple and run tours. Funding was sought from the Falkirk Common Good Fund and she expected that the Common Good Fund committee would meet soon to consider the application. As a cultural and heritage landmark the Steeple was important to the town centre. In regard to the town centre. Mrs Geisler explained that a number of stakeholders had an interest on its redesign and redevelopment Falkirk BID was the lead body and the Council had a key role.

The Director of Development Services then summarised performance as measured by key performance indicators. Overall they showed good performance by the Service.

In regard to indicator CNS.005 (% of business properties leased by the Council that are occupied) members asked for information on those which were currently unoccupied. The Director confirmed that 94% were occupied and that she would provide detail on how many were unoccupied. Mrs Geisler acknowledged some were in poor condition and the intention was to dispose of these and invest in the remaining stock.

Decision

The Performance Panel noted the performance of Development Services over the period 1 April 2018 to 30 June 2018.