

The background of the slide features a large, light blue watermark of the City of Vancouver's coat of arms. The crest is a shield divided into four quadrants. The top-left quadrant shows a city skyline with a diagonal beam of light. The top-right quadrant depicts a stag's head with antlers. The bottom-left quadrant shows a three-masted sailing ship on wavy water. The bottom-right quadrant features a grizzly bear standing on a rock. Above the shield is a crown with four maple leaves. A banner at the bottom contains the motto "A NE FOR A".

Agenda Item 1

Minute

Draft

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Minute of meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held remotely on Thursday 9 September 2021 at 10.00 a.m.

Councillors: David Balfour
Lorna Binnie
Jim Blackwood
Dennis Goldie
David Grant
John McLuckie
John Patrick (convener)

Councillors also attending: Joan Coombes
Adanna McCue
Alan Nimmo
Robert Spears

Officers: Sophie Dick, Democratic Services Graduate
Ian Dryden, Acting Head of Planning
Kenny Gillespie, Head of Housing & Communities
Ross McLean, Business Manager
Robert Naylor, Director of Children's Services
Brian Pirie, Democratic Services Manager
Stuart Ritchie, Director of Corporate & Housing Services

S17. Apologies

An apology was submitted on behalf of Councillor Coleman

S18. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

S19. Minute

Decision

The minute of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 3 June 2021 was approved.

S20. Rolling Action Log

A rolling action log detailing the status of actions which had yet to be completed was presented for consideration.

In reference to ID 553 'Progress Report – Slamannan Primary School and Early Learning Class', the committee asked when inspections would be undertaken. A question was asked about behaviour and low staff numbers at Slamannan Primary School seeking an update on the situation. The Director of Children's Service clarified that no appointment for an inspection had been made and that he would refer back to committee in the future with a response to the matters raised.

Decision

The committee noted the Rolling Action Log

S21. The Corporate Plan 2020-2022 – Communities

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided performance information on the Communities priority. The Council priorities were approved in the Corporate Plan 2020 - 2022 on 30 September 2020. The report outlined the key achievements thus far: supporting people, engagement, funding, children and young people and Covid-19 development services.

Appendix 1 to the report provided an overview of the Corporate Plan: Communities by Actions, Performance Indicators, Council of the Future Projects and LGBF Performance Indicators and showed the current status in progress. Appendix 2 reported the progress of each action taken to fulfil the Communities Plan. Appendix 3 displayed graphs and comments of updates on projects for the month August 2021. Appendices 4 and 5 were performance indicators.

The committee highlighted that 160 local residents had participated in eight Falkirk Plan Community Sessions and asked what was being done to increase participation. Furthermore, it asked if it had been different participants from previous discussions. The Head of Housing & Communities stated that 160 participants was a good turnout taking into consideration the impact of the pandemic. He explained that all discussions were in-depth, lasting between one to two hours per individual. Mr Gillespie confirmed different participants were involved as the Third Sector was utilised to include those involved in the Harder to Reach project. He explained that higher levels of participation would come due to the type of work, transparency and confidence this work offered to communities therefore attracting more people – Community Choices exemplified this as communities would see the quality of work being carried out.

Following on from a question about the background of the participants, Kenny Gillespie confirmed participants were drawn from all ward areas and had varying backgrounds.

Members then turned to the five-year litter strategy implemented under the Covid-19 – Development Services achievements and asked for an update on progress. It was noted that concerns were still being raised by communities and questioned if any enforcement action was in place. The Acting Head of Planning was aware of the concerns and agreed to return with an updated plan to committee.

The committee sought clarity around the decision for Community Hubs to not accept rent payments. The Director of Corporate & Housing Services explained that Hubs were currently open with limited operation with the purpose of assisting those most in need, offering a triage service. He stated there were over 100 different locations across Falkirk that would accept payments and be located in more convenient places to individuals.

The committee then focused on the pilot schemes, which aimed to return children to their homes from care homes, achieving potential savings of £0.478m in 2021/22 and asked how success was measured. The Director of Children's Services explained that evaluation would be about the number of children in care – the aim was to reduce the number of children in external residential care and placed in the care of the Council. The purpose of this was to allow children to remain close to their home, community, peer groups and stay in the same school. Evaluation of these factors would be taken into consideration on an individual basis, therefore making success dependent upon the individual's outcome. Success would also be measured upon the amount of financial savings accumulated by the Council over a period of time.

Members then referred to the Sustainability/Environmental Impact section of the report and noted there were none listed. They highlighted a shortage of 330 bins, a reduction of 4 support staff and 2 vehicles and questioned how these service cuts were not taken into consideration when evaluating impact. Ian Dryden stated he would bring an update to committee regarding strategy and carer resource implications.

In regard to the Children & Young People achievement, it was stated there had been a 5% increase in Local Authority foster care but a 20% increase in independent foster provision between March 2020 and March 2021. Members asked why there was a significant gap and necessity for independent foster provision. Robert Naylor explained that the 5% was reflective of the intake of new foster carers whilst also being hindered by the retirement of others. The increase of independent foster provision was due to a greater number of external providers offering places to the Council. Overall, there had been an increase of foster placements for children which was aligned with the aim to keep children in their homes. Mr Naylor highlighted the complexity of this work but assured committee that the long-term goal would be to have as many Falkirk foster carers as needed.

The committee asked if business owners were approached by the Council to help tackle litter in the five-year litter strategy. The Acting Head of Planning explained that since the pandemic, the Council had closer working relations with local businesses and wanted to continue this business model. Mr Dryden stated he would refer back to committee with the response from local businesses.

Members then turned to the evaluation for the first pilot phase of Community Choices and asked if the results would be reported to committee. Mr Gillespie clarified that all members would receive feedback from the evaluation in a forthcoming meeting.

The committee suggested that the Council should promote prevention of littering. Mr Dryden recognised there had to be a balance between publicity, community empowerment and enforcement where necessary. He explained that there would be hotspot areas for littering which would require a working relationship with communities, but a key element to success would be sending out the message to reduce littering.

Following on from a question about why Advice Hubs & Spokes, Redesign of Housing Property Services and Community Assets & Learning Estate would be reported to the Communities Workstream Board and when it would come to committee, Mr Ritchie explained that the Top 10 Priority Projects would be reported to the Executive. The Council of the Future Change Projects were reported as part of the progress reports which were appended to Communities, Innovation and Enterprise reports to Scrutiny. All projects would be reported to members, the only difference would be the varying levels of detail held in reports.

Members referred back to the balanced approach towards littering and suggested that there was not enough enforcement. The Acting Head of Planning stated he would be happy to evaluate the approach as part of the progress update.

The committee noted the continued need of food banks which it suggested should be coming to an end through work carried out by the Council.

In regard to action CP CHS20 COM-08 – ‘Ensure people feel safe within their community and live in high-quality housing’, members asked when the replacement of windows and doors in housing would begin and the strategy to carry this out. The Head of Housing & Communities explained that the windows and doors contract had been awarded, amounting to around £54m and would be targeting the non-gas houses first. He explained that the first phase of the project would commence before Christmas 2021 and tenants would be notified fully of this due to the inconvenience the work may cause.

Members then referred to the new legal obligation as of February 2022 that homes in Scotland should be fitted with interlinked fire and smoke alarms which the Council had received funding for. An update on the progress of

this change and if deadlines would be met was sought. Mr Gillespie clarified that the Council had been aware and working on these changes for 3 years and it would be completed by February 2022. He explained that once a tenancy had emptied, it was a part of the process to implement these changes as well.

The committee referred to the mobile CCTV cameras that had been deployed across Falkirk (CP CHS20 COM-08) and asked how the location of these cameras was prioritised. The Director of Corporate & Housing Services stated a CCTV report would be going to Executive in October; however, this could be shared with all members. There was a mix of fixed and mobile cameras across Falkirk – the mobile cameras were to be used in areas of high anti-social behaviour and be relocated if the issue had situated elsewhere. Historic areas of anti-social behaviour would also be taken into consideration.

Following on from a question regarding action CP CHS20 COM-08 and private landlord evaluations, Mr Gillespie clarified the Council's remit included an assessment of landlords being 'fit and proper'. In cases where 'fit and proper' was not being upheld, the Council were able to implement plans that the landlord must adhere to and if this did not happen, they would be referred to the civic licensing committee.

Members referred to the £36.6m that had been invested during 2021/22 to improve homes to meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard which had a target of 98.60% shown in indicator HQM 1 – 'Percentage of Stock meeting the Scottish Housing Quality Standard'. Members questioned if the investment would be utilised to meet 100% target, if possible. The Head of Housing & Communities explained that achieving 100% was also dependant on owner occupiers as recommendations could not be forced and owner occupiers may decide to not act upon them. The £36.6m was used to maintain current standards through maintenance checks as well as strive towards 100% as much as possible.

Committee turned its focus onto heating homes adequately, especially in regard to the ongoing discussion relating to the use of gas. Mr Gillespie explained the Options Appraisal was ongoing which would consider the use of gas and other types of energy and renewables. The current heating systems met the SHQS, but focus would be placed on how the Council could tackle fuel poverty, keep houses as wind and water-tight and maximise the usage of energy available currently.

Members asked about who participated in the 18 community groups referred to in action CH20 COM-04 – 'Build on new strengths created within our communities'. The Head of Housing and Communities stated that specific details could be presented to committee, but explained these groups were about empowering communities. The purpose was to utilise the Third Sector in bringing in a variety of groups to participate.

The committee referred back to the 160 local residents participating in the eight Falkirk Plan Community Sessions and asked how this project would be affected if numbers reduced. Mr Gillespie explained turnout had been impacted by the pandemic and ideally numbers would increase. He stated those involved participated in a two hour long discussion which he suggested was positive given the pandemic.

Following a question regarding a fuel poverty update, Mr Gillespie explained regular updates were given to members in regard to costs and utility companies. As utility companies had returned to the Council with higher costs than anticipated, a report would be going to the next meeting of Council. He explained that the Council had recognised the increase cost of heating and had paid out over £36,000 to individuals for fuel payments over the winter.

Members asked for an update on the progress of the redesigned Speech & Language Therapy and Physiotherapy services with NHS Partners referred to in action CP CS20 COM-09 – ‘Ensure children and young people thrive in their education/training’. The Director of Children’s Services explained collaborative work had been undertaken with NHS Forth Valley to evaluate the speech and therapy work in schools and move towards a community based model. Schools had utilised some funding from the Pupil Equity Funding into training for staff and employing more Speech and Language Practitioners with the purpose of avoiding NHS waiting lists. Mr Naylor stated he would return to committee with an update on speech and language and physiotherapy progress.

The committee turned to action CP CHS20 COM-03 – ‘Cut red tape to make it easier for communities to make decisions for themselves’ which discussed the Community Choices programme and the voting which took place for the Small Grants and Capital Place Based Grants. It sought more information on those who were unsuccessful and if help could still be granted to them. Mr Gillespie explained that help would always be offered to those who were unsuccessful via the Community Team. There were other avenues of support, for example from CVS, who had previously helped groups.

Members noted the format of Appendix 3 to the report and suggested that an alternative format could be considered.

In indicator HQM 4a – ‘Average length of time taken to complete non-emergency repairs (in working days)’, the value had increased from 13.9 in 2020/21 to 34.8 in 2021/22 and members questioned why this was. The Director of Corporate & Housing explained that this was due to the Covid-19 restrictions as there had been limited access to properties and the Service was mindful of safe working practices. During the pandemic, tenants were able to register urgent and non-urgent repairs which had led to a backlog of non-urgent repairs as urgent were prioritised while Covid-19 restrictions were in place. In terms of working through the backlog, additional resources had been accrued, for example building maintenance employees had taken on more roles.

The committee asked for an update on the number of void housing and the period of time the property was void for. Mr Ritchie explained the same phenomenon was occurring in voids as seen in the backlog of non-emergency repairs (indicator HQM 4a). Additional resources had been accrued with the purpose to reduce the void period – over the course of the following months, he suggested that more properties should be available for tenancy. He stated that he would return to committee with an update on voids in the next Communities report.

Committee then noted that during the clearing phase of tenancies, fixtures which were still usable (such as carpets) were thrown away. It asked if new tenants were given the option to keep the fixtures instead. The Head of Housing & Communities explained there was a process in place regarding carpets, blinds and other fixtures in offering them to new tenants. There could be health and safety reasons for the removal of fixtures such as electrical issues which may demand the carpet to be lifted for checks or lamp shades not meeting electrical standards.

Members requested a report on the frequency of gully cleaning and if any changes in strategy had occurred. The Acting Head of Planning stated he would return to committee with a report on the current approach.

The committee turned its attention to LGBF indicator SSW6 – ‘Rate of readmission to hospital within 28 days per 1,000 discharges’ as it showed in 2018/19 the value was 117.38 which had increased to 122.07 in 2019/20, however, the short trend showed decrease. It asked who was responsible for investigating the reason behind initial discharge and if it was the appropriate thing to do. The Director of Corporate & Housing stated a report would be presented from Adult Social Care on how the assessments were made.

Decision

The Scrutiny Committee:-

- (1) noted the performance of the Council in relation to Communities, and**
- (2) asked for a report to the next meeting on the issues raised in regard to the Litter Strategy and Gully Cleaning.**

S22. Local Government in Scotland Overview Report

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which set out the key messages identified by The Accounts Commission Local Government in Scotland Overview Report and provided a local context to these messages.

The Commission's report identified 10 key messages:

1. The Covid-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on all aspects of society, including the economy, jobs, and the physical and mental health of the public
2. Relationships with communities have been vital
3. Level of service disruption have varied
4. Some services were delivered virtually
5. The workplace demonstrated the versatility to take on new roles.
6. There were significant changes in council governance structures and processes
7. Councils continued to face significant financial challenges, and these have been exacerbated by the pandemic
8. The Scottish Government has provided substantial additional financial support, but the nature and timing of funding has created further challenges for councils
9. Councils have started to plan for longer term recovery from the crisis
10. There has been some ongoing learning resulting from the emergency response to the pandemic.

The budget gap reported in May 2020 was estimated at around £55m over the next 4 years – this had to be reduced through transformation and how the Council responded to Covid-19 or budget cuts.

Members suggested that it would be beneficial to know what percentage of the budget each department received and where savings were being made. The Director of Corporate & Housing Services explained that a report would be taken to the Executive in October which would begin discussions for the budget period 2022/23. Included in the report would be a transparent discussion about the financial constraints placed on the Council - Education Services amounted to half of the Council's budget and officers would begin engagement with staff and the public.

The committee turned to 4.3, 3 – 'Levels of service disruption have varied' which explained there had been significant negative impacts on vital areas including carers who lacked access to respite care. Members noted the issue of recruiting carers and suggested the Council should increase the rate of pay to reflect the demand of the job accurately. Other members suggested otherwise stating the Council currently paid a higher rate than the NHS.

Following a question about the measurement of internal/external communication, Mr Ritchie emphasised the importance of communication especially over the last 18 months. In terms of communication with Councillors, weekly updates were provided on key activities/issues which had since reduced as services returned to a steady state. Employees had access to both formal and informal avenues of communication including general updates on key issues and managers keeping contact with staff. A pulse survey was undertaken throughout the pandemic and actions from this would be reported to committee in a future meeting. External communication had taken a number of forms including the website, Community

Conversations or Third Sector, if found to be more effective. He explained that lessons had to be learned to enable improvement which would be utilised in future actions.

Members then asked if feedback was still possible between employees and managers to which Mr Ritchie explained that employees were at the core of all work – their views were extremely valuable as it was a better perception of what was going on. He stated that 1-2-1s and team meetings were utilised for a number of things including feedback, tasks and wellbeing - if this approach was not working, more informal options were available. A wellbeing group had also been established; it was chaired by the Chief Executive and his representatives allowing staff to have direct communication to the top of the organisation. The Director of Children's Services agreed that communication at all levels was vital – he suggested that internal and external communication had improved in terms of frequency and quality as shown by the number of groups established to enable discussions, for example, weekly Trade Union meetings which were initially 6 weekly. The website and text messaging services were being used much more frequently than prior to the pandemic to ensure the best advice was being communicated to individuals. He noted the increase in interaction with members and despite committees having returned, new forums such as Community Engagement and SPR had allowed for this.

Youth employment had increased in the Falkirk area from 5.35% in March 2020 to 10.1% in June 2020 and reduced to 7.4% in May 2021 – members asked what type of employment youths were in and if the ending of furlough would impact these statistics. Mr Dryden stated that a report would be presented in November to the Scrutiny committee on employment targets in which this information would be included.

Following a question on whether the £14m underspend would be enough to cover the 2021/22 financial year, Mr Ritchie stated a report had been submitted previously to Executive relating to the projections of the current financial year. He explained that there were still some uncertainties relating to winter as the Council usually faced unexpected costs such as gritting. He confirmed the £14m was included in the current projections and an update would be presented to Executive in October.

The committee questioned how many staff members had returned to office-working and the Director of Corporate & Housing explained the majority of staff had been working in the frontline during the pandemic with jobs involving caring, building maintenance, roads etc continuing as normal. Those who had been able to work from home still remained so in accordance with the Scottish Government guidelines.

Decision

The Scrutiny Committee noted:-

- (1) the key messages set out in The Accounts Commission's Overview of Local Government;**
- (2) the local context to these key messages, and**
- (3) that a follow up report on the Council's response to Coronavirus would be submitted to Committee by December 2021.**