

JOINT PUBLIC PROTECTION COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on THURSDAY 26 JANUARY 2023

BRACKNELL FOREST COUNCIL, TIME SQUARE, MARKET STREET, BRACKNELL, RG12 1JD

Present: James Cole, John Harrison, Thomas Marino (Chairman) and John Porter

Also Present: Rosalyn Gater (Team Manager - Commercial), Sean Murphy (Public Protection Manager), Stephen Chard (Democratic Services Manager), Moira Fraser (Public Protection Partnership) and Damian James (Chair of the PPP Joint Management Board)

PART I

24 Minutes

The Minutes of the previous meeting held on 5 October 2022 were approved as a true and accurate record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the inclusion of the following amendment:

- Item 18 (paragraph 8) was amended to state that the reason for the rise in the current year's and the 2023/24 Budget was due to salary increases, rather than cost of living increases.

25 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

26 Notice of Public Speaking and Questions

No public questions were received.

27 Forward Plan

The Forward Plan was noted.

28 2023/24 Service Plan: Public Protection Partnership

Sean Murphy introduced the report (Agenda Item 6) which identified the relevant details of the Inter Authority Agreement and set out how the PPP intended to operate through the delivery of the Service Plan.

The report's foreword was not yet completed and, subject to approval of the Plan, Sean Murphy would finalise this with the Chairman.

The Plan set out progress six years into the existing ten year arrangement. It then outlined future challenges and how those would be met. Sean Murphy highlighted some of the key strategic priorities for the Service:

- Staffing. Recruitment and retention remained a challenge in some teams. This was being aided by the Workforce Strategy which included a focus on developing existing officers. Vacancies were being filled by agency staff and the service delivered, but this was a costly option.

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- Budget deficit. This had been created by issues including the reconfiguration of the PPP following the exit of Wokingham and a drop in licensing income. A fundamental review of fees and charges would be taking place.
- New system. The system went live in December 2022 but this was much later than originally planned. It was in the process of being fully embedded. The system would help to assist customers and drive efficiencies.

The PPP had been performing well as evidenced in the performance measures and measures of volume and it was important that this continued for the remainder of the agreement and beyond.

Councillor James Cole proposed amending paragraphs 2.7.1 and 2.7.2 of the report to reflect that there was more than one Licensing Committee.

Councillor Cole asked for clarity on the meaning of point 1.1 of the Workforce Planning Strategy. Sean Murphy responded there was a constantly changing set of priorities which had covered the Covid-19 pandemic, Homes for Ukraine, the cost of living crisis, and damp and mould in houses; and a flexible workforce continued to be required.

Councillor Cole referred to point 1.2.5 and asked why it was considered that the size of the PPP meant that staff would experience extended periods of absence from work. Sean Murphy responded that there were approximately 80 staff within the PPP and therefore it was likely that some staff would be off sick for extended periods from time to time. He added that sickness levels were currently low.

Councillor Cole asked whether the Licencing Team was understaffed if the amount of licencing work was dropping. Sean Murphy responded that there had been an issue in attracting experienced Licencing Officers. Efforts continued as it was necessary to have the full complement of staff without the use of agency workers. It was possible that trainees would move into this specific area of work.

Councillor Cole noted that the Risk Register stated that the controls in place had not reduced the risk of data breaches, and asked for this to be clarified. Sean Murphy responded that he would investigate this further as the controls should result in a lowering of this risk.

RESOLVED that the Service Plan be approved.

29 Public Protection Partnership Q3 Service Update

Sean Murphy introduced the report (Agenda Item 7) which informed the Committee of the performance of the Public Protection Partnership in line with the operating model and business plan, and provided an update setting out service delivery in the period up to the end of Q3.

Sean Murphy apologised to the Committee for the missing data for Q3, which was due to the data transfer to the new system. The data would be presented to the next meeting if it was available.

In terms of finance, a relatively small underspend (£80k) was forecast and this followed success in attracting grant funding as well as careful budget management. An overspend could otherwise have been reported. The Committee would determine how any underspend would be utilised into the next financial year.

Three new trainees had been recruited and a fourth was pending. Work also continued in developing existing staff so they could progress to professional roles and a number of officers had come forward to do so.

Customer satisfaction was reported in excess of 80% among residents and businesses, with very few service complaints.

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Another positive was the level of Member engagement in Ward related issues which in turn helped residents.

Rosalynd Gater described work undertaken to assist residents with issues of damp and mould. Officers were responding to reports urgently whenever necessary, inspecting properties and providing advice to residents and landlords on mitigating actions that could be taken. For example in relation to heating and ventilation.

Another area of focus was in relation to ensuring that premises which had converted from commercial to residential use met required standards. This involved colleagues from Building Control and the Fire Service.

Councillor John Harrison noted the expectation that the Homes for Ukraine programme would be winding down as the PPP had inspected homes which were hosting Ukrainian families, and asked what the next major challenge for the Partnership would be. Sean Murphy reported that 360 inspections had been undertaken across the two local authority areas. He acknowledged that this work was reducing but there were still arrivals from Ukraine and inspections were also needed where families were moving to a new host.

In terms of future challenges, Sean Murphy explained that work in responding to reports of damp and mould was ongoing together with awareness raising of the issue. Concerns were also being raised in relation to the sale of counterfeit goods, and issues relating to tobacco, alcohol and vaping. There were also extended projects relating to the conversion of commercial to residential properties, around air quality, and in the finalising of the Contaminated Land Strategy for West Berkshire. The Bracknell Forest Strategy had already been approved.

Councillor John Harrison asked if there were the specialist skill sets available within the Partnership to meet these requirements or if new staff needed to be recruited. Sean Murphy responded that the PPP was fortunate in having a number of very good specialists in key areas. Particular strengths of the shared service was the ability to pool skills, build capacity and have a flexible workforce. Damian James concurred, but added that there were instances where the Partnership would recruit in order to fulfil specialist tasks, citing the response to fly tipping reports as an example.

Councillor Cole referred to customer satisfaction and queried the conflicting statements of no negative ratings in response to a satisfaction survey whilst separately six service complaints had been received. Sean Murphy responded that the small number of complainants might not necessarily have completed the survey, so it should not be assumed that there was 100% satisfaction, but the results were positive.

Councillor Cole asked whether the Partnership worked with Penny Post for communications. Sean Murphy confirmed that they did, and that he had recently engaged in a cost of living interview with them. Sean Murphy added that he was investigating the use of the Nextdoor community based app that could be used for targeted communications in local areas.

The Chairman thanked officers for all their hard work. He was pleased to note that the new system had gone live.

RESOLVED to note the Service Update since the last meeting.

30 Regulation of Investigatory Powers

Sean Murphy introduced the report (Agenda Item 8) which set out the outcome of the recent inspection by the Investigatory Powers Commissioners Office (IPCO). Specifically this related to the PPP's use of surveillance tools, such as CCTV.

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This was a joint inspection of both local authorities. This made sense as the CCTV policies held by Bracknell Forest and West Berkshire were very similar and the policies for the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) were completely aligned.

The inspection noted the PPP's close engagement with this Committee, but recommended engagement with a wider cohort of Members. The Committee was asked to recommend to the two local authorities that they implement this wider oversight as felt most appropriate. Linked to this it was also recommended that a Member bulletin be distributed on this highly important topic.

The inspection also found that relevant staff were kept well briefed on this area of activity and that staff training was up to date.

Councillor James Cole noted that the rules set out by the IPCO were highly complex, and asked how Members could be assured that the Partnership was getting it right. Sean Murphy responded that the IPCO was the main regulatory body and agreed there were tight regulations to follow. Each authority had a Senior Responsible Officer who was responsible for the integrity of the process within the two authorities. They were closely involved with the inspection. The Councils' were very alert to the issue and held significant levels of experience, however it was also possible to seek external advice when needed. The necessary procedures were well documented and closely followed.

The Chairman noted that the list of authorising officers needed to be updated as West Berkshire Council had a new Legal and Democratic Service Lead (Nicola Thomas). Sean Murphy responded that she would be added to this list, subject to appropriate training. He added that in many cases he personally authorised this level of surveillance.

RESOLVED that:

- The content of the report be noted.
- The Committee would recommend to both Councils that the IPCO views on wider Member oversight be implemented as each Council felt appropriate.
- The subject of surveillance would form the basis of a PPP special Member briefing bulletin.

31 Any other items the Chairman considers to be urgent

No additional items were raised.

(The meeting commenced at 7.30pm and closed at 8.20pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature