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Minutes of the meeting of the **SCRUTINY (POLICY AND PERFORMANCE) COMMITTEE** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Wednesday, 25 October 2017 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor K Mills

Councillors: T A Bond
M I Cosin
R J Frost
B Gardner (as substitute for Councillor D A Sargent)
B J Glayzer
P J Hawkins (as substitute for Councillor J M Heron)
S C Manion

Officers: Chief Executive
Director of Shared Services
Acting Head of Customer Delivery
Democratic Services Manager

80 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P M Beresford, J M Heron, M Rose and D A Sargent.

81 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that, in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 4, Councillors B Gardner and P J Hawkins had been appointed as substitute members for Councillors S A Sargent and J M Heron respectively.

82 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

83 EK SERVICES FACE-TO-FACE SERVICE PROVISION AT DEAL AREA OFFICE

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources and Performance, Councillor M D Conolly, introduced the presentation to the Committee.

The Director of Shared Services advised that similar closures had taken place at the area offices in Canterbury City Council and Thanet District Council. Members were advised that the changes to the provision of face-to-face services at area offices in the Dover District was not about forcing people to access services on-line as there was still the option of telephone services and being able to make appointments at the Council Offices in Whitfield. There would also be a home visiting service for those individuals who needed it.

In respect of the Deal Area Office, the 'average' user was a 45-54 year old female without a disability who had travelled 2.19 miles to bring in paperwork and who may

have been in Deal for other purposes as well. The reasons for visits to the Deal Area Office were broken down as followed:

- 33% Benefits
- 21% Parking
- 16% Council Tax
- 8% Other (including non-DDC related matters)
- 7% Waste
- 7% Housing
- 7% East Kent Housing
- 1% Food Voucher

Members were advised that as a result of changes to the benefits system there was a decreasing need for people to bring in paper evidence. These changes included new digital systems, risk based verification and the roll out of Universal Credit. Furthermore, parking charges (which related to 1/5th of customer contacts) could only be dealt with online from November 2017.

Overall, the number of customer contacts had decreased year-on-year since 2015/16.

The proposed alternative access for each category of customer contact was as follows:

- Benefits – Online, post, email, appointments, telephone
- Parking – Online only
- Council Tax – Online, post, email, appointments, telephone
- Other – Email, telephone
- Waste – Online, email, telephone and local issue for bags
- Housing – Telephone, post, email, appointments
- East Kent Housing - Telephone, post, email, appointments
- Food Voucher – Not an EKS provided service

In response to questions from Members it was stated:

- That there would no redundancies arising from the changes as the area office staff would be redeployed to fill currently vacant positions in the call centre. This would in turn relieve pressure on call answer times which was currently not on target. EKS was also looking at recruiting apprentices.
- That the hours during which appointments could be made at the Whitfield Offices had been adjusted to reflect changes in bus timetables.
- That EKS had been working with Age UK/Age Concern to provide assistance for elderly and vulnerable people.
- That EKS had a lone working policy in place and that the home visiting service offered greater control as officers knew the details of the people that they were visiting.
- That much of the required documentation could be submitted electronically now as evidence for benefits.

- That there was not expected to be an impact on local businesses in Deal through the withdrawal of face-to-face customer contact as surveys and staff feedback had indicated that many customers were in Deal for other reasons as well as visiting the area office.
- That a free phone service would be available from the Deal Area Office.
- That approximately half of the forecast £45,000 saving came from the Deal Area Office.
- That the decision was made based on sound evidence and the same logic and reasoning had been used in Whitstable and Ramsgate.

The following points were raised by Members:

- There was concern expressed that the decision was being taken prematurely given the current level of customer contact in the Deal Area Office.
- The capability of many older people to deal with the shift to on-line services.
- The cost and time loss involved in having to travel by public transport from Deal to Whitfield for a face-to-face appointment.
- That the case for achieving financial savings as a result of this decision given that no rent was paid on the Deal Area Office was questioned.
- That the decision to withdraw face-to-face services at the Deal Area Office be deferred until such time as further information on the impact of the decision could be provided to Members.
- That the decision should wait given the Council would be making a decision on outsourcing the provision of customer services in the coming months.
- To question whether the home visiting teams had the capacity to take on additional work.

The Chairman invited members of the public present at the meeting to speak and the following points were raised:

- That the usage levels of the Deal Area Office did not justify the closure.
- That the users of the Deal Area Office were often the most vulnerable and least able to switch to using online services.
- To praise the service provided by staff at the Deal Area Office. This included helping people complete forms and there was concern that this level of assistance could not be replicated via telephone or online.
- That people had experienced problems accessing services by telephone. In addition, that the local rate call charge meant that there was a cost to calling the Council that was not incurred via face-to-face services.

- That increased housing development in Deal would impact on future usage levels.
- That the decision would put pressure on Deal Town Council services as during a previous temporary closure of the Deal Area Office members of the public had gone there under the mistaken belief they could access the services there.

In summing up, Members were advised that the Council faced a significant budget pressure relating to homelessness. The Council would take measures to protect the vulnerable but that most users of the service could make the channel shift to alternative service access even if it wasn't their preferred method.

The decision to withdraw face-to-face services at the three area offices, including Deal, predated the decision to look at outsourcing customer services. The withdrawal of face-to-face services at the three area offices would be accompanied by an implementation plan. This would involve press releases, the provision of information to assist the relevant ward councillors and work to ensure that people were signposted to the alternative ways in which they could access services.

As part of developing the criteria for home visits an Equality Impact Assessment would be undertaken.

RESOLVED: That it be recommended to the Cabinet:

- (a) That the Deal Area Office be kept open until more information can be supplied on the usage of the area office and the impact of its closure, including:
 - (i) The number of disadvantaged and vulnerable users
 - (ii) The impact of Universal Credit
- (b) That in the event that the Deal Area Office is closed:
 - (i) the Scrutiny (Policy and Performance) Committee be assured that training will be provided to Deal Town Council and Ward Members on how the public can access council services and assistance.
 - (ii) That the criteria for defining 'vulnerable' be developed at an early stage.
 - (iii) That regular feedback be provided to the Scrutiny (Policy and Performance) Committee on the impact of the closure of the three area offices.
- (c) That Councillor M D Conolly be thanked for attending the meeting.
- (d) That the members of the public be thanked for attending and contributing to the meeting.

The meeting ended at 8.26 pm.