

MINUTES OF JOINT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MEETING

28 JANUARY 2019

PRESENT:

Membership of Communities and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Councillors Mahoney (Committee Chair), Mrs A'Barrow, Mrs Allanach, Mrs Brown, Cade, Douglas and Eccleson

Membership of Environment and Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Councillors Sandison (Committee Chair), Brader, Mrs Bragg, Ellis, Gillias, Mrs New, Picker and Mrs Roberts

Leader of the Council: Councillor Seb Lowe

In Attendance: Councillors Roberts and Roodhouse

Officers: Adam Norburn (Executive Director) and Veronika Beckova (Democratic Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillors Leigh Hunt and Keeling (Communities and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee) and Councillor Bearne (Environment and Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee).

2. DISCUSSION WITH THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Council's Leader and Executive Director attended the meeting to answer questions on performance and future strategy. An overview was provided by the Executive Director. The main points were as follows:

Local Government Funding

The Government had committed to increasing funding for local government throughout the course of the current Parliament and yet a great deal of uncertainty still remained.

There was likely to be a significant shift of resources into social care in the coming years, which meant that upper tier authorities were likely to see the largest increases in funding. The concern for district and borough councils such as ours therefore was that our funding would be constrained at best and significantly reduced at worst to fund the increases in social care funding that were undoubtedly required.

The picture for business rate retention and the future of New Homes Bonus funding were still very unclear, which continued to make prudent financial planning almost impossible. The Government had announced that the local share of growth retained under the system would increase from the current 50% to 75% in 2021/22 and would reach 100% at some stage in the future. However, the impending reset of the business rate baseline risked much of the growth the Council had seen since the system was introduced.

Workforce

The Executive Director was leaving the Council at the end of June and a new Executive Director should be in place well before then. This would bring both risks and opportunities for the Council but on balance, it would be beneficial to have a fresh pair of eyes at the top. Our management arrangements were extremely lean compared to almost every other council of our size and one of the new Executive Director's first tasks would be to assess what resources were needed at senior management level to drive the Council forward to meet our objectives.

Last year, we carried out our two-yearly staff survey and this showed that the Council was still considered to be an attractive place to work. Workforce morale and motivation was still high but sickness absence had become a matter of real concern to the Executive Director over the last year or so and this was one of the key things he wanted to turn around before his departure.

*The following **supplementary comments** were made:*

As stated in the council's Constitution, the Leader of the Council has the sole authority to appoint to the post of the Executive Director. On this occasion, the appointment would be made by the Interview Panel consisting of the three group leaders and an independent chair from West Midlands Employers.

The topic of Employee Wellbeing and Sickness Absence Management was under review by Communities and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee and formed a part of the agenda for the next meeting on 6 February 2020. The agenda was available to view on the council's website. To fully understand the council's position, members were encouraged to read the comprehensive report provided by officers.

Partnership Working

The Council working in partnership with other organisations to achieve common objectives and outcomes was now the norm. The Council played an active role in the Coventry and Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership (CWLEP) and the Growth Hub to attract inward investment to Rugby. The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) was seeking to make its funding streams increasingly accessible to non-constituent member councils such as ours. The Council needed to ensure that it continued to strengthen relationships with both the CWLEP and the WMCA.

To focus on two specific examples, our partnership with Daventry at the Rainsbrook Crematorium was progressing well and we were currently looking for wider collaboration in the field of waste and recycling by considering entering into a multi-council partnership for a Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) located in Coventry.

Digitalisation

Digitalisation was a key tool to allow people to access some of the Council's services 24/7 and manage demand. This year we would have a new Digitalisation Strategy, which would be geared at achieving increased efficiencies and service improvements. We launched our Rugby Borough Council app in the latter part of last year, which was being used increasingly week by week, and we were currently developing a chatbot, called Ellis, to handle an increasing number of online queries.

*The following **supplementary question** was asked:*

With regards to the Business Continuity Plan, what processes are in place to ensure that if for example, Rugby experienced another power cut, the Council is able to continue communicating with residents?

The Council's Business Continuity Plan is currently under review. Cyber-security is vital. As is being back in operation quickly after an incident. As part of the review, we are looking at potential scenarios and put in place appropriate actions to mitigate the potential impact.

Commercialisation

Commercialisation was a sensitive topic that must be considered carefully by the Council. Almost £6 million were currently derived through fees and charges, which allowed existing services to continue and flourish.

Nowadays, Councils were often in direct competition with each other across their borders and it became increasingly important to protect the income derived from our commercial services.

On the other hand, the Council did not want to risk putting some of the small and medium players in the market out of business through our commercial activities, so it was really important that we picked and chose carefully the markets we decided to enter into and understand why we were choosing to do so.

What was clear was that we needed to align our charges better with our costs to ensure we recovered a higher proportion of our costs as well as continued to drive our commercial agenda to generate more of our own income in future.

*The following **supplementary comments** was made:*

A small number of potential commercial avenues within the Council's service areas was identified by the Senior Management Team.

The Council may wish to consider whether housing development was an area to explore. The aim would be to provide the borough with affordable housing builds.

Committee members were asked to submit questions prior to the meeting. Answers to the pre-submitted questions were circulated in advance of the meeting. The questions and answers were as follows:

Communities and Resources

Q: Do we still aspire to be financially self-sufficient as outlined in the Corporate Strategy?

It is our responsibility to ensure resources are available to deliver the objectives of this Council and to ensure the prosperity of our Borough. We recognise that to succeed in our bold ambitions we need to locally determine our finances and the best way to do this is through financial self-sufficiency. As a pro-growth authority, we have continued to benefit from business rates, council tax income and new homes bonus, yet we have prepared ourselves as far as possible for the proposed reforms to the

financial system. Our reserves and balances have increased by more than £5m in the last three years in preparation for this and once the sector receives clarity on local government finances, this council will proceed to capitalise on the strong foundations laid to date.

*The following **supplementary comments** were made:*

The review of the existing Corporate Strategy was underway. It was anticipated that the revised Corporate Strategy, covering the next four years, would be in place in Summer 2020.

The Leader's priorities were investing into the borough; regenerating the Town Centre; building on Rugby's natural advantage – transport connectivity; and maximising prosperity and economic growth.

Communities and Homes

No questions

Growth and Investment

Q1: What is the plan for the future of the World Rugby Hall of Fame?

Discussions with World Rugby will take place on 11 February 2020. The purpose of the meeting will be to understand in greater detail the new 'Destination Rugby' marketing campaign and World Rugby's aspirations post-November 2020 when the existing contract expires.

Q2: The Improvement Fund for the Town Centre priorities included improved signage in the Town Centre and environmental enhancement. Recommendations from the Visitor Economy Working Party estimated such works would cost approximately £152,000. When will that work start or has Cabinet found alternative funding sources?

Whilst we acknowledge the recommendations of the Visitor Economy Working Party, OSC will recall that the Borough Council will be commissioning a Town Centre Spatial Strategy that will drive the regeneration of Rugby Town Centre. This was reported to Visitor Economy Working Party on a number of occasions. Any improvements to public realm and signage will be incorporated into this regeneration project. The Town Centre Improvement Fund will fund the production of the Strategy. The Strategy is critical to leveraging in external funding sources successfully, from the LEP, the WMCA and central government.

Q3: We have recently had some interest from the private sector to invest into the Town Centre. How has that work progressed on the retirement housing scheme at Little Church Street; and the former Woolworth Store in High Street? What has been the council's involvement? Have we analysed why the recent LEP bid failed?

The Herbert Grey College application is expected to be considered at February Planning Committee.

The Woolworth Store proposals (Adventure Golf and Indoor Trampolining) are under discussion. The Executive Director and Leader of the Council have met with the owner to discuss his aspirations and at our request, Jon Bass at CW Growth Hub will be arranging a follow up meeting.

We have not submitted any bids to the LEP as we need to produce the Town Centre Spatial Strategy first. Our Future High Street Fund bid is being reviewed by MHCLG in preparation for Phase 2 of the funding round.

Q4: Rugby Borough Council, Warwickshire County Council and Cemex are the three largest landowners in the Town Centre with considerable building and land assets in close proximity to each other in North Street, Evreux Way, Corporation Street and Newbold Road.

Most of the current developments that have come forward in recent years have fallen very much short in terms of meeting either the Town Centre action plan or the Town Centre planning policy to deliver a high-quality prime retail and recreational/leisure area.

Are we not in the same place as we were with Chapel Street some years ago where the old owner (COOP) was offer a low-quality development that Rugbians and the council found unacceptable? The council had to step in and intervene. In that instance, we gained higher quality retail units, an art gallery museum and library and a home for the Hall of Fame linked to our heritage to the game of Rugby Football.

Such an intervention could provide a visitor hotel and conference centre, retail/store franchises and a new town hall leaving space on the old site for much needed affordable and social housing and a viable transport hub/bus interchange providing rapid transit bus links to the two railways stations, the college and new employment sites already outlined in the local plan.

Would this not be a better and more robust bid to talk to our regional and central government partners about?

Response from Growth and Investment

The Town Centre Spatial Strategy will provide the necessary masterplan and policy approach for the entire town centre, including our own and others' assets. We also have the benefit of an up to date adopted Local Plan in place which sets the parameters for quality design and quality public realm. This will be further supported in 2020 by Supplementary Planning Documents relating to Sustainable Design and Construction and Air Quality.

The town continues to attract strong market interest which is a benefit. The Options Appraisals accompanying the Spatial Strategy will assess the best uses for our own assets and the wider masterplan will help inform the Council if it requires its CPO powers to help achieve the overall Vision.

It should be noted that without the Spatial Strategy we cannot submit credible funding bids to regional and central government partners for large scale improvements.

Response from Corporate Resources

We recognise there is much external investment interest in our borough, including the town centre and as a key landowner, we have been engaging with various stakeholders, including Cemex and WCC. We are actively reviewing our sites, including our car parks to undertake options appraisals for each location, which will include the option for a high-quality hotel, amongst other investment opportunities in order to regenerate and give purpose to our town centre.

Furthermore, we are in talks with our blue light partners to understand their plans into the medium and longer term and explore potential co-location opportunities as part of our current One Public Estate (OPE) project for the Town Hall site.

Needless to say, we have big ambitions for the Town Centre and as work progresses further on this, information will be presented to everyone for consideration, including our residents and existing stakeholders in the town centre so that we can all collectively shape its future.

*The following **supplementary comments** were made:*

The draft Town Centre Spatial Strategy would be subject to public consultation. It was anticipated that the Strategy would be publicly available in Summer 2020.

Members were informed that an appointment to the post of Economic Growth Officer was made. The focus of the post holder would be on funding for the Town Centre (identifying funding sources, bidding for funds, etc). A solid “of the shelf” business case would aid in securing funding.

Due to their location, the Town Hall and the Rugby Art Gallery and Museum formed part of the Strategy as assets under review.

A member commended that there was a lack of mid-range hotels in the Town Centre.

*The following **supplementary question** was asked:*

With regards to the Strategy, is the council engaging Rugby School in the development process?

The council is in talks with Rugby School on various matters. The council’s engagement with Rugby School has increased in recent years.

Environment and Public Realm

Q1: What plan does the leader have for the Council to engage with residents of the borough on the climate emergency?

The Council’s work in relation to the Climate Emergency is being guided by a cross party working group. In their report to Cabinet on 3 February 2020, the Working Group propose that a communications and engagement plan is produced, including an initial survey/questionnaire which will seek to engage residents in the Climate Emergency and gain feedback on resident priorities.

I agree with the Working group that public engagement will be important as the agenda progresses, and that engagement should be taken forward in a structured and coordinated manner. As such, I am supportive of the proposal that we set out our engagement intentions, via a communication and engagement plan.

Q2: How will the Council plant more trees?

The Council is only able to plant trees on its own estate – i.e. land which we own. The Council seeks to take advantage of every opportunity to add to both the numbers and the quality of our tree stock and will continue to do so. Where external landowners express an interest in planting more trees on their land, the Council will continue to work with interested parties and the Woodland Trust to maximise these opportunities.

*The following **supplementary comments** were made:*

The property developer of Houlton went above and beyond with regards the green infrastructure and was keen to engage and consult with the council's planning department, various organisations, groups and stakeholders. The council had learned valuable lessons from the development of Houlton estate and the good relationship with the developer.

With regards to Southwest Rugby, master planning of the site would be of utmost importance. Houlton had the advantage of being owned and build by a single developer. Southwest Rugby would be built by at least seven different developers. It would be a big task for the council to ensure integration and equality among developers. A prudent green infrastructure should be the top priority of any housing developer.

With regards to existing estates, it would be impossible to retrofit these with green networks. If practical, existing green networks should be joined up to provide a continuous habitat for wildlife.

A member stated that the National Planning Policy Guidance was broad and generic and informed the committee that Reading Borough Council undertook in-depth scrutiny and as a result, introduced a policy for housing developers.

Q3: To provide free car parking in the evening and weekends the Cabinet approved expenditure from the Town Centre improvement fund for a further 12 months as it had from the previous 12 months. This was justified by Cabinet based on a belief footfall over that period in the town had increased by 7 per cent GF. Where did the evidence come from to support the figures quoted at Cabinet since the council has not used footfall evidence for some years?

Footfall figures are provided by Rugby First. Rugby First obtain footfall figures via two footfall sensors, located in the town centre. The sensors measure and record the number of people that pass the sensors.

Figures provided by these sensors for the first five months of 2019/20 indicate a year to date increase in footfall of 7.9% increase compared to the same period in 2018/19 (see Figure 1).

Monthly Footfall

	Year to date %	
	2019	2018
Rugby	7.9 %	-1.9 %
East Midlands	-3.5 %	-2.3 %
High Street Index(Market Towns)	-3.4 %	-5.3 %
High Street Index - BDSU(BDSU - Multifunctional)	-1.3 %	
UK	-1.5 %	-2.6 %

Figure 1. Monthly footfall data recorded by Town Centre Sensors

This increase compares positively to the East Midlands and High Street Index (Market Towns) statistics, which both show decreased footfall for the same period.

The following **supplementary comments** were made:

Communication

- Ward councillors were not kept informed of matters arising in their wards that were dealt with by council's officers. A particular situation that had recently unfolded was given as an example. The Leader advised the committee that he would investigate the matter directly.
- A memorandum of understating was in place and would benefit from a scrutiny review. This would provide an opportunity for the council to ascertain how well the partnerships were working.
- The Local Councils' Charter was in place since 2017. The Charter was a framework to support a mutually beneficial working relationship between the tiers of authority in Warwickshire. The aim of the Charter was for all councils to work together to provide better services to residents by improving communication; consulting each other; giving support and help and measuring how well the councils were doing.

The chairs thanked the Leader of the Council and Executive Director for attending the meeting.

CHAIR