

MINUTES OF JOINT MEETING OF BROOKE AND WHITTLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

29 JANUARY 2018

PRESENT:

Membership of Brooke Overview and Scrutiny Committee: Councillors Mrs A'Barrow, Mrs Bragg, Ms Edwards, Keeling, Srivastava and Dr Williams

Membership of Whittle Overview and Scrutiny Committee: Councillors Sandison (Chair), Brader, Gillias, Mrs O'Rourke, Roberts, Roodhouse (substitute for Councillor Douglas and Ms Watson-Merret

Leader of the Council: Councillor Michael Stokes

In attendance: Councillor Mrs Avis

Officers: Adam Norburn (Executive Director) and Linn Ashmore (Democratic Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillors Douglas (Whittle), Lowe (Whittle), Mrs New (Brooke) and Pacey-Day (Brooke).

2. DISCUSSION WITH THE LEADER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Council's Leader and Executive Director attended the meeting to answer questions on performance and future strategy.

The Executive Director gave members a brief overview of the current position regarding local government finance and organisational health. The main points were as follows:

- In terms of general Government funding health and education were at the top of the list ahead of local government.
- Funding for public health was likely to reduce in the medium term.
- More clarity around funding sources will be available by 2020.
- Government was increasing the level of business rate retention from 50 percent to 75 percent by 2021. This should be a benefit to this authority.
- Increased business rate retention will be predicated on the transfer of additional responsibilities to local government. Additional funding is more likely to be directed to WCC services but the level of increase in public health funding was unclear.
- In future 100 per cent retention was expected but reforms needed to be fiscally neutral for Government. There was a question over when this might happen as primary legislation would be required.
- New smarter ways of working were needed including the streamlining of technology. This includes increasing customer access to include out of hours.

- Changes need to be better aligned to costs and to reduce/remove the significant subsidy of some services.
- Our financial position makes it essential for the council to push the commercialisation agenda and drive income generation.
- It is getting more difficult to recruit staff as salaries are not attractive when higher wages are available in other places.
- Staff are under more pressure and sickness levels are up this year. Four colleagues died in service, two former colleagues have also passed away, and this has had an emotional impact on staff.
- There are some cases of long-term sickness due to cancer and stress and the situation is being managed closely.
- It is important to motivate staff and attract the right people.
- The boom in the private sector has resulted in people moving away from the public services as they can earn a lot more. This is affecting a range of skills, including planning and manual trades. This is a big challenge moving forward.

Committee members had been asked to submit questions prior to the meeting and these were as follows:

Q1 Has an action plan to deliver the Corporate Strategy been agreed?

- A. The detailed Action Plan to ensure and monitor delivery of the Corporate Strategy is currently being developed as the result of more than 30 separate meetings with Heads of Service and Service Managers across the Council, which are taking place between January and March. A number have already been held.

These meetings will formalise an action plan for each service/team, refresh operational risk registers and produce a new set of performance measures/indicators against which to monitor performance.

In the meantime, the Corporate Strategy is still being delivered on an ongoing basis as part of our business as usual.

Q2 What benefits has membership of the West Midlands Combined Authority brought to Rugby?

- A. The biggest benefit is that Rugby is there at the table. Talks are already being held on the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham and Coventry's City of Culture. We have been engaged in talks since the outset and have already been in contact with the organisers who are keen to talk to Rugby.

The Swift travel card system was now available to purchase at Rugby railway station. It allows commuters to travel across the West Midlands. This came as a direct result of lobbying.

The Local Plan is the current biggest ongoing topic of local concern relating to housing, business, land and employment. A lot of discussion around planning took place.

Through the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) funds of around £1.8 million will be made available which could be used towards tackling homelessness and we are waiting to see if some of this funding could be accessed to benefit Rugby.

The regeneration of the town was another aspect that would benefit the borough. As a direct result of engagement with the WMCA, Rugby hosted a visit by Sajid Javid, to showcase the town and our new developments.

Q3 What do you see as the main challenges over the next two years?

- A. The financial future of the council was the biggest challenge but must be tackled in the right way and we must continue to offer an excellent value-for-money service.
Digitalisation was another key challenge that will play a part in the changes needed to make savings.
It is the role of the Executive Director and senior officers to deal with operational matters, and my role as Leader is to make sure this is done in the right way.

Q4 What is the Leader's opinion of the increases in on street car parking charges made by WCC, and how this will affect the local economy?

- A. Rugby Borough Council had no input or part in WCC's decision-making process. The effects of the increases are unknown and there was no evidence available yet, but an overview of the situation will be maintained. Council-run town centre car parks are competitively priced and the public have the option of using these. There was no intention of getting into a price war with WCC.

Q5 Has the Leader been in contact with GE about the company's plans to leave the town?

- A. The company was still at the negotiation and consultation stage of the process. No direct contact has been made with GE by the council but the Coventry and Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership (CWLEP) Growth Hub is in contact and will cascade information down.

Q6 GE are a major employer in the town. Have you had any talks or discussions with them, and what action do you intend to take? Will a task force be created?

- A. If discussions result in an agreement that a task force should be created, then yes, the council would be willing to take part, though the benefit of this was unknown.
The Growth Hub has been involved in discussions. Our representatives attend meetings where the strategy of the town is raised. Businesses liaise with growth hubs and LEP's and the LEP Board and Economic Prosperity Board are consulted a great deal.

Q7 Has any research into the impact of the collapse of Carillion on Rugby been carried out?

- A. No research has been carried out and the impact is expected to be minimal on the people and the town. The situation will be monitored through the LEP and ongoing discussions.

Q8 Has all of the money which the council is allowed to keep from Right to Buy sales been reinvested in buying new housing stock?

- A. Not all. We have just over £6m in Right to Buy receipts and this financial year have handed back just over £713,000. Recent purchases of three homes this year and a further 31 in the next financial year mean we are now in a much better position and do not need to worry about paying back our receipts. The new Housing Strategy sets out the approach.

Note: Questions 9, 19 and 20 were linked together and the fuller written response to these is as follows:

Q9 What effect has Universal Credit had on employment figures in Rugby?

- A. We do not have detailed information on Universal Credit and the impact on employment. However the statistical information released by the Department for Work and Pensions shows that when we became a Full Service area in May 2016, 266 claimants were receiving Universal Credit and in employment. This increased to 1,008 in December 2016 and in December 2017 this had increased to 1,690 of 3,587 claimants. This means that 47% of claimants are in employment - the national average is 42%.
This increase is due to the fact that since becoming a Full Service area, most new claims for help to pay rent and day to day financial support are made to Universal Credit and not the old legacy benefits including Housing Benefit. Based on information provided by Warwickshire County Council the employment rate in Rugby for 16-64 year olds was 81.6% between October and December 2016, and between July and September 2017, this had increased to 82.1%. However, it should be noted that there is no evidence to show if this increase is a direct result of the introduction of the Universal Credit Full Service into our area.

Q19 What effect has Universal Credit had on the council's finances?

- A. With regards to Council Tax it has not been possible to identify the collection rate separately for recipients of Council Tax Reduction who receive Universal Credit compared to those who receive other forms of income.
However, the impact on the Council Rent account has been significant. In April 2017, 422 tenants had total arrears amounting to £284,210. This has increased with 599 tenants receiving Universal Credit and their total arrears are now £440,000. Housing Officers are continuing to work with individual tenants and we will continue to monitor the impact of Universal Credit on our rent accounts. Changes to Universal Credit are due to be implemented shortly, which are intended to reduce the time that a claimant has to wait for their first payment. This should start to help the rent arrears situation.

Q20 How is the roll-out of Universal Credit impacting on staff resources at Rugby Borough Council? Is it having a positive or negative impact?

- A. The rollout of the Universal Credit Full Service has seen the number of claims for Housing Benefit reduce, but at the same time an increase in the amount of claim activity with regards to claims for Council Tax Reduction, where a claim may require amending on a monthly basis due to changes in the amount of Universal Credit in payment.
During 2017, two members of the Benefits Team (approximately 1.5 FTE) left on redundancy grounds to take into account the reduction in the caseload. In September 2017, it was agreed by Council that the Benefits Team and Housing Options Team would be merged in order that the skills and knowledge of this team can be utilised in meeting the challenges that face the Council in complying with the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act which is due to be implemented in April 2018.
In March, Cabinet will be considering a report of the proposed structure of the Community Advice and Support Team and how they plan to meet the challenges that arise from the HRA, Universal Credit and Welfare reform and how we can support our residents through these challenges.
Following the implementation of the new structure and the changes in roles, the staffing level of the team will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that the staffing levels meet the level of activity.

Q10 How much of the council's housing stock is used as temporary accommodation?

A. One hundred and six units of HRA accommodation are in use to fulfil our accommodation duties. Endeavours continue to be made to step up the sourcing of self-contained Private Sector Leased (PSL) accommodation to match the successes in securing housing of multiple occupation via the scheme.

Q11 What actions are Rugby Borough Council taking to tackle rough sleeping in Rugby town centre?

A. A multi-pronged approach is taken. Four people have been matched to supported accommodation and a fifth is in the process of being placed. We are piloting an accommodation-based support placement with two rough sleepers in partnership with addiction services, support providers and criminal justice. In one week 58 separate placement offers were made to 28 rough sleepers. Regular referrals are made to the night shelter. Partnership work is ongoing on ways to prevent homelessness, including the WMCA. Rough sleepers are the end cause and there was a need to identify the issues at an earlier stage. I visited all of the rough sleepers in December with council officers and they were all offered accommodation. There were a number of complex circumstances and accommodation was just one factor.

Supplementary point – concern was raised whether the recommendations of a scrutiny review of homelessness were being implemented and progress was being made.

There was every confidence in the processes being carried out and the recommendations made by councillors.

Officers were congratulated on the way that rough sleepers in the town had been treated and, particularly in relation to other local authorities.

Supplementary point – there were a number of background stories being reported from external agencies.

Rough sleepers often have chaotic lifestyles and a range of issues. It is not just a matter of having a roof overhead.

Q12 What is the council doing to help ex-offenders find accommodation?

A. Ex-offenders who are vulnerable as a result of being in prison or for any other reason are offered interim accommodation if they are homeless. There are a number of ex-offenders in interim accommodation at present. If they are not vulnerable advice is offered on finding accommodation. If they do not meet the terms of the Allocation Policy work is carried out with Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) to co-ordinate solutions

Q13 How much money has the council spent on the Hall of Fame, and how much income has it raised?

A. The annualised set up figure was £300,000 and the operating revenue cost was £23,550. The amount raised in ticket sales is £15,000. Other avenues of income continue to be explored.

Q14 Apart from securing sponsorship for the World Rugby Hall of Fame what initiatives does the Leader have to market this attraction more widely to increase visitor numbers and claw back the lost £100,000 in ticket receipts?

A. No monies have been lost. The figure of £100,000 relates to the forecast of ticket sales, which was not met.

Approaches to marketing are detailed in the report of the World Rugby Hall of Fame Task Group.

Further discussions and meetings will be held with World Rugby and the WMCA. Ongoing discussions with World Rugby have included the installation of brown signs on the surrounding motorway exits into Rugby. New signage has been installed at Rugby railway station and there are signs and brochures in rugby stadiums and service stations around the country.

A visit to Japan, with the Executive Director, took place that included a meeting with the Japanese Tourist Board and Head of Rugby World Cup. Discussions will continue around publicising the HoF as part of the promotion of the Rugby World Cup.

The Hall of Fame has been raised in meetings with the WMCA and events relating to Coventry's City of Culture in 2021 and the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham in 2022. Organisers are keen to build on relationships and promote the Hall of Fame.

Supplementary question - Has Rugby School been supportive?

- A. Yes, Peter Green, the Head Master was a key supporter in bringing the attraction to the town and the relationship with the school is the strongest it has been in recent years. Officers meet with the school staff on a regular basis. Offers of discounted rates, free days, open days and tours have been discussed and put in place.

Supplementary point – the visitor information boards are not up to date. The recent Town Centre Heritage review found that there was a need to link signage between venues and events.

Officers are looking into this, including the installation of touch smart boards.

Q15 Has the green bin charge led to the 24 per cent increase in fly-tipping incidents in the Rugby Borough?

- A. There is no evidence to suggest that the green bin charge has resulted in an increase in fly-tipping but if this changes it will be reviewed. There is an increase in the number of heavy goods vehicles dumping waste, which is a national trend. The council is successful in marketing its investigation services. It is also a matter of education. It is the individual's responsibility to ensure their rubbish is collected and disposed of properly. In many cases waste is collected and then dumped illegally.

Supplementary point - Rental properties and irresponsible private landlords are a real issue and often do not deal with waste responsibly.

This point was noted and will be taken on board.

Q16 What feedback has been forthcoming from the Warwickshire Waste Partnership in terms of reducing the amount of waste in the three-bin system, and to reduce the cost to this authority of taking waste to landfill?

- A. The responsibility for waste disposal lies with Warwickshire County Council. The Warwickshire Waste Partnership (WWP) is working with its member authorities to identify schemes to reduce the overall level of waste. Meetings to discuss the feasibility of options will be held in the coming months.

The following supplementary questions and points were raised:

Q. Are the other local authorities in favour of a “sin bin” approach to improve household recycling, and is this topic discussed in any type of joint leaders’ forum?

A. Information via the Economic Prosperity Board is shared. The WWP is considering a wide range of options which include some potentially contentious suggestions such as three-weekly black bin collections.

People want more information to be able to understand what can and can’t be recycled

This point will be taken on board.

Q. Why is there no contract with the local Climafuel facility?

A. The disposal of waste is the responsibility of WCC who issue the contract. The situation is regarded as perverse when other local authorities are transporting their waste into Rugby. This has been discussed with the plant but Rugby does not fully meet its current waste acceptance criteria. However, they would be prepared to soften their rules based on the fact the plant is situated in the borough.

Waste rejected due to contamination is taken to the plant. Serious action should be taken at council leader level.

Waste and recycling are costly services and it would be very difficult to enter into individual contracts. It is a difficult topic but the lack of change is not through the want of trying.

Q. It is understood there is a confidential report containing a menu of choices that was agreed by the WWP and reported back to local authorities, but it is not known how this was dealt with or consulted upon. Where is the report and how has it been progressed?

If this is a menu of choices, some extreme, why has it been kept confidential, and how can a consensual view be reported back to the WWP?

A. For some councils this is a logistical question. All procedures and processes are on the public agenda and there are no private discussions.

Frank and open discussions have been held with the WWP, which included a range of options. Savings of £7-£8 million could be made, although realistically this is more likely to be nearer £3-4 million across the county based on potential changes to black bin collections, food waste collections and garden waste charging.

To generate income the green bin collection charge was introduced.

One major challenge was that all the neighbouring authorities have different collection schemes and contracts in place and it is difficult to see that a

collective agreement can be put in place soon. There is a lot of work to be done.

Q17 As the Council is set to achieve financial self-sufficiency by 2020, what are you doing to contribute to the plan?

A. Every idea discussed, every paper produced and every decision taken is in line with the Corporate Strategy, of which one of the overarching priorities is to be financially self-sufficient by 2020.

Q18 Following the Autumn Budget 2017 will the Council double council tax on empty properties?

A. The council currently charges 100% on empty properties but from April 2019 local authorities may raise the amount of council tax charged on empty properties from 100% to 200%. This is a matter for Council to decide.

Q19 – See question 9 above

Q20 – see Question 9 above

Additional Supplementary Questions and points were:

Q. How do you see future joint working with WCC or other local authorities?

A. Joint working is the only way forward. There needs to be a rejection of working in isolation and identification of ways of working together, which will help us achieve self-sufficiency.

The sharing of specialised services will happen more often, rather than councils all providing the same services. Procurement was one area where joint purchasing in bulk will result in savings for all organisations.

Q. How can partnership working be developed more widely?

A. The WMCA and the Economic Prosperity Board do get to the core of matters relevant to Rugby. Members are welcome to come to the meetings and listen to the discussions.

Q. Can you give examples of integration?

A. This is already happening but more is needed. Decisions need to be made on how WCC is included. One question was; do we want to become full constitute members of the WMCA? Another topic for debate was the issue of becoming a unitary authority.

Comment - The way Rugby First involved the empty shops' landlords was an unhelpful way of helping rough sleepers in the town centre.

Accommodation had been offered on a number of occasions. Three of the individuals involved lived in a council owned flat, two left voluntarily and one that was moved was offered accommodation. There are a range of reasons that resulted in the actions taken. Rugby First had received a very high volume of complaints from shopkeepers, police and members of the public. There were examples given of open drug taking in front of the public. Unfortunately, there were instances when individuals were given handouts and help from the public but they would use this to buy drugs.

The council officers involved in dealing with the situation went above and beyond their call of duty.

Q. The churches and voluntary groups do a wonderful job helping people but is there anything else the council can do?

A. There is extensive help available. Not all of the shelters were full to capacity over the Christmas period and there are places available for those that want to take them.

Q. What lessons have been learnt in terms of communication?

A. There have been some gaps but the situation in relation to bins has improved. There have been two spells of bad weather which created challenges and

backlogs, but the communication seems to have kept the public informed and largely satisfied.

Comment - The public follow the advice on the council website about reporting bins that have not been emptied but often this does not resolve the problem and the ward councillor is contacted.

Comment - Members should be contacted by officers about matters relating to their ward.

Q. The organisation is tight on capacity at present due to high levels of sickness and staff morale is very low. How is this being monitored and how will information be fed back to members?

A. Nearly all members of staff have one-to-one meetings with their line manager, many on a four-weekly basis. This scheme allows staff to talk about work or non-work matters. Sickness is managed through the set processes and strategy and earlier occupational therapy referrals are made if needed. The Human Resources team is rolling out a scheme to help staff with mental health issues based on a network of support allowing staff to talk about their problems. Access is also available to external counsellors.

Managers would be held responsible for following the routines put in place.

How is this reported?

1 to 1s are intentionally confidential between the participants, but if we chose to monitor formally how many have been carried out and their frequency we could use the internal audit process and the Human Resources team would have records of identified actions that needed to be followed up.

The Chair thanked the Leader and Executive Director for attending the meeting.

Members were invited to volunteer for a task group review on communication and informing and engaging our communities.

CHAIR