

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

31 JANUARY 2017

PRESENT:

Members of Brooke Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Councillors Ms Edwards (Committee Chair), Mrs A'Barrow, Cade, Mrs Garcia, Miss Lawrence, Mrs O'Rourke and Sandison

Members of Whittle Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Councillors H Roberts (Committee Chair), Douglas, Gillias, Mistry (substitute for Councillor Birkett), Pacey-Day and Roodhouse (substitute for Councillor Keeling)

The Leader: Councillor Stokes

Officers:

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

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

RESOLVED THAT – Councillor Roberts be appointed Chair for the meeting.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillors Birkett, Keeling and Mrs New.

3. DISCUSSION WITH THE LEADER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ON PERFORMANCE AND FUTURE STRATEGY

The members of both Brooke and Whittle Overview and Scrutiny Committees had been requested to submit questions in advance of the meeting. A copy of the pre-prepared responses had been circulated to members by email.

In addition to this the following points and questions were raised:

Vision

Q. Where do you see the authority in ten years' time?

A. We should continue on the same path. We have a sound Local Plan and financial plan. The authority is recognised locally and nationally as being a very good pro-growth local authority. I attend many external meetings with various outside bodies, Government officials and ministers and feedback has always been positive. The council's reputation is a credit to its members and officers. There are difficult decisions to be made in the coming weeks but the council remains in a strong position moving forward.

Q. Will the council exist in ten years' time, or will it become part of a unitary authority?

A. The Conservative Group's opinion on unitary authorities is no secret, that this would be the best way forward and would be a vehicle for better services. WCC delivers excellent services at both borough and county level. There were a lot of unknowns and the Conservative Group remains open to engaging in discussions.

Q. Other authorities have joined up some of their back office services. Is this a possibility for Rugby?

A. The council previously entered into a venture with Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council but this was not successful. We have positive experiences of shared service agreements with Daventry District Council and had considered opportunities to join up our waste collection services, although Daventry decided not to progress this option. We are open to discussions if other opportunities come forward.

It is possible that public service hubs will become much more normal within the next ten years and that change will not be restricted to just local government.

Q. How would this affect front line services?

A. This approach would not be limited to back offices. To support the reduction in debt and financial constraints we would look to a greater combination, and explore solutions. A joint waste contract for example could make savings for all authorities involved.

One example of this was three other local authorities that are not geographically attached, sharing their planning service. Each authority has its own planning committee but the back office work is shared.

Q. Would moving services away risk losing local knowledge and experience?

A. The building control service is shared with Warwick DC and Daventry DC and this arrangement is working well. It would be similar to being part of a unitary authority but retaining governance.

Q. Who would officers be accountable to?

A. There isn't a lot of detail available at this stage, so this is difficult to answer but we would retain our own elected members and committees.

There are several examples of local authorities that share Chief Financial Officers which means the officer must balance the differences in policies and politics between these. The key is that overall governance would be retained by each local authority with responsibility for those officers' actions.

Leadership

Q. What keeps you awake at night – are there any key issues of concern?

A. My priorities are to the public, ward constituents and the council – including officers. I am aware that every penny spent by this authority is public money so the key area of focus is to ensure that all members are conscious of how public money is spent, and getting value for money.

Q. It is a fact of life that difficult decisions will impact on people and businesses and would affect vulnerable people. How do you approach this?

A. Decisions are made at a strategic level and there will always be winners and losers. My style of leadership is to bring people along and mitigate concerns. I will hold meetings to offer explanations, or ask people to explain matters to me and the leadership team, including senior offices. I ask that they do not make themselves difficult to get hold of.

Q. If charging for recycling is introduced to help make savings this will have social consequences and won't some sections of the community suffer?

A. This will be a difficult decision to make. The council must maximise efficiencies and respond to challenges set by Government. Other larger councils have scrapped whole departments but we do not have that luxury. The decision on the green waste collection will be controversial, but difficult financial and budgetary decisions are necessary. Other authorities have already made changes and if this is not done now this will cause problems in the future.

Q. What is your, and the organisations, opinion of elected members?

A. I went from back bencher to Leader and view all members as being just as important as the members of Cabinet. There will always be moral choices to make for members acting on behalf of the borough or their own constituents.

Q. Non-executive members were not consulted before the press release regarding the green waste collection was issued. Are members a part of the decision making process, or are they disconnected from what is happening across the organisation?

A. I do not agree with this view. The green waste matter was one big particular issue which was very complicated with little time to take action; officers were under pressure to provide detailed information within a very short timescale.

With regards to the press release, occasionally officers may use wording that is sometimes not in the best interests of the authority. It is disappointing to hear this feedback now when nothing has been raised in the past two years.

There was a genuine need to make a decision quickly, which was based on the evidence reported from the steering group. The report was long and complicated and, having been published on the website, a press release was issued in an attempt to inform the media. It was important that the information was publicised on the council website and this was an attempt to be as transparent as possible and explain the rationale behind that decision.

The way the decision was taken was not ideal, though constitutionally correct. Officers worked over the weekend to enable all members to take an informed decision but this situation should not happen again.

The Autumn Statement brought further financial challenges and the topic was brought forward by Cabinet as it did not want to hide details within a budget report. The criticism over the press release was accepted.

The recommendations within the latest report are those of officers. The Chief Financial Officer has outlined the best options for the council and it will be for all members to make a decision at the meeting of full Council.

I am more than happy to be involved as and when I am needed and pride myself on how I carry out the roles of Council Leader and Group Leader. I have supported Labour councillors on the Oakfield Park matter and I strongly believe every councillor adds value.

Q. How do you measure performance of Cabinet members, and whether this is successful?

A. The structure aligns one cabinet member per head of service. I meet every portfolio holder on a four weekly basis, then cabinet members meet once a month, but if there are particular issues they will meet more frequently. Meetings take place at least once a month between portfolio holders and heads of service.

I keep track of performance and have matched the individual's skills to the requirements of each cabinet position.

Success can be assessed by identifying where savings can be made and used as a benchmark to measure performance.

Q. Would you say the Environment and Public Realm Portfolio Holder was successful?

A. Yes, some criticism has been received but a difficult decision was made and carried out. Unfortunately, there were issues around consultation but an attempt had been made to communicate with every household in Rugby via leaflets. However, the contractor distributed these with junk mail and then there was further criticism when Works Services Unit staff were deployed to deliver leaflets.

Q. At the last joint overview and scrutiny committees meeting, the portfolio holders came along well prepared but the Environment and Public Realm Portfolio Holder gave no real answers or gave any indication of any underlying issues. Is this a concern?

A. This was a complex issue and problems were caused through the press and social media. To put the matter into context, more comments were received from the public on the Oakfield Rec development and Brandon Stadium.

Q. The same old faces appear at member training. What can be done to get more councillors to attend training?

A. There is a training budget in place but several sessions either get cancelled or very few take part. The budget should be used, or it will be lost. Some councils publish attendance as an incentive to attend.

Members commented that some topics such as safeguarding and equality and diversity were covered through their professional roles and a suggestion was made that Training Tracker would be a useful tool.

There were a number of e-learning packages on the market, and this was just one of many options being explored. Although some topics may have been covered through members' private or professional life, there are some situations where training needs to be tailored to suit local government and it is still important to attend.

Members were invited to submit any suggestions.

Other comments made included:

- The democratic services team produce an annual training programme (which is already done).
- When did the training co-ordinator group last meet?
- What training is compulsory?
- Attending during the daytime can be difficult.
- Newly elected members tend to learn as they go along.
- Party groups normally nominate a mentor for new members.
- There is a lot of good training offered, but there is a need to get councillors to attend.
- Long term councillors may only need re-fresher training.

It was agreed there was a need to reinvigorate member training one way or another.

Corporate Strategy

Copies of the draft Corporate Strategy were circulated to members. These had a new front sheet design, tag line, and key priorities including the rationale behind the choice of priorities in each portfolio area.

The draft Corporate Strategy will be considered by Cabinet prior to submission to Council for full consultation. Group Leaders received the draft copy two weeks ago.

Members were offered the opportunity of submitting suggestions or comments to be incorporated before the wider consultation takes place.

Q. Where does homelessness sit within the corporate strategy?

A. Members will note that this is the first priority under the Communities and Homes Portfolio.

Q. It is not just about access to high-quality housing. Do we really think this is the main priority for homelessness?

A. The aim is to consult members on the content of the strategy and include areas they think are important, and make the strategy as broad as possible.

The Chairman of the Homelessness Scrutiny Sub Group reported that work was ongoing and the group were continuing to gather evidence.

The council is leading on the Trailblazer project, based on homelessness prevention. A bid for £865,000 of funding over a three-year period was successful and the first payment is now due. This will enable an officer seconded from the housing service to lead a countywide focus on prevention work, which will hopefully result in real savings across a variety of organisations through early intervention.

Environment and Public Health

Waste Collection

Q. The literature over the green bin services has confused councillors and members of the public. What steps are being taken to ensure that any future literature is written in language that is easily understood by all?

A. The literature for the suspension of the green waste service was produced in a hurry. A lessons learnt meeting was held and a project implementation team has been established to look into all the potential implications of charging for garden waste collection. In future communications will be better tailored to suit the audience, and will be tested on non-subject experts.

Information that was published on the council website appears to have been incorrect. This has been cleansed and all data is now correct. We are now into the second week of the reintroduction of green waste collection.

Members will need to make a decision at the meeting of Special Council on 7 February, on whether to introduce a chargeable service and the price/frequency.

Members commented there was a need to demonstrate to councillors that officers have corrected matters. Better consultation was needed and the improvement of communication could be considered through the scrutiny process with it being agreed that Matthew Deaves would be invited to a scrutiny meeting in the near future to provide an outline of the approach to be taken by the Communications Team.

Environment

Q. Does the Council have an emissions strategy?

A. No, but it has a Carbon Management Plan produced with the Carbon Trust. This highlights a range of actions aimed at lowering the carbon footprint such as installing LED lighting, a biomass boiler, better insulation and window improvements etc.etc.

Q. How green are RBC's fleet of vehicles? Are there any plans to fuel the bin lorries and buses on Compressed Natural Gas (CNG), as there is a fuel station located just outside Rugby?

A. A previously used CNG refuse freighter was unable to work effectively on landfill sites. This restricted us and resulted in additional costs. All current freighters met the highest emissions standards at the time of purchase. The vehicles use around 30,000 litres of fuel each month so our own fuel store is required.

Growth and Investment

It was acknowledged that questions on the topic of the Hall of Fame had been covered by the report to Cabinet for its meeting on 6 February, which all members had received a copy of.

Art Gallery and Museum

Q. When is the working party looking at the future of the museum being convened?

A. It was agreed this would be put to overview and scrutiny and a brief on this was awaited.

Local Economy

Q. What meetings has the Leader attended, or intends to have, about bringing increased businesses into the Borough?

A. I attend meetings of the Joint Economic Prosperity Board, West Midlands, Federations of Small Businesses, District Councils Network, Rugby BID and I have given talks at the Rugby Small Business Luncheon. I go out and meet businesses in the town and have had some interesting private discussions with retailers and successful conversations with the Swan Centre, which have resulted in direct results.

The Network Rail's Rail Operating Centre has informed me that they were impressed with the way RBC handled its application. It is moving its operations from Euston and the North into the new centre in Rugby. An invitation was extended to all members to visit the centre.

A leading Japanese company reported that they chose to locate their business at Ansty Business Park purely on the basis of the pro-active approach by myself and council officers. Their decision was a direct result of our intervention. Businesses and their representatives are targeted and telephone calls or meetings are arranged.

Q. Rugby's key business strengths are in the communications, retail and logistics areas and many small offices are being developed around the town centre. Should we be encouraging other businesses and not just retail to the town?

A. Yes, we are open to discussions with anyone. The best form of recommendation is word of mouth, and we already have an excellent reputation. With the Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses we talk to businesses about their needs and help point them in the right direction, whether this is in, or outside, of the town centre.

It was acknowledged that Rugby, and in particular the Ansty Business Park, has a lot to offer. There were some concerns that the media report this as being situated in Coventry but the Leader stressed the businesses themselves were well aware they were in the Rugby Borough. The new London Taxi factory should be open and operating by late spring.

Q. There is a £150K transfer of business rates to the town centre – where has this money been spent and what plans are there to manage the split between the in and out of town shopping arrangements and are there any plans for a central bus/coach station?

A. More has been invested recently than in previous years on actions to support the future vision for the town centre including:

- Hall of Fame – foyer remodelling
- Town Centre Public Realm Review and proposals
- Improvements to town centre signage
- Town Centre marketing

There are no plans for a central bus/coach station.

There is a misconception that the council owns the town centre. We don't and have no control over business rates.

Rugby School own school property only. They had been discouraged from purchasing units that would have competed with Salters and Heaphys but these stores have now closed and the school may look into this again.

Members commented on the effects of internet shopping and how residents and visitors view the town centre. There are a lot of empty shops and the opening of Elliott's Field has affected footfall.

The Leader responded that the council maintains a positive approach. It is important to keep doing what we do well and maintain the town centre as a clean and safe place, and continue to market the town. The Hall of Fame and the new town centre branding will help to support the objectives laid out in the Town Centre Action Plan.

There is a need to be bold and support the re-design and structure of the town.

Out of town shopping has an impact and draws people into Rugby. The new centres attract people who are staying but there are challenges. Members gave some examples of these:

- Marketing at the rail station
- Marketing of the Hall of Fame at Elliott's Field
- Easy bus links from the town centre to Elliott's Field
- Parking near the Hall of Fame, particularly for groups
- Voucher/ticket discount scheme

Members were informed that tour operators were not actively promoting the Hall of Fame because the admission is currently free and they make their profit by negotiating group discounts. It was likely they would become more willing to promote the attraction once ticketing charges are introduced.

Members commented that greater connectivity was needed with links to new housing developments. It was suggested a working party made up of partner agencies could look into this.

There was a borough wide transport plan in place, and the Local Plan also goes some way to addressing these issues.

A Destination Management Plan has proved successful for Stratford and Warwick and perhaps Rugby could do more.

Communities and Homes

Ageing Population

Q. It is recognised that we have an ageing population, the Local Plan even refers to this, so what action is Rugby Council taking to prepare for an ageing population across the Borough?

A. The Promoting Independent Living review carried out last year resulted in a number of actions. Independent living is not exclusively about older people but some actions taken have included:

- Work to re-designate some sheltered housing as general needs has been halted while housing needs are assessed.
- Through the Local Plan the design of new developments and amenities will be made attractive for people of all ages.
- Look into ways to reverse the fear of anti-social behaviour and crime.
- The Head of Communities and Homes has visited and carried out work at Drover's House to learn what they do to help and support the elderly and people suffering from forms of dementia, and how this information can be used by the council in its service delivery.

Members commented that a previous retirement housing scheme based at the old Herbert Grey College site could be reviewed. The Head of Growth and Investment would be asked to look into this.

Homelessness

Q. Does the council use Streetlink, and if so what are the figures on rough sleeping reported?

A. Yes, the council does use Streetlink. The last survey was carried out on a day in November by the Home and Communities Agency and the result was none were found. The Housing Options Team report that there are typically 2-5 people rough sleeping at any one time, that they are aware of. Hope 4 state the number is often much higher on some occasions. The council believes that the official figure is low and does not include people sleeping in tents or shelters etc., or reflect at all what is happening outside the town centre.

The report on the findings of the Homelessness Scrutiny Sub Group was expected to be available shortly.

Housing Repairs

Q. A number of elderly residents have had problems with central heating boilers breaking down and not being repaired over the weekend. Does the council have out-of-hours maintenance contracts in place for its properties, and is there an emergency contact service?

A. Our own maintenance operatives work on a rota basis out of hours, and can be contacted through the Control Centre. However, they do not cover gas and electric so there are separate contracts in place for these. There are also separate contracts for specific items such as lifts.

The Head of Corporate Resources will be asked to check the service contracts.

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

CHAIR