

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

17 OCTOBER 2016

PRESENT:

Membership of Brooke Overview and Scrutiny Committee: Councillors Claire Edwards (Chair), Mrs A'Barrow, Cade, Mrs Garcia, Lewis (substituting for Councillor Mrs New), Mrs O'Rourke and Sandison

Membership of Whittle Overview and Scrutiny Committee: Councillors Birkett, Douglas, Gillias, Keeling and Roberts

Portfolio Holders: Councillors Leigh Hunt (Communities and Homes Portfolio Holder), Mrs Timms (Growth and Investment Portfolio Holder), Mrs Parker (Environment and Public Realm Portfolio Holder) and Ms Robbins (Corporate Resources Portfolio Holder)

Officers: Veronika Beckova (Democratic Services Officer)

In attendance: Councillor Roodhouse

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillors Miss Lawrence, Mrs New and Pacey-Day.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Item 4 of Part 1 – Councillor Douglas declared a general non-pecuniary interest by virtue of his employment as Policy and Campaigns Officer for the National Federation of Property Professionals.

3. DISCUSSION WITH PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

The council's portfolio holders attended the meeting to answer questions on performance of their service areas:

Environment and Public Realm

Question 1

In the report to cabinet dated 3rd October regarding the green bin service it states the recycling industry has been in decline for some years with our contract for the Materials Recycling Facility due to expire in 2019. This deals with dry recycled items. Organic green recyclable material is dealt with using a different process in Warwickshire: in-vessel composting. The product mainly used for top dressing of land fill sites as those come to the end of their life and as a soil improver in agriculture. Is this facility still available to the council?

We are currently using in-vessel composting and I have not been made aware that that will change. The Cabinet Working Party will be looking at this.

Question 2

Methane is considered eight times more damaging to the environment than CO2. How does the council intend to tackle this impact to the environment? Also reduce the possibility of green fly tipping into our natural environment and the spread of non-British evasive species by green fly tipping? Should green bins be emptied less frequently?

This is one of the issues that will also be looked at by the Cabinet Working Party. I have not yet seen a report on the matter.

The green bin collection service will be suspended for 12 weeks. People will need to use the black bin for their food waste. There will be impacts as it is a very valued service but tonnage is very low during the three coldest months of the year. Following the 12 weeks suspension, a thorough analysis will be carried out. I am not aware of any other decisions being made about the service.

Question 3

Home/community composting

Has the borough/county looked at community composting to support the growth in edible community gardens? Isn't it true that there is no such thing as organic waste, just a product that has not been fully utilised? Is there any way that you can encourage people to take on home composting?

I am very keen on composting. I am not aware of any local community composting projects that could be supported. We have some great champions within our communities and I hope that we can harness their advice. It's an area that will be explored going forward. In the 12 weeks that the green bin service is suspended, I will put the guidance on home composting forward for inclusion in the promotional materials.

Question 4

Grounds maintenance of heritage churchyards or closed churchyards where the council has agreed to ensure their up keep, particularly in non-parish areas where there is no parish precept to cover grass cutting or invasive plant growth within the grounds. How frequently are they inspected? How many cuts per year should they expect to see to maintain those churchyards?

In respect of Church of England, the council has a legal duty to maintain land that falls within parish areas. The costs are recovered under the precept charge. Each site has its individual needs. Churchyards are part of our green spaces and their up keep is important.

A member asked a supplementary question regarding the St Michael's Church in Brownsover and was advised that the issue is being dealt with by the relevant officer.

Corporate Resources

Question 1

The council corporate property section has recently carried out repairs to The Retreat. Shouldn't it now be looking for the building to make an income for the council by letting it? When it was put on the market by the former leader of the council it failed to attract any interest from the commercial sector and had to be taken off the market.

Any works carried out since the council vacated the Retreat and the Lawn buildings have been for either health and safety, security or to protect the buildings. There has not been the necessity for much of this work to be done.

Options are being considered for the future of these buildings as a whole and whilst it may be that leasing them to generate income is an option, there is currently work being undertaken to consider the future of this entire site and until that has been concluded, it is considered best not to constrain ourselves or potentially incur cost to get these buildings to a lettable standard if it is only to be for a short time.

Once the work undertaken to consider the future of the entire site is completed, members will be informed of the way forward.

Question 2

In view of the collapse of sterling, how does that impact on the finances of RBC? Do you have a plan to mitigate those impacts?

There is a two part answer to this question:

Inflation – from the council's budget perspective, we are affected somewhat by cost increases due to the change in exchange rate but this is limited as the majority of the council's expenditure is salary based which is not directly affected by the changes in exchange rates. The significant expenditure lines, that are most likely to be affected by the fall in Sterling, are our gas and electricity bills and also fuel costs. However, any inflationary cost increases will be mitigated by the on-going energy saving efficiency measures that the council has put in place. Overall, any inflationary pressures will be handled as part of the budget setting process.

Some of the efficiency measures taken by the council were installation of solar panels on all council buildings as appropriate which will cut our long term energy costs and also the impending Waste Service Route Optimiser that will assist us with managing our fuel costs. We are looking carefully at our energy costs to help the council save as much money as we possibly can.

Investments – the council doesn't invest in non-sterling products so there is no particular impact. This approach is in accordance with the council's Treasury Management Strategy that was approved by Council on 13 February 2016.

Question 3

Albert Street premises are now housing the Repairs Team – what are the plans for the top floors and what is the timetable?

Some members have visited the site and are aware of the state of disrepair of the top floor of the building. They are being considered as part of the overall Asset Management Strategy. Several options are being for whether the floors would be best utilised as office space for the council, a commercial lease or other use altogether within the constraints of the current temporary planning permission. The business case for any use will need to balance the refurbishment cost against the relatively short term available. The current planning permission expires in December 2018 and this is scheduled to be reviewed by the Property Services Manager in April 2017. It is anticipated that this site, together with others, will be a substantial part the draft Asset Management Strategy which will be considered by members early in the New Year.

A member asked a supplementary question regarding underutilised buildings as a whole and renting them out to generate income. The portfolio holder's response was that renting out any underutilised or unoccupied buildings is the best way forward for the council to generate more income.

Growth and Investment

Question 1

Does Rugby have surplus public sector land? And if so, where is it located?

We put all of our land into the Local Plan process this(including leased land) was assessed by officers as they went through SHLAA and the Local Plan process before it came to council. I am not aware of any surplus public sector land in the borough. The County Council has some farm land that it is promoting for development in the South West Urban Extension.

Question 2

If the Local Plan is agreed, what percentage of ad hoc planning applications does the council think will go ahead outside of the designated areas?

Each planning application that is received is considered by the Planning Committee completely autonomously from the council. It must be determined on its own merits and it depends on what is submitted to us. Adopting a Local Plan that releases more deliverable housing land into supply across the borough is the best way of meeting Government policy and regaining control of planning applications.

With the dispersion of the sites that are put forward in this Local Plan, we are more likely to be able to meet our housing needs within those areas which will allow us to resist planning applications in other areas.

At this stage of our Local Plan, we can't apply for funding from the recently announced investment pot which can be used for our infrastructure. This funding requires authorities to have an adopted Local Plan.

Our officers' recommendation is to have a Local Plan in place which is controlled, as far as possible, by the council. If we don't have an adopted Local Plan by March 2017, one may be imposed on us where inspectors will work with our officers and make the decisions. Any delay will cause more difficulties for us.

Question 3

How much is the development and adoption of the Local Plan going to cost?

We will try to stay within the budget and I will circulate the actual figure to all members.

Question 4

Planning policy

Do we have a plan to ensure developers build homes that are already future proofed, i.e. homes for life that don't need expensive later adaptations to accommodate residents with limited mobility, etc?

There isn't any justification for us seeking to require design or construction standards beyond those required nationally. Changes to building regulations in recent year have made various advances in these areas and continue to do so. Through the Local Plan consultation, we have received a lot of comments (particularly in villages) suggesting that a proportion of new homes should be specifically for older persons. This is something we are now considering prior to moving to the submission stage of the plan.

Question 5

What actions are you taking to encourage developers to build properties suitable for older residents wishing to move out of family sized homes?

This is something that comes across strongly in the comments received in the Local Plan consultation. There is only so much that we can ask for but we can put policies in place which guide developers as to what we need locally.

Question 6

Considering that large lorries can cause houses to vibrate and wear out residential roads when moving between building sites, why are waste movement programmes not mandatory for all major developments to mitigate the effects on local residents?

You can have something written in a plan but trying to enforce it is a completely different matter. It is down to being a considerate constructor. It is something to keep in mind when major developments are put forward where it would be more of an issue. Bridges also need to be taken into consideration in any routing plans.

The Warwickshire Minerals Plan is coming up for consultation. It's the best place to look at lorry routing with regards to quarry movements. We were particularly successful in Wolston where there was a lorry routing plan in place to avoid the villages around.

Communities and Homes

Question 1

When are we going to build Council Houses? How do we make that possible?

We have built new council houses in Parkfield Road, Dunchurch and Grandborough and rebuilt council houses in Pailton, Dunchurch and Grandborough. Also the development in Hillmorton has been specifically designed for houses to be reconfigured as needs change.

In addition to what we have built, we also enabled housing associations to build houses around the borough. All of the future developments are supposed to have a social housing element and we will continue to work with housing associations and others to bring forward more affordable housing. We can also increase our stock through the Private Sector Leasing Scheme, and are also potentially considering buying into private sector.

A number of new national policies are coming through from the Government and the impact of these is not yet fully known. Until the national policies are sorted out, officers were asked to not to carry out any more work on developing council housing sites.

As soon guidance on the new national policies becomes available, it will be shared with members via the Housing Member Conversation. The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday 22 November at 5.30pm and it is hoped that as many members as possible will attend.

Question 2

RBC owned garages – many are in disrepair. What are we doing about them?

We have carried out a complete review of all of our garage sites with regards to redevelopment. In New Bilton, we had a garage site which we leased to the community and they set it up as a community parking area a few years ago.

Warwickshire County Council (WCC) was offered a site in Long Lawford to use for parking as there are plans to expand the local primary school. The proposal was originally refused, but WCC has now expressed interest in the site. We are prepared to lease the site to WCC. They will be responsible for the site clearance and getting it ready for parking. Discussions are still ongoing. Clearly no housebuilding on garage sites will take place until the impact of national policies, and their effect on the HRA, is known.

Question 3

Housing Repairs and Adaptations

As a borough, do we put people before financial cost of adaptation or do we insist move to already adapted property which may be many miles from people's home community and support networks? What is the time period for adaptations?

The council was the instigator behind the county-wide Heart Project which has resulted in much shortened time for adaptations. It all depends on the individual's value judgment, and if they are prepared to wait for a few weeks for the adaptations to be carried out or wish to move to a property which is already adapted. Adaptations in the private sector are covered by the Disability Facilities Grant.

Adaptations used to take around 180 days. This time frame has been reduced to around 90 days. Rugby already had the best service in Warwickshire which was improved even further.

The following additional questions were asked at the meeting:

What is the cost of paper printouts?

The cost is very high. At one time it wasn't cost effective for everyone to have an electronic device. Now it's becoming so much cheaper. Year on year, it will be become much more cost effective to get rid of paper and only have electronic devices, but it is no use investing in hardware if people won't, or don't know how to, use them. Therefore, we need to understand what people need, and how they want to use it.

Before the next member conversation, all members will receive a questionnaire about what their technology needs are, etc which is part of the IT review, and this will form a large part of the debate at the next Communities and Homes conversation.

What are our Corporate Priorities going forward?

Environment and Public Realm

The portfolio is working closely with the Head of Service on the priorities which are yet to be finalised.

Corporate Resources

1. Optimise income generation and identify new revenue opportunities

- Develop a commercial approach where appropriate to delivering existing and new services
- Provide support to other organisations to deliver common objectives
- Continue to review our services and charge appropriate fees and charges

2. Prioritise use of resources to better meet changing customer needs and demands

- Redesign and implement new models of service delivery
- Plan and deliver services in partnership with other public sector organisations
- Optimise the use of our land and property assets
- Continue to develop our workforce to ensure the Council has the right staff with the right skills to meet changing needs and demands
- Effectively manage the Council's strategic and operational risks

3. Ensure the Council works at optimum efficiency

- Harness the use of IT to adopt more modern ways of working
- Continue to review our services to optimise efficient working, remove waste and provide better value for money
- Keep tight control of our finances, with robust management of our assets and procurement

Growth and Investment

1. Promote sustainable growth and economic prosperity

- Delivering an ambitious local plan
- Conserving and enhancing the natural and built environment and embracing Rugby's proud heritage and history
- Enabling the delivery of strategic investment sites across the Borough

2. Work with partners to promote and grow Rugby's visitor economy

- Enhancing the reputation of The Rugby Town through delivery of the World Rugby Hall of Fame visitor attraction
- Celebrating our cultural and artistic heritage through Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, The Benn Hall and popular events and festivals
- Supporting Rugby town centre as a visitor destination for leisure, retail and cultural activities

3. Encourage healthy and active lifestyles to improve well-being within the borough

- Ensuring access to sporting facilities across the Borough including making sure the Queens Diamond Jubilee Centre plays a key role in delivering leisure and recreation activities
- Working with partners to organise and support access to physical activity and sporting activities for young people
- Using sport, heritage and art to support wellbeing and combat social isolation

Communities and Homes

1. Ensure residents have a home that works for them and is affordable

- Help people to access high-quality housing to prevent homelessness
- Make the best use of existing homes, whatever their tenure
- Help people to live independently

2. Deliver digitally enabled services that residents can access

- Develop a digital strategy that works for the council and for our residents
- Engage with partner organisations and the voluntary and community sector to help people to use online services
- Act with our partners to ensure that people have access to digital services

3. Understand our communities and enable people to take an active part in them

- Engage with the voluntary and community sector to recognise the differing needs of our communities
- Work with our partners to encourage people to actively engage with existing local groups, or to start one
- Identify local issues and engage with a range of organisations to help people to identify solutions that work for them

CHAIR