
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, Kent, ME10 3HT on Wednesday, 14 October 2015 from 7.00 - 9.57 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Mike Baldock, Cameron Beart (substitute for Councillor Samuel Koffie-Williams), Andy Booth (Chairman), Lloyd Bowen (Vice-Chairman), Derek Conway, Mike Dendor, Mick Galvin, Mike Henderson, Ken Ingleton, Peter Marchington, Prescott, Ben Stokes and Roger Truelove.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Peter Binnie, Amber Christou, Zoe Kent, Jo Millard, Bob Pullen, Pete Raine and Nick Vickers.

APOLOGY: Councillor Samuel Koffie-Williams.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Mike Cosgrove, Duncan Dewar-Whalley, Harrison, Samuel Koffie-Williams, Ghlin Whelan and John Wright.

264 CHANGE TO THE ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chairman advised of a change to the running order of the meeting, to bring forward the item on the Council Tax Support Scheme.

265 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 9 September 2015 (Minute Nos. 202 – 210) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

266 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

267 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Finance, the Revenues and Benefits Manager and the Head of Finance. The Cabinet Member for Finance advised that there had been no change in the recommendation from 2015/16 to 2016/17.

A Member asked how many properties had been empty for more than two years and was advised that there were approximately 65 long term empty properties and that staff working on the empty homes scheme were made aware of this. In response to a further question, the Revenues and Benefits Manager advised that pensioners on a low income received full Council Tax support.

The Chairman referred to Table 5 in the report and sought confirmation on the amount collected. The Revenues and Benefits Manager advised that she hoped to maintain the level of collection, around another £200,000 had been collected from 2013/14 and future amounts could fluctuate due to fraud issues, changed earnings or benefit renewals.

A Member was concerned that outstanding amounts were not just written off and was advised that debts were collected continuously and not written off.

The Chairman advised that the document would be reviewed and any changes considered. He thanked the Cabinet Member for Finance, the Revenues and Benefits Manager and the Head of Finance for their attendance.

268 UPDATE ON SITTINGBOURNE TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, the Director of Regeneration and the Special Projects Manager.

The Cabinet Member for Regeneration introduced the report and gave an update on progress. A Member referred to the map attached to the report and questioned the dates for commencement of works; he was advised by the Director of Regeneration that the map was out of date and he would provide an updated, more readable map. The Director of Regeneration also gave a summary of outstanding issues; detailed design and highway issues; conclusion of the Section 106 Agreement; and agreement of the lease of the cinema (heads of terms had been agreed). He advised that work was not likely to commence before March 2016 and that the building of the multi-storey car park would commence at the same time as the development of site 1. Due to the loss of parking at that site, temporary parking was to be provided at the Biffa waste site. There would also be a cut-through access through to the High Street.

A Member was concerned about the effect on shops at the west end of the High Street with the loss of the car park at Cockleshell Walk and the Special Projects Manager agreed to provide the Member with more detail on car parks.

In answer to questions from Members, the Director of Regeneration advised that Quinn Estates and Hause and Holm had signed a deal for all of the phase 1 residential units at site 1, the residential apartments at site 2 that would be 1-bedroom apartments for private rent and site 3 that would be similar. He also advised that there would be more than 300 car park spaces in the multi-storey car park at site 5, the retail area at site 6 covered 35,000 square feet and the 7-screen cinema at site 4 was 29,000 square feet. Negotiations were taking place with major restaurant chains to rent the ground floor of the cinema site and the report in the planning approval set out details of the remodelling of highways in this location.

After further questions, Members were advised that there would be approximately 500 cinema seats, the anticipated opening of the cinema was at the end of 2017 and the cinema operator would tailor the opening times to suit the local need.

A Member acknowledged that it was a large, complex project which was only partly under the Council's control, but was concerned at the lack of progress and more definitive timing of the development. The Cabinet Member for Regeneration advised that with so many partners involved, so many processes to go through and some unpredicted issues, the Council did not have full control of the scheme, but the project was moving in stages and there were regular operational, directional and partner meetings and on-going discussions. A timetable had not been given as delays caused disappointment and only non-confidential information was released.

In response, a Member was concerned that Members and the public were not aware of regular meetings or progress that had been made. The Director of Regeneration explained his frustration at the legal complexities of the project but advised that it was closer to achieving commencement than ever before.

The Chairman said it was unrealistic to give specific dates or a timetable as the Council were among a number of partners in the project and the Cabinet Member for Regeneration stressed the importance of finalising the legal documents thoroughly.

In response to questions from a Member, the Director of Regeneration advised that £2.5million had been approved from LGF Funding to support the highways and infrastructure works; the £60,000 costs of the proposed footpath linking the multi-storey car park on St. Michael's Road to the High Street would be met by Spirit of Sittingbourne within the Section 106 Agreement and would be built to adequate levels and be adopted so there would be no further future costs to the Council. He also advised that the Spirit of Sittingbourne had previously considered purchasing The Forum but Tesco would be marketing it again. He also stated that the planning permission for a Travel Lodge hotel at the Bell Centre had now lapsed.

The Special Projects Officer advised that there had been difficulties in the highway design near the train station as it needed to be designed to be safe and work for taxis, buses, and passenger drop-off, as well as considering that the route was the main A2 through Sittingbourne. He advised that the Section 278 Agreement and other detail was nearing agreement. He also advised that Network Rail had raised no objection to the project, it had no adverse impact on their passengers and they were satisfied with the initial plans. Network Rail could put pressure on South East Trains if there was an objection. The Special Projects Officer also advised that the proposal would be going to the National Rail Regulator to approve and the target date for finalisation was 31 March 2016.

In answer to a question about the appointment of a contractor for the multi-storey car park, the Special Projects Officer advised that the Council's legal procurement was followed, the tender process carried out and Huber Car Park systems was their preferred contractor. As preferred contractor, they would not have to go through the tender process again as a fixed price had been agreed.

A Member asked how housebuilding on the Tesco site north of the railway would affect the number of houses allocated in the Local Plan and was advised that if a developer built less than the planned 450 houses there would be a shortfall, but if it built more there would be a windfall. The Director of Regeneration also confirmed the outstanding issues to be resolved on the town centre development were cinema lease; vacant possession of the Fountain Street site; formal grant of planning permission; Kent County Council to agree highway design; Network Rail to agree layout; design matters of properties and details in the Market Square.

In answer to a question on vacant possession of units in Fountain Street, the Special Projects Officer advised that tenants had been given notice to quit and the leases would terminate on 31 March 2016, but there was a monthly extension clause included to stay if there was further delay.

A Member asked about the provision for parking at the proposed hotel and another Member suggested basement parking should be considered as part of the planning application.

In answer to a question as to whether consideration had been given to the re-opening of the subway between the railway and The Forum, the Director of Regeneration said he was not aware of the subway.

A Member suggested that since the initial large signs announcing the project had been erected, there should have been a further update and the Cabinet Member for Regeneration advised that each partner had their own communication team and there should be an announcement about the cinema before Christmas 2015.

A Member highlighted the external condition of 34 High Street, Sittingbourne as the internal of the building was being refurbished for place making and was advised by the Director of Regeneration that since it was in the Conservation Area, planning permission was necessary for external works and had been submitted. When asked about plans to encourage visitors to the High Street, he was advised that the report was not about the High Street, but extra visitors to the cinema and restaurants would encourage visitors to the High Street and that Starbucks and Costa Coffee were already investing in the High Street in advance of the Regeneration.

The Chairman advised that discussions on Phase 2 of the scheme would be revisited on an agreeable date in the future.

269 REVIEW OF HOUSING SERVICES

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Housing and the Head of Resident Services to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Housing referred to the objectives of the Housing Services Performance Review and advised that the provision of temporary accommodation was an issue for all district councils, not just Swale. He explained that Housing Services worked with those people who presented as homeless, landlords and with young people to prevent homelessness, but numbers of homeless were increasing.

The Head of Resident Services explained that Swale's housing problems were similar to those in Thanet and advised that the main issues were residents with mental health issues unable to access private housing, lack of affordable or supported housing, families moving to the Borough from more expensive areas and lack of suitable-sized properties. She advised that after the recent purchase of a property to house families, another property was already being sourced.

A Member gave examples of inadequate properties and landlords' unfair eviction action, and suggested a Registered Landlord Scheme and outlined its benefits. She also suggested Members should shadow the Housing Enforcement Team and highlighted the lack of four and five bedroom properties to house larger families.

A Member asked what the review was hoping to achieve and suggested using the data from the Temporary Accommodation Provision for Swale Homeless

Households report presented to the Cabinet meeting on 7 October 2015 to see if these objectives were met.

A Member suggested the review should go wider than focusing just on temporary housing and agreed that private landlords should be examined and representations sought from them in order for the Council to work more effectively with them. He gave examples of poor landlords and suggested that more pressure should be put on Central Government for longer tenancy agreements. He sought clarification from the Head of Resident Services whether the number of affordable homes being built would continue to fall lower than last year's level of 73, and how much private accommodation was available in different areas of the Borough. He also suggested communicating with Amicus Horizon and other housing associations to unlock opportunities for building more accommodation in the future.

A number of Members supported the suggestion of a Landlord Register. Other suggestions included the review of rural area landlords; the prosecution of landlords who provided sub-standard housing; developers to be encouraged to supply 1-bedroom houses as there was a shortage of accommodation to downsize to; a shared ownership scheme; mobile homes as cheap, affordable temporary or permanent accommodation and the Council leasing properties from private landlords.

In answer to the suggestions and questions raised, the Head of Resident Services responded with the following:

- There were an increasing number of larger families but Housing Associations were not building larger properties
- It was difficult to secure evidence in cases of unlawful evictions but the new Protection of Eviction Act came into effect last week to assist
- Landlords were prosecuted; the team were very proactive
- Due to regulations, they had been unable to compile a Landlord Register but changes in law meant this option could be revisited
- She would provide the information from the report on Temporary Accommodation Provision for Swale Homeless Households
- There was a strong Landlord Forum
- She agreed that landlords needed incentives to co-operate, there were costs and affordability issues and the landlord's property needed to be available for the tenant for 2 years
- It was not possible to know the number of private landlords in the Borough
- Housing was not the cause of mental health issues but many residents with mental health issues had lost their home as a consequence
- There were local issues with residents related to legal high drugs and ex-offenders and she suggested Chief Inspector Tony Henley be invited to a future meeting to contribute to the review
- The Housing Register was not about housing needs in the Borough, it did not give a full picture and could not be used as evidence for planning applications any more
- Housing Services would look more sensitively at what sites were available
- It was not possible to use mobile homes for temporary accommodation as the legislation was restrictive

The Cabinet Member for Housing advised that the Landlord Forum was well attended, offered up to date legal information and incentives for landlords to attend. He referred to the National Housing Federation Booklet to assist with the review and confirmed the details of the next Landlord Forum as 5.30pm in the Council Chamber on 27th October 2015. The Head of Residence Services agreed to send the link of the Housing Enforcers television programme, in which various staff had taken part, to Members.

The Chairman was encouraged by the ideas put forward and suggested a Member from each geographical area of Sittingbourne, Sheppey and Faversham could lead on the review. He thanked the Cabinet Member for Housing and the Head of Resident Services for their attendance.

270 REPORT BACK ON CALL-INS

Members noted the decision on the Members' Localism Grant.

271 REVIEWS AT FOLLOW-UP STAGE AND LOG OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Policy and Performance Officer introduced the report and advised that in future reports he would be removing the reviews that had been implemented. Members resolved that the report be noted.

272 REVIEW PLANS

The Policy and Performance Officer introduced the report and advised that the review plans had been updated to reflect the discussion at the last meeting.

A discussion ensued and the Chairman suggested a task and finish group for the Housing review with a Member leading for each area of the Borough. It was agreed that Councillor Mike Dendor with assistance from Councillor Derek Conway would lead for the Sittingbourne area, Councillor Mike Henderson would lead for Faversham and the Chairman with assistance from Councillor Harrison would lead for the Isle of Sheppey.

The Policy and Performance Officer advised that the Head of Planning Services would be in attendance at the Local Plan Enquiry in November and December 2015 and the Chairman agreed that the Development Control Review should be delayed until early January 2015 in order that the Head of Planning Services could give the review his full attention.

A discussion took place to consider the appropriate time to commence the Leisure and Tourism review.

Members resolved that the new plans be agreed.

273 OTHER REVIEW PROGRESS REPORTS

There were none.

274 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Policy and Performance Officer confirmed an extra Scrutiny Committee had been arranged to take place on 9 December 2015 at 5pm in the Council Chamber, Swale House to discuss Fees and Charges.

The Chairman recommended that the Sittingbourne Town Centre Regeneration team should return to the Scrutiny Committee in the future. Members agreed that the Planning Services review should commence on 13 January 2016 and the Leisure & Tourism Review on 10 February 2016. The Chairman suggested that a representative from Amicus Horizon should be invited to attend the meeting on 11 November 2015 as part of the Housing Review, and suggested Chief Inspector Tony Henley was invited to attend a future meeting. A Member suggested that other Housing Associations could also be invited to attend.

275 CABINET FORWARD PLAN

The Policy and Performance Officer introduced the item for information. A Member sought clarification on the Faversham Recreation Ground – Proposed Heritage Lottery Fund Bid and the Policy and the Performance Officer agreed to seek more information.

Chairman

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All Minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel