
POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Virtual Meeting Via Skype on Wednesday, 9 September 2020 from 7.00pm - 8.30pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Lloyd Bowen, Mike Dendor, Alastair Gould (Chairman), Ann Hampshire, Benjamin Martin, Pete Neal, Ken Rowles, Julian Saunders, Sarah Stephen, Ghlin Whelan (Vice-Chairman) and Corrie Woodford.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Kellie MacKenzie, Kieren Mansfield and Bob Pullen.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Monique Bonney (Cabinet Member for Economy and Property), Steve Davey, Tim Gibson, Elliott Jayes, Denise Knights and Roger Truelove.

103 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 9 September 2020 (Minute Nos. 606 – 613) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

104 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

105 SWALE ECONOMIC IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2020-2023

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property and the Economy and Community Services Manager to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property introduced the draft Economic Improvement Plan 2020-2023 which set-out the priorities for the Council and the actions it intended to take in respect of the future development of the local economy. The Cabinet Member explained that work on the document had commenced prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. She stated that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown had had a “catastrophic” impact on local businesses. The document was currently out for consultation.

The Economy and Community Services Manager explained that they were consulting the public, local businesses and several key agencies and reminders for comments were being sent. He reported that of the responses received so far, comments had been made about: the lack of local skills which was having a major burden on the local economy; and that local infrastructure needed to be in place before areas were developed.

The Chairman invited Members to ask questions as the Committee went through the document page-by-page:

Introduction – page 10

In response to questions from a Member, the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property stated that the Council would pursue economic growth, but not if there were too many negatives. The environmental challenges referred to in the document were about the environmental standards that were deliverable. She stated that both the Council's Environmental Improvement Plan and Economic Improvement Plan were documents that should go "hand-in-hand".

Key Local Issues – pages 10 to 11

- Needed to review current planning policy constraints and explore how they could be updated to allow and support business growth;
- should explore the use of residential space and how that could be used for small business uses;
- local secondary schools were well resourced and unused for several weeks during the year, the Council could explore how they could be utilised for adult education and similar uses;
- improved networking on local business suppliers should be included;
- engagement through business networks to support businesses with environmental improvements should be included; and
- stressed the importance of ensuring that sites that were supported for employment in the Local Plan were also supported by the planning process when applications came forward.

In response to the comments, the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property explained that it was part of the role of the Council's Economic Development Unit to support businesses through the planning process, and whilst she understood that there were some constraints within the process there were also opportunities. She considered that the planning system was currently very narrow in its thinking about what land should be used for business development and it needed to be more flexible, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. The Economy and Community Services Manager explained that historically the planning system had focused on B Class uses, but employment was broader than that.

Our Priorities – Page 12

- Needed to expand and specify the type of support available for businesses;
- should add local residents under the second bullet point for Our Priorities; and
- were the Council still offering the business advice service? And was it specialised?

The Economy and Communities Manager advised that the Council's Business Support service was still available. He explained that the service offered a two-part course for both new and existing businesses on a monthly basis. He also spoke about the Council's Business Advisor who offered confidential one-to-one advice. Those seeking specialist business support were signposted through the Kent growth hub to the appropriate support.

The Economy and Communities Manager reported that officers were currently working on new material and ways to publicise and market the service. He agreed to arrange a "meet and greet" session for Members with the Council's Business Advisor.

Securing investment and infrastructure – page 13

A Member raised concern about the lack of reference to housing within the document given that it was one of the Council's priorities.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property agreed to think about how improving the provision of affordable housing could be included in the document.

A Member asked about measures to improve broadband provision. The Economy and Communities Manager said that the Council worked with KCC to support the roll-out of publicly funded broadband provision. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property said that it was crucial that broadband provision was addressed through the local plan process. A Member referred to the new technologies that were being introduced to improve broadband connectivity and performance in rural areas including satellite and relay services.

Members raised coach and lorry parking issues, the inappropriate parking of lorries on local roads around Sheerness Docks and the different needs for coach parking and stop-offs for tourist and commuter services. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property said the Council recognised that it had an issue which needed to be dealt with.

Supporting local businesses – pages 14 and 15

A Member asked how many commercial sites and premises there were across Swale to serve local business expansion needs as well as new investment. The Economy and Communities Manager said that the planning process was critical in ensuring there were enough sites coming on-stream to enable inward investment and expansion. The Council were actively working with developers in bringing forward new premises and pointing tenants in their direction. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property said that the Council should try to work more on its assets in order to bring in more revenue.

A Member queried what the Council was doing to encourage smaller businesses to come to Swale? The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property stated that small retailers were currently opening in both Sittingbourne and Faversham and she was encouraged by that, particularly given the current situation.

A Member considered that local businesses and economy should have been on the agenda for discussion at the Area Committees, as he had requested. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property considered that economic development covered a broad range and was difficult to consider at area level. The Economy and Community Manager stressed the importance of local knowledge, for instance about potentially available business properties, and that they needed to find a way of feeding that into the process.

There was some discussion about business premises that had not been looked after and fallen into disrepair and whether compulsory purchase was possible. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property explained that this would be a last resort. A Member stated that the Council's planning enforcement team should be approached in the first instance. A Member spoke about a premises in the High Street, Queenborough which, as a Ward Member he had brought to the attention of the Council's enforcement team. They had been successful in ensuring the property was restored and it was now being used as a business premises.

Improving Skills – pages 15 and 16

- Concerned that Swale was ranked in the worst 10% nationally for low skills;
- the priorities for this section were general and should include working with voluntary groups;
- improving skills should include the 14 and under-age group;
- the Council were in discussion with KCC about provision of further education (FE) in Sittingbourne;
- could space be provided for skills training in Swale? and
- needed to explore ways that the elderly could engage with young people and pass on their skills and knowledge.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property considered that FE provision needed to be highlighted at the planning stage.

There was some discussion about the Action Plan referred to in the document, and the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property agreed to circulate it to all Members via Democratic Services.

The Economy and Communities Manager explained that the final Plan would be considered by Cabinet at their meeting on 23 September 2020.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property and the Economy and Communities Manager for attending the meeting.

106 DRAFT 2019/20 ANNUAL REPORT TO COUNCIL

The Policy and Performance Officer introduced the report which provided a summary of the Committee's work for the 2019/20 Municipal Year.

A Member congratulated the Chairman and the Policy and Performance Officer for their work and stressed the importance of the Committee being able to ask "difficult questions" when considering policies, strategies and plans of the Council.

Resolved: That the draft 2019/20 Annual Report be submitted to Full Council.

Chairman

Copies of this document are available on the Council website <http://www.swale.gov.uk/dso/>. If you would like hard copies or alternative versions (i.e. large print, audio, different language) we will do our best to accommodate your request please contact Swale Borough Council at Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, Kent, ME10 3HT or telephone the Customer Service Centre 01795 417850.

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