

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

2nd September 2009

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Phil Mould (Chair), and Councillors K Banks, G Chance, W Norton, J Pearce, D Taylor and D Thomas

Also Present:

Councillor C MacMillan

Officers:

J Staniland and L Hadley

Committee Services Officer:

J Bayley and H Saunders

1. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillors R King and Smith.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or of any party whip.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting held on 29th July 2009 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. ACTIONS LIST

There were no updates on actions contained within the Action List.

5. CALL-IN AND PRE-SCRUTINY

The Committee considered the Decision Notice of the Executive Committee meeting held on Wednesday 26th August. Officers informed the Committee that both the procedures for the Councillor

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Call for Action (CCfA) and the recommended model for crime and disorder scrutiny had been approved by the Executive Committee.

There were no call-ins or suggestions for pre-scrutiny.

6. TASK & FINISH REVIEWS - DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENTS

There were no draft scoping documents to consider.

The Chair reminded Members that there were only two Task and Finish Groups currently running which were due to reach completion in the late autumn. The Chair encouraged Members to think of suitable subjects that could be proposed for a scrutiny review.

7. TASK AND FINISH GROUPS - PROGRESS REPORTS

The Committee received reports in relation to current reviews.

a) Dial-A-Ride - Chair, Councillor King

In the absence of the Chair, Councillor Chance informed the Committee that the Group had not met for a long period of time as they were waiting for a large amount of information to be provided by Officers in order to complete the next stage of the review. The Chair of the Committee urged that this information be provided by Officers as soon as possible. Officers confirmed that the next meeting of the Group was scheduled for Wednesday 9 September where it was anticipated that the majority of the information requested by the Group would be presented.

b) Neighbourhood Groups – Chair, Councillor Banks

Councillor Banks informed the Committee that the Group had been examining the value and benefits of the Neighbourhood Groups in their current format. She explained that the Group had examined a diverse number of options that could be utilised by the Council to communicate with a larger number of residents.

She explained that completed questionnaires were still being submitted by Officers and Members and these had been analysed. The Group had interviewed several stakeholders involved in the Neighbourhood Groups process including: the leaders of the three political groups represented on the Council; the acting Deputy Chief Executive; representatives from the Police; and Officers from the Council's IT, Communications and Economic Development teams. The Group had examined the potential for using new technology,

such as Twitter, for community engagement and had also considered government guidance on these issues.

Members of the Group were due to attend the October round of Neighbourhood Group meetings to consult and inform residents about the review.

RESOLVED that

- 1) **Officers be urged to provide the information required by the Dial-A-Ride Task and Finish Group as soon as possible; and**
- 2) **the Task and Finish update reports be noted.**

8. FEES AND CHARGES TASK AND FINISH GROUP – UPDATE

The Committee considered the response provided by Officers regarding the implementation of the recommendation by the Fees and Charges Task and Finish Group that the Council introduce additional fees and charges to cover the cost of planning services. Officers informed the Committee that fees had been introduced for: planning enquiries; pre-application discussions; and post-decision amendments. Officers advised Members that owing to the current economic climate the number of applications had decreased, however, it was expected that these would increase as the market picked up. With regards to post-decision amendments, Officers reported that the Government was due to introduce new legislation which would require all local authorities to levy a fee for this service.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

9. TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY

Officers informed the Committee that this item provided Members with an opportunity to undertake pre-scrutiny of the Town Centre Strategy before it was considered at the Executive Committee.

The Chair invited Councillor MacMillan, the relevant Portfolio Holder, to begin this item by answering the question of whether he thought the proposals were realistic, deliverable, and achievable. Councillor MacMillan informed the Committee that he believed the team of consultants commissioned to undertake this initial piece of work had highlighted all of the main issues facing the town centre and had also provided a wide range of realistic and deliverable suggestions as to how to tackle some of these problems. He

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believed that if all Members agreed that developing a strategy for the town centre was a priority for the Council then it would be feasible to fund the actions proposed in the strategy. He stressed that implementation of the proposals would happen over a long period of time. It would therefore take years to fully achieve the potential of the town centre.

Councillor Thomas explained that the future development of the town centre was something that she was passionate about. However, she felt that she had heard similar proposals for the town centre many times in the past and very little had been achieved. She questioned how achievable the proposals were. One of her main concerns was that the Council might raise residents' expectations but might not in the long-term be able to deliver.

Councillor MacMillan explained that he was willing to support the proposals for the duration of his time on the Council but that more advocates were needed to champion the scheme. He suggested that Councillors should sign up to a long term plan to show their support for the proposals. Members briefly touched on the issue of leveraging in external funds to help deliver the strategy and the possibility of approaching Advantage West Midlands to help fund some of the proposals. Councillor MacMillan said that he felt that at this stage, the Council should not discount this option. He believed that if the Council could produce a sound business plan for the proposals with a clear strategic vision and key deliverables then there was a chance that Advantage West Midlands would be willing to support the strategy.

He went on to acknowledge that the Kingfisher Shopping Centre had a role to play in the rejuvenation of the town centre. He had met with representatives from Scottish Widows where the future of the town centre was discussed. Scottish Widows were keen to ensure that something was done to develop the town centre as it would help to attract retailers into the Shopping Centre. There was a pressing need for units to be let and Scottish Widows had attempted to find creative ways of attracting good quality retailers to the Centre. Members commented that they wanted to ensure that any development that did take place would benefit the entire town centre and not just the Kingfisher Centre.

Members concurred that they were passionate about the town centre and its future. It was noted that the Council could not afford not to undertake redevelopment of the town centre as so much of the economic future of the town relied heavily on the town centre being a vibrant and prosperous place. It was noted that the current provision of retail and leisure services in the town centre was not

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enough to offer choice to both residents in the town and to attract visitors from outside the area.

Officers commented that in the past, proposals for the rejuvenation of the town centre had been un-co-ordinated. This time a much more strategic approach had been taken, with the production of an overall strategy for all of the key areas within the town centre. It was also important to ensure, through planning development policy that the most appropriate uses of land were provided for in the town centre.

Members particularly liked the plans for the 'gateway' area to the town, where the train and bus stations were situated. In the past, local Ward Members had experienced difficulty in getting work done on these areas. Members stressed that there were many parties that could potentially be involved in any re-development of this area and that it would be important that the Council worked in partnership to realise the proposals for this part of the town centre. It was suggested by Members that the best approach would be to carefully stage the implementation, ensuring that small scale actions with tangible outcomes were undertaken first followed by the more large scale and complex elements of the scheme in the latter stages.

Members asked Officers to clarify the current position with regards to permitting banks and building societies inside of the Kingfisher Shopping Centre. Officers confirmed that banks and building societies were permitted within the Centre; however policy did restrict successive blank frontages occupying large parts of the centre. Members commented that there was a need for smaller, independent shops to populate the Church Green area. Councillor MacMillan generally agreed with the Committee but pointed out that there was a need to encourage, in particular, a range of high quality and diverse retail uses.

Councillor MacMillan informed the Committee that the strategy was still under consultation and a further consultation event with relevant interested parties was due to take place the following week. Comments provided by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and at the stakeholder event would be reported back to the Executive Committee.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

10. PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR PLANNING, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSPORT - ANNUAL REPORT

The Chair welcomed Councillor MacMillan, the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Economic Development and Transport to the meeting. Councillor MacMillan presented his Portfolio Holder Annual Report in accordance with the questions set by the Committee. In response to the first question which asked whether the Council as the Planning Authority should influence and encourage private developers to build new developments to certain required standards, he felt that the Council should not take any more action than it currently takes. He felt that the Council provided adequate guidance in planning documents such as the Core Strategy. Some Members of the Committee disagreed with this and felt that more should be done by the Council. In justification of his view, Councillor MacMillan argued that builders and developers understood the market they were working in and therefore knew what would sell. By being too stringent in the application of rules and regulations, the Council would run the risk of deterring companies from building in the town.

Members of the Committee pointed out that the recent housing developments built by some of the town's Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) had resulted in high quality buildings that were both spacious and incorporated environmentally friendly design features. It was questioned why many private sector developers were unwilling to also do this. Officers commented that it was interesting that there was this difference between private sector developers and RSLs. One of the reasons for this was because of the need for RSLs to comply with Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) standards.

The Committee asked Councillor MacMillan his views on how the Council should work in partnership with other agencies to combat the problem of people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs). Councillor MacMillan admitted that this was a complex issue that required a long term solution. It involved the Council working in partnership with organisations such as Jobcentre Plus, Connexions and other education providers. The Council had already worked with the Prince's Trust to undertake a scheme helping to support school leavers in applying for jobs. The Council had also been working in partnership to organise a careers fair for year 8 pupils in the town and also to establish a 'young entrepreneur of the year' award.

He informed the Committee that he had met along with other Councillors with Professor Michael Clarke, a former Vice-Principal

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of Birmingham University, regarding the possibility of establishing a 'Redditch University Centre'. The idea of this initiative was that educational institutions in Redditch such as the North East Worcestershire College could provide foundation level degree courses that could enable young people in the town to readily access a University education. Councillor MacMillan felt that what was needed in the town were organisations that would be able to work with the community to initiate effective schemes like this that could help address the issue of NEETs.

The Committee discussed the performance of children at school and the merits of the two-tier versus the three-tier system in enhancing pupils' performance. It was also noted that parents played a huge role in influencing the attitude and aspirations of their children. It was suggested by the Committee that the subject of NEETs might be a suitable subject for a scrutiny exercise.

The Committee asked Councillor MacMillan his views on the future of the Business Centres. He explained that Officers in Property Services had proposed that the Business Centres be reviewed. He explained that he believed the Council needed to be clear about what it wished to use the Business Centres for. In the past, it had been envisaged that they would be used to provide office space for start-up businesses. However, it had been shown that very few new businesses had taken up units. He argued that if the Council wished to provide support for start-up businesses then it may be more effective to give the resources spent on Businesses Centres directly to start-up business in the form of grants. Furthermore, he suggested that before any review was undertaken of the Business Centres, work should be undertaken to establish the needs of new businesses and how the Council might be able to address these.

Members asked the final question regarding the progress of the Smartcard scheme and real time bus information at bus stops in Redditch. Councillor MacMillan confirmed that Worcestershire County Council had been working in partnership with Diamond Bus Company and Centro to progress this scheme. All buses in the West Midlands area would be supplied with the equipment and technology to support Smartcard ticketing. However, there had been supply issues of this equipment which had resulted in a delay in rolling out this scheme until late autumn. With regards to real time bus information, Councillor MacMillan explained that this system had been installed in Worcester bus station and at the Alexandra Hospital in Redditch. It was also being made available at the Redditch bus station and on the 57 and 58 bus route in the town.

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The Chair thanked Councillor MacMillan for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

11. PORTFOLIO HOLDER ANNUAL REPORT - QUESTIONS

The arrangements for the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Local Environment and Health Portfolio Annual Report were considered by the Committee. Members agreed a number of questions for the Portfolio Holder to address during his Annual Report (Appendix A).

12. REFERRALS

There were no referrals.

13. WORK PROGRAMME

There were no updates provided on the Work Programme.

RESOLVED that

the Work Programme be noted.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 8.45 pm

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Chair