

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 3rd September,
2020

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Joe Baker (Chair), and Councillors Salman Akbar, Michael Chalk, Peter Fleming, Pattie Hill, John Fisher, Andrew Fry, Ann Isherwood and Mark Shurmer

Also Present:

Councillor Brandon Clayton – Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services
Councillor Matthew Dormer – Portfolio Holder for Planning, Economic Development, Commercialism and Partnerships
Councillor Craig Warhurst - Portfolio Holder for Housing and Procurement

Officers:

Mike Birkinshaw, Sue Hanley, Deb Poole, Guy Revans and Judith Willis

Democratic Services Officers:

J Bayley and J Gresham

25. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor Jenny Wheeler with Councillor John Fisher as named substitute.

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest nor of any party whip.

27. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

Chair

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the minutes of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 2nd July 2020 and 30th July 2020 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

28. PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Chair welcomed Mr. I. Soady as a public speaker to the meeting, who was invited to speak to the Committee.

His speech was delivered as follows:

“I note that Item 6 on the Agenda is Pre-scrutiny of the Restoration and Recovery Plan. Under the heading “Living Independent, Active & Healthy Lives”, one of the sub-headings is “Develop a Parks & Open Spaces Strategy (including increased physical activity & cycling).

I would like to bring to the Committee’s attention the publication in March this year by Worcestershire Green Infrastructure Partnership on behalf of Worcestershire County Council of a document entitled “Planning for a Multifunctional Green Infrastructure Framework in Worcestershire”. It is effectively an analysis of current green spaces throughout the County, a statement of their importance, and a strategy for their maintenance and improvement. Redditch Borough Council was one of the contributors and signatories to this document.

Table 5 of the report lists major Worcestershire sites at or near capacity. Arrow Valley Country Park appears in this list.

Other parts of the document (particularly Section 5) emphasise the benefits that readily accessible open spaces have for the more deprived areas of the County. Redditch is identified as having some of the most deprived areas.

The report also supports the Redditch Local Plan No 4 published in 2017 which makes strong recommendations for retaining open spaces, especially Chapter 8: “Creating and Sustaining a Green Environment”. Objectives under this heading include: ““To maintain and provide a high quality natural, rural and historic environment

with a Green Infrastructure network which maximises opportunities for biodiversity value, wildlife and ecological connectivity” and “To protect, promote and where possible enhance the quality of the Borough’s landscape and Redditch Borough’s other distinctive features”. Section 13 goes into more detail regarding Primarily Open Space, which constitutes much of the Country Park.

I commend the report to the Committee and hope that they will endorse its findings and make every effort to ensure that its recommendations regarding preservation and enhancement of green space in Redditch are adopted in full by the Borough Council, and in particular that its contents are made known to all sub-committees”.

29. NEW CEMETERY - UPDATE REPORT

The Chair welcomed the Bereavement Services Manager to the meeting who presented a report to the Committee outlining the historical discussions and decision-making process undertaken in respect of the provision of a new cemetery. He confirmed that the item would be further scrutinised at a future Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting.

The Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services was invited to speak to the Committee and explained that this was an important item and that there was a considerable need for new cemetery provision.

Some Members were keen to understand the process in more detail and whether a single report that summarised the process was available and what work had specifically been undertaken in the previous twelve months. It was clarified that due to the ongoing suitability testing and because the Planning applications was a material part of the process, as yet no single report had been produced. It was reiterated that various reports had been provided to Members previously and that information regarding the current testing of sites was available in the Planning application. Some Members indicated that they hoped there would be complete transparency in the decision-making process once a decision on the subject was brought before Executive Committee and Full Council.

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The Bereavement Services Manager explained that there had been delays in the process for several reasons including due to the ecology and archaeology of certain sites and the appropriateness of surveying these areas. This was in addition to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown.

The Chair requested that regular updates were provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the new Cemetery as and when information was available. On being put to the vote this was carried.

RESOLVED that

- 1) the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be provided with regular updates on the new cemetery as and when available; and**
- 2) the report be noted.**

30. PRE-SCRUTINY - RESTORATION AND RECOVERY PLAN

The Head of Business Transformation, Organisational Development and Digital Strategy outlined the report in respect of the Restoration and Recovery Plan and in doing so highlighted the following:

- Delivery of essential services had continued during the pandemic.
- Economic recovery plans were being established across both Redditch and the Worcestershire area and the Restoration and Recovery Plan would sit alongside these two documents.
- Learnings from the 'first wave' of Covid-19 had been recognised and had resulted in major changes to how the Council operated.
- The Restoration and Recovery Plan had been formulated around the five Strategic Purposes and included priorities from the Council Plan. The Council Plan was drafted prior to the pandemic and, due to changes in priorities during the pandemic, a Council Plan review was scheduled to take place in early 2021

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to ensure priorities were refreshed and remained relevant.

Members questioned what the plans were for brownfield sites mentioned in the Recovery and Restoration Plan and what type of use they may be allocated to. Officers undertook to ask the Head of Planning and Regeneration for the information for circulation for the consideration of members of the Committee at a later date.

The Head of Business Transformation, Organisational Development and Digital Strategy confirmed that the Executive Committee had a role to monitor performance around the actions contained within the Restoration and Recovery Plan. The Deputy Chief Executive also confirmed that this was a huge priority for the Strategic Management Team and that the Council's Chief Executive and the Head of North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration were preparing an economic recovery plan and framework for the Borough.

The Chair queried the loss of rental income incurred during the pandemic and it was accepted that there would be a significant loss in this area but that officers were working proactively to mitigate any losses.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

31. PRE-SCRUTINY - HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT STRATEGIC IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Procurement introduced the report in respect of the Housing Revenue Account Strategic Improvement Plan Progress and in doing so highlighted the following:

- Successes had been achieved in the key compliance areas of the Housing Revenue Account Strategic Improvement Plan including gas servicing, asbestos and fire safety.

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- The Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown had impacted on the provision of Housing Services at the Council which had forced a change in priorities so that major compliance issues and emergency and essential repairs were only carried out.
- Rent collection had been impacted due to the increase in Universal Credit applicants and residents who had been placed on furlough or had lost jobs.
- Measures had been put in place to mitigate the deficit in rent arrears and residents had been contacted regarding the options for rent payment and the process for applying for Universal Credit if needed.
- Staff had worked positively and with success throughout the implementation of the measures.
- Voids were at a record low number.
- Structural changes implemented in the Housing Service had been successful.
- Reduction of costs had been successful and reserves of £144k that had been previously agreed for use to balance the budget in 2019/20 had not needed to be used.

The Deputy Chief Executive provided further information regarding the report and the following matters were highlighted for Members' consideration:

- The financial situation of the Housing Revenue Account was still being monitored extremely closely and the Committee was advised that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government had had a strategic discussion with the Council regarding the impact of Covid-19 and the financial returns that had been made.
- There had been some delays in the Culture Action Plan however, it was still progressing in Housing and corporately and as a result of remote working there would be some fundamental changes however, it was important that the plans remained flexible in the current situation.

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The Chair asked the following questions with regard to Housing Services:

1. How many homeless people there were currently in the Borough?
2. What was happening with the homeless people who were provided temporary accommodation during the Covid-19 pandemic at The Blue Inn?
3. Would there be an increase in local labour contracts within the Council and apprenticeship positions created?
4. What was the current turnaround timescale for Voids?

The Head of Community and Housing Services reported to Members that during lockdown rough sleepers had to be provided with temporary accommodation consequently there were no homeless people in the Borough. A number of families had been placed in temporary accommodation and the Housing Options team were working closely with the Voids team to provide a solution to more permanent accommodation. It was hoped that there would be apprenticeships established over the next 2 to 3 years in the department. Some Members expressed concerns about the retention of apprentices and the final qualifications provided to apprentices. Officers acknowledged that retention of apprentices was dependent on vacancies however, succession planning was underway to create leaders for the future to make improvements in this area.

Regarding the use of local labour, the Head of Environmental and Housing Property Services explained that over the next 12 months work would be divided into smaller programmes in order for smaller, local contractors to bid for work. It had, however, been necessary to engage non-local contractors during the pandemic in order to carry out essential works urgently.

Officers confirmed to the Committee that all staff were provided with adequate Personal Protective Equipment and undertook full risk assessments when carrying out inspections and any works. Furthermore, if tenants felt that the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment was not being utilised during appointments they were advised to report this to Housing Services. It was acknowledged that there had been problems with contacting some of the Housing

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teams, and although the Covid-19 pandemic had certainly had an impact it was confirmed that a simplified solution was being created in order for Members to report complaints and get responses more quickly.

The Head of Environmental and Housing Property Services explained that gas servicing was not suspended during lockdown and that due to the way gas servicing was scheduled in advance the service was able to continue with the servicing plan. This would continue as residents felt more comfortable having gas servicing staff in their property.

The Chair thanked officers for a detailed report and comprehensive answers.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted

32. SCRUTINY OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE'S WORK PROGRAMME - SELECTING ITEMS FOR SCRUTINY

The Senior Democratic Officer (Redditch) presented the Executive Committee's Work Programme and reported that a further item had been added to the work programme since the latest edition was published, entitled Borough Level Economic Recovery Framework which was due to be considered by the Executive Committee on 27th October.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

33. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

It was confirmed that there were no updates to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme however, Officers undertook to take account of any changes made during the meeting.

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RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

34. TASK GROUPS, SHORT SHARP REVIEWS AND WORKING GROUPS - UPDATE REPORTS

- a) Budget Scrutiny Working Group – Chair, Councillor Jenny Wheeler

The Senior Democratic Services Officer (Redditch) reported to Members that the Budget Scrutiny Working Group had not met since the previous Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting and the next meeting was due to be held on 22nd September 2020.

- b) Dementia Task Group – Chair, Councillor Michael Chalk

Councillor Chalk reported to the Committee that the first meeting of the Task Group was scheduled to take place on 14th September 2020.

- c) Performance Scrutiny Working Group – Chair, Councillor Andrew Fry

Councillor Fry advised Members that a date had been identified for the next meeting on 7th September 2020.

The Chair thanked all the Members that were involved in the Working Groups and Task Groups.

35. EXTERNAL SCRUTINY BODIES - UPDATE REPORTS

- a) West Midlands Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Redditch Member, Councillor Michael Chalk

The Committee was informed by Councillor Chalk that the next meeting of the West Midlands Combined Authority was due to take place on 7th September 2020.

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- b) Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee –
Redditch Member, Councillor Michael Chalk

The Committee was informed by Councillor Chalk that the next meeting of the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee was due to take place on 30th September 2020.

The Meeting commenced at 6.30 pm
and closed at 8.07 pm