Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Review of the Civic Development Project

October 2017
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1. Executive Summary

1.1. The review was undertaken at the point of receipt of the draft RIBA stage 3 Report from GVA consultants on the Civic Development in October 2017. This enabled the assessment to review both the approach to date and to advise on the work required prior to a report being made to Council in December 2017.

1.2. Although some key documents had not yet been completed it was felt the correct balance had been chosen as to timing the review so that any advice could be taken on board well in advance of the Council meeting.

1.3. A significant economic development investment of this size is unusual in the current climate of financial austerity. Tunbridge Wells have not been exempt from financial pressures and will not receive any revenue support grant from government from 2018/19. They are currently in a comparatively strong financial position through sensible and effective financial planning. The ambition and thus borrowing needed underpinning the planned investment is undoubtedly significant in relation to the council’s net budget.

1.4. The council starts from a relatively low amount of debt, however even after the planned borrowing after the planned investment in 2022 its level of external debt will not be unusual compared to other district councils. The financing costs of the loan will however be a significant proportion of their net revenue budget, approximately 20%.

1.5. The council have a clear and managerially deliverable recurring savings strategy to offset the additional debt financing charges involved. This means they retain financial sustainability going forward; albeit with inevitably less flexibility that comes from funding circa £77m of debt.

1.6. Additional income of £556k pa from leasing two floors of the new office accommodation will complete the funding for the loan. CIPFA have not independently assessed the accuracy of this figure only that it appears reasonable and appropriate steps appear to have been taken to determine the demand.

1.7. The CIPFA team were impressed by the council and many aspects of their approach to the project, it has all the aspects of successful delivery, in particular:

- Vision
- Ownership/Commitment
- The retained architects, GVA are of high quality and are supplemented by an experienced in-house team
The quality and thoroughness of pre-tender work on delivering the build
Savings strategy – appears deliverable
Prudent financial planning approach
The involvement and approach of the Director of Finance, Policy and Development

1.8. The nature of a build project of this size circa £90m (including development work to date) is that it has some significant inherent risks. Although these cannot be completely avoided the council were well aware of these and appear to have taken actions to control them

1.9. The council have undertaken significant due diligence in advance of tendering the work. The CIPFA team on site, based on their experience of other major projects, were very impressed with both of the quality of the design work prior to tender in terms of both approach and thoroughness in the context of the project aims and site preferred.

1.10. The future running costs of the proposed new theatre have been considered in detail. However, other revenue implications of the project have had comparatively less analysis, eg the new offices. Although from a financial planning perspective an extremely prudent approach has been taken, indicating a high level of contingency. The capital receipt from selling the existing site has also had less analysis due no doubt to predicting actual precise values three to four years in the future.

1.11. There is a need for a one-off revenue contingency to be set-aside over the next four years, prior to the new buildings becoming operational. In particular the new Theatre is anticipated to run at a significant deficit above the current level of subsidy in its first few years. There is a clear strategy to deliver the contingency by setting aside planned recurrent savings in advance of having to repay debt. This strategy will need to be clearly documented and controlled.

1.12. The council have used specialist consultants on the build project especially to help them reach this point, adding to the level of confidence. They are also reliant on a number of key staff. If the project is approved in December 2017 they need to ensure that more of the future work is “main-streamed” into the organisation with appropriate investment made to capacity to ensure improved resilience.

1.13. CIPFA recognise the strong intuitive appraisal in favour of both new offices and the new theatre but this needs to be more clearly documented in the report to Council. The development overall is a place shaping cultural investment. VFM rightly concerns ‘effectiveness’ as much as ‘economy’. Officers are advised to set out as clearly as possible the place shaping benefits hoped for. From a more narrow view of ‘economy’, the scheme does not pass a financial value for money test in that the new income and charges will not cover the cost of the loan which will mostly be met from additional savings.

1.15. We would like to thank those we interviewed and the staff who supported us for their welcome, openness and cooperation in carrying out this work in such a short timeframe.
2. Methodology and Terms of Reference

2.1. The Director of Finance, Policy and Development (s151 Officer) commissioned CIPFA to undertake an independent review of the proposed Civic Development project. The aim being a report to an all member briefing on 2nd November 2017 and the Audit Committee on 21st November 2017. The work was undertaken by two experienced Finance Directors/Chief Financial Officers.

2.2. The review was agreed to include:

- An assessment of the key financial assumptions underpinning the scheme
- Review of the funding strategy, income and savings initiatives
- Explore alternative contingency planning
- Opinion on the completeness of reports to members, reflecting fairly the advice of the council’s retained cost consultants
- Provide advice to the statutory officers on the planned approach to financial governance over the life of the scheme.
3. An assessment of the key financial assumptions underpinning the scheme

3.1. Medium term financial planning

3.1.1. The council has been sensible in considering the new funding requirement’s as part of its overall MTFP to 2022/23 and beyond. CIPFA have reviewed the overall plan assumptions for reasonableness, particularly planned savings.

3.1.2. 2022/23 is beyond the government’s published CSR period and a new Parliament will be in place at this point. The biggest risk to the MTFP is whether negative Revenue Support Grant (RSG) of £600k in 2019/20 will continue. The council have assumed it will not based on advice. However, it remains a risk and additional savings would need to be identified if this reduction in resources recurred in 2020/21 and beyond, with inevitably reduced scope due to the increased debt financing costs of the scheme.

3.2. Overall Project Cost

3.2.1. As the scheme has developed initial estimates of project costs have increased significantly in line with changing and expanded vision; not least for the project to be delivered on the Great Hall car park site. The figures examined by the CIPFA team for the project are at RIBA stage 3 and have been prepared by an experienced team of architects, GVA. Key staff, particularly the Theatre Manager and external experts have been used to ensure the specification for the project is accurate. As such there is a high degree of confidence that there will not be major, costly, changes to the build specification once the scheme is let.

3.2.2. Although complex and the development requires demolition of two car parks, it is essentially a new build which generally are less risk in comparison to refurbishment schemes.

3.2.3. Given the size, location and approach to the scheme it is anticipated that the council will receive a high level of interest from builders and as such receive a competitive price. However this is contingent on the scheme running to plan, delays in starting the project could well mean inflationary increases. The scheme will also be subject to exchange rate risk prior to letting which is higher than normal due to Brexit negotiations over the next few years. An element of contingency has been allowed for this.

3.2.4. The overall cost of the scheme, including that spent to date is estimated to be approximately £90m. The council have been prudent in funding development costs
of £4m prior to tender from revenue. There is an assumption that £9m will be obtained from the current site in order to fund the project, which together with revenue contributions reduces estimated borrowing for the scheme to £77m.

### 3.3. Value of the current civic site

3.3.1. The site has been subject to soft market testing and is in a prime location for development. Based on that work the council feel a reasonable estimate has been made of potential sale proceeds of £9m. However disposal represents a significant risk in that potential buyers will not have done detailed site assessments until the council has further progressed with its intention to build replacements and achieved planning.

3.3.2. **Undoubtedly the scale and/or timing of the receipt is a risk and as a result the council are advised to model scenarios and contingencies on their underpinning borrowing strategy.**

### 3.4. Theatre Business case, future income and cost projections

3.4.1. Specialist advisors Bonnar Keenlyside have been used to prepare a business case for the Theatre with the Theatre Manager. The calculations and financial assumptions have been challenged for reasonableness.

3.4.2. A summary of the projections are set out below to year five

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tunbridge Wells new theatre - projected budget</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BUDGET 2021/22</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Summary</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variable costs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gross Profit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Profit/(loss)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3.4.3. The projections of income growth to year five appear to be realistic, using Theatres of comparable size, for example Norwich for number of productions and average proportions of seats sold.

3.4.4. Assumptions of costs, particularly for on-going maintenance are based on RIBA estimates but are unlikely to be spent in the first five years as the Theatre will be new so an element of contingency is apparent.
3.4.5. The results show a break-even position by year five which is well within the council’s budgeted subsidy of £350k pa. As such the financial allowance is prudent and can be reviewed after a few years of operation.

3.4.6. After year five it has been anticipated that income will continue to grow to produce a surplus, £283k pa at year eight. This could well be achieved but should certainly not be assumed at this stage or in considering the overall decision to proceed with a new Theatre. These are set out below and show a more optimum level of income.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Profit/(loss)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5. Business case for office and car park

3.5.1. An updated detailed business case is in preparation following receipt of the draft RIBA stage 3 report. CIPFA discussed the overall strategy with the Leader and council officers. There is a lack of office space in Tunbridge Wells and for its longer term sustainability, building quality office accommodation near the station is sensible. However all this needs to be set down into a formal document to support the formal decision making process.

3.5.2. The current offices are unsuitable for modern working and require refurbishment. The cost of this is estimated by GVA at £14.9m, however this would not increase the value of the premises by this amount. In addition to the refurbishment cost of this option the council would need to decant and find alternative office accommodation whilst the works are undertaken, this is estimated by the council to cost £4.3 million in total over a four year refurbishment timeframe.

3.5.3. The disposal of the offices, together with the theatre are estimated by the council to provide a receipt of £9m, more than the build cost of the proportion of office space to be used by the council of approximately £6m. Costs of occupying the new offices may well be more than current ones, however this can be set against the
increase in business rates gained from the additional business rates which the council will retain an element of.

3.5.4. If the offices were viewed in isolation, with the Theatre not considered, the council’s borrowing strategy would have taken account of using its own reserves to internally borrow rather than externally borrowing the whole sum required. As such any business case for the office could reasonably assume this.

3.5.5. A more detailed case will need to be prepared for the December 2017 Council decision which CIPFA can give an updated view on.

3.6. Adequacy of transition budget

3.6.1. The council will incur a number of additional, one-off revenue costs in implementing the project and in transition, above that included in the capital estimates. Officers have been sensible in considering what these could be and have put a funding strategy in place, achieving savings early which will give a transition budget of £3.2m if delivered to the timings anticipated.

3.6.2. There has been a reasonable assessment of the additional subsidy, above that budgeted, that will be required to run the new Theatre. This additional cost will be because all staffing will need to be in place before the Theatre is at capacity. The majority of this will be in year one but is estimated to be £1.2m, leaving £2.0m for other transition costs.

3.6.3. The council will need to consider what additional development/transition costs post planning and tender award will be required. All subject of course to Member’s decision on the project going forward.

3.6.4. These costs need to be more accurately set out and will include:

- Additional Theatre Subsidy for first three years of opening
- Additional Loan charges while current site is sold
- Additional costs of running both sites in transition
- Moving costs to new building and fitting out
- Vacant period for new offices for let to private sector
- Loss of car parking income
- Other transition costs
3.7. **Inherent Risks – scheme slippage and/or cost**

3.7.1. No matter what the prior planning and management no scheme of this size and complexity is without risk of slippage in terms of time and cost. Projects such as this rarely underspend but there are lots of examples of unforeseen events leading to time delays and cost increases. As the only funder, those risks that cannot be included in the contract with the builder will fall to the council and will increase overall costs. The council, as well as making robust plans for delivery has been prudent in how it’s funding assumptions for the scheme and if necessary within reason could cope with unforeseen events.

However, going from effectively debt free to funding long term debt of £77m on current projections undoubtedly reduces the flexibility of any district council to cope with shocks in the future, but this council’s current financial position is strong and its finances are well led.

3.8. **Borrowing Strategy**

3.8.1. The council currently have minimal borrowing which is unusual for local authorities. However, the loan proposed and overall costs of capital are not out of step with the average for districts and can be measured not just against this investment but the rest of the council’s asset base.

3.8.2. Understandably there is nervousness about interest rate risk and currently it has been assumed in financial projections that the £77m cost will be borrowed at a fixed rate of 2.75% over 50 years as an annuity. The cost of this, £2.8m pa has been budgeted for in financial plans.

3.8.3. There is a risk of interest rate movement up to 2022 and the draw-down of the full borrowing required. The council will need to produce a special funding strategy for the short term to 2022 as distinct from its longer term strategy. It should develop this with its specialist treasury advisors and is right to avoid excessive costs of carry in advance of actual need as the project progresses to completion. In addition, the council will need to be realistic about the timing of its hoped receipt and there is a strong probability of a mismatch at least over a relative short time period with the likelihood of the council having to fund the full scheme (at £85m) in advance of the receipt.

3.8.4. Although borrowing in one tranche is risk free this does not necessarily represent the best value for money for the council and a more managed approach is being considered with advice from the council’s treasury management advisors.
3.8.5. A more balanced approach could be to borrow less than the full amount over 50 years, with the balance borrowed more flexibly over shorter periods at lower interest rates. This could reduce the revenue pressure on the council or reduce the overall loan period, thus saving significant interest payments of £m’s over the long term. Using short term borrowing and the council’s current resources while watching market rates and taking advice from Treasury Management specialists could be a sensible approach.

3.8.6. Based on the work done, the proposed plans are in line with both the current Prudential Code and the likely changes that will be introduced from 2018/19 which is to be commended.

3.8.7. The increase in the council’s borrowing is reasonable in comparison to its overall asset base. Tunbridge Wells is shown in the graph below with £77m of debt (the blue bar) and how this would compare with other English district councils per head of population. With the increased debt it would have the 73rd highest level of debt per head of population rather than being one of the lowest. However it is not possible to determine how much of the other council’s debt relates to invest earn projects as opposed to that relating to council assets not generating a return.
56 of the 20 English non-metropolitan districts have no debt, the graph above excludes these. Spelthorne and Woking are also excluded as their exceptionally high debt levels skew the shape of the graph.

3.8.8. The capital financing costs of the borrowing will however be a significant proportion of the council’s future net revenue budget, approximately 20%.
4. Review of the funding strategy, income and savings initiatives

4.1. Savings Strategy

4.1.1. The council’s saving strategy has been agreed by its Leadership Board but will need to be agreed by Members. CIPFA consider all of the savings managerially deliverable and reasonable in the current financial climate. They are similar in nature to those achieved by other councils. The inevitable caveat is future local political decision making, as in isolation some of the savings will not be seen as neutral or non-contentious.

4.1.2. Summary of savings proposed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saving Proposed</th>
<th>£000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garden waste collection charging</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community groups and environmental grant alternatives</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of development programme resources</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased share of business rates</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-locate Weald Information Centre to Hub</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Executive savings</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Management savings (Achieved April 2017)</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pension reserve contribution ends</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,290</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.3. Additional income of £556k pa from leasing two floors of the new office accommodation will complete the funding for the loan. This is based on 20,200 sq ft @ £27.50 per sq ft. This is a net rent there will be service charges and other costs chargeable in addition to this. GVA expect this type of office to then have compounding rental growth of 2.5%. This is on the basis of soft market testing with a completion date of 2020/21 as the office will be completed before the theatre. CIPFA have not independently assessed the accuracy of this figure only that it appears reasonable and appropriate steps appear to have been taken to determine the demand.

4.2. Garden Waste Charging £700k income

4.2.1. Tunbridge Wells is unusual in not charging for garden waste collection. The charge budgeted for of £30 pa for each household choosing to use the service is reasonable and less than other council’s charge. It is considered deliverable as part of the introduction of the new waste collection contract.
4.3. **Community groups and environmental grant alternatives £280k**

4.3.1. This has been considered sensibly and will be done in a staged way in discussion with community groups but will not be without contention. The Tunbridge Wells lottery, recently introduced gives some alternative funding opportunities to some groups to help mitigate the financial impact felt.

4.4. **Review of development programme resources £500k**

4.4.1. The council, anticipating a high level of development have included a recurring £500k pa for these resources, both internal and external. After the project is delivered the budgeted resources can be reduced or allocated against investment projects with a return. The assumption is realistic but given the importance of the resource to the project it will need to be managed carefully as part of transition to realise the saving.

4.5. **Increased share of business rates £300k**

4.5.1. This a reasonable assessment of the increase that will be incurred from the development in the borough already planned. It is likely to increase significantly above this by 2022 if other projects come to fruition, eg the old cinema site. The risk any reset of business rates may mean Tunbridge Wells may lose an element of their growth via an increased tariff before 2022 if the ‘Fair Funding Review nationally goes ahead and is implemented.

4.6. **Re-locate Weald Information Centre to Hub £40k**

4.6.1. The relocation appears low risk and the sum immaterial in the context of the overall savings.

4.7. **Project Executive savings £100k**

4.7.1. Included in the revenue budget and will be realised at the end of the project.

4.8. **Senior Management savings £120k**

4.8.1. The senior management team was reduced in 2016/17 and the savings already achieved.

4.9. **Pension reserve contribution ends £250k**

4.9.1. This saving has already been delivered.
5. Explore alternative contingency planning

5.1. Impact on future ambition

5.1.1. The financing charges on the increased debt will commit a large proportion of the council’s net revenue budget from 2022/23, approximately 20%. With the majority of the council’s spend committed to statutory services such as waste collection and planning, this leaves limited resource available for other council funded projects or investment.

5.2. Organisational Capacity and single points of failure risk

5.2.1. The council, due to its size has limited overall capacity. This contributes to the risk of “single point of failure” for key individuals, particularly for this project. It has been sensible in sharing service provision to increase resilience. However, although having quality staff that are delivering the council’s ambitions it needs to reduce its reliance on key staff by sharing knowledge and key tasks more.
6. Opinion on the completeness of reports to members, reflecting fairly the advice of the council’s retained cost consultants

6.1. The council has been very open in sharing appropriate information with members and the public and has been receptive to challenge.

6.2. The council leadership does however need to be very careful in its use of language in seeking to explain complex financial information as simply as possible. For example when referring to components of the project in isolation such that the new car park will be self-financing.

6.3. For the car park to be self-financing the business case will have to demonstrate that the additional income from increased patronage and premium charging over existing council car parks will be higher than the loan charges over the period.

6.4. The new car park is considered a necessity to provide for users of the new theatre and offices and therefore cannot be viewed in isolation to these other components.

6.5. We also advise the Director of Finance to separately justify GVA’s statements of financial payback in their RIBA reports.

6.6. Report to December 2017 Council

6.6.1. The report to Council in December 2017, in order to be complete, needs to fully evidence the decision, consolidating key information and strategies already in the public domain. Particularly to evidence value for money from an overall economic perspective, linking to Council objectives and financial benefits. This needs to include, but should not be limited to:

- Links to the Economic development strategy regarding the need for office accommodation.
- A comparison of outcomes financially for refurbishing the current Theatre, letting it close or the proposed move.
- Business case for the office remaining in its current location, including the costs of refurbishment and the proposed move.
- Car Park business case, which is a necessity for delivering the Theatre and office moves and maintaining car parking spaces in the town.
- An explanation as to why costs have changed from initial, high level estimates made prior to detailed work by GVA which has now been completed.
- The gross cost of scheme and how it is made up and financed.
7. Provide advice to the statutory officers on the planned approach to financial governance over the life of the scheme.

7.1. If approved the financial governance and monitoring of the scheme will be crucial to ensure its success.

7.2. The council is planning to employ its own, experienced “clerk of works” for the scheme. This is eminently sensible but needs to be supplemented by appropriate finance resource, both on monitoring and controlling costs of the project and ongoing revenue costs of the constituent elements.

7.3. Monitoring reports will need to be included in the budget monitoring reports to cabinet.

7.4. A board, including the Leader, the Chief Executive, Director of Finance, Policy and Development and the Civic Development Manager needs to receive regular reports on progress of the development.

7.5. A project team and board will need to be established to ensure the success of the office move, ensuring staff are engaged and that cultural change of new ways of working are adopted.
8. Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1. The development overall is a place shaping cultural investment. VFM rightly concerns ‘effectiveness’ as much as ‘economy’. Officers are advised to set out as clearly as possible these benefits. From a more narrow view of ‘economy’, the scheme does not pass a financial value for money test in that the new income and charges will not cover the cost of the loan which will mostly be met from finding off setting savings.

8.2. CIPFA commend the efforts and process on the build project pre tender and pre planning.

8.3. We recognise the strong intuitive appraisal in favour of both new offices and new theatre, but this needs to be more clearly documented in the report to Council.

8.4. The key advisors appear highly competent and credible

8.5. The core financial assumptions and financial governance arrangements appear reasonable and sound

8.6. The council need to document more clearly how the development of the Theatre achieves value for money by achieving its cultural, economic growth and place shaping ambitions.

8.7. Abandoning the scheme is neither cost or risk free, with large investments required for the current Theatre and offices if the scheme does not progress. These costs need to be clearly documented, with the resultant ongoing revenue costs as a comparison to the new development.

8.8. There are inevitably going to be large costs of transition, some have been calculated and by achieving savings in advance of 2022/23 a sum of circa £3m can be set-aside to cover them. These costs need to be more accurately set out.

8.9. The scale and/or timing of the receipt for the current premises is a risk and as a result the council are advised to model scenarios and contingencies on their underpinning borrowing strategy.
9. The CIPFA Team

9.1.1. Sean Nolan CPFA, BA, Director of Local Government & Policing CIPFA. Overall Director for this assignment.

9.1.2. Sean Nolan is CIPFA’s Director of Local Government, during which time he has been central to the shaping of the organisation’s policy in areas such as 100% retention of business rates. Before joining CIPFA, Sean spent four years as the Chief Finance Officer in the Office of Kent’s Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC), where he oversaw a period of financial transition. He was a central part of the team that garnered praise from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), which last year pronounced Kent Police’s financial sustainability as ‘outstanding’.

9.1.3. Sean has 30 years’ experience in public finance roles and prior to the OPCC, he spent over 16 years as treasurer for Buckinghamshire and East Sussex County Councils respectively. At East Sussex he also served as Deputy Chief Executive with the wider responsibility for the broader resource portfolio covering ICT, procurement and property. In his time with East Sussex Sean was financial lead for major regeneration and directed the capital planning process. Sean is a former President of the Society of County Treasurers, (SCT), The Police and Crime Commissioners Treasurers Society (PACCTS) and the Association of local Authority Treasurer Societies (ALATS). He has also served as Financial Advisor to Parliament’s Communities and Local Government Select Committee and been a core advisor to the English Local Government Association. Sean will provide oversight of all aspects of this project.

9.2. Peter Robinson, CPFA, MBA, CIPFA Associate

9.2.1. Peter is an experienced Director of Resources and section 151 Officer, working in these roles for eight years at two unitary council’s; Bristol a large city with a 450k population and Herefordshire, a rural council that was facing extreme financial challenges before he arrived.

9.2.2. He has a wide range of experience but of particular relevance to this assignment is his work on capital planning, investment and economic regeneration, for example, in Bristol the Colston Hall refurbishment, the new Museum of Bristol and a successful office refurbishment and consolidation programme.
10. Meetings Held

Officers

- William Benson  Chief Executive
- Lee Colyer   Director of Finance, Policy and Development
- Paul Taylor  Director of Change and Communities
- John-Jackson Almond  Theatre Director
- Nicky Carter  Head of Human Resources
- Jane Fineman  Head of Finance and Procurement
- Diane Brady  Civic Development Manager
- Ian Hirst  Head of Digital Services and Transformation
- Gary Stevenson  Head of Environment and Street-scene
- David Candlin  Head of Economic Development and Property

Members

- Councillor David Jukes  Leader of the Council
- Councillor Tracy Moore  Portfolio holder for Civic Development
Quality standards and controls


All CIPFA report-based projects are subject to a peer review process as part of our commitment to Quality Assurance. We apply a range of project controls, quality assurance, toolkits, best practice, programme and project management including best practice as embodied in OGC’s programme management, PRINCE2 and the management consultancy statement of best practice.