

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 23 November 2020

Present: Councillor Chris Woodward (Chairman)
Councillors Thomson (Vice-Chairman), Atwood, Bland, Chapelard, Hayward, Morton, Neve, Ms Palmer, Pound, Scholes and Stanyer

Officers in Attendance: William Benson (Chief Executive), Lee Colyer (Director of Finance, Policy and Development (Section 151 Officer)) and Mark O'Callaghan (Scrutiny and Engagement Officer)

Other Members in Attendance: Councillors Atkins, Dawlings, Fairweather, Hamilton and Scott

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

OSC56/20 There were no apologies for absence.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

OSC57/20 There were no disclosable pecuniary or significant other interests declared at the meeting.

NOTIFICATION OF PERSONS REGISTERED TO SPEAK

OSC58/20 Councillors Hamilton and Scott were registered as Visiting Members on item OSC61/20. There were no members of the public registered to speak.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 12 OCTOBER 2020

OSC59/20 Members reviewed the minutes. No amendments were proposed.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting dated 12 October 2020 be approved as a correct record.

ITEMS CALLED-IN

OSC60/20 There were no items which had been called-in.

FIVE YEAR PLAN UPDATE

OSC61/20 The Chairman brought this item forward on the agenda.

William Benson (Chief Executive) introduced the report set out in the agenda pack.

Councillor Hamilton had registered to speak, comments included:

- Raised at both the Planning and Transportation and Communities and Economic Development Cabinet Advisory Boards, specifying the Memorial Field as the location for the new Community Centre should be removed from the document.
- To be clear, the request was just to remove the Memorial Field as the location, not the idea of supporting development of a Community Centre.
- The Memorial Field was open space that was valued by the community.

- There was no planning consent for the Memorial Field or a plan B if planning consent was not granted.
- The results of a Parish Poll was that the Memorial Field was not the right location for the new Community Centre.
- The Borough was only playing a supporting role, the decision was ultimately for the Town Council as it concerned its own land.
- Open space was of unquestionable value and relevance to the issues of well being, mental health and those suffering from domestic abuse.
- In other areas, land had been acquired by Councils to protect it as open space but this had not happened in Paddock Wood.
- Given the current circumstances the Council had an opportunity to review the views of residents and changes in market force.
- Members were asked to support the removal of the Memorial Field as the location of the community facility from the TWBC document.

Councillor Scott had registered to speak, comments included:

- There were a number of demographic changes with consequences for planning. The growth and numbers of people, particularly the Council's reduction in the share of 20-30 year olds and the substantial increase in residents who were over 65 years of age. Housing growth had been slower, but prices had risen.
- Very happy to see the reference to light electric vehicles but there was a need to consider the type of vehicles that would be used.
- Public consultation with wide engagement was very important.
- Town centres would need to be made more attractive, to attract more visitors but without increasing congestion.
- Action was needed on the Civic Centre and the Town Hall.
- A summer festival in 2022 would help morale and brighten the moods of residents.
- The Council must attract new investment and encourage activities.
- The Council must ensure that projects that were put forward were deliverable and welcomed by residents.
- The Council must also deliver on its green agenda.
- The report should be recommended but with the proviso that the comments raised were emphasised.

Discussion included the following matters:

- The Town Hall and the Assembly Hall Theatre would be included in the project portfolio to be taken forward.
- All contract work undertaken by the Council had complied with the constitution, financial procedure rules and contract procedure rules.
- If the Council had entered into a new contract, the details would appear on the contract register.
- The confirmation of Covid-19 Marshals was done as an extension to an existing contract, not a new contract.
- The Council's Gold Group was linked to the Covid-19 Panel. Group Leaders would be consulted on decisions taken and those that have been proposed to ensure that there was a political awareness of the actions that officers were taking during this time of emergency.
- The Council had been clear that it would support Paddock Wood Town Council. It had agreed that the Memorial Field as a specific location would be removed from the document.
- The themes that had emerged and included in the report had come from the Councillor Convention held in 2019.

- Retrospective issues would be considered as part of the Plan. It was understood that funding had already been given to address some of the sewage issues currently experienced in Paddock Wood. In addition the Council was looking to secure some Highways infrastructure provision and was also looking to improve drainage and flooding at the bottom of the Pantiles.
- The use of Hydrogen as an alternative fuel source was something being considered by the Climate Emergency Panel. In addition these were provisional priorities which the Council would be exploring and which would be subject to further extensive engagement and consultation.
- Work on the Cultural and Creative Industries framework would be important, particularly post Covid-19. As part of the work for the Local Plan, the Council had commissioned further work on the town centre.
- Leisure in the town centre was included in the Sports and Active Recreation Strategy and the Council's planning policies. It made commercial good sense to have these facilities.
- A request was made that the Discretionary Housing Payments Policy be given more prominence with more importance given to identifying those residents that might require help.
- There were a few suggested topics for future Member Briefings:
 - Benefits Take Up Campaign.
 - Moratorium on Council Tax Arrears Court Action – particularly the use of debt collection agencies.
 - Simplification of the Council Tax rebate system.
- The report included provision which aimed at improving football facilities with a new sports hub adjacent to the Hawkenbury Recreation Ground. The Council was looking to produce an updated business case in 2021. The site at Culverden was a separate matter.
- The Local Government White Paper had suggested that there might be some incentives for Local Government reorganisation, either Unitisation or the merging of Local Authorities. All recent discussions with Government were that this was no longer the case.
- With regards to the Town Hall and the Assembly Hall Theatre, the Council had operated very well over the last few months with staff adapting very well to new flexible working patterns.
- The cost of running and maintaining both the Town Hall and the Assembly Hall Theatre increased each year. The increasing cost and the need to decide on the future of both buildings were the reasons the Council had included them as projects that should be taken forward as a matter of urgency.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

PORTFOLIO HOLDER UPDATE - FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

- OSC62/20 Councillor Dawlings (Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance) introduced the report set out in the agenda, comments included:
- Officers were working on a budget for 2021 but in something of a vacuum as the Government had cancelled its planned budget and its three year spending review.
 - The financial statement that would cover only one year was expected on Wednesday 25 November 2020. It was not expected that the statement would offer much clarity to Local Authority funding.

- The Council had been recommended not to make any drastic decisions to reducing any services but instead to draw down on available reserves. And that was what had been planned as part of the budget process.
- This was likely to mean drawing down on about £3m of reserves during the course of 2021/22.
- The Economic Development staff were currently working on 2 schemes to support businesses – The Local Restrictions Support Grant and the Additional Restrictions Grant Discretionary Scheme. Applications were available on the website.
- For the eleventh consecutive year, the Council had received an unqualified audit report.
- The Council had also now received a grant from Government for the renovation of 3 properties on Crescent Road. The renovated houses would be used to help house the homeless.
- The Housing Support Scheme and Council Tax Support Scheme had both been the subject of a review to reflect the introduction of Universal Credit. In addition a new Council Tax Protocol, put together in collaboration with the Citizens' Advice Bureau was about to be adopted.
- For clarity on the financial bail out of Fusion, Fusion were awaiting the outcome of a bid for funding from the Government (CIBILS Loan). Fusion had now received a loan of £13m. The agreement with the Council was that Fusion repay their pre Covid-19 debts, which comprised of a management fee for the last financial year, the loan interest and capital payments for 2019/20 and 2020/21 and the solar panels on the tennis centre for 2019/20 and 2020/21. It was expected these payments would be made by the end of March 2021.
- The Council had offered to provide support of up to £420k to assist in the opening of the 3 centres from now until the end of December 2020. This would be monitored monthly via the provision of their management accounts.

Discussion included the following matters:

- The £420k to Fusion would remain the total amount the Council would give regardless that the period between now and the end of the financial year had been reduced.
- The Mid Kent Services were shared services between Tunbridge Wells, Swale and Maidstone with staff mainly based in Maidstone. The cost of the services were shared on a slightly different basis depending on the service. Each service had its own collaboration agreement which set out the terms of that collaboration.
- The partnership would continue until such time as a particular partner served sufficient notice that they wished a change to the partnership.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

POVERTY TASK AND FINISH GROUP: TERMS OF REFERENCE

OSC63/20 Councillor Pound (Chairman of the Task and Finish Group) introduced the report set out in the agenda, comments included:

- Once some initial work had been undertaken, it was the view the Group should meet every fortnight.
- It was hoped that a report would be brought back to Overview and Scrutiny at its meeting in April 2021.

- The Group would focus on the top-ten Lower Layer Super Output Areas in the Borough.
- It was the initial view of the Group that it would not be seeking to put forward recommendations as to what it thought the Council should do, it was more likely that the Group would identify ways in which this Council could facilitate other Agencies to take forward actions on behalf of the Community.
- Poverty was assessed against income, employment, education, skills and training, health and disability, crime, barriers to housing services and the living environment.
- Poverty didn't only impact on children, it also impacted upon the disabled, single people (particularly single women) and this would all be included.
- The next meeting was scheduled for Tuesday 1 December 2020.

RESOLVED – That the Poverty Task and Finish Group Terms of Reference be agreed.

CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT TASK AND FINISH GROUP: UPDATE

- OSC64/20 Councillor Hayward (Chairman of the Task and Finish Group) provided a verbal update, comments included:
- Draft Terms of Reference had been circulated to members before the meeting. A copy would be published in due course.
 - Given the current exceptional circumstance and the likelihood that the way things would be done were likely to change. The view was, the work of this Group would be put on the back burner for the time being.

Discussion included the following matters:

- The membership of the Group had yet to be established.
- Partners and stakeholders would be welcome on the Group.
- Councillor Scott and Councillor Woodward expressed an interest in joining the Group.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

WORK PROGRAMME

- OSC65/20 Councillor Woodward presented the Work Programme and outlined the dates for forthcoming meetings, comments included:
- The Budget Update Report that would normally come to this meeting had been put back and would be included at the meeting in January 2021.
 - The next Portfolio Holder update on Sustainability was confirmed for the January 2021 meeting.

URGENT BUSINESS

- OSC66/20 There was no urgent business for consideration.

DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

- OSC67/20 The next meeting was scheduled for Monday 18 January 2021.

NOTE: The meeting concluded at 7.55 pm.