

**Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
11 March 2014**

Present:

Councillor P.A. Broom (Chairman)
Councillor A.E. Friday (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

C.A. Bannister
C.A. Davis
R.D. Dunn

C.M. Frazer
D. Gohil
I.T.E. Harvey
M.J. Madams

M.W. Rough
D. Saliagopoulos
S. Taylor

Apologies: Councillors F. Ayers and A. Ayub

In Attendance:

Councillor N. Gething – Cabinet member for Economic Development and Fixed Assets
Councillor V.J. Leighton – Cabinet member for Planning and Corporate Development
Louise Punter – Chief Executive, Surrey Chamber of Commerce
Dean Akinjobi – Lower Sunbury Business Group
Dr Sabine Lohman – Chairman, Spelthorne Business Forum

51/14 Disclosures of Interest

There were none.

52/14 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 January 2014 were agreed as a correct record.

53/14 Matters Arising

The Chairman advised that the invitation to representatives of Residents' Associations to attend a meeting of the Committee in relation to Council service provision and Localism had been postponed due to the flooding crisis.

54/14 Call in of Cabinet Decisions

No decisions had been called in.

55/14 Capital Monitoring

The Committee received an update on the capital expenditure against the budget position of the schemes within the capital programme for the period April 2013 to January 2014.

The Chief Finance Officer reported that £1.279m had been spent to date, which represented 68% of the revised budget. The projected outturn showed that there was an anticipated spend of £1.540m which represented 81% of the revised budget.

Members asked questions in relation to capital spend on Staisafe Radio and Laleham Park, and agreed to receive written responses.

The Chairman requested an update at the next meeting in relation to the impact of the flooding crisis on next year's finances and the issue of slippage with some capital projects.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the report of the Chief Finance Officer outlining the current capital spend and forecast position for the period to January 2014 be noted and
- (2) an update report be provided to the next meeting.

56/14 Revenue Monitoring

The Committee received an update on the net revenue expenditure and forecast outturn position for the period April 2013 to January 2014.

The Chief Finance Officer reported that the forecast outturn at net expenditure level was £12.368m which resulted in a projected favourable variance of £214k, after taking into account the use of carry forwards. Interest earnings would exceed the budget by £20k.

He explained the impact of the flooding on the revenue budget and the types of expenditure which could be claimed back from central Government.

He also outlined the measures the Council was taking to assist residents and businesses affected by the recent flooding, which included:

- 3 month Business Rates relief for businesses;
- 3 month Council Tax discount for households who suffered internal flooding;
- Grants for businesses impacted directly or indirectly: he advised that the Government's allocation to Spelthorne Borough Council was being challenged and
- A Repair and Renew grant scheme for both residents and businesses to undertake works to protect their properties from flooding in the future: the Council was still awaiting final details from the Government on this scheme.

The Committee was concerned that it wasn't clear whether there was any support forthcoming to assist residents and businesses after the Council's 3 month relief/ discount period ended, as it was aware that many would not be able to reoccupy their property within that timescale.

RESOLVED that the report of the Chief Finance Officer outlining the current net revenue spend and forecast position for the period to January 2014 and the measures being taken to assist those affected by the flooding, be noted.

57/14 Leader's Task Groups

The Committee received reports from the Leader's Task Groups looking at Economic Development and Fixed Assets on the work undertaken to date.

Economic Development Task Group

Councillor Gething, the Lead Member on the Economic Development Task Group reported that the development of an Economic Strategy for Spelthorne had been its most notable achievement and he congratulated John Brooks, Deputy Head of Planning and Housing Strategy for guiding through the Strategy in record time.

The Strategy had been widely welcomed and received positive comments from the business community; it had raised interest from potential new business partners. The Strategy included an action plan which the Task Group would oversee.

Two sub-groups for Staines-upon-Thames and Ashford had been created to support economic development specifically in these towns; a strategy document was being prepared for Ashford, aiming to make the main street, Church Road, more attractive for people to shop and work and a Staines-upon-Thames Day would be held on 29 June 2014 to showcase the town and emphasise that in spite of recent weather conditions it was open for business and a vibrant area to invest in.

Louise Punter, Chief Executive, Surrey Chamber of Commerce, Dean Akinjobi – Lower Sunbury Business Group and Dr Sabine Lohman – Chairman, Spelthorne Business Forum gave their feedback as representatives of the business community on their relationship with the Council.

All three were very positive about their experience of working with the Council; its willingness to involve the business community, the rapport built with staff and the support it had given to their activities.

Surrey Chamber of Commerce commented that they found the Economic Strategy useable, readable and actionable. It had assisted the Chamber with mapping an action plan focussed on how it can help the Spelthorne area; an international worker would be placed in Spelthorne first to launch a service helping businesses get started in international trade.

Each representative highlighted their main areas of work for the immediate future and outlined their members' experience of the flooding crisis.

The Chairman thanked the representatives from the business community for attending and contributing to the discussions.

Fixed Assets Task Group

Councillor Leighton, the Lead Member on the Fixed Assets Task Group gave an update on the work it had completed to date:

- A room was now available with independent access for evening meetings, reducing the cost of having the entire building open for an evening with associated staff costs.
- Flooding had delayed lease negotiations on the Towpath asset.
- Options for Churchill Village Hall would be discussed at the next meeting of the Task Group, with a recommendation to be made to Cabinet.
- The Task Group was overseeing a tendering exercise for valuation services, seeking to apply a tariff approach to the valuation of assets with the aim of proposing a standard scale for rental income for potential leaseholders and identifying the overall benefits the Council was giving user groups through subsidies or other contributions.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the work undertaken to date by the Leader's Task Groups for Economic Development and Fixed Assets and
- (2) receive a more detailed report on the work of the Fixed Assets Task Group at the next meeting including information on the outcome of the valuation exercise.

58/14 Planning Enforcement – update

The Head of Planning and Housing Strategy gave an update on the revised planning enforcement list which had been overhauled to make it easier to use. Cases were now listed by ward and detailed the enforcement history. Once the document had been signed off by the portfolio holder it would be sent to all councillors monthly. A public version would be circulated on the Planning Committee agenda on a quarterly basis.

The Committee suggested the confidential version of the list should be circulated on gold paper to make clear to members the confidential nature of its contents.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) the update on the revised planning enforcement list be noted and
- (2) the enforcement list circulated to all councillors be produced on gold paper to emphasise its confidential nature.

59/14 Housing Issues – update

The Joint Heads of Housing and Independent Living gave an update on the housing and welfare reform issues affecting Spelthorne. They covered a wide range of issues; from the extent of the problems, to some of the 'solutions'. These included:

- Increased numbers on Housing register and facing homelessness

- flexible and helpful approach of Housing Benefit administration to assist private sector landlords
- discussions held with Kwasi Kwarteng MP to highlight welfare benefit issues locally and the difficulties in implementing conflicting legislation ie around discharge of homeless duty and suitability of accommodation given the acute shortage of affordable, reasonable quality, private rented properties
- extensive work assisting people in relation to housing issues during the flooding
- meeting of Strategic Housing Group representatives with local Registered Social Landlords such as Thames Valley, Paragon and A2D to discuss ways of providing more affordable accommodation locally
- proactive work with people affected by the benefit cap; encouraging people back into work, including case study examples
- innovative use of Discretionary Housing Payments
- employment of a specialist housing adviser to draw together an action plan of good practice and practical ways the Council can increase the supply of temporary and other accommodation
- negotiations (almost complete) to convert two Council-owned park's properties to use as temporary accommodation

The officers explained the dilemma they faced between proactively encouraging those affected by benefit cap/under occupation to seek solutions such as return to employment or downsizing rather than simply paying any rental shortfall to them and the consequent underspend on the discretionary housing payment (DHP) budget as a result of this approach. It was possible that in future years the Council would be penalised due to this underspend, by a reduction in the budget for DHP, whereas those authorities that didn't undertake as much proactive work and spent the full budget for DHP might see an increase.

The Committee was concerned by this situation and asked the officers to highlight the issue to Kwasi Kwarteng, MP in a briefing note.

Members expressed concern about allegedly incorrect service charges being issued to residents by A2Dominion which was putting people in arrears and at risk of homelessness. The Chairman suggested that the matter be added to the Committee's work programme.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the update on Housing issues;
- (2) congratulate and thank the Housing teams for their creative approach to addressing problems;
- (3) ask the officers to brief Kwasi Kwarteng MP on the dilemma between encouraging solutions to those affected by welfare reforms and facing a reduction in the DHP budget and

- (4) include on the Committee's future work programme a session with A2Dominion Housing Group.

60/14 Localism Act

Councillors Friday and Dunn reported back on the progress of the working party looking at what the Council was doing to address Localism. Councillor Dunn explained the work that other councils were doing to inform residents about the opportunities available by way of neighbourhood plans but was not aware of any work undertaken in this area by Spelthorne Borough Council. He agreed to source materials from other authorities for ideas on how to progress this area. Councillor Friday gave an overview of what the Council was doing in relation to Business Rates discounts, the General Power of Competence and Assets of Community Value. The former two needed to be kept under review but the latter had been progressed and was due to be launched in the spring edition of the Borough Bulletin.

The Committee discussed how it might engage local community groups in Localism and agreed it would be useful to raise the opportunities available to communities with representatives of Residents' Associations at the next meeting. In the meantime the working party was asked to produce an 'easy guide' to Community Rights for residents in advance of the next meeting.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the report of the working party and thank them for their work on Localism;
- (2) invite representatives of Residents' Associations to the next meeting to hear about their Community Rights and
- (3) ask the working party to produce an 'easy guide' to Community Rights for residents in advance of the next meeting.

61/14 Cabinet Forward Plan

The Committee received the Cabinet Forward Plan.

RESOLVED to note the Forward Plan.

62/14 Work programme 2013/2014

The Chairman noted the items currently on the Work Programme for the May 2014 meeting as follows:

- Discussion with residents about Localism
- Financial reports
- Addressing the Budget gap
- Reports from Leader's Task Groups
- Updates on transport links and Streetscene

She also confirmed that A2Dominion would be included on the Work Programme as discussed at this meeting and that a special multi-agency meeting would be organised to consider the issues raised as a result of the flooding crisis.

63/14 Any other business

No other business was reported.