

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE CABINET

14TH OCTOBER 2020, AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors K.J. May (Leader), A. D. Kent (Deputy Leader),
G. N. Denaro, M. A. Sherrey, P.L. Thomas and S. A. Webb

Officers: Mr. K. Dicks, Mrs. S. Hanley, Mrs. C. Felton,
Ms. D. Poole, Mr C. Forrester, Mr. M. Dunphy and Ms. A. Scarce

31/2020 **TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies for absence.

32/2020 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

33/2020 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held on 9th September 2020 were submitted.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held on 9th September 2020 be approved as a true and correct record.

34/2020 **ANY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD MEETING HELD ON 12TH OCTOBER 2020**

Officers confirmed that there were no recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 12th October 2020 for consideration by Cabinet.

35/2020 **PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE - GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER (COUNCIL RESPONSE)**

The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regulatory Services advised that this was a topic report in current circumstances and asked the Strategic Planning and Conservation Manager to take Members through the report.

The Strategic Planning and Conservation Manager advised that there had been detailed discussions of this items at the Strategic Planning Steering Group (SPSG). There were two recommendations which referred to the response to the Planning for the Future White Paper and

the response to the Changes to the Planning System. The White Paper was taken first, and the Strategic Planning and Conservation Manager gave a brief summary of the response, which covered the following areas:

- It contained 3 pillars of proposals with 24 further pillars leading from the main areas.
- The focus was to speed up the planning system and make it simpler and affectively there was a strong focus on house building.
- There was a significant change from where the local authorities were at the moment and these would have an impact on this Council as it progressed through its current review.
- The main issue was the change in the allocations – as currently there was much more scope in respect of other policies. The proposals broke it down into three areas; growth, renewal and protection.
- The response was a balanced one as far as possible, although there were some issues and the responses tried to pick up the technical issues.
- More clarity was needed in respect of the 3 pillars, as the “devil was in the detail”.
- There were some issues around setting development management issues nationally and the Strategic Planning and Conservation Manager explained this in more detail.
- The removal of the duty to co-operate was a positive element as this was something which had not really worked in the vast majority of places.
- There was support for the simplified sustainability test, which would reduce the work needed.
- The standardised methodology - there would be varying views in respect of this as to whether the results would mean the figures were either too big or too small, so this was also a contentious issue. Clarity and certainty were the key in order for everyone to be able to deliver the required numbers.
- Affordability issues were discussed in respect of housing and the link to employment.
- There were a number of technical issues which needed to be considered, for example speeding up the process but this should not be to the detriment of the decision that were made. The resource and the technology were also needed in order to achieve this.
- There were substantial changes in respect of the timescale, which were welcomed. Whilst this was supported, consideration also needed to be given to the consultation process, which should not be weakened, as there was much benefit from the face to face consultation which currently took place.
- The infrastructure delivery and funding also carried with it a number of issues, which gave certainty and clarity, but it should

be made sure that the levy was set at an appropriate level. It was likely that this would have financial implications for the Council.

It was hoped that the response flagged up the areas of concern whilst supporting the majority of it where there were positives for the planning system.

The Strategic Planning and Conservation Manger then moved on to the Council's response to the Planning Systems Changes, which had already been submitted as the deadline was 1st October. However, it was confirmed that there was an opportunity to provide further feedback, should Council wish to do so on considering this document. Much of it was similar to that in the White Paper and contained details around the Housing Methodology and details of the changes to the housing need in Bromsgrove District were discussed. This was due to new population projections and affordability changes, which put this Council in a different position. A further change proposed was in respect of affordable housing and the need for the Council to deliver affordable housing wherever it could was discussed.

The implications of these documents were mainly in respect of those in the process of preparing plans and what approach should be taken. Some authorities were continuing to try and avoid the reforms and others were at a position where they would have to take them into account. In respect of this Council it was suggested that it continued to do the things that it could do, but did not spend significant amounts of money on evidence which may not be needed, although things such as a flood risk assessment could go ahead in the background. It was suggested that nothing be published for consultation until the Council had a better idea of what the reforms were and once the Government's response was published the Council would be able to pull together a plan as to how to move forward. Subject to agreement the website would be updated to explain that things were progressing, but documents would not be published until such time as it was more appropriate.

The Deputy Leader reinforced a number of areas which had been covered in the presentation of the report, which he confirmed that had been before two meetings of the SPSG, with the most recent meeting being very well attended and detailed discussion had taken place. The importance of clarification on the Greenbelt was also highlighted which would majorly affect this Council. The timescale to put a plan together was also noted and the importance of speeding up this process and the financial implications. It was vitally important to also deal with the affordability issue that Bromsgrove District had. The Deputy Leader also drew Members attention to a number of excellent ideas within the report, including tree lined streets and help for small builders and help for self-builds were also welcomed. There was still work which would continue on the current Plan and whatever needed to be done would, but there would be elements which would be put on hold until clarity had been received.

Following presentation of the report Members made a number of comments:

- The Leader had been on a call with central Government recently and it had been made clear that there would be further consultation later in the year on this matter.
- It was about providing homes but also economic growth areas within the District and the challenges the Greenbelt posed. The area had good connectivity and it was felt that a small amount of the Greenbelt needed to be allowed for economic growth and homes.
- The financial implications in respect of the levy were discussed and it was confirmed that it was a risk, but it was difficult to say at this stage what this would be. The Strategic Planning and Conservation Manger explained in detail how this currently worked and the proposals for setting this nationally and how it would impact on this Council.

RECOMMENDED that

- 1) Appendix A as detailed in the report, be submitted to MHCLG as the Councils Response to the Planning for the Future White Paper; and
- 2) Appendix B as detailed in the report, be confirmed as the Councils response to the Changes to the planning System consultation.

36/2020

RECOVERY AND RESTORATION PLAN

The Head of Transformation, OD and Digital Services explained that the purpose of the report was to introduce the Council's approach to recovery and restoration, particularly in light of the current pandemic. It was acknowledged that whilst the pandemic was still on going there was a real need to plan for the future recovery. It was noted that the deliver of services had been maintained it had become clear that both local and national economies had been badly effected by the present situation and lockdown. In order to try and address some of those issues a Bromsgrove Economic Recovery Plan was being developed together with a much wider County focused recovery plan and the intention was that this Recovery and Restoration Plan would sit along side those documents. This document had been built around the Council's strategic purposes and included some of the priorities in the Council Plan, key recovery actions together with some recommendations from the recent Corporate Peer Challenge Review which had taken place earlier this year. As the council Plan was drafted before the onset of the Pandemic and it is likely that the Council's priorities will have changed. A review of the Council Plan would therefore take place in early 2021 to ensure that the priorities and focus were relevant to, hopefully the post Covid position. It was noted that all Heads of Services had been involved in the construction of the Recovery and Restoration Plan.

The Leader commented that the report had been considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Board on 12th October, with no concerns being raised. It was a good plan and confirmed that the Council Plan would be fully reviewed in 2021.

The Chief Executive thanked the Management Team for work so hard, not just in respect of the Plan but also the work over the last six months. The Plan as it stood at the moment, but as part of the recommendations there was scope for it to be revised and reviewed in the future, which was important in light of the present circumstances. The Plan placed the Council in a good position to move forward and addressed the elements in the Corporate Peer Challenge, which was a fair reflection of the Council at that time, but it had already moved on in respect of a number of issues, as would be expected.

The Leader took the opportunity to pay tribute to both Officers and Members for how they had approached the Covid-19 situation. They had been proactive and despite a very stressful time had protected frontline services and been able to support residents.

The Deputy Leader raised a number of points, and made particular reference to the Planning Consultation document, and how the Recovery and Restoration Plan reinforced a common strand through the Council on what it was trying to deliver. He asked for feedback in respect of concerns around people losing their jobs now and in the future due to the pandemic and support that could be put in place to help sign post them and assist them. It was noted that there was in fact growth in engineering, IT and construction, so opportunities were available.

The Chief Executive responded that affordable housing was important in achieving a balanced community. He was able to share a number of proposals which he had recently discussed with the Leader. The Leader confirmed that the Council was looking to employ a Business Support Officer, to help businesses look to a future vision and an Officer to help particularly the 16-24 years age group who had either lost their jobs or were going into work for the first time in order to enable them to get into the work place. These would be three year fixed term contracts primarily to support the economy of Bromsgrove District. This was welcomed as there were concerns around that age group in particular. It was acknowledged that there were schemes out there but it would be useful to have an officer who was able to sign post people and support them through the process. The Chief Executive reiterated that there was a lot of support available, but it was often difficult to navigate through it, the aim of the posts would be therefore to support people to do this. The skills agenda was huge and further meetings were taking place with the Worcestershire LEP around that agenda. It was explained that the £1m in reserves would not be completely utilised but once the officers were in place the Council would be in a better position to understand what other uses it could be put to in order to provide the necessary support in what was expected to be a very challenging six months.

Members emphasised the need to support local businesses and to shop local in order to support and protect local communities and help them to get through this very difficult time.

Concerns were raised as to whether there was capacity within the NWeDR to support all the tasks allocated to them or whether additional support would be needed. It was explained that whilst these were allocated to NWeDR they would be supported in carrying these through by partners, such as the Events Team would help with the promotion and events work at the Bird Box. This was a very fluid situation, and it would be reviewed regularly, but would very much be a team effort.

RESOLVED that

- 1) the proposed Recovery and Restoration Plan 2020 - 2021, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report be endorsed;
- 2) the Cabinet monitor the council's recovery actions against the plan and the Chief Executive Officer, in consultation with the Leader, be authorised to make amendments to the plan as required; and
- 3) the Corporate Peer Challenge Report 2020

37/2020

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2020/21 TO 2024/25 - UPDATE

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources suggested that the papers spoke for themselves, but the areas which need to be considered in more detail were listed on page 82 of the agenda pack.

The Head of Finance and Customer Services that the report highlighted the parameters that would be used for setting the Medium Term Financial Plan and that as referred to everyone was going through a period of great uncertainty. The spending review was likely to be only for one year, clarification on New Homes Bonus was still uncertain and the Fairer Funding Review remained unclear. It was therefore difficult to set a four year plan, however the key objectives would remain the same in order to meet the Council's Strategic Purposes and maintain balances at £2m. the Council would also try to maximise investments and income opportunities and focus on being commercial. There would be a review of the vacant posts, review of fees and charges, identification of savings and pressures to the budget and a review of reserves. In previous years it was noted that there had been issues with the capital programme, a lot of work had been done on this in the previous year and had continued this year. It was anticipated that at Quarter 2 this would be closer to what had been forecast and this would be reviewed and reduced if necessary as it was not acceptable to keep rolling those forward as it impacted on borrowing and forecasting. Budget Managers would also be encouraged to take ownership of fees and charges and to do a proper review with a business case. It was accepted that this would be

difficult this year with the Covid-19 situation, but it would be a work in progress.

The overspend was largely due to the car parking position, which everyone was aware of and it was expected that some of this would be claimed back from Central Government and an application had been put in. The Council had received a Covid-19 support grant of £1.1m and it was confirmed that the pay award had been agreed at 2.75%. It would be prudent to use a figure of 2% going forward.

The graph at 3.11 of the report showed the gaps that would need to be addressed, although it was confirmed that the Council had sufficient reserves to cover these if necessary. However, budget Managers were being contacted to see whether further efficiency savings could be made and excess budgets removed. Reference was made to those who had been significantly under budget the previous year and look at pushing to reduce the budget or if they were carrying a lot of vacancies to delete those posts. This was not good practice and work was being done at CMT to ensure there was an improvement and the budgeting more accurate.

The Deputy Leader asked about the implication of the current situation on the Council Tax position and the need for support to be put in place. It was accepted that this Council did not carry the full weight of the "loss" but concerns were raised moving forward and whether any projections had been made. The Head of Finance and Customer Services responded that due to the arrangements, the Council only shared a relatively small percentage of any losses. Monies from both Central Government and the Council's own hardship Grants had been paid out. He was happy to circulate the exact figures outside of the meeting. There was a small drop in the percentage of collection figures at the moment compared to the previous four years, but it was hoped that this would go back up again as people got used to paying in a different way, which had changed in some cases due to the pandemic. Officers were being sympathetic to those residents who were struggling in respect of collections and residents were encouraged to reach out and access the support available.

RESOLVED that Cabinet note the parameters to be used to prepare the 2021/22 budget and the framework for the Medium Term Financial Plan to 2024/25.

The meeting closed at 6.47 p.m.

Chairman