

**BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD**

**28TH MARCH 2022, AT 6.00 P.M.**

PRESENT: Councillors C.A. Hotham (Chairman), J. Till, S. J. Baxter, S. R. Colella, R. J. Hunter, H. J. Jones, A. D. Kriss, M. Middleton and C. J. Spencer

Observers: Councillor G. N. Denaro, Councillor M. A. Sherrey and Councillor P. L. Thomas

Officers: Mrs. S. Hanley, Ms. D. Poole, Mr. G. Revans, Mr. K. Hirons and Ms. F. McIntosh, Mrs. P. Ross

73/21

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor A. Beaumont with Councillor M. Middleton in attendance as named substitute. Apologies for absence were also received from Councillor R. Deeming and Councillor P. McDonald with no named substitutes.

74/21

**DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND WHIPPING ARRANGEMENTS**

There were no Declarations of Interest nor of any Party Whip.

75/21

**TO CONFIRM THE ACCURACY OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD HELD ON 15TH FEBRUARY 2022**

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 15th February 2022 were submitted.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 15th February 2022 be approved as a true and correct record.

76/21

**LAND DRAINAGE WATERCOURSE MAINTENANCE OPERATION - PRE-SCRUTINY**

The Chairman welcomed the Senior Water Management Officer from North Worcestershire Water Management (NWWM) to the meeting who

gave a detailed presentation regarding the Land Drainage Watercourse Maintenance Operations. During the presentation Members' attention was drawn to the following:

- Bromsgrove District Council owned just under 8km of watercourses, primarily through recreation grounds. The Council was considered a riparian owner and under the Land Drainage Act 1991 was legally required to maintain the flow of water in a channel. Officers reported that it was important for the Council to lead by example with managing the flood risk particularly in respect of private landowners to mitigate any issues on private land. Historically, the Parks and Place team carried out maintenance of the watercourses on an ad-hoc basis, however it was reported that delays were sometimes experienced due to the capacity of the team or if there was a greater need experienced in other areas of their workload.
- The importance of maintenance best practice was highlighted to the Board, and it was explained that vegetation was a natural part of a healthy watercourse as it provided shade, bank stability, a source of food and filtered sediment. Aesthetics were not the main reasons for watercourse maintenance it was more to do with flood risk and maintenance of the ecology. This was particularly important in light of the recent discovery of water voles by officers in some watercourses in the district. These animals were listed as critically endangered in England and they and their habitats were protected by law. It was noted that Environmental Services Operatives were provided with training in order to identify evidence of water voles' presence at any watercourse.
- Himalayan Balsam was an invasive non-native plant that caused many problems across watercourses throughout the UK. The management of Himalayan Balsam was labour and time intensive.
- Although most of the work undertaken by the Place and Parks team was carried out to a high standard an example was presented to the Board outlining an instance when best practice guidelines had not been followed by operatives. This had resulted in further work, extra expenditure and engagement of an external contractor. It was hoped that this schedule of works would help to avoid instances like this in the future.

After the presentation, Councillor R. Hunter was invited to speak as the Chairman of the Impact of Flooding in the District Task Group. He stated that this report was welcomed, however, he expressed concern regarding the engagement of an external contractor rather than creating

an opportunity to carry out the maintenance work in-house. He noted that this way forward would not only create extra roles within the Council but would ensure greater control of any maintenance. Councillor R. Hunter proposed an additional recommendation regarding the potential of carrying out the work in-house. The proposal was not seconded.

In response to this, Councillor M. Sherrey who was in attendance as the Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services and Community Safety commented that recommendations contained within the report provided a more cost effective way of ensuring that the watercourses were maintained regularly. In addition to this, the engagement of an external contractor would ensure flexibility in carrying out the works. The Board were informed that this was to be considered as a pilot scheme and could be reviewed after the first year had been completed. It was with this in mind that the Chairman requested that a verbal update item be placed on the Board's work programme for consideration once the first year of the contract had been completed in order to ascertain the success of the maintenance.

Members asked some questions regarding the maintenance of specific watercourses in the district including Sanders Park and the Balancing Pond on the Oakalls. Officers undertook to provide this information to the Board. Other queries from Members included whether the external contractor would be assessed accordingly to ensure they had not provided unsatisfactory work to the Council previously. Members were reassured that the procurement process was currently underway and was robust. The Board were also interested in understanding the process of enforcement taken in respect of private landowners who did not maintain their watercourse thus impacting on the surrounding area. It was reported that officers always tried to work with landowners before commencing enforcement proceedings. However, if this was not successful a formal enforcement process could be initiated.

**RESOLVED** that the Land Drainage Watercourse Maintenance Operations be noted.

77/21

### **EQUALITY ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022**

The Head of Transformation & Organisational Development presented the Equality Annual Report 2021-2022 and reported that this was the first report of its kind and was as a result of a recommendation made by the Equalities Task Group investigation.

During consideration of the report Members' attention was drawn to the following:

- The report outlined the key achievements and progress in 2021, undertaken by the Council, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it was clarified that the information provided was not an exhaustive list of the activities undertaken during this period.
- Partnership working had been successful during the Covid-19 pandemic and support had been provided to those residents that had been identified as most in need. Several new events had taken place during this period including Bromsgrove's first Pride event.
- Initiatives that had also taken place within Council operations and were included as part of the report; had included Mental Health Awareness training, Time to Talk and the establishment of a Health and Wellbeing Group.
- Census information was included within the report. However, the Head of Transformation & Organisational Development acknowledged that this data was almost 10 years old, and officers would look to use the new census data as soon as it was available towards the end of 2022. Members felt that this would be a very useful exercise and would provide the most up to date information of the demographic within Bromsgrove which would then enable targeted support to those who needed it most.

Councillor G. Denaro, who was in attendance as the relevant Portfolio Holder, reported that he was extremely pleased with this report as it provided a clear picture of the many activities that officers were undertaking in this area.

Some Members questioned the data in respect of Shopmobility and the drop in usage during the Covid-19 pandemic. Officers explained that there had been a drop in use of the service, however it seemed that the numbers were increasing once more. It was requested that further information be provided in this area and officers undertook to provide additional data to Members.

There was further discussion regarding health inequalities in the district and it was reported that this was an area not covered by the Equalities Act 2010 but covered by the Council Plan which was due to be refreshed in June 2022.

The Chairman reiterated that this was an excellent report, and it was encouraging to see how much work was being carried out in this space. Further information in respect of services offered to care-leavers was requested by the Chairman and the Head of Transformation & Organisational Development undertook to contact the relevant officers to provide information to Members.

**RESOLVED** that the Equality Annual Report 2021-2022 be noted.

78/21

**FIREWORKS - MOTION - FOLLOW UP ON PROGRESS - BRIEFING NOTE**

This item was deferred, and it was confirmed that the update would be considered at the next meeting of the Board on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

79/21

**PLANNING DETERMINATION TIMESCALES - VERBAL UPDATE**

The Head of Planning, Regeneration and Leisure Services presented the verbal update in respect of Planning Determination Timescales. In doing so the following was highlighted for Members' attention:

- There were no particular concerns in respect of planning application determination timelines. Currently the data suggested that 100% of the applications received within the last quarter had been considered within the agreed timeframe which was set by central government or in agreement with the applicant in certain instances. Members were informed that the timescales for some categories of larger applications was consideration by 16 weeks and some were 13 weeks. Smaller applications had and 8 week timescale for determination
- The planning officers worked proactively with developers, particularly in respect of larger applications, to ensure that, if necessary, an extension of time agreement was put in place.
- Timescale data was submitted on a quarterly basis and central government provided an average over a two year period,

In order to better understand the data that had been provided, Members were interested in how many major applications had been received in the previous quarter. Officers undertook to provide this information.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Planning, Regeneration and Leisure Services for her attendance at the meeting and queried the number of vacancies currently within the planning team. It was reported that there

were currently vacancies for 1-2 officers but that this was being looked at and it was hoped that these vacancies would be filled very soon.

**RESOLVED** that Planning Determination Timescales Verbal Update be noted.

80/21

### **TASK GROUP UPDATES**

The Chairman invited Councillor S. Colella to present the Task Group update which provided an update on the Impact of the Review of Library Services Task Group. In doing so, he highlighted the outcome of the presentation of the recommendations to Cabinet, and as a result of them not being agreed it was thought that they should be revisited to see if any amendments could be made, with the view to presenting these amendments to Cabinet for further consideration again.

Members were informed that the task group was reconvened late in 2021 and that Councillors K. May and P. Thomas had been invited to discuss potential amendments. After this meeting it was decided by task group members that there would not be any amendments made to the original recommendations as it seemed likely that the Cabinet's response would remain unchanged.

In conclusion, Councillor S. Colella stated that this had still been a worthwhile investigation, established with good intentions, which had resulted in a good report that confirmed that libraries would continue to receive the funding they deserved.

**RESOLVED** that Task Group Updates be noted.

81/21

### **TOPIC PROPOSAL - FUEL POVERTY**

Councillor R. Hunter presented the Topic Proposal form in respect of establishing a Fuel Poverty Task Group. It was explained that residents were facing an unprecedented rising level in the cost of living and that it was important that the Council provided as much support as possible to those residents identified as in need.

Although all Members recognised that this was a difficult time and that residents did need support, some of the Board were interested in publicising the large number of services already provided by the Council. It was noted that it was important as elected Members to increase communication around these services in order that residents became more aware of grants and initiatives that were available to them.

There was some discussion regarding the option of inviting an officer to present further detailed information on what services were available to residents therefore avoiding the establishment of a longer task group process. This could result in the information being made available quicker and therefore cascaded to residents more efficiently.

Following a robust debate whereby Members discussed the usefulness of having all of the information available to residents in one place, such as information on access to Disability Facility grants, District Heat Network and more partnership working with Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (BDHT) Members resolved the following:

**RESOLVED** that

- a) the topic be included on the work programme and a Task Group be established to undertake a more in-depth investigation, appoint a Chairman for the Task Group and set a time scale for completion of the investigation; and
- b) Councillor R. Hunter be appointed as Chairman of the task group.

82/21

**FINANCE AND BUDGET WORKING GROUP - UPDATE**

The Chairman explained that the Finance and Budget Working Group had not taken place since the last meeting of the Board. However, Members were informed that a meeting was due to take place in April 2022.

**RESOLVED** that the Finance and Budget Working Group Update be noted.

83/21

**WORCESTERSHIRE HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - UPDATE**

Councillor S. Baxter provided the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) update and explained to Members that the minutes of the meeting would be circulated to the Board for information.

**RESOLVED** that the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee update be noted.

84/21

**CABINET WORK PROGRAMME**

The content of the Cabinet Work Programme for the period 1st April to 31st July 2022 was considered by the Board.

**RESOLVED** that the Cabinet Work Programme be noted.

85/21

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered the Overview and Scrutiny Board work programme. Officers undertook to make any necessary changes highlighted during the course of the meeting.

**RESOLVED** that the Overview and Scrutiny Board Work Programme be noted.

The meeting closed at 7.46 p.m.

Chairman