

Bromsgrove District Council

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Planning Services and Housing Strategy

Aligned to all strategic purposes but in particular to “Help me to Find Somewhere to Live in my Locality” and “Help me to Run a Successful Business”

I am pleased to present an update report to the Council about the areas covered by my portfolio. In doing so I would like both to look back over recent events and forward to emerging issues. I will begin by talking about housing and housing strategy going forwards in Bromsgrove.

Housing Strategy

- **Homelessness** – homelessness is always a good indicator of the health or otherwise of a local housing market, and I am happy to be able to report that homelessness remains relatively stable in Bromsgrove. During the last five years homelessness acceptance figures have been around 70 a year, with requests for housing options interviews ranging between 700 and 800 a year over the same time period.

I am also pleased to be able to report that the Council successfully awarded a new homelessness and housing options contract in January 2018. The new contract was secured by BDHT after an exhaustive procurement exercise. This activity coincided with the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018, and we have worked closely with our partners to ensure everything is in place to meet the latest legislative requirements and provide a good service to local residents facing housing issues in the district.

The council continues to use all DCLG homelessness grants to prevent or respond to homelessness locally, with a particular focus on the needs of young people and ex-offenders.

- **Affordable housing** – As members will be aware, we regularly negotiate for up to 40% affordable housing provision in our Section 106 agreements with developers. Over the last five years these have delivered an average of 100 affordable homes a year and these homes go on to be owned by local Registered Providers, such as BDHT, who will be renting the properties to local residents. I would say at this point that we are very aware that there is no room for complacency here – the pipeline of new homes coming on-line is healthy, and we have 15 housing providers operating in our area, but there’s always a need to do more. We currently have around 2000 households

registered on our housing waiting list, some of whom have an urgent need to find an alternative home so we have also been working up plans to take a more interventionist approach to the housing market as I will now go on to explain.

- **The immediate future** – the housing market in Bromsgrove is catering well for people living in the district and commuting out to work, but for local residents living and working in Bromsgrove the situation is more challenging, and we are determined to step in and try to rebalance the market from this perspective. As a result, I am pleased to advise that the council is in the process of opening a housing company to help ramp up delivery of new homes for local people, starting with development of the site of our old headquarters at Burcot Lane. I would like to take this opportunity to offer thanks, on behalf of the council, to Homes England for their support with this project. Homes England's offer of a £1M accelerated growth fund grant towards the scheme is a massive boost in terms of moving things forwards and we look forwards to working in partnership with them to provide high quality housing that also creates new jobs and opportunities for small and medium enterprises locally. Building 61 new homes at Burcot Lane is the first step of a wider programme that's about the council utilising its assets in new ways, and I look forward to being able to report to council on similar initiatives in the near future.

Planning and Regeneration

Development Management

As ever the Planning Department has been extremely busy. Between April 2017 and April 2018 the team determined 740 formal applications. The speed of determination of applications remained strong with 91 % of major applications and 90% of other applications being determined within the relevant time periods. This performance is well above the advised 60% and 70% respectively. Other work included dealing with discharge of conditions and pre application enquiries, as well as providing general planning advice to customers via the enquiry phone line (5 days per week) and the popular Householder Planning Surgery facility. A raft of training sessions has also been provided for Parish Council colleagues across the District.

Defending Planning Appeals is another area the service is involved with. During the period April 2017 to April 2018 a total of 37 of the Councils' decisions were challenged at appeal 27 of which (71%) were successfully defended.

The team continues to evaluate its working methods both with internal colleagues and external stakeholders and adjusts working practices as a result. Some staff

turnover has resulted in new team members who have brought with them some new ideas.

Bromsgrove District Plan

The Bromsgrove District Plan was adopted in January 2017 and the review is already underway. Following the anticipated publication of the revised NPPF in the Summer it is anticipated that the Issues and Options document will be considered by Full Council in September.

Conservation

The Conservation team, as well as providing advice on planning applications, is currently working on updating the conservation area appraisals and compiling the local list of heritage assets. The team also provides technical assistance to the THI scheme.

Liaison with County Highways

The Strategic Planning and Conservation Team has also been engaging with Worcestershire County Council Highways on addressing the infrastructure issues; We are currently working on the scope and scale of the transport evidence base required to be support the production of the Bromsgrove Plan review. Working alongside our advisors Mott MacDonald, we are adopting a different approach to WCCs standard approach. This is to ensure that transport matters are considered right at the outset of the plan making process and factor more prominently in the decisions of where development should go. Mott MacDonald on are also closely scrutinising the work being prepared to support major planning applications such as the Perryfields and Whitford Road sites, this scrutiny is on both the technical work prepared by developers and the response of WCC to this work. We meet with WCC and Highways England once a month, and have an ongoing program of work to ensure closer working takes place. Various bids have been submitted by either WCC or BDC for funding for much needed infrastructure such as improved walking and cycling measures or for the A38 major scheme bid. Mott Macdonald will continue to be used until such a time that we have confidence in WCC to provide a technically sound and efficient transport service to the Council. As Portfolio Holder I would invite all members to work together to ensure that at member and officer level at WCC, that this district has the support it needs from WCC as highways authority.

Enforcement

In terms of Enforcement issues, many cases continue to be closed because of successful negotiation. However, in addition the council has not shied away from taking formal enforcement action.

Economic Development and the Townscape Heritage Initiative

The Planning team continues to work closely with colleagues in Economic Development to support the regeneration of Bromsgrove Town Centre. Since the previous Portfolio Holders report, Waitrose is now open and at the other end of the High Street Aldi is under construction.

We are continuing to see the benefits of the Townscape Heritage Initiative, which has seen £1.2 million of National Lottery funding alongside £400,000 from Worcestershire County Council, used to regenerate the Bromsgrove town centre. In particular the renovation of the Tudor house on New Road is now complete, along with a number of new shopfronts along Worcester Road which have really made a difference to the look and feel of this part of town. The THI project is now nearing completion, in order to ensure as much work is undertaken as possible the Heritage Lottery Fund granted an extension to the scheme till the end of 2018, unfortunately though this is the final extension we will be granted and the scheme will have to close at the end of December.

In terms of other centres, planning officers have had input into suggested public realm improvements at Rubery and implementation has now commenced on site.

Building Control

At a time of increased competition from the private sector, the building control department has managed to achieve an overall increase in its application numbers and enquiries. This has been done whilst continuing to offer exceptional non-fee earning services, such as dealing with dangerous structures, building demolition and general, impartial advice. The Building Control service throughout North Worcestershire continues to enjoy a high reputation amongst its clients with its customer focussed approach. The service is also expanding its partnership base beyond the Authority's boundary's undertaking an increase in work on sites within South Worcestershire as well as Stratford areas. The construction industry remains fragile and the Grenfell tragedy last year will no doubt impact widely on the whole Building Control and construction sector however the service is confident it will be able to meet any challenges it faces.

Conclusion

Strategic Housing and Planning and Regeneration are public facing services that contribute widely to achieving our strategic purposes and whilst working with county highways has its challenges, working practices have been put in place to facilitate more meaningful engagement .

Map 1: Bromsgrove Townscape Heritage Initiative Area Map



Picture 1: British Heart Foundation



Picture 2: Bank Solicitors