

## **MINUTES**

### **STRATEGIC PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY**

**6 FEBRUARY 2018**

<b>Councillors:</b>	Barrett Birnie Fisher S Hearn Hicks Howard (Vice-	Chairman) Ransley Riddick Timmis C Wyatt-Lowe
<b>Officers:</b>	James Doe  Andrew Horner  Fiona Jump Katie Mogan Caroline Souto Chris Taylor  Craig Thorpe Emma Walker	Assistant Director - Planning, Development and Regeneration  Group Manager - Development Management  Group Manager – Financial Services Member Support Officer Financial Planning & Analysis Team Leader Group Manager - Strategic Planning and Regeneration  Group Manager - Environmental Services Group Manager - Environmental and Community Protection

#### **Also in attendance:**

Councillor Janice Marshall  
Councillor Graham Sutton

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

#### **11            MINUTES**

The minutes of the Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 23 January 2018 were confirmed by the members present and signed by the Chairman.

#### **12            APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillor Anderson.

Councillor Howard chaired the meeting in the absence of Councillor Anderson.

#### **13            DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**14            PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

**15            CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL-IN**

None.

**16            BUDGET PREPARATION 2018/19**

J Doe gave a presentation to members and highlighted some changes from the previous budget meeting in December. At the last meeting, the government were considering raising planning income fees by 20%. This has now been confirmed and is fully operational. The purpose of the fee increase is to ensure that local authorities have the capacity to support the government's ambitious housing growth. It is predicted that the increase in fees will generate revenue of £158k a year. The fees for pre application planning advice have been reviewed and this will generate £7k bringing the total fee income to £165k.

The department have prepared a growth bid and planned an operational reorganisation which the new income will fund. The aim is to increase the department's capacity and ability to deal with major applications and improve efficiencies. The following has been proposed:

- One new Planning Officer and two trainees
- Training budget for trainees
- New Assistant Team Leader to support enforcement and business development/efficiency
- New supervisor for business support team (including planning registry/validation)
- Will give more capacity for senior staff to focus on major developments

An application for the LA3 site is due imminently which is expecting to have 1,100 units. There have been 3,200 applications over the last year and the capacity is needed to deal with this alongside the minor applications.

Recruitment is hard due to the lack of supply of planning officers and the training budget will mean trainees can be trained.

The Enforcement department is currently quite stretched and is operating on a reactive basis as there isn't enough resource currently to fully check on the

compliance of planning conditions.

It is hoped that by freeing up some of the senior officers time, then they can assist with other projects in the department, like the development of the new Local Plan. The cost of the restructure is £177k which will create a small pressure in the budget. The Hemel Hempstead Business Ambassadors is based on a subscription service and this generates £63.5k of income but there is a manager who coordinates the program and there are operational costs. The council have decided to support this scheme for its third year which will cost £45k.

Councillor Birnie asked if 'golden handcuffs' would be applied to those that go through the trainee program.

J Doe said yes. The internal policy is that if they leave within 24 months, then they have to pay a proportion of the costs of the training they received.

Councillor Birnie referred to the £12k pressure and said there had been no mention of how the service would improve from the public's point of view. He said on major applications, there was a failure to interact with the public and all objections should be placed on the website for all to see.

J Doe said he was aware that this was an issue. The restructure should help improve the capacity of the team. The current planning system is about 20 years old and the tender will soon go out for a new system. It is hoped that this will be operational by December 2018.

Councillor Birnie asked if the new system would mean that planning officers could scan objections sent in via post or email and upload onto the website.

J Doe said all post is scanned so there is the facility to add this onto the website under the new system.

Councillor Hicks referred to the £12k pressure and said that despite the potential overspend, if this includes a training budget then it is an investment. He also asked if the recruitment issues experienced in building control had been solved.

J Doe said the trainees are doing well. It is a fluid labour market and professional companies are not bound by wage structures like the council and can offer higher salaries. The building control department is currently fully staffed but that includes some agency provision.

Councillor Hicks referred to the Business Ambassadors and the cost of the service. He asked if this was mostly covered by subscriptions.

J Doe said what the council was funding was offset by the income raised.

Councillor S Hearn asked about recovering costs for enforcement cases. Would this be made easier with more staff.

J Doe it should improve the department's ability to take cases through the courts. The council can only recover its legal costs and not officer time. The restructure should add resource to give officers the time and ability to begin checking on compliance of planning conditions. Currently, they operate on a reactive process and respond to complaints from members or residents.

Councillor Timmis asked if the 20% increase was for all categories of planning applications. She said a 20% increase on everything seemed quite steep.

J Doe said the increase had been proposed by government and did apply to all applications.

Councillor Timmis said she was concerned that this fee increase may encourage people to not apply for planning permission. She asked if there would be an increase of staff in the conservation department because they are quite difficult to get hold of due to their high workload.

J Doe said it is yet to be seen whether or not this fee rise would discourage applications. The old fee structure only covered the cost of 50-60% of the service and even with the 20% increase, costs are not fully covered. If residents do not apply for planning permission, they are at risk of enforcement action. He said the conservation department was well resourced with two members of staff.

Councillor Fisher asked if the new structure and a better way of working would help the issue of retention and recruitment.

J Doe said there should be enough staff to deal with the workload. In terms of recruitment issues, there are defined pay structures so it is difficult to compete with other local authorities and private planning consultants can offer higher salaries. Staff are given a varied case load and are given the best opportunities to progress.

Councillor Birnie asked about recruitment in Environmental Protection. Air pollution is a growing problem and isn't a material planning consideration when determining applications.

J Doe said that came under D Austin's service. He said he was aware that they also suffer with recruitment issues but the planning department are joining with Environmental Protection to do some work on air pollution.

Councillor Riddick said there were some good staff but the concern is capacity. Certain applications are a distraction and consumes their resources. Can this be controlled?

J Doe said every case was different. Each application must be treated professionally and the decision must be justified. In some major applications, the issue are clear and officers can arrive at a swift decision. It is hoped there will be a better relationship between fee income and officer time.

Councillor Riddick asked if was possible to set a target of how many hours an officer is expected to spend on an application.

J Doe said the department work to the performance standards shown in the quarterly reports. Major applications have a target of 13 weeks. It is definitely a suggestion worth exploring.

Councillor S Hearn asked if there was a procedure to track staff progress.

J Doe said staff have an annual appraisal.

Councillor Hicks asked if the new IT system would improve the standard of plans submitted on the system. Some of the plans submitted are of poor quality.

J Doe said applicants do have standards to meet and applications can be turned away if they do not meet these standards.

Councillor Birnie said some developers play the system and get permission for a development and then render the site unusable and then the council don't get business rates.

J Doe said the only power the council has is under a s.215 order. The council can't force development.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe agreed with the comments. The council should be pushing for an improvement in visual appearance. Dacorum is a relatively affluent area and developers should have to meet certain standards which perhaps could be written into policies.

J Doe said the council had that opportunity now with the new Local Plan. The reorganisation of the department would free up senior officer time for them to address design quality.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe said this was more important for town centre developments in main thoroughfares for those visiting Dacorum in order to continue to attract residents and businesses.

Councillor S Hearn said the council should be looking forward to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century in order to leave something behind and look to futuristic developments.

J Doe said work was ongoing on planning for infrastructure to support these developments like fast broadband.

C Taylor said there is a vision for large developments to allow for modern methods of construction. However, technology is moving so fast that it is hard to know what will happen in 20 years. The department are working with Hertfordshire University to conduct this work.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe said it was a two way street. She said it might be an idea to have a Member Development session on modern design. The council and

developers need to be imaginative whilst being sustainable and as the planning authority, the council should be receptive.

Councillor Marshall gave an update for environmental services. She said there had been little development since the last meeting in December but the main areas were:

- A CSG review would mean a saving of £50k
- There was a saving of £45k in transport as dry recycling is now sent to a centre within Hertfordshire which means a shorter distance to travel
- On page 52, there has been an adjustment in staffing within Environmental Protection. This has been difficult to compare like for like.

Councillor S Hearn asked who was responsible for clearing the litter from the laybys and behind the fences on the A41. He noted that this had got worse recently.

Councillor Marshall said if it was private land, then it would be the land owners responsibility to clear it. She asked the councillor to send her an email with the exact location and she would look into it.

C Thorpe said the annual A41 clear up would begin in the third week of March and are currently awaiting permission from HCC as they own the road. It will take two weeks with two crews to carry out the work. The department used to do it twice a year but traffic management is expensive. The clear up used to happen alongside HCC grass cutting but they have moved this operation to overnight which is not practical or safe for litter picking.

Councillor Timmis said the country was too polite on rubbish and action needed to be tougher. She also asked if the high winds experienced meant there was an impact on the budget.

C Thorpe said yes it does. The department responded to 400 emergency calls about fallen trees compared to North Herts who had just 40. It did hit the budget which meant other projects had to be scaled down. The saving proposed in the budget has come from scaling down the density of planting and the restructure of the Trees and Woodlands team.

Councillor G Sutton said a lot of people point the blame at local authorities on rubbish. The irresponsible drivers are the ones dropping the litter. In the past, DBC have written to local companies asking them to secure their loads as a lot of rubbish falls off the back of lorries. Current signage is not strong enough.

Councillor Marshall said the council can use fixed penalty notices but these can only be issued if the person is caught in the act. CSG are holding an event in March where a huge fly tip will be publicised.

Councillor Birnie said the headings in the report were not very helpful. He asked what Environmental Protection roughly encompasses.

E Walker said that this covers the Scientific Officer who deals with air quality, contaminated land and statutory noise nuisances.

Councillor Birnie asked about knotweed infestations.

E Walker said this was not covered under contaminated land but can be dealt with by a Community Protection Notice which other local authorities have done.

Councillor Birnie asked about the power to issue a CPN.

E Walker said it had certain criteria to meet: unreasonable and persistent behaviour and a detrimental effect on quality of life. She said she would need to check if this would extend to buildings.

Councillor Birnie said there was a concern about knotweed in a recent planning application. It must be declared when a house is sold but a developer doesn't have to notify.

E Walker said she didn't believe it was a material planning consideration but would check with colleagues in the planning department.

Councillor Barrett asked about the shortfall in income within trade waste.

C Thorpe said that there is work ongoing to identify why the council is losing business. Some businesses are closing down but sometimes it is because the council aren't as competitive. Some other waste companies offer attractive deals on 12 month contracts. Exit interviews will be conducted to find reasons why businesses are leaving the service.

## **17                  WORK PROGRAMME**

The work programme was agreed.

The Meeting ended at 9.20 pm