

## MINUTES

### STRATEGIC PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

24 SEPTEMBER 2019

**Present:**

**Members:**

**Councillors:** Barrett  
Beauchamp  
Birnie (Chairman)  
P Hearn  
Hobson  
Ransley  
Riddick  
Rogers  
Silwal (Vice-  
Chairman)  
Stevens  
Taylor  
Timmis  
Woolner

**Officers:** Sharon Burr Corporate and Democratic Support Officer  
James Doe Assistant Director - Planning, Development  
and Regeneration  
Fiona Jump Group Manager - Financial Services  
Craig Thorpe Group Manager - Environmental Services  
Emma Walker Group Manager - Environmental and  
Community Protection

**Also in Attendance:**

Councillor Alan Anderson  
Councillor Julie Banks  
Councillor Graham Sutton  
Councillor Colette Wyatt-Lowe

The meeting began at 19:30

**30** **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the last meeting were agreed and signed.

**31** **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies for absence.

**32**                    **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**33**                    **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

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

None.

**35**                    **BUDGET MONITORING Q1**

Fiona Jump presented the report.

F Jump explained that :

Appendix A provides a summary of the revenue position for the Council.

The forecast is a budget pressure of £121k against budgets for the entire Council.

Appendix B contains more detail around capital programmes.

The forecast shows an underspend of £79k against those capital schemes.

Cllr Hobson asked a question regarding garages, explaining that she would like to understand what is behind that as she knows that some are being sold off.

F Jump explained that the level of voids was what was driving the figures on garages, when the figures are set they are based on a particular level of occupancy but the level of voids have been higher than expected, and that the department concerned was organising a stock condition survey which will enable them to take decisions regarding the future of the garage stock.

Cllr Birnie said that 3.3 Commercial Waste Review was mentioned again and asked for a timescale for this to be completed.

C Thorpe answered that the review from consultants had now been completed and said that he would be meeting with them the next day to discuss the outcome. He confirmed that there would be more information available for the next committee meeting.

Cllr Anderson added that officers are looking at various aspects of the commercial waste service and it may be that commercial recycling could be used as an opportunity to try and get the commercial waste back that we have been losing. Cllr Anderson added that price structures etc are being looked at to get to the bottom of the immediate problem.

Cllr Birnie explained for the benefit of the new councillors that this is an ongoing problem and that we have been losing commercial waste contracts to private contractors.

The report was noted.

## **36                    ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

Craig Thorpe presented the report.

Cllr Beauchamp offered congratulations on the performance of the Splash Park staff, saying that he had received several comments from people saying how successful it had been and how good the staff were.

Cllr Wyatt Lowe said that she was delighted with our collaboration with the Friends of the Nicky Line and added that she hoped that anything we are doing is cross referenced with the various agencies that are involved with the Nicky Line to make sure that we are not duplicating efforts and what we do there is what the residents actually want.

Cllr Wyatt Lowe also mentioned new collection bins installed in Aragon Close in the flats, she said that they look like they are going to be a vast improvement and she asked if they had impacted on the way that the tenants were disposing of their rubbish. Cllr also asked if Ward Councillors could be informed when something like the Nicky Line project or the new bins occurs so that, if there are any problems, they can communicate with the appropriate people.

C Thorpe replied that Housing actually put these bins in, but they do seem to be working. He agreed communication with the councillors would be good.

Cllr Timmis said that she was pleased to see the number of bedding plants added but would like to know how many trees were planted as with climate change we should be looking at this.

C Thorpe said that he had numbers for both trees that have been taken out and trees that have been planted and indeed the number planted is set to increase as a project has just started as a result of the climate emergency and as a direct wish of Cllr Williams to plant more trees as well as identifying areas of land where we can plant both quickly and sustainably over the next few years.

Cllr Anderson said it is important to remember that we cannot just plant trees anywhere and everywhere. It is down to individual landowners and the County Council and Highways are cautious of trees with roots which can damage tarmac etc, It takes a lot of work to find suitable planting for a thousand trees and that is what is happening at the moment.

Cllr Ransley asked if individual Ward Councillors can suggest where trees could be planted.

C Thorpe said he would be happy to look at any suggestions.

Cllr Birnie said that it has to be borne in mind that not only tarmac but also services run under the verges so it is not always easy to use those sites.

Cllr Timmis said that she noticed a number of fly tips had been cleared and she wondered what the cost of that was and also what we are doing to discourage them – she added that she had seen a Herts CC leaflet that goes out to every household urging people to ensure that, if they go to someone to dispose of their rubbish, they are registered. Cllr Timmis suggested that warning notices in areas where fly-tipping occurs regularly, for example Flamstead, and brought along some examples of signs which Cllr Birnie suggested that she pass around at the end of the meeting.

E Walker said that there is already signage up in some places, and the leaflet went out with the council tax bills.

Cllr Anderson added that there is already a standard sign in use in the borough.

Cllr Riddick asked how many working cameras we have and whether we have been successful in catching anyone with the cameras.

E Walker replied that there are three cameras and they are moved around on a rota, she added that they have been successful in the past and they were also looking to update the technology as a lot of offenders are driving to areas without headlights so that the cameras cannot film them.

Cllr Barrett asked how often weed spraying and road cleaning was done as there seemed to be a lot of weeds etc on pavements and in gutters.

C Thorpe responded that we sweep every road on a rota basis of 5 to 6 weeks and the same rota for grass cutting. He said that weed spraying was done by a contractor 3 times a year and he confirmed he would send Cllr Barrett the rota.

Cllr Beauchamp asked what the timescale was for the food recycling in flats being rolled out and he also asked a question regarding what a void garden clearance was.

C Thorpe answered that regarding the flat it would be the first week in October that the roll out started and it would be fully implemented by March next year. He explained that a void garden was the garden of an empty house.

Cllr Taylor asked what the cost of running an individual camera was.

E Walker answered that they use an encrypted card which is viewed rather than CCTV and she was not sure of the individual cost.

Cllr Birnie said that he noticed that the dry recycling was down and he wondered why.

C Thorpe said he would have to go through the tonnages individually and see what had dropped off – it can be affected by many things from football matches, meaning more cans and bottles, or the glass can sink to the bottom so more comes out in one month than another.

Cllr Birnie asked that if C Thorpe could find out the reason it is down quite significantly and confirm by email and C Thorpe agreed.

Cllr Riddick mentioned that he had asked for certain areas to be swept and that this had not happened yet. He asked for an indication of when this would happen, as he said it had not been done for several years.

C Thorpe replied he would find out when it was due to be done and pointed out that the County Council should be taking some responsibility when they mend the road and leave the chippings. Cllr Riddick said that he had tried going directly to County with no real result.

Cllr Stevens asked how tonnages were calculated and whether the trucks were weighed on the way in or out?

C Thorpe replied that the weight of the comingled recycling material is weighed as it comes into the depot and again when it is bulked out to the reprocessors...The weight shown is the outgoing weight. As the material from Dacorum was to be mixed with that from other Local Authorities before the start of the contract with Pearce Recycling DBC's recycling material was sorted into its individual materials (plastics, paper, cans and glass etc) which resulted in a compositional analysis being agreed.

The report was noted.

### **37**                    **COMMUNITY PROTECTION Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The report was presented by Emma Walker.

Cllr Woolmer asked a question regarding training in preparation for EU exit, and whether there was any indication of the number of staff needed to deal with that.

E Walker replied that we do not know the details as yet but there may be some issues with imported food so everybody's training has been updated to ensure that they are up to date and know the process required, but there was no indication of the number of staff that would be needed.

Cllr Ransley asked for an explanation of what a Remedial Notice entailed.

E Walker explained that for example if there are two neighbours with a boundary, the piece of legislation may apply which may involve a notice being sent to one of the parties to cut the hedge to a lower level as it may be affecting light etc.,

Cllr Birnie asked if in relation to paragraph 6.2 and 6.3 referring to this matter, could it become practise to advise the Ward Councillor when this is about to happen

E Walker replied that they could advise but the problem at this stage is that it is unknown whether it is going to be complied with or not, so no detail could be given in case legal proceedings follow.

Cllr Banks said that outside of the report she would like to record her personal thanks to the team for the clean-up day in Grovehill and she asked how many councillors attended the event in Highfield.

E Walker confirmed that Councillors were invited but she was not sure who attended.

Cllr Birnie said he noticed that there was no mention of invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed which would affect the environment.

E Walker replied there have been no complaints and so have not dealt with this so far but if they receive one they will look into it.

Report Noted

The report was presented by James Doe

Cllr Birnie asked a question regarding targets – he wanted clarification on why there appears to be 2 targets of 70% and 10% regarding the intervention level.

J Doe explained that there are two different measures – the headline figure that is monitored every month and every quarter is about the number of appeals that go in and the number that we win. Of all the appeals that went in we won on 66%. But the Government's intervention level is measured on a different basis. This is about 10% of appeals against the total number of applications submitted to the Council over a two year period. These are measured over two periods between 2016 and 2018, 2017 and 2019. On the first two year period we are running at 0.6 of 1%, so we are doing well. J Doe added that he has provided a link for the Government Document in the report which explains this in full detail.

J Doe said that there is red indicator in Building Control around the number of cases dealt with within two months and asked that the Committee note that this will be the last regular report that they will get on Building Control as Dacorum Building Control Services are due to transfer to Hertfordshire Building Control on October 1<sup>st</sup>. J Doe has advised the other HBC (Hertfordshire Building Control) members that this Committee will be expecting at least an annual report from them on their performance within the Dacorum area.

Cllr Timmis asked if there was anything in place at the moment with regards to Building Control as she has spoken to a planning officer who said that they needed more advice from Building Control and did not know where to go for that advice now.

J Doe said that if Cllr Timmis gave him the address of the property after the meeting he would look into that, and confirmed that there are arrangements in place. We are in a transition period and agency workers have now left but their places are taken by officers from HBC, so the service should be running seamlessly.

Cllr Riddick said that appeals are always an emotive subject and on the Development Control Committee sometimes see things put forward with a recommendation for approval and wonder why they have come to them. He said that with one in particular the applicant is disgruntled and thinking of appealing and having looked at his design and access statement which was on the website and which had a reply from our planning officer against various paragraphs, it was clear that it should never have gone forward for approval, so expectation was raised. Cllr Riddick added that if that could be moderated rather than chasing numbers it would be beneficial.

Cllr Birnie said that this question was difficult to deal with in this committee meeting because it sounds like a matter of training of officers, he asked that the committee be copied into any answers that J Doe provided.

J Doe said that if Cllr Riddick would give him the details of the case he would look into it and added that officers should always be qualifying their advice. He added that applicants were encouraged to seek pre-application advice because it adds both quality and value to the submissions. However, the applicant doesn't have to take the advice and what comes in does not necessarily reflect the advice given.

Cllr Riddick said that he saw something he had not previously seen regarding income and asked if we received a bonus payment from Central Government for every approved dwelling, and could not see the income reflected in the report.

J Doe said that the New Homes Bonus comes into the council under a separate income line. What is shown in the report is the statutory planning fees. The New Homes Bonus is being phased out by the government, but the council has effectively safeguarded the receipts so that we do not become reliant on it as a source of income because it was never going to be permanent. He added that it was more a finance matter.

Cllr Sutton said that he had been updated by James Deane with regards to New Homes Bonus but there was still no definitive answer on when it may cease.

Cllr Anderson added that the council had to ensure that the planning department did not rely on the income, which is why it is dealt with separately. Other councils who have not done that and there are some who have come to rely on it and as a result they have a financial problem.

J Doe said that when the Director of Finance gives his annual budget presentation there will be a report on the different income streams.

Cllr Hobson made the point that the decisions that are being looked out now are Q1 and those were issued by the planning inspectorate so the decisions will have been made by the committee or by officers so it is the decision of the Council.

Cllr Beauchamp asked if the agency staff spend was likely to increase or decrease and by how much as new staff are recruited.

J Doe replied that this was difficult to answer because the agency staff in place are not filling permanent roles, they are additional as there are some large applications in at the moment including LA3 which is taking the whole of one officer's time. It is being kept under review and as agency contracts are flexible we can make a very quick decision.

Cllr Timmis said that if she were a member of the public she would find it frustrating trying to get through to planning as she had tried over the last month and found it very difficult. She added that you may get through to an answerphone with a message that they will come back to you within four days. She has also had complaints that residents' comments are not being added to the website promptly. Cllr Timmis said that she felt that this was not good service, although she is aware that there are temporary staff and a lot of pressure on the department at present.

J Doe said that he acknowledges the point on contacting officers and that we are trying to improve on this area, with work going on later this year on this and other efficiencies within the department. He said that on the issue of the website – comments will only go onto the website if they are submitted via the portal. Letters and emails are not scanned in because it is so resource intensive and the efficiency drive across the council encourages use of the website.

Cllr Anderson made the point that if planning officers had to reply to every single email and letter and phone call the system would grind to a halt quickly. Case officers are overloaded and cannot reply to questions unless they are pertinent. He asked about the upgrade or replacement system that we are getting.

J Doe replied that when someone writes or emails in, the comments are not lost. They are kept on the back office file and every representation is taken into account and a summary will appear on the officer's report. He added that the new system is due to go live within the next few weeks and there will be a publicity launch to encourage people to sign up to the 'My Dacorum' portal which enables them to access other council services and comment on planning applications within that area. Cllr Hobson suggested that an automatic reply could be given with some information. She added that she would like to understand the significance of DNP03 (the percentage of planning application refusals against target).

J Doe said that it provides an indication about how much challenge we are getting in the system. There are no statutory targets here. It is the appeal outcomes that we are looking at and this is running quite high this quarter and we will monitor it.

Cllr Riddick spoke about members of the public logging comments on the portal and said that he had been approached by numerous people who wished to comment on a particular case recently, but were terrified that there would be repercussions. He asked that if these are sent to the relevant planning officer, are these collected as well and are people identified.

J Doe said that we cannot accept anonymous replies because it could mean an inherent injustice in the system. If someone is not prepared to put their name to what they are saying. But we do not put personal information on the system like address, phone or email details as there are data protection issues with that and the policy has always been clear. He added that if someone is concerned they can contact their ward councillor and the councillor can put forward the views from residents expressing their issues and concerns.

Cllr Taylor asked if there was any differentiation between those appeals which are based on developers or from owner applicants, and are the KPI's for the two different and do either owner or developer applications distort the figures.

J Doe explained the information can be broken down as to what category of development the application falls into and there are 3 broad categories – major, 10 homes and above, minors which are less than that and the other category which refers to largely householder applications, extensions, garages and things within the curtilage of the dwelling. But government measures are divided into two sections - major developments and then everything below that, so usually the upper category would be developers who are making those applications. J Doe said that you had to drill down to get an accurate figure for the two categories and he did not have that information to hand. He added that the number of major applications per year was very low as compared to the number of minor applications, so the majority are in the minor category.

Cllr Birnie asked if it was expensive for an individual to make an appeal.

J Doe replied that it can be very expensive, but there is a statutory fee which must be paid to the borough council.

The report was noted.

## **39**                    **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Work Programme was discussed – Cllr Birnie said that some items were already on the list and went through those. He then invited suggestions for items for future meetings.

Cllr Timmis suggested climate change and Cllr Birnie agreed it was an important subject but pointed out that it is rather a 'catch all' heading and it would be difficult to decide which of the portfolio holders would be responsible and he would rather have more specific subjects.

Cllr Anderson said that garages which was on that list did not come under this committee. He suggested that in terms of environmental sustainability the committee could review the Council's private emergency plan and also the Council's environmental management system, which gives an analysis the Council's use of

gas, electric, water etc., this is something which comes into Nigel Howcutt's area and is something he could present.

Cllr Hobson said that an enquiry on recycling of plastics would be valuable and for instance asking the company that does our recycling to attend a meeting and give us some evidence and also ask some businesses to come. Not just about what happens to the waste but also what the Council can do to encourage people to use less plastic. Cllr Hobson added an enquiry would show that the Council was being proactive in understanding the issue and what it could do.

Cllr Anderson said it is important that members who request reports lay out what information they require and what it is they hope to achieve, he added that he felt Cllr Hobson had brought together two different subjects, one being dry recyclables and the other waste reduction.

Cllr Birnie suggested that Cllr Hobson come up with the bones of the enquiry – what topics you want to cover and how you want to cover them.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe said that we do have within Cupid Green a team who go out educating particularly in the schools with regard to environmental matters and it might be quite useful as a precursor to anything else to have an in depth look at what they do.

Cllr Birnie asked if the committee would like him to approach Craig and see if a visit could be arranged to Cupid Green and members of the committee concurred.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe suggested that it would be helpful to have the meeting held at Cupid Green.

Cllr Sutton added that it could be taken a stage further and a visit to the recycling centre and also to the food waste unit could be made as Cupid Green is only the first stop on the journey.

Cllr Birnie agreed that would be particularly useful for new councillors.

Cllr Beauchamp said it would be useful to have a report based on the number of offences and penalties that have been issued with regard to the recent by laws that have been introduced.

Cllr Banks said that at the moment it is all about education, but indeed the first of the figures should become available.

The meeting was closed at 21:10. The next meeting is to be held on October 29 2019

The Meeting ended at 21:10