

MINUTES

STRATEGIC PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

1 DECEMBER 2020

Councillors: Beauchamp
Birnie (Chairman)
P Hearn
Hobson
McDowell
Riddick
Rogers
Silwal (Vice-
Chairman)
Stevens
Taylor
Timmis

Officers:	Nathalie Bateman	Strategic Planning & Regeneration Team Leader
	Ian Charie	Hemel Garden Communities Programme Director
	James Deane	Corporate Director - Finance and Operations
	James Doe	Assistant Director - Planning, Development and Regeneration
	Katie Mogan	Corporate and Democratic Support Lead Officer
	Chris Taylor	Group Manager - Strategic Planning and Regeneration
	Craig Thorpe	Group Manager - Environmental Services
	Sara Whelan	Group Manager - Development Management and Planning

Also in attendance:

Councillor Alan Anderson
Councillor Graham Sutton

The meeting began at 6.30 pm

Following a Joint meeting of the OSCs where a presentation on the budget was given, the Strategic Planning & Environment OSC meeting began at 7.30pm.

145 MINUTES

The minutes from the previous meeting were agreed by the members present and will be signed by the Chairman at the next available opportunity.

There were some incomplete action points from the last meeting.

C Thorpe said officers were aware of the request from the committee to advise ward members if new trees were to be planted in their wards and an email would be distributed by the end of the week.

Councillor Timmis said she had not received an email about the powers of the Animal Welfare and Public Health Officer. J Deane said he would follow this up.

146 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Barrett and Councillor Ransley.

147 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

148 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation

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

None

150 BUDGET PREPARATIONS 2021/22

J Doe gave a presentation to members on the budget changes in his area mainly relating to Planning Performance Agreements.

Councillor Birnie referred to the estimate of £400k over the Medium Term Financial Strategy period (MTFS) and asked what the length of this period is and what the charge for the service is.

J Doe replied that the MTFS period was four years. The charges for the service are currently being reviewed and they need to be costed to adequately reflect the likely time taken by staff that need to be employed. It would be difficult to give an average charge as it would depend on the size and complexity of the issues involved from which staff will negotiate a final figure with developers.

Councillor Birnie highlighted that the presentation seemed to show this would only give an income of £70k a year and said this wasn't a huge amount.

J Doe explained that the staffing has been costed at £110k a year on a three year projection and this will be kept under review. The estimate of £400k is a cautious one and the team will need to look at all the sites coming forward. The £400k represents 60% of the total sites coming forward. The staffing figure can be mitigated by the use of fixed term contracts so if the income does decrease, staffing can be reduced accordingly. The main pressure with new sites is in year 1 and 2 and predicting an income of £250k over that period and in years 3 and 4, the estimated excess in planning fee income will be £160k. These are cautious estimates of large sites

coming forward. As a benchmark, the fee for LA3 in late 2018 for 1100 homes was £120k.

Councillor Birnie said the council already charge planning fees and this is an add on service. He said he did not think the figures would stack up in terms of resources required to fund the service.

Councillor Timmis said she felt this looks like the planning department are getting friendly with developers and there will be no need or point to any consultation with the public and parish councils which would just serve as a tick box exercise. She referred to the letter sent to the Secretary of State from the Leader about disagreeing with the housing figure targets.

J Doe said this engagement with developers was an increasing practice across councils and it is about officers working with developers to make sure they are following the council's policies. The benefit of this is that it provides an opportunity through a structured timetable that developers will engage with the community in the early stages. The Leader of the Council has sent a letter today and the housing targets are being challenged. In Dacorum, the outcome will need to be factored into the next stage of the Local Plan.

S Whelan answered Councillor Birnie's previous question about the charges for this service. She said this would be done on a sliding scale and for example, an application between 10-50 homes the average charge would be £20k, 50-99 units the average charge would be £50k and this would increase as the number of units increase. The Planning Performance Agreements service is set out in legislation and should be cost recovery charges only so there will not be any large income surplus. There is added value in having engaged in conversations with developers and being able to consult early.

Councillor Birnie pointed out that he did not feel the council were in a position to be financing new services. Until the Local Plan was agreed, he asked how the team can be sure that there will be the volume of applications predicted.

J Doe said they can be certain of volumes from intelligence they receive from developers. The government encourages local authorities to engage with developers early. When the Local Plan is inspected by the inspectors, the council has to demonstrate that the sites that have been identified are realistic and capable of being taken forward.

Councillor Birnie referred to the comment that these agreements were non-binding and asked if this applied to both sides.

J Doe said that was correct and no discussion can ever bind the council's final decision.

Councillor McDowell echoed the concerns raised by Councillors Birnie and Timmis and had concerns that this could turn into a private consultancy and give developers a 'foot in the door' to the council. He felt the council should keep a greater distance from developers.

Councillor Birnie said members should have confidence in the integrity of planning officers.

Councillor McDowell queried the costings put forward and the possibility of a loss.

J Doe said these costings would need to be reviewed on an annual basis. This isn't a money making exercise and there is room for flexibility. The staff employed will also be able to carry out work on other projects within the planning teams.

Councillor Birnie commented that the planning team had previously had difficulty recruiting staff.

J Doe said in the past, the team has been reliant on agency staff. Since the Covid pandemic, the recruitment issues have eased slightly.

Councillor Beauchamp had concerns that if this was successful, it would draw resources away from Development Management and could hold up smaller developments.

J Doe felt the opposite would happen. If the council didn't go down this route, the major developments would be coming in anyway. This would give the team extra capacity.

Councillor Stevens referred to appendix Ei where the SPAE budget was laid out. He referred to the income line which was projecting an increase in £100k from the year before and asked officers if they were confident this would be achieved.

J Deane said this referred to all the services that sit under SPAE OSC's remit. He said he was not able to see one major contributor to that figure and it was an aggregate of the smaller budget lines over different cost centres. The income is coming in but is being offset for other expenditure.

Councillor Riddick asked if the team were moving away from agency staff and commented that if the council are employing staff directly, the staff will take 2-3 months to be fully trained. He referred to the work coming through on the major developments and queried whether this would now decrease because of the pandemic. More people are working from home and so there is less demand for commercial premises.

J Doe confirmed the team were not reliant on agency staff. They are making use of a service that places professionals from the private sector into the public sector so they can get experience. These are not employed on agency rates. In relation to the projects, enquiries are still coming in throughout the pandemic. There is some evidence of commercial interest, especially at Maylands but this relates to smaller industrial units not office space.

S Whelan added that the applications that are being submitted at the moment are of increased complexity. There are major sites coming through at the Station Gateway and Spencer's Park redevelopment and these are unlikely to fall away. In the 2008 financial crash, a lot of land owners used the time to mobilise on planning applications ready to build when the market was back up.

C Taylor commented that the small units at the Maylands Business Park have a waiting list and are full. The office market is changing and the team will need to watch

it over the next 3 - 6 months. The demand is changing towards 'drop down' spaces where people can work remotely without working at home. There are four empty offices at the business centre and the team are looking at the space to see how it could work as a 'drop down' space.

Councillor Birnie referred to the capital budget and the figure for the fleet replacement programme which seems to extend into future years. He asked if this was a rolling replacement or an expansion of the fleet.

C Thorpe said it was a rolling replacement. The vehicles are replaced over time instead of all at once because otherwise they will need to be serviced and have their MOT all at the same time and then eventually, would all need to be disposed of at once.

Councillor Birnie asked if these were mainly refuse vehicles or a mixture.

C Thorpe said they are mainly refuse vehicles, they are high value vehicles costing about £200k each.

Councillor Birnie said the budget starts at £3.1 million in 2021/22 and then drops to £841k in 2025/26 and asked if this was standard.

J Deane said it was normal to see ongoing expenditure every year and there are spikes based on the life span on the vehicles.

Councillor Birnie asked what the lifespans of these vehicles are.

C Thorpe said they are kept for a minimum of 7 years.

Councillor Birnie referred to employees under Regulatory Services and there was a 6% increase for external support.

J Deane said he would find out this information after the meeting.

Action: J Deane

Councillor Birnie congratulated the finance team on their hard work in producing the budget. He also thanked the planning team.

The report was noted.

151 HEMEL GARDEN COMMUNITIES SPATIAL VISION

I Charie and N Bateman gave a presentation to the committee.

Councillor Timmis referred to page 40 of the report which states that if the spatial vision isn't approved, it will present a risk to the town's government supported garden town status. She asked officers to clarify what that meant.

I Charie explained that the council were awarded this status by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in 2019 which came with a grant split between Dacorum and St Albans. This is a government sponsored initiative and there are 49 across the country.

Councillor Timmis asked about the target number of houses for this project.

I Charie responded that there will be 11,000 homes split equally between Dacorum and St Albans and there will be 10,000 jobs created. Part of project is about how people will move around these new areas from their houses to their jobs without relying on traditional modes of transport.

Councillor Timmis commented that she felt this was a utopian vision and was concerned that there could be a lack of garden space in favour of communal outside space and the pandemic has shown how important individual outside space is. She was also concerned about the impact this would have on wildlife.

N Bateman said this was an ambitious vision and it needs to be in order to work out what we wanted from the plan. From previous member briefings, the key message has been that active and sustainable travel is key. The pictures in the presentation doesn't represent the amount of parking or garden space and the aim was to try and put as many visual aids in as possible to illustrate things that are critical to local centres and neighbourhoods of the future. We know that gardens are key and there are great links to the countryside in Dacorum, the green network is to strengthen what is already present in the town.

Councillor Birnie referred the routes around the town on page 54 of the report. He asked what they consist of as some of it doesn't exist at the moment.

N Bateman said the Chiltern Way link is via public rights of way, they do currently exist and there is signage but appreciate people will need to know it's there. The Nicky Line loop is not currently connected all the way from the station to Harpenden. We need to plan to ensure the right public realm improvements are provided and navigational aids such as clear signage. The Nicky Line loop is to link up other potential routes along the River Ver, along the edges of St Albans and into Leverstock Green.

Councillor Birnie asked if they were all public rights of way.

N Bateman said there are some routes that will need to be strengthened to be delivered. The Hemel Garden Community loop involves some country lanes and will need to be improved.

Councillor Anderson said he would find it easier to support his Cabinet colleagues if one was to explain how the transport routes would bed in with the surrounding populations. He didn't want to make the town centre inaccessible to the surrounding villages who don't have access to public transport.

J Doe said this will not be an insular development and he hopes that as the strategy develops, there will be a detailed sustainable transport plan for the town. He advised the committee to treat this report as an overarching strategy and aspiration and not a finalised blueprint.

I Charie added that this is aspirational. A high level vision only has to capture what we want to see. There will be detailed studies, transport and infrastructure work. The next stage will be a piece of work led by the Crown Estate to take the spatial vision pillars and turn them into something more fixed and provide commentary and narrative.

Councillor G Sutton said he had been involved from the start as Portfolio Holder and was proud of the work the team has done so far. There is no harm in setting sights high and it is easier to bring something forward rather than start at the lower levels and wish something had been included. The integrated transport links is important and we see it as providing links to the Hemel Garden Community and strengthening across the whole town. He noted the comments about green issues and commented that there are ways of encouraging wildlife when building houses. He said this plan was in its early stages and would like to thank the officers for the work put in and colleagues in St Albans. He hoped this would produce something good for the future.

Councillor Birnie asked the committee to note the report as a good basis for the project.

152 WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor Birnie reminded members to email him if there was anything they wished to add. He asked for a report to be added on the work programme on market undertaking. C Taylor said she could bring a report to committee in the new year.

The Meeting ended at 9.30 pm