

MINUTES

STRATEGIC PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

15 JUNE 2021

Present:

Members:

Councillors: Beauchamp
Birnie (Chairman)
England
Harden
P Hearn
Ransley
Rogers
Silwal (Vice-
Chairman)
Stevens
Taylor
Timmis
Wilkie
C Wyatt-Lowe

Officers:	Simon Coultas	Operations Manager - Clean, Safe & Green
	James Doe	Assistant Director - Planning, Development and Regeneration
	Layla Fowell	Corporate & Democratic Support Officer
	Fiona Jump	Group Manager - Financial Services
	Ben Stevens	ASB Officer
	Craig Thorpe	Group Manager - Environmental Services
	Emma Walker	Group Manager - Environmental and Community Protection

Also Attendance:

The meeting began at Time Not Specified

1 MINUTES

Minutes for the last meeting were agreed and signed by the chair

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr McDowell – Cllr Ransley Sub

Cllr Graham Barratt

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest

4 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None

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

None

6 FINANCIAL OUTTURN REPORT

Fiona Jump shared the provisional outturn report with the members and was happy to take any questions they had.

Cllr Harden referred to bullet point number 4 and the point regarding pest control and waste he asked for the specific impacts for loss on incomes streams and asked what were the plans to recuperate the loss from these streams as some of these services should have taken place irrespective of the pandemic.

Craig Thorpe responded that they had suspended bulk collection as they could not maintain social distancing. Also the business collections heavily affected the finances as businesses went elsewhere or were not in business at the time.

E.Walker said that pest control was suspended due to not being able to enter properties, then, when restrictions were lifted, demand on the service was lower and it was still at a reduced demand now due to people being put off about having people in their houses.

C.Thorpe responded regarding cesspool emptying, that they had budgeted for an income due to increasing costs however when the pandemic hit they decided they would not go ahead with the cost increase.

Cllr Beauchamp referred to overspend of £30k on the White Bridge refurbishment and asked what these overspends were. Secondly he asked about the refurbishment of the Bury, and what the £180k overspend on that.

C.Thorpe said that he would come back to Cllr Beauchamp on the White Bridge.

A.P C.Thorpe to send information on the White Bridge overspend.

J.Doe advised that there were issues with the Bury and there was a full structural survey being done that required specialist people due to it being a listed building. This was delayed due to the pandemic but was nearing completion. Then they would be able to see the full picture of the restoration costs and decisions could be made about the building's future.

Cllr Birnie asked if they could explain what MRP charges meant.

F.Jump explained that MRP stood for Minimum Revenue Provision and it was an accounting requirement by law. When borrowing is used to finance capital expenditure, they are required to put through a charge that represents putting money aside to repay that borrowing.

Cllr Birnie asked for more details of the £81k of investigative work at High Barns.

F.Jump believed that this is additional work that has been undertaken for issues that have arisen at High Barns.

Cllr Birnie asked what High Barns was

J.Doe said that the correct officer is not here to answer that but some investigative work was undertaken a few years ago around the area that was subject to infilling caused by the former chalk mines and we had to carry out additional investigation work into a new issue that had arisen.

Cllr Birnie had added up some of the figures that had been given and they stated a deficit of £2.4 million on outgoings and incomings, but it actually comes to £2,358,000. Similarly, income from grants received is stated as £3.6 million, but it is slightly more at £3,633,000 representing an additional £33k. He asked whether these discrepancies were not relevant at this stage and would the final outturn be fine-tuned at publication.

F.Jump said when it comes to millions they do tend to go to the nearest million or .1 of a million which helps transparency in reports.

Cllr Birnie would like these figures to be more accurate.

Cllr England referred to point 4.3 and the £298k pressure against waste services. It mentioned that there were 3 factors and the first factor was a 30% increase in tonnages. However, the others are not separated. He was wondering whether the global market for recyclables was something that wasn't going to bounce back as a result of the end of Covid but the other things will and asked how much of that was due to the effect of the global market for recyclables.

F.Jump said she didn't have the percentages to hand however she could circulate if that was helpful

A.P F.Jump to circulate percentages in recyclables.

Cllr Birnie advised there would be an item on waste on a forthcoming meeting, which would provide more figures,

The report was noted

7 **PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT AND REGENERATION
PERFORMANCE Q4 REPORT**

J.Doe went through the report and he was happy to take questions.

Cllr Stevens picked up on point 21 of the report and referred to completions, he did not think it adequately reflected how good the performance was against the core

strategy, and it seemed to have adopted 1023 as the future target. The core strategy gave them a target of 430 dpa and the 674 reported was ahead of that. He would like to see how performance was against the original future plan, there was a dispute in terms of the 1023 number, the more realistic number that they were talking about should be about 500 a year and to publish a report which suggest that they were way under what the government wanted them to build was leaving the door wide open for people to challenge them on developments. Whilst their 5 year land supply was not good enough to meet the target the 5 year supply at 430 a year was.

J.Doe responded that the figures were completions as they were and that is what the market along with developers, housing association and the council were doing themselves in delivering each year. What they need to have a look at was the development trajectory over a number of years. There would be some strong years where they would have done more than the 670 and sometimes less and it would be the average that needed to be looked at. They should be able to get some monitoring figures out to the committee in due course to show those trends effectively. The point on land supply was a very critical one because that was an important point when it came to looking at planning appeals and whether appeals should be allowed on the basis of housing supply and whether they like it or not as a council the 1023 figure was what was used by the government simply because that was what their standard methodology generated as they objectively assessed the housing needs of the borough and that was what they used as the housing delivery test. What was important was that Officers continued to track the actual completion rate and when they come on to the local plan in due course they would revisit the issue of the housing numbers in Dacorum.

Cllr Birne asked if the 670 figure included all completions

J.Doe confirmed that the 670 figure included all completions, private and council and those under permitted development.

Cllr Birnie said that if they were doing comparisons over many years, he would like to see against those figures the number of approvals they had issued.

JDoe would pick up information with the strategic planning team, and would get more information and circulate

A.P J.Doe to circulate approvals numbers for several years to members.

Cllr Beauchamp asked about the improvement plan to reduce the enforcement caseloads from 600 to 400, this meant that they could still after 12 months have over 400 cases outstanding and was there a plan to bring them down

JDoe said what it meant was that there would be an amount of work at any one time, if they could not get that work in progress level down to around 400 it would be a much more manageable level which would enable them to prioritise more important cases where they may have to serve notices or which may include prosecutions. They have bought in an officer to clear the backlog and a system had been implemented to triage new cases to come to a rapid conclusion as to whether or not an actual breach had occurred and whether or not there was a case to investigate.

Cllr Beauchamp said that it was an area of great concern as 400 was a large number and he hoped the triage system was not just a means of batting away the lesser cases.

J.Doe said absolutely not. This was about sharpening the performance management within the team and getting to important cases quicker.

Cllr Timmis said that they had a lot of enforcement issues in her ward that were not being dealt with, leading to developers exploiting the situation by having buildings built without planning permission or using other means to get around planning permission. The team was working really hard but had too much on their plate and it showed with 600 waiting and she felt the department were not able to function as they should due to not having enough staff. She had spent a lot of time not being able to get through to planning. She started with emails and then phone calls and she had issues from residents with valid claims that were not being listened to.

She also referred to site visits, stating that during the pandemic officers refused to visit sites even though most of them were outside with no risks and she felt it was unreasonable not to visit such sites.

J.Doe said it had been a very difficult year and site visits were harder in the first 6 months of the pandemic, they could not make appointments for enforcement cases as they needed to carry them out without prior notice and so they could not guarantee the safety of a site with Covid. With planning applications they were able to get applicants to send in pictures and if they needed different pictures they could ask for them but that was someone asking for something from the council rather than the council trying to enforce against a breach of controls. He said that members could go to him if there were issues in getting hold of the planning officer. He would monitor the plans to manage the cases and a plan to get through the backlog.

Cllr Birnie agreed it had been an issue in not getting responses and they had been advised that officers do not always have a phone. However, when emails were sent officers often still did not respond. As planning was one of the most frequently used interfaces with residents, it was really important for officers to improve their response rates.

Cllr Timmis said she knew that they were under pressure but it was not a good thing if they do not have the people to do this resulting in many residents calling her for advice and making it impossible to do her job satisfactorily.

J.Doe said that that he would take that back to officers and instruct them to prioritise member emails to ensure they can do their job.

Cllr Beauchamp asked if it would be appropriate to make a referral to cabinet that one additional resource was required for the planning department.

Cllr Harden said he would be reluctant to do that as any department head could come to scrutiny to make referrals to cabinet.

Cllr Birnie agreed with Cllr Harden and said that they have just taken on another member of the team whom they must allow to bed in and reduce the pressure of work.

Cllr Stevens said that there were proposals coming through regarding how they would manage the workflow through the department. Also, the changes to planning consent may reduce the workload.

Cllr Rogers said that he agreed with Cllr Stevens about the changes that would be going into the planning department. However perhaps they should be ahead of the game in this area and perhaps some extra people were needed in the particular area which was the greatest time consuming for a councillor; namely, trying to deal with planning applications and complaints from residents about them. He would support an increase in head count.

He also referred to a comment made earlier in terms of objectively assessed needs. He asked if J.Doe thought that government used the same formula across the country for assessing the need or the demand and did he feel that DBC had been sanctioned for over achieving previous targets in the past, because this year's completions of 674 over a previous target of 450 meant DBC had over achieved by 50%. Perhaps this explained why government had increased the target by another 52% to 1023 and was this viable.

J.Doe said that he thought that the housing needs question would be covered in the next meeting where the local plan would be discussed, but the same formula was used across the country. In response to Cllr Stevens, there would be some technical work which took place with the local planning consultations which would explain it all and he would provide some links for members. In terms of whether it was need or demand it was need, it was a measure of need as opposed to demand which was very much a market factor, it was trying to look at what demographic trends were coming through, what was driving the need as opposed to demands which was more about the number of people out there needing or being able to access housing at any one time, however he would suggest exercising caution over the figures as they had a good year last year bearing in mind completions were down in Q1 during the pandemic but then picked up, ending on 674 which was quite a bit above the 430 target in the core strategy. He said that the 430 was adopted by the council in 2013 and that was 20% below their objectively assessed need at the time and the planning inspector looked at their core strategy and said they should bring forward an early review of the plan because they were under by 20%. Reverting to the point about the actual need figure itself, before the government bought in the new methodology local areas would set their own need figures, so pre 2017 officers had done some collaborative work with nearby councils in the SW Herts area and they had generated a figure of 756 dwellings per annum. Using the latest demographic information they now have a new figure with the government methodology of 1023. There were a number of ways to look at these figures and he would not rely on the 430 figure as being reliable because things had changed and the government had made it very clear about its promise of around 300,000 homes per annum and he thought that this was a fixed policy and pressure on councils. How to distribute that around the country would be another matter.

J.Doe referred to Cllr Stevens' point regarding the planning bill that would be coming forward and the direction of travel indicated by the white paper that had come out last year. When the details are available, officers will organise an information session for members. However, Cllr Stevens was correct in that the approach to how they look at

planning applications may be very different in the future and the government seemed to be promoting the use of design codes, so a code would be defined for a particular area or areas in the borough and if a developer met the criteria in the code then outline planning permission would effectively be automatic. Of course there were more permitted development rights coming out all the time and with all of these factors planning applications were changing quite radically.

Finally, he referred to the point made about the enforcement staffing and noted the comments made. Budget setting for the forthcoming financial year would soon be due and Cllr Anderson and he would take the comments away and consider how they could be represented in the budget setting proposals.

Cllr Taylor wanted to follow up on the point made about residents contacting Members when they could not get hold of planning. Like many members he published his phone number on the website and he did not want to be answering planning enquiries when residents could not get hold of the planning department. He would like J.Doe to think about how that could be managed and come back with proposals at a future meeting.

Cllr Birnie referred to paragraph 7 and the recovery of fees and that they had a reduction of shortfall of 10.5% and wanted to know if that was for Q4 or was it an annual figure.

J.Doe said this was annual.

Report was noted

8 **ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMUNITY PROTECTION Q4 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

E.Walker ran through key point from the report for and was happy to take questions from members

Cllr Birnie congratulated Walker on test and trace 16 out of 315 was pretty good.

Cllr Harden referred to the Covid Marshalls and asked what their titles were, how many there were, how they were funded and also when the funding would end.

E.Walker said they were called Covid advisors as they take a helpful approach which was what they do with most enforcement activity. Their role was to advise members of the public initially before they look at taking enforcement action and were keen to use behavioural change and encouragement rather than heavy handed enforcement., There were 6 advisors and they were funded by the COF fund which was held centrally at the County Council, but Dacorum had its own portion of the COF funding which is the Contained Outbreak Funding and they were funded until January if that was required.

Cllr Silwal referred to 2/3 being the food premises rating and commented it was low in comparison to 4/5 and asked why that was.

E.Walker advised that this was a skewing of the results due to the impact on the food inspection programme of the Covid restrictions. At the time they were only

responding to imminent health risk conditions, which meant they were only rescoring the poorly compliant premises rather than the low risk premises which resulted in the 5 rated premises tailing off. They expected this to improve in the coming months.

Cllr Timmis congratulated the Clean Safe And Green team for the quick clearing of fly tipping. She referred to the dog fouling report which stated they had a number of dog fouling reports actioned and asked what that meant.

C.Thorpe responded that actions meant that they had been cleared.

Cllr Birnie referred to point 2.6 and the significant work that had been put into responding to planning enquiries and wanted to know why.

E.Walker said they had recruited a new contaminated land officer and a new acoustic specialist in the last 18 months and that figure was a lot lower before they joined. They had spent a lot of time working with Planning and Development Control to try and make sure that they were getting those responses back in a timely fashion, which they had now achieved.

Cllr Birnie asked who the responses went to.

E.Walker explained that they went to statutory consultees for technical responses or concerns about contaminated land or acoustic issues and this reflected the time her department took to respond to planning.

Cllr Stevens thanked the department for their engagement regarding the Old Mill in Berkamstead and the noise complaints. This was causing issues for residents last summer and this resulted in planning conditions.

The report was noted.

9 ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES Q4 PERFORMANCE REPORT

C.Thorpe ran through key points from his report and welcomed questions from members.

Cllr England asked how wildflower areas are chosen so Members can explain this to residents.

C.Thorpe said that there is a lot of information on the website that could be shared with residents regarding the wildflower areas including areas chosen and the reason they were not mowing and where bee boxes had been placed.

Cllr England said he was not able to answer the residents' questions from the information on the website and asked whether there were there any maps he could share.

C.Thorpe said that it was a fairly new scheme and that it was a work in progress, but further information will be put on the website.

Cllr Harden asked if there was a reason why an area of grass would not be strimmed but poisoned instead. He also queried who was responsible for the hedges around Heath Lane Cemetery.

C.Thorpe said that they use weed killer only in areas where there are multiple obstacles and there should not be any substantial damage. There could be cases of an overzealous operator but that should be minimal. He would find out who was responsible for the cutting of that hedge.

A.P C.Thorpe to go back to Cllr Harden regarding the responsibility.

Cllr Beauchamp referred to the statement made by the Environment Agency regarding who would take over the maintenance of the River Gade if the project went ahead and said that when the last river improvement happened there had been a filtration pond put in and he was not aware to date that it had ever been desilted and the silt was now almost to the top of the Gavels so any water run-off from the road would run into the Gade washing the silt with it. The smell was also particularly bad.

C.Thorpe said he wasn't an expert in this area. However he knew that the pond was cleaned out some years ago and he wasn't sure that they had an ongoing programme for this, so he would get back to Cllr Beauchamp.

A.P C.Thorpe to respond to Cllr Beauchamp outside of the meeting.

Cllr Birnie asked whether the reference to Kilner Court refurbishment being completed was to do with the bin store.

C.Thorpe confirmed it related to many improvement including the bin store.

Cllr Birnie also referred to the item Football pitch drains and asked which pitch that referred to.

C.Thorpe said it referred to all football pitches under Council control. DBC used to employ an external contractor for the work. However, it was quite costly and so they have since bought the equipment to work with their tractors to do this work themselves.

The report was noted

10 **ABANDONED VEHICLE POLICY**

Ben Stevens ran through the report with members and welcomed questions.

Cllr Harden referred to the end of section 3 and the statistics around recent activity and the small 3.81% of vehicles that were removed and destroyed from a total of 1,337 reports. He asked what officers believed was the cause of the low percentage to be and was there an issue around public awareness

as to what constituted an abandoned vehicle so that many reported vehicles were not actually abandoned.

B.Stevens said that there is a section on the website for reporting and they do try and demonstrate on there when reporting what an abandoned vehicle was. However, this does not always succeed and the vehicle is often just a nuisance vehicle.

Cllr Harden said he would be interested to look into perhaps doing a campaign to help residents understand what an abandoned vehicle is and thus cut down on the time wasted by officers.

B.Stevens said he would take those comments back and consider what they could do.

Cllr Birnie referred to the point that said that officers would follow up within 3 days of a report of an abandoned vehicle and asked if that was correct. He was also surprised that there was such a discrepancy between the number of reports and the vehicles that were found to be abandoned. He asked whether most people realise realising that they have to move their car as a result of the issue of the initial notice.

B.Stevens explained that many people will react once they got the notice and the car was often claimed or officers have a discussion with the owner and the vehicle is moved, some people do not want to move them but the car is then reclaimed before destruction.

Cllr Harden suggested that there may be a reporting mechanism that they could put in their data showing the reasons for resolution, for example that the owner had moved the vehicle.

E.Walker said that although there was only a result of 51 resolved by removal in actual fact all were resolved as some were moved as they were not abandoned. She took Cllr Harden's point regarding education and felt it was a good idea. However, using that as a performance indicator as to what officers were doing was not appropriate.

B.Stevens added that other authorities were also reporting low numbers.

Cllr Beauchamp asked for clarity on paragraph 5.4 concerning vehicles on private land. He asked if this covered private land that had been used for a number of years as a community car park whether the Council had any enforcement powers under these circumstances.

B.Stevens said that they can enforce on any open land and what often happened was that the land owner reported it. Where the land owner was not known then a 15 day notice would be served.

Cllr Silwal referred to paragraph 3.4 where the local authority could issue a fixed penalty of £200 instead of prosecuting and asked if that was before or after a court case.

B.Stevens said that this was prior to court and if officers have enough evidence, they could issue a fixed penalty before court action.

Cllr Silwal had reported a car on Friday that was in a poor state. However no one came to remove the car until Monday even though it was in a dangerous position. He asked how it was decided that a car was dangerous and would need to be moved urgently.

B.Stevens said that there were no legal definitions of vehicle abandonment, which made things difficult. However, condition, location and other factors are considered before deciding that a car is abandoned and officers cannot be too hasty in removing vehicles. If it were in a dangerous position it probably would have been a matter for the police.

The report was noted

11 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS TO THE RIVER GADE

JDoe introduced the report and invited Christopher Hall from the Environment Agency and Kieran Sheenan to make their presentation.

Christopher Hall thanked the committee and gave some background to the River Gade improvements. The key points were:

He said that the members would probably want to know why the Environment Agency were proposing it. He explained that the main driver for the project from the Environmental Agencies point of view was the Water Framework Directive, which since leaving the EU has been adopted into UK law. The river Gade was failing on a number of measures set out by the Water Framework Directive and was in a less than good status. Part of their commitment to the water quality of the River Gade. The proposal was to realign the river channel which would revitalise the chalk stream to what it used to be.

A large amount of water resources capital and water resources revenue funding had been secured from the Environment Agency in 2021 and 2022 and around £400,000 and a further £250,000 from 2022/2023 onwards from Affinity water, as Affinity is part of their revitalising rivers partnership.

The main objects of the projects were to improve the river and the adjacent parkland, creating an environment more akin to the natural chalk stream. This would improve opportunities for amenity and recreation around the river, improve resilience to low flow events and to climate change by reconnecting the river with the groundwater table. It would improve the ecology of the river by creating an environment that supports good ecological status under the water improvement regulations 2017. It

would also improve the floodplain by re directing the river to the valley bottom and would also address the impact of the gauging station, which was currently in Gadebridge Park and acts as a barrier to fish, by its relocation. There would be a reduction in the maintenance of the current channel by improving flow and therefore cutting down on the growth of vegetation.

The overall cost is estimated to be around £750,000. They have around £610,000 of water resources capital money overall and as previously mentioned they have money from Affinity Water.

The project also meets DEFRA's 25 year environment plan and the outcomes would be pure clean rivers and resilient water supply, beautiful landscapes, flourishing wildlife and native species, thriving rural economies and communities, protecting animals and plants from health risks. The project also supports Dacorum Borough Council's policies, including the Local plan 104, supporting initiatives to improve the quality of the water in rivers and canals part C. Part D, encouraging wetland habitat creation, part F restoring culverted watercourses to a more natural state and also Local plan CS26 and the strengthening of biodiversity corridors, the better public access and links through green spaces and finally CS27 (the conservation of heritage assets) and the NPPF paragraph to identify and address the particular significance of any heritage asset that may be affected by a proposal.

So the main benefits anticipated would be that 57% Framework Waterbody Directive would be enhanced with 415 meters of river restored. 1.1kilometers of waterbody opened up to fish and eel passage, 6.5 kilometres of river habitat enhanced and 0.3 hectares of wetland habitat created. The project would also improve water sustainability, contribute to the delivery of the water land and biodiversity. It would also impact on consideration of abstraction reductions and changing the land use.

Delivery of this project is estimated to cost £750,000, which would include a 60% optimism bias. The amenity aspects of the budget were estimated at £120,000 and they Dacorum Borough Council has been asked to make a contribution to the amenity aspect. Therefore the whole project cost would be around £870,000. They were currently at the point of almost completing their modelling and creating detailed designs on where they expect the river to go and the bridges to be placed. The project was expected to commence in September 2021 and be complete in 2022. However, due to Covid, the dates were slipping. If agreement for the funding was obtained from the committee this evening, they could come up with a project plan that would be acceptable for everyone.

Kieran Sheenan shared slides outlining the proposed changes and took questions from the committee.

Cllr Beauchamp asked, assuming the project goes ahead and the river is moved, and given that the run off from the Leighton Buzzard road runs at various points into the existing perched channel and will no doubt continue to do so once it's moved, who would be responsible for the maintenance. He said he was aware of a project taken on by Affinity Water at Gadebridge Lane, but who will ensure there is a good flow throughout and that it does not become silted. He also asked if they could give assurance in continuity of supply not just in the park, but as it joins the Water

Gardens and the Riverside development. Finally he questioned how much they had spent on consultancy so far.

C.Hall responded that the responsibility, once they have completed the project, would be handed over to Dacorum Borough Council as it is currently DBC's responsibility. However part of the project plan is that it would decrease the need for maintenance.

K.Sheenen said they are doing another study on the channel retaining water and he would be able to report back then.

A.P KSheenan to provide information on the further study

Cllr Birnie asked if there were any indication when he could report back

KSheenan said they were looking at next month.

Cllr Beauchamp asked if they had a date on when the project was likely to be initiated as the dates have moved over the years, and whether the Bowls club would be involved at every step.

KSheenan confirmed that currently they were looking approximately next spring and the Bowls club would be involved.

Cllr Timmis referred to the new bridge that was pictured and contrasted it with the White Bridge, which is very attractive, whereas the one they had pictured was more like a road bridge, rather modern and not in keeping with the chalk stream. She welcomed what they were planning for the River Gade, but there were two other chalk streams in Dacorum and wondered whether there were any plan in respect of those two streams.

KSheenan said they were in partnership with other agencies in regards to the other streams. In relation to the bridge he confirmed it was not a road bridge, the idea was that it would be a 3 meter wide bridge not designed to take traffic but designed so people can cross at diagonals, it was a wide design so as not to feel constrained and it would have a low gradient so that wheelchairs can go over. The design allows for lattice work across the parapet that would look like the White Bridge.

Cllr Birnie commented that it would have to go through the planning process.

JDoe confirmed that the whole scheme would have to go through planning with particular attention paid to the bridge, not so much because of the White Bridge itself but the site was very close to the Bury which was a listed building and any structure may well affect its setting and that would be subject to discussions with the conservation officer.

Cllr Wyatt Lowe said that they had heard a lot about the structural changes that they were proposing which would enhance the flow of the chalk stream itself. However she hadn't heard anything about how they were going to improve the water quality as she understood that one of the issues with chalk streams was the discharges into them and they should be doing something about the water quality itself at the same time and she would like reassurance on this point.

KSheenan responded that water quality was not in the brief they were given. However, what they were going to do was capture the discharges from the Leighton

Buzzard road and bury them on the existing line of the Gade, take them down and discharge them into the flood culverts which was where they were discharged anyway. They currently discharge into the river and then discharge into the flood culvert. Other discharges in the town are caught by the spring flow culvert including the ones from the Queensway carpark. He quoted a phrase "The solution to pollution is dilution" which means they effectively put a small amount of pollution into a larger volume of water which is not perfect, but that said the river Gade itself should be cleaner. A major issue with the Gade is the fine sediment that was a pollutant in itself, as it added phosphates and nitrates to the water that causes turbidity which is bad for fish, microorganisms and for photosynthesising plants. It was also bad for the fish redds as the silt fills them up. One of the reasons they were keeping the river flowing cleaner and flowing more rapidly was that it would reduce the amount of fine sediment and that will help dramatically with the water quality. Other unseen pollutants are on the WFD requirements and the targets for the river and those are being dealt with by the Environment Agency. Most of the point source pollutions in the UK had been dealt with, but 95% of the issue that they have UK wide is diffuse pollution. This covers things like misconnections and also agricultural runoff and pesticides and such pollution was very hard to pin down. There were larger schemes running nationwide run by Natural England in terms of greener farming. However, in terms of the solution to pollution being dilution, if they put more water in the watercourse any pollution that they do have will be diluted. One of the things that was being done by Affinity Water as a result of pressure from the Environment Agency is a reduction in the abstractions taken from the rivers, so all of that should help.

Cllr Stevens asked for assurance that the abstraction they have here was now at its peak and that they were now able to rely on the water flow to be able to keep the river flowing.

C.Hall said that the Environment Agency deal with the licences for abstraction. However he couldn't give a definitive answer at the moment but would come back on the point.

A.P CHall to come back to the members on the licences for abstraction

Cllr England stated that from what he understood, they were not going to take the runoff water out of the water. He said he did not have much confidence in the scheme they had outlined and that it was going to take a lot of the pollution away from the river. He asked if they could be sure that, in scoping out a new channel, a large amount of the river flow would not simply go down into the course gravels which were as he understood just below the surface across the valley floor, and also how would they know where the so called original channel should be, or was it that they were not going back to roman times and were just choosing a suitable modern course for the river.

K.Sheenan responded that they were not trying to go back to the original course and he had explained that in his presentation, it would be almost impossible to say where the original course would have been as so much has been done over the ages to change it. Many view rivers in a different way to what they actually are. They imagine that river had been a single thread winding down the centre of the valley and never changing. But the chances are that it was either a wandering channel that changed course regularly or a braided channel that splits and re-joins. It all depends on the

gradient and the amount of gravel in the river at that moment. What they did know was that it would have been at the bottom of the valley as the river cut the valley, but the current position was entirely man made. They would not try to recreate the original channel but try to create something that was more natural and the benefit of that would be water flowing through clean gravels leading to a reduction of silt coming into the river and depositing on the margins and destroying any reeds for the fish. It would require a lot less intervention than the system that is currently there. In terms of the loss of water through the gravels, that could be an issue and they are studying that at the moment. Depending on the results of that study, they may well take a slightly different route.

Cllr England asked whether the project was worthwhile as it did not effectively address pollution problems and also asked for confirmation that they have overestimated the costs by 60% just in case something goes wrong.

C.Hall agreed that they have overestimated what the price may be to be sure that the cost would not go any higher.

Cllr England noted that the large bridge seemed partly designed to accommodate the gauge to measure the flow and asked if that would be the part that Dacorum Borough Council were being asked to pay for.

K.Sheenan said that there would be 2 bridges. The one near the Bowls Club was part of the scheme and the Environment Agency were paying for that, but there would be another bridge further up the park, north of the Queensway car park and that would be the one that Dacorum Borough Council would be paying for. In relation to his previous question, the river was not currently meeting various Water Framework Directive targets that it was supposed to meet because of; fine sediment, lack of fish connectivity, abstraction problems and the gauging station coming to the end of its life. This meant there were not really any do nothing options.

C.Hall said that something would eventually have to be done. The water that does not go through their gauging flume is missed by the hydrology and telemetry people and would therefore affect any flood warnings for Hemel so they do need an accurate gauging station in Gadebridge Park and they do not have one at the moment. The existing one was probably built in the 50's or 60's and will be coming to the end of its life very soon and something would have to replace it.

Cllr England said he had seen a lot of pictures of the River Gade from around 50 years ago and it appeared much wider. He felt the solution would be to have a new gauge and more flow in the river by taking less water out of the ground further up so that it could flow in the river.

K.Sheenan said he wouldn't disagree with him but people in London want their water and this water extraction was an issue with population levels.

Cllr Harden said he was intrigued by the examples given of the flooding. He asked whether increasing the height of the banks of the river, as opposed to re-routing the river, would solve the problem. He was also intrigued by the sense that re-directing it for a more natural flow would resolve the flooding problem and wondered what the difference in costs would be and would it be cheaper to raise the banks of the current river, and would any of this resolve the flooding north of the white bridge

C.Hall gave as an example context on how the Environment Agency measures flood risk the flooding in the Somerset levels in 2013/2014. That was a one in 200 year event, but they expect with climate change that these events would become more frequent.

K.Sheenan said that it seemed counter intuitive, but if they put the river at the bottom of the valley it could drain the whole valley. If they keep the river where it is at the moment it is perched so that all the water that comes down doesn't get into the river, so it is missed by the gauge so they don't know how much water is actually going down. It drains away into the gravels. In terms of building up the banks, they have been doing that in Yorkshire since time immemorial and yet Hebdon Bridge gets flooded every year and the place is full of walls. It doesn't work in the long term. He said that currently the perched channel has no way for the fish to get into it, so it failed on that score, it has fine sediment so it fails on that and the reason it for that was because it has no gradient because originally it was a mill lake to retain the height of the river along the edge of the valley to drop down at the head into the existing channel water wheel. So it is perched above the natural level and no matter how high you have those walls it would always have that low gradient and consequently you were always going to have fine sediment issues and extra maintenance costs. So raising the banks is a simply a short term solution. With climate change more sudden flooding events are expected as the air will contain more water vapour, leading to larger winter storms with heavier rain.

Cllr Birnie said that raising the banks would preclude the promised features that were educational for children.

K.Sheenan agreed.

Cllr Harden asked if the redesign of the river would stop the flooding north of the river.

K.Sheenan said that it wouldn't.

Cllr Birnie asked whether amenities such as the beaches and the bridge would not be provided if DBC does not put in the money requested.

C.Hall said that they would not get the footpaths and one of the bridges. The Environment Agency would be paying for the large bridge by the Bowls Club as that would house the new gauging station. The Council's contribution would be for footpaths, the second bridge and some information boards.

Cllr Birnie noted that the report mentioned a number of springs coming into the river and asked whether they simply comprised run off from the car parks and the Leighton Buzzard Road, or were there some natural springs that still exist and run usefully into the river.

K.Sheenan said that were some natural springs.

Cllr England agreed with Cllr Rogers that there were more studies to be reported and it would make sense to him to hear them before they gave their approval and

support. He would suggest that they delay supporting it now and ask that a clearer case was put forward.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe agreed in that they were still tweaking the project and that they had to go back and take more measurements and soundings. She agreed with a project that should in principle be an improvement however she felt that that case had not been proven tonight and she would prefer to wait until the plans that were being put forward were more defined than those that were presented.

Cllr Birnie asked whether the funds that were already raised were time limited and would a delay in the project affect the availability of those funds.

C.Hall said that they put in a bid each year from the working capital revenue budget but each year they have been successful and they were confident that they would continue to get funding.

Cllr Birnie asked if he could fully answer the funding question and come back to us with the number of other points they were taking away that evening.

A.P C.Hall to provide more information about the funding

Cllr Harden said he was trying to look at the potential risks if the project was not to go ahead and that it did not give him an answer. The issue he had was trying to still be wise with taxpayer's money and wanting to improve something within the natural environment and that was the challenge he had in his head. He asked if they chose not to invest as a council what would then happen. They had been told that the river would get more polluted and there would be worse flooding but was that it, was it the natural scenario of the river that was going to happen? If that was the case then what would the Environment Agency's responsibilities be and would how they deal with that be affected if the local authority does not invest?

C.Hall responded that if the council does not invest then the Environment Agency could build a project where there would be one bridge missing but there would still be the rest of the project. It would be nice if the council did contribute, however the bulk of funding was coming from the Environment Agency and Affinity Water. As for the "what would happen" the water quality is failing the WFD so they had a legal responsibility to do something to it. They have looked at other options but they feel that the channel realignment was the best one. If they were to do nothing then eventually the gauging station and the flume down the left hand side of the park would need to be replaced because of the flooding in other parts of the park. When the existing gauging station becomes useless, they would miss a lot of the flow and they would not be able to give accurate flood warnings for Hemel Hempstead Town Centre. There would also be more flooding affecting the Bowls Club leaving areas of the park unusable over winter months and the spring water would not be picked up.

Cllr Beauchamp said in its current form he couldn't support the project, there were far too many unknowns. However he looks forward to a plan that suits all of the objectives that they have. They need to spend more time on this.

Cllr Silwal agreed with Cllr Harden in that they have already spent £130k in feasibility study, investigating and outline design so if they were to hold back on the project that would be a waste. They need to think about it.

J.Doe followed up on some of the points that were made by the members, he thought it would be fair to say that there would be more work required on this as Cabinet has to receive a report in due course to make a final decision on whether the scheme could go ahead because it runs across Borough Council land and indeed the question of the Borough Council's contribution.

Cllr Birnie suggested in view in the opposition around the room that they welcome the report and hoped that Cabinet would continue to engage with the Environment Agency, without making any recommendation as to whether it should be taken forward.

Members agreed.

Cllr Rogers asked if we should be voting on it

Cllr Birnie a vote was not necessary

Cllr Rogers continued that they had heard from both sides of the argument and rather than just going ahead with it, there seems to be a bit of dissent in the room.

Cllr Birnie explained that they were simply noting and welcoming the report. He assumed that nobody could object to their welcoming information. The committee was simply suggesting that cabinet continue to look into the project by getting more information from the Environment Agency.

Cllr Rogers said as he understood this would go forward to Cabinet and they could give the go ahead and yet they have heard many reservations about it.

Cllr Birnie confirmed it would go to Cabinet without a positive recommendation to proceed. The Committee could only make recommendations and Cabinet could choose to ignore recommendations if they wished. In any case, it would have to go to Full Council if there were a certain expenditure involved. However as there were some reservations expressed, he would be very surprised if it did not come back to this OSC meeting in due course.

Cllr Rogers suggested to ensure that was the case that they say that they recommend that it doesn't go forward that Cabinet does not make a positive decision to go ahead with the project.

Cllr Birnie said they have not made that recommendation either way.

Cllr Rogers asked if they could make that recommendation.

Cllr Silwal said that the Officer's report recommendation was to consider and give support to the river restoration scheme within Gadebridge Park and Members to express their views.

Cllr Rogers said that he would propose that they and suggest to Cabinet that they have great reservations and they do not believe that it would be a positive step forward without sufficient information.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe seconded that proposal

Recommendation; the Committee recommends that Cabinet do not to move forward with the plans in their current state without further information.

12 **WORK PROGRAMME**

There were no amendments

The Meeting ended at Time Not Specified