

## MINUTES

### STRATEGIC PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

12 APRIL 2016

#### Present:

<b>Councillors:</b>	G Adshead Anderson (Chairman) Ashbourn E Collins Fisher S Hearn	Hicks Howard Ransley Riddick C Wyatt-Lowe (Vice-Chairman)
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<b>Officers:</b>	David Austin James Doe  Katie Mogan Sara Whelan	Assistant Director - Neighbourhood Delivery Assistant Director - Planning and Regeneration Member Support Officer Group Manager - Development Management and Planning
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#### Also Attendance:

Councillor Janice Marshall  
Councillor Graham Sutton

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

#### 93 MINUTES

The minutes of the Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 15 March 2016 were confirmed by the members present and signed by the Chairman.

#### 94 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Bateman and Councillor Matthews.

#### 95 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

#### 96 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

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

None.

**98**                    **RECYCLING CONTRACT**

D Austin introduced the report to members and ran through a few key points. The waste service contract in Dacorum expires in October 2017 and so it is time to start thinking about the new contract. Discussions have taken place with neighbouring authorities to work together and go out to tender with Watford, Welwyn Hatfield and Three Rivers. Dacorum has a very good reputation for the quality of recyclables and the council will maintain control of that under the new consortium contract. There is a debate in the industry particularly in local authorities over whether it is better to play the market with short term deals or to go for longer term agreements which allows for long term investment and stability in the waste service.

Councillor Ashbourn said that the consortium could be a good approach but it is important to be careful if a clearly identifiable benefit or balance can be established against the cost. Also, the cost of exit and if there will be an exit policy. Councillor Ashbourn said he understood the arguments but hoped there would a degree of caution.

D Austin said he understood the concerns and there was historically a Hertfordshire Waste Partnership consortium for newspapers and other recyclable materials. Some districts on their own were receiving £75-100 a tonne whereas in the consortium we were receiving well over £100 a tonne. There are standard clauses in the contract for an exit.

Councillor S Hearn asked D Austin if he was confident that the quality of the service will be maintained and not affected by the influence of other local authorities.

D Austin said that the new contract would not directly impact on residents. It is important to increase public participation and to not get complacent. As a department, we are always looking to improve the service, for example, No Food Waste stickers were put on residents black bins and in the first week, there was a huge increase in food waste collected. Dacorum have a waste transfer system whereby inspections can be made before it is sent off to the reprocessor. If there are issues with contamination on a particular round then targeted work can be done to improve the quality of the waste. There is nothing to suggest this would change under the new contract.

Councillor E Collins said she was concerned by a seven year long contract; it is a long time to commit when there are rapid changes in the population.

D Austin said there are more single households which changes the composition of the waste. Also, there are changes in materials which have an effect. For example, glass is getting thinner which then decreases the amount of tonnage collected.

Newspapers are also in decline as more people use online resources. There is a price index which reflects price changes in materials and Dacorum will receive a financial benefit in this new contract if the market picks up. There is not a lot of difference if Dacorum go it alone or join with the waste consortium but a longer contract allows for greater investment in reprocessor technologies.

Councillor E Collins asked D Austin to clarify what investment would be made.

D Austin said facilities would be improved. There is research into lasers that are able to separate different plastics and coloured glass. This contract will be an incentive to reprocessors.

Councillor Ransley asked if there would be any extra cost or impact on staffing levels.

D Austin said there would be no effect on staff. Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council would be the lead authority for the contract and each authority would pay them an annual subscription to oversee the project.

Councillor Hicks asked if there are penalties for any material that is not recyclable.

D Austin said that non-recyclable materials must be well in excess before a load is rejected. There is a targeted approach and press campaigns to promote recycling.

Councillor Anderson asked if the food sticker results would be on the next quarterly report.

D Austin said yes they would be. The stickers were distributed at the end of February and so the impact was mostly felt in March where there was a 50% increase in food waste collected in the first week.

Councillor Fisher asked if there will be attempts in the future to include other local authorities into the consortium.

D Austin said that there were ten districts within Hertfordshire and there were long discussions about who was going to be involved in the contract. Geographically, this proposed consortium works well and other local authorities are not committed. The authorities in this partnership have earlier contract renewal dates and it is vital to move now. It could lead the way for joint collections on boundaries and could set a foundation for other projects.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe was also concerned with the contract length. She said she would be more comfortable with perhaps a four year contract with the option to extend. Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe said so much could change and could potentially be financially worse off. She said she was concerned that the contract may lead to complacency within other authorities.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe said she was also concerned regarding the quality of recyclables which Dacorum has a good reputation for. Within this group contract, will the quality be monitored so that Dacorum do not get dragged down?

D Austin explained that the market was in a state of oversupply and contracts are being cherry picked for waste quality. Some local authorities are hauling their loads considerable distances to get to a waste depot. The local authorities in this contract share a commitment to material quality and Three Rivers also have an outstanding reputation for waste quality. Furthermore, loads are sampled individually.

Councillor Marshall thanked the committee for their comments and would present them at Cabinet when this report goes before the committee.

### **Outcome**

The Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

## **99                    CONSERVATION STRATEGY PROGRESS**

J Doe gave members a brief update on the conservative strategy. He said heritage was very important and there are currently 2,000 listed buildings and 25 Conservation areas in Dacorum. The department is one of the best resourced in Hertfordshire. The Conservation Strategy was approved at Cabinet in November 2015. There is an annual action plan and this is focused on Conservation area appraisals with a photographic database in preparation for the move to the Forum.

There are heritage issues in development and the heritage team's time is taken up with providing comments for the planning casework team. They also receive listed building applications. The team had a huge input in the Water Garden and Old Town design.

Councillor Ashbourn congratulated the officers on the Strategy and Action Plan documents provided. He questioned how well these documents will be aligned with day to day planning activity.

J Doe said a lot of conservation officer's time was occupied with case work. Hopefully, the character appraisals will provide up to date information which is very important to properly assess planning applications. It is important to manage the department to ensure an appropriate balance of time.

Councillor Ashbourn said that with a new influx of staff in the planning department, it is very important to interact and liaise with Town and Parish Councils.

S Whelan said that a new conservation officer had been appointed and would be a great addition to the department. Recently, there was a training session to look at conservation design in Berkhamsted and Tring which has empowered officers to

understand conservation a lot more. Another session is planned for summer and it is hoped this would include some site visits. There are also plans to have a 'design surgery' for planning officers with conservation officers on Monday and Wednesday mornings.

Councillor Anderson asked what measures were in place to ensure the independence of the conservation officers' advice.

J Doe said that the conservation officer is just one of the many consultees and planning officers must weigh up conflicting advice which can be difficult. If the planning issue is in a conservation area with listed buildings then the conservation comments carry a lot of weight. Other priorities include regeneration and house building. Every case is processed with a recommendation which is presented to a senior case officer for checking. This ensures checks and balances throughout the process.

S Whelan said she is yet to encounter any issue with the independence of conservation officer. S Whelan said she was comfortable officers were providing professional advice.

Councillor Hicks was pleased that there was a system of checking. He said the trouble was that applicants spend a lot of money on architect fees to match the advice given and then this is eventually rejected due to differing opinions in senior officers. Should there be a common set of ideals within the department?

S Whelan said they receive approximately 2,500 planning applications a year. She hoped there was a consistent approach. The department are going to roll out case conferences for tricky developments.

J Doe said it was also vital to have good up to date policies and character assessments. The pre application advice is critical for applicants.

Councillor Anderson said that the previous group manager had looked into including members in the pre application advice.

S Whelan said she would endorse this approach but felt it was only proportionate for large scale developments. Currently, there is a pre application phase two on Spencers Park and she was hoping to invite Development Control Committee members for a briefing.

Councillor Ransley questioned when a heritage building arrives for planning application, which weighs heavier, Core strategy or a local action plan.

J Doe said every case is different. If a building was not on the statutory list then it was not protected from demolition. He said everyone was fully aware of the pressure the borough is under to provide new housing and older buildings can be more useful for denser developments.

Councillor S Hearn suggested that the early involvement of members and councils may prevent as many objections.

J Doe said there was an upcoming review of the Core Strategy and there are currently strategic locations of development.

Councillor G Sutton gave his support to the Conservation and Planning teams. He said the work ethic has changed considerably and the conservation team's comments are taken seriously by officers.

### **Outcome**

The Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted and endorsed the report.

## **100                    DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT SERVICE**

S Whelan introduced the report and highlighted the key points. She said the Housing and Planning Bill currently going through Parliament was going to create huge changes.

Starter homes are to be offered at 80% of market price to first time buyers under 40 with a limit of £250,000. At the moment, the borough negotiates affordable housing as there is huge pressure to provide this. The starter homes will not be subject to s106 or CIL payments meaning less income from the borough.

The new bill will ensure every local authority has a local plan in place by 2017. Dacorum have a local plan but is in the process of updating the Core Strategy.

The brownfield land register will come into force. Local authorities will be required to place all brownfield land onto a register to encourage developers to come forward to build new homes. It is thought that 90% of all brownfield sites by 2020 will have permission in principle which will assess land use. It becomes complicated when it involves heritage assets and flood risk areas.

The bill may create an approved provider approach. The local authority will only hand over full property history to a private company which will liaise and consult with residents and town/parish councils. They will provide a recommendation to the local authority but the final decision still remains with the local authority.

There will be an increase in fees which is good news. They should be increased in line with inflation. At the moment, the department does not recover its costs.

Councillor Ashbourn said he understood the new legislation was fast paced but he felt there was a danger of getting absorbed in the momentum. He felt the council had a duty of care to residents and their well-being. There is currently a huge pressure on roads and traffic and he was conscious of responsibilities.

J Doe said the quality of design was vital. There will be less impact when developments are properly planned with suitable facilities and open spaces.

Councillor Anderson highlighted that local authorities are obliged to follow new legislation but hoped it would be possible to interpret legislation. He said he had followed three planning bills through Parliament and found they changed rapidly.

S Whelan said she worked closely with the Planning Officers Society who have been invited to scrutiny sessions and has undertaken a lot of lobbying on this bill. The bill could change again before it becomes law but she felt starter homes were definitely here to stay. The new bill will certainly make the planning process more complicated.

Councillor Anderson said that parish councils were upset that the consultation stage may be removed.

S Whelan said that the technical details will be at the permission in principle stage. However, there are no set details like how many homes, the style of homes etc which will be difficult to articulate to parish councils.

Councillor Hicks asked the size of a starter home.

S Whelan said the only limit is the value. As Dacorum is a high value area, she felt a two bedroom terrace house would probably be the norm.

Councillor Hicks said surely it is uneconomical to blend starter homes into the surrounding street scene.

S Whelan said that would be based on a balance of issues with a financial viability aspect.

J Doe said it was no different to the current affordable home scheme. Developers must up their game in conservation areas. For example, the Queen Street Depot site in Tring. Dacorum is a high value area but this is a national policy applying to all areas. Starter homes will not have the s106 or CIL payments so this is an advantage for developers.

Councillor S Hearn was concerned with the preparation of brownfield sites. Will there be a policy to cooperate with neighbouring and joining authorities? Aylesbury are building 4,000 new homes very close to the border of Tring.

J Doe said there is collaboration with other local authorities on policies as there is a duty to cooperate across boundaries especially when Dacorum is rather constrained by Green Belt land.

Councillor Fisher asked if the development of brownfield could be controlled to prevent a huge flurry at the beginning of the scheme.

S Whelan said there was no suggested plan for this. With the register, the government are seeing above and beyond Core Strategies and trying to protect Green Belt land focus development on brownfield.

Councillor E Collins said she was concerned with starter homes and materials used to fit in with the existing street scene. She said there was a desperate housing shortage which was more important than materials.

S Whelan said there is a push to build new homes. If an authority does not deliver enough then they must release land. It is important to ensure homes built now are not the slums of tomorrow.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe commented on the well designed and well-built new homes in Woodhall Farm.

### **Outcome**

The Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

## **101            BUILDING CONTROL**

S Whelan introduced the report to members. She said they had a good market share in the residential sector, but not quite as good in the commercial side and this is an area to improve on. The department is legally bound to publish its fees but this means they are undercut by private firms up to 10%.

There is a Hertfordshire consortium but it was felt that it was not financially viable or attractive so therefore building control is now in-house.

Staffing levels are critical. There are five temporary members of staff and two permanent. Building Control is a competitive market and Dacorum have a good reputation within Hertfordshire so temps are keen to come and work for the council. It is hoped that a 'grow your own' scheme can be used in the department to either support a candidate through a degree or a graduate. Performance related pay has been discussed and St Albans council have introduced this.

Councillor Ashbourn stated he liked the idea of the 'grow your own' scheme in order to instil the correct values.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe said Dacorum is a high employment area on the outskirts of London which means it is difficult to attract new staff. Do we have market forces payments to entice people to work and stay at Dacorum.

J Doe said the department did have but was withdrawn for budget savings. It is a careful consideration to make. St Albans performance pay comes from their surplus on fee income.



Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe said the Council must be paying over the odds for agency staff. Surely the savings from agency staff can be used for performance pay for permanent staff.

**Outcome**

The Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

**102                    LAND CHARGES**

S Whelan introduced the report to the committee. She said that income was steady and work was underway to put the service online. When it is live, they will be able to charge for the service and this will also help with the move to the Forum. Land Charge project is a government initiative and the timeline states it will be ready by 2020 which should include a central search engine.

Councillor Ashbourn hoped the process to moving it digital would be robust because it has been known for documents to go missing.

S Whelan said everything would be digitalised to ensure staff can work from home. This is a huge project but will be a big achievement when complete.

Councillor Howard asked what the slippage on date is. They seem to be quite tight deadlines.

J Doe said these were draft dates. The Conservation appraisals will be allocated to consultants so will not take up officer's time.

**Outcome**

The Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

The Meeting ended at 9.05 pm