

MINUTES

Dacorum Borough Council

Strategic Planning and Environment Tuesday 8 Nov 2022

Councillors: (12)

Neil Harden (Chair)
Mark Rogers (Vice-Chair)
Jane Timmis
Colette Wyatt-Lowe
Anne Foster
Garrick Stevens
Adrian England
Stewart Riddick
Rob Beauchamp
Sheron Wilkie
Rosie Sutton

Also in attendance: Alan Anderson (Cllr)
 Graham Barratt (Cllr)
 Julie Banks (Cllr)

Officers: (6)

Alex Robinson – Assistant Director Planning
Richard LeBrun – Assistant Director Neighbourhood Delivery
Hannah Peacock - Head of Transformation
Ronan Leydon - Strategic Planning and Regeneration Assistant Team Leader
Oliver Burrough (Corporate Graduate)
Aiden Wilkie (Director)

Officers Viewing via TEAMS: (2)

Rebecca Williams
Rob Sellwood.

SPE//22 MINUTES

The minutes from the last meeting were approved and signed by the Chair.

SPE/0/22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Taylor and Hearn

SPE/0/22 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Chairman

There were no declarations of interest.

SPE/0/22 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

SPE/0/22 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

None.

SPE/0/22 ACTION POINTS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The actions from the previous meeting were noted.

SPE/0/22 Q2 - PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT AND REGENERATION PERFORMANCE REPORT

ARobinson took the report as read, noting the updates on the mitigation strategy to lift the current moratorium and work with HCC on planning resilience. ARobinson highlighted progress on 2 supplementary planning documents in the last quarter, and noted the collection of £750,000 in CIL in the last quarter. ARobinson advised that income across the planning service is down over the last quarter, as are search fees, and performance in development has decreased due to the moratorium and a national downturn in the number of planning applications submitted. ARobinson highlighted the progress made in enforcement.

Cllr Foster commented on paragraph 2.3 in the report regarding planning resilience and requested clarification around 'potential collaboration with partners'. ARobinson advised that they are considering a number of options on how to improve planning resilience and they are looking at opportunities with media partners as well as across HCC to identify other resources. ARobinson explained that there is an issue with recruitment across the county and they are therefore working with partners on a strategic solution, including the sharing of resources.

Cllr Stevens asked if they are looking at a central county planning body. ARobinson confirmed that this is not being considered and that they are looking to identify any particular skillsets. Cllr Anderson also noted that they are looking at non-controversial services, such as back office operations where there is no scope for differing interpretations in what is in the public interest and where there is a benefit from sharing with other authorities.

Cllr Wilkie requested an overview of how resource sharing will work. ARobinson advised that they are in the early stages of the process and are currently exploring options with partners as part of a wider initiative led by HCC to better understand the current status of each local

authority. Further updates will be brought to the Committee and it was reiterated that there are no plans for a joint planning service that would operate across the county.

Cllr Wilkie noted IT improvements and asked if this is part of the resilience planning. ARobinson explained that the planning system is not operating as well as it could due to capacity in the system and there are a number of inefficiencies within the system. One area of consideration is IT systems and if more can be done to digitise data and speed up applications.

Cllr Harden thanked A Robinson for the report.

SPE/0/22 COMPLAINTS POLICY

HPeacock provided an overview of the policy, noting that this is part of the Customer Strategy as approved by Cabinet in February 2022. The policy highlights key areas of the strategy to put the customer at the centre of services. HPeacock took the report as read, noting the focus within the strategy regarding phoning customers in relation to frustrations, updated response times and reviewing levels of responsibilities with team leaders handling stage 1 complaints and heads of service dealing with stage 2. The aim is to implement the policy by 1st December 2022, subject to approval from Cabinet. HPeacock also introduced OBurrough, a corporate graduate who has assisted with the development and implementation of the policy.

Cllr Foster referred to a complaint in 2019 that was ignored and that the follow-up complaint was also ignored, resulting in going to the RGO. Cllr Foster noted the timeframes that were not met previously and asked if a response would now be given if they were not met. Cllr Foster advised that the issue was that 2 services were involved and the complaint was considered closed once it was sent to the relevant service. Cllr Foster also noted that she did not receive a copy of the complaint made and that the phone number did not provide an option to get through to complaints.

HPeacock confirmed that part of the work linked to the development of the policy is the centralisation of complaints resource under the Customer Service unit, and the centralisation of this resource, including the tracking and monitoring of complaints, allows better oversight of when complaints are slipping against deadlines. HPeacock commented on the previous complaint and the number of services being involved, noting that one officer will be appointed as the lead on the complaint and will be responsible for collating responses and then responding to the customer. On the issue raised by Cllr Foster, HPeacock advised that there will be one point of contact who is responsible for highlighting issues to the service or officer handling the complaint, adding that, as part of the policy, they have confirmed with all heads of service what they are responsible for to ensure complaints are allocated to the appropriate person.

Cllr Foster queried if the complainant would have the contact details of the person handling the complaint. HPeacock confirmed they would have the contact details of the person handling the complaint, who is expected to phone the customer in the first instance where they provide their contact details.

Cllr Foster asked if a copy of the complaint is provided when logged. HPeacock confirmed that templates are being considered with the expectation that the key elements of the complaint are included. On providing a copy back to the customer, HPeacock confirmed that this would be considered further.

Cllr Harden clarified that the customer would be contacted in the first instance and asked if this had taken place before. HPeacock confirmed that this isn't part of the current approach and was reflected in the feedback when developing the strategy.

Cllr Harden confirmed that he had tested the callback feature recently and was impressed with how it works.

Cllr Foster asked if customers will be informed on progress regarding their complaint. HPeacock confirmed that they would be.

Cllr Wilkie commended the report and congratulated the team on their work. Cllr Wilkie commented on complaints first raised with a councillor that are taken to officers rather than going through the complaints system. Cllr Wilkie noted previous issues with the system and the time taken to resolve complaints, commenting that these issues appear to have been addressed with the policy.

Cllr Timmis referred to the NHS and the aim to diffuse issues before they are escalated into becoming a complaint. HPeacock confirmed that they are covering this as part of the wider customer strategy and focusing on pain points within the system that could be resolved through other work being undertaken. There is also a focus on staff training and how to handle with issues before they become a complaint as well as how to ensure these issues are then reflected in service improvement activities.

Cllr England commented on item 3.4 or 3.5 of the report and asked if they should refer to formal and informal complaints or if this should be phrased differently to avoid confusion. HPeacock confirmed that this could be considered further, stating that they have reviewed the policy to ensure it is as accessible as possible. HPeacock added that the website also covers comments and compliments, though the focus is currently on complaints.

Cllr Beauchamp asked where in the policy local councillors come in, noting that they look to resolve complaints where possible and that customers aren't always aware of this. Cllr Harden stated that he was unsure where this would feature within the policy. HPeacock agreed, noting the separate route into the council and that whilst they may not formalise this within the policy, it can be covered in staff training to highlight the different ways that issues are escalated.

Cllr Rogers stated that he is unsure of specific officer responsibilities when looking to raise complaints from residents and asked if there is any training in place to ensure the switchboard can clarify the correct person to speak to. H Peacock referred back to the centralisation of the resource, noting that they will be regularly handling complaints and will know where to send key issues and that officers have been asked to confirm the key areas they are responsible for.

Cllr Stevens queried how many complaints are handled on a daily or weekly basis. HPeacock advised that centralising the resource will help improve the quality of data provided to members as well as addressing what is being done to respond to complaints.

Cllr Harden stated that it would be beneficial to see the number of complaints that come into the Council or the percentage of total interactions.

Cllr Stevens asked if the Complaints Policy will also apply to housing complaints. HPeacock confirmed that the policy applies to all services and the change to the timeframes is in response to change in the housing ombudsman policy.

Cllr Stevens asked if the system will use a reference number to take handlers to the complaint. HPeacock confirmed that the current complaints system uses reference numbers and that she will provide an update on the CRM in due course.

The Committee noted the report.

Action: H Peacock to report back complaints figures.

SPE/0/22 GREEN WASTE SUBSCRIPTION

RLeBrun took the report as read, noting that the Council is facing significant financial and environmental pressures in the medium-term and must therefore consider a number of options to close the budget deficit in future years. The situation has been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis as well as the recently approved 2022-23 National Pay Award. The option being considered is to introduce a chargeable garden waste service to help the council reduce the cost of the service provision. RLeBrun noted that the collection of garden waste is a discretionary service, not a statutory service, and does not have to be provided by the council. The proposal is to introduce a paid service for all garden waste from the first week of March 2023 when the garden waste service recommences after the winter break.

Cllr England thanked RLeBrun for the report and acknowledged on the need to save money and agreed that it is logical to look at non-statutory services, though he urged caution around the unintended consequences if the decision is rushed. Cllr England asked if the proposal would effect recycling versus residual waste, noting that the report states there is no detriment amongst those who carried this out, though there is evidence from Haringey that 4% of residual waste was garden waste and could therefore increase Dacorum's residual waste, an area that they are looking to improve upon. Cllr England also noted Hemel Hempstead's recycling centre, stating that it is not considered fit for purpose and asked if it was the right time to put more pressure on it. Cllr England asked if the proposal would also lead to more bonfires and queried the air quality risk posed by people burning wet garden waste, noting that there is no safe level and that some people may decide to take this route during the cost of living crisis. Cllr England then asked how many of the 36% who don't pay but don't have garden waste have composted successfully and asked what they are encouraging people to do if not to recycle locally, suggesting that it could lead to dumping of waste. Cllr England clarified that he was not against the proposal and noted his concerns of implementing it too quickly and not doing it well, stating that there could be some unintended

consequences. Cllr England stated that giving people £10 off the service would be enough for those struggling and that they should recognise the cost of living crisis on those on fixed income. Cllr England then asked if the proposal is driven by environmental virtue or if they are simply looking to save money. Cllr England then asked if home composting is a goal and suggested that the primary objective should be to first establish home composting successfully before proceeding with the proposal. Cllr England asked when recycling would be standardised in the UK and if the council is giving a commitment to remove the charge when it is implemented.

Cllr Harden clarified that Cllr England supports the proposal but not the current timeframe. Cllr England stated that he recognised it should be introduced.

RLeBrun noted that Hounslow showed a 4% increase when charging was introduced, though they did not look into how much garden waste went into residual waste first, but it helped provide an overview of where education is required. Evidence from other councils shows that the initial impact on the recycling rate is very small and it then recovers quickly. RLeBrun noted that the proposal is also an opportunity to remind residents of the whole recycling process, and further into 2023 they are looking at more options to push this. It was noted that St. Albans have regularly been in the top 5 councils for recycling and are likely to remain in this. On the Hemel Hempstead recycling site, RLeBrun confirmed that they are in regular Herts Waste Partnership meetings, which discusses waste across the whole county, including the use of recycling centres and kerbside collection, and the concerns can be raised. On bonfires, RLeBrun acknowledged the impact on air quality and advised that there is little anecdotal evidence of an increase in bonfires and that the greater concern is the dumping of garden waste. Looking at composting, RLeBrun confirmed that this will form a major part of the communication plan and that they are looking at companies they can work with to get better deals for residents on composters. RLeBrun acknowledged the comment that having more time would allow for more education, adding that this information has been available for a long time and that those who are doing it are likely doing so already, and while they need to act now, they will also be looking at composting. With regards to the cost of living, RLeBrun advised that they have looked across the county and how to be consistent regarding concessions and that offering further concessions could cost the council more to manage these. RLeBrun advised that there will be lessons learned and changes will be made when required and they will return to the Committee to provide updates. RLeBrun confirmed that this is ongoing work and that the environmental team works proactively to look at all means on how to educate the public around this.

RLeBrun acknowledged the government consultation that took place last year regarding waste and the proposal to offer a part-free garden waste collection service. Councils fed back on this and a response is yet to be received. RLeBrun noted that making the scheme free would leave large budget holes across the country and that they are therefore unlikely to introduce this in the short to medium-term. Whilst it has been a conversation, they are unlikely to see a free garden waste scheme in the next 1-2 years.

Cllr England commented on the statement in the report that currently two thirds of households use the service and a 30% take-up is expected, meaning that 36% will not sign up to the service. Cllr Harden noted that residents could share bins. RLeBrun agreed, stating that if the subscription is paid for the bin then it will be emptied. RLeBrun advised that they

have forecast 30% as this is the standard across councils when the scheme is introduced, adding that Devon found one third of bins were full, one third were put out and didn't have much waste in and the other third weren't put out, and that is rare for councils to not achieve over 50%. RLeBrun stated that they will have a better understanding once the scheme has been in place for a year and that the expectation isn't that the remaining 36% will be dumping or burning their garden waste.

Cllr Harden referred to item 2.3 in the report and commented on the wording regarding St. Albans and East Hertfordshire moving to the scheme. RLeBrun confirmed that both have now moved onto the scheme. It was noted that the '8 out of 10' assumes that Dacorum will move to the scheme and should instead read '7 out of 10'. Cllr Harden noted that two areas that have not moved to the scheme due to having garden and food waste in the same bin, otherwise they may have proceeded, meaning that 100% of Hertfordshire is moving in this direction.

Cllr Foster commented on fly tipping, noting how easy it is to dump garden waste and issues already caused by invasive species. Cllr Foster stated that she has spoken to Ashridge about this and they have stated that green waste is a particular issue and they are concerned that the problem will increase.

RLeBrun thanked the councillor for raising the concern and advised that some invasive species are dumped regardless. Lebrun stated that if they have a better understanding of where green waste dumping is occurring, they can look at education and enforcement to also tackle the issue of invasive species.

Cllr Foster asked that the scheme be delayed until the council consults with Ashridge. RLeBrun acknowledged the comment, adding that the situation is already occurring. Cllr Barratt commented that they could not assume that residents will suddenly turn to fly-tipping as this has not been the case in other boroughs. Cllr Wilkie commented that Councillors are not opposed to the scheme and that concerns are around unintended consequences, particularly given the financial crisis. Cllr Wilkie acknowledged the pressures that the council is facing and commented that there are untested elements within the proposal. Cllr Harden noted that actions will be taken if invasive species are being dumped.

RLeBrun confirmed that they can consult with Ashridge and that this will take place to better understand issues around invasive species.

Cllr Timmis commented that the majority of fly-tipping is not carried out by local residents and suggested that this may also be the case at Ashridge. Cllr Timmis noted her support for the scheme and that most residents would be happy to pay for the service, noting that use of bins tends to be low and therefore bins could be easily shared.

Cllr Harden remarked that sharing bins with neighbours could be included within the communication plan.

RLeBrun confirmed that FAQs will be put up on the website and will be regularly updated, noting that they will follow St. Albans' example on this and be very clear about what can and can't be done.

Cllr Stevens asked if a subscription runs for 12 months or the balance of the year. RLeBrun confirmed that people will pay the balance for the year and people are encouraged to sign up at the beginning of the year to get the full service, noting that the communication plan will take place before it launches at the start of March 2023 and ensure that people receive the full service.

Cllr Stevens asked how they will address issues at the beginning of March. RLeBrun advised that Dacorum has been running a subscription extra bin service and can adapt the model for the green waste scheme. A company, PermiServ, has been consulted with regarding providing bin labels and this will be received by residents within 3-5 days and will cost £1.25 per resident, which has been costed into the scheme. The process is therefore automated as much as possible to help minimise errors and there is confidence that there should be no delays between sign up and service delivery. RLeBrun noted that other Hertfordshire councils are already using the service and have confirmed that the company delivers as promised.

Cllr Stevens asked how quickly they can proceed with the scheme. Cllr Harden stated that the implementation is within the report. RLeBrun confirmed that the scheme will go live week commencing 27th February 2023 and that the ability to sign up will go live in the first week of January. Once there is agreement from Cabinet, the communication and education work can commence. RLeBrun advised that whilst it was unlikely that most users will sign up at the beginning of January, the service can cope if they do and they also have until the start of March to push the service, adding that they are likely to see an increase in users over the Easter period. RLeBrun added that the complaints service is also being built in to allow people the option to call the council when needed.

Cllr Harden asked that the IT service be able to handle demand. RLeBrun stated that the process has to work regardless of the number of people who sign up, and that the second key element is the education and communication programme, which is being addressed via weekly meetings to ensure the whole process is ready as soon as the scheme has been signed off.

Cllr England acknowledged the communications planned throughout the year, noting that people are less likely to listen to the messaging during winter and instead suggested that they promote composting and making arrangements with neighbours to share bins ahead of 2024. Cllr England stated that the council need to give people time to prepare and he voiced concerns about where the scheme comes on scrutiny and that it was not within the Work Programme at the last meeting. Given the uncertainty regarding take-up, Cllr England suggested that if the scheme does proceed then it should be free for those on benefits and pensions, noting that he would not support the scheme if this was not offered. Cllr England added that the scheme should also be delayed to allow for communications over the summer period.

Cllr Beauchamp noted his broad support of the scheme and echoed the concerns around implementation. Cllr Beauchamp asked if the service is only available via online subscription and if those without internet access would be able to sign up. RLeBrun advised that they are primarily focusing on online sign-up, though there is a phone number who can talk people

through the sign-up process, and while the aim is to have a fully automated service in time, help will always be provided. Cllr Beauchamp stated that the communications need to include an alternative for those who do not have internet access.

Looking at the £10 discount, Cllr Beauchamp commented that this could be more generous and noted that the second bin cost would not be increased. Cllr Beauchamp suggested that the cost instead be applied to the second bin charge and then offer a £15 discount for green waste collection. Cllr Beauchamp noted that green waste can still be taken to recycling centres and that those close to recycling centres may use this option instead, adding that there may be extra pressure on Cupid Green with people from the St. Albans area using the facility and asked if they would consider asking people to prove their residency to use it.

RLeBrun confirmed that St. Albans have already implemented the green waste subscription and that he did not expect to see an increase in residents using Dacorum facilities. Cllr Beauchamp stated that they may already be using their services and that they need to be aware of the potential increase in use. RLeBrun acknowledged the comment, noting that HCC control the recycling centre and it would be unrealistic to ask them to restrict which boroughs can use it, though they can ask if there are any increases in use following implementation of the scheme across the borough.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe noted her support of the proposed scheme, advising that the process is already in place with the second bin scheme and can be readily adapted. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe stated that whilst she would prefer to see the £10 concession increased, she acknowledged that they did not want to lose the financial benefits of the scheme by creating an overly complicated administrative system. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe noted the commitment that the scheme will be under review.

Cllr Harden asked members to vote on the report.

FOR	AGAINST	ABSTAIN
5	0	4

SPE/0/22 WORK PROGRAMME

Cllr Harden advised that a discussion took place pre-meeting to look at the Work Programme and comments raised and confirmed that a new Work Programme will be circulated in the coming days.

Cllr Timmis requested an item on climate change and how residents are being encouraged to take action. Cllr Timmis stated that an item on water and floods should also be included, noting that Affinity Water have attended the meeting in the past. Cllr Timmis also requested an item on Luton Airport expansion plans and the government enquiry regarding their recent application, which Luton Borough Council granted, to expand from 18m to 19m passengers,

and that a further expansion is in the pipeline. Cllr Timmis noted the impact on both the immediate and wider areas.

Cllr Beauchamp noted that there is a water resource programme that is ongoing and is jointly hosted by Thames Water and Affinity Water, and suggested that both parties be invited to discuss their plans for the future.

Cllr Timmis noted the amount of acronyms included in the Work Programme. Cllr Harden advised that a glossary is usually included and that they would ensure a glossary is included within the reports.

Cllr England asked if air quality could be included. Cllr Harden stated that they are awaiting government information and the item is pencilled in for the January meeting.

There being no further business.

Cllr Harden formally closed the meeting at 9:09pm.