

CABINET

Wednesday, 17th July, 2013

Present:- Councillor Gareth Snell – in the Chair

Councillors Mrs Bates, Mrs Beech, Kearon, Turner, Stubbs and Williams

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 22nd May 2013 be agreed as a correct record.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. URBAN NORTH STAFFS GREEN SPACE STRATEGY ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT

A report was submitted to inform Members of progress made with the implementation of the Urban North Staffordshire Green Space Strategy and the associated Action Plan.

The Strategy promoted the environmental, economic and social benefits which green space brings to parallel strategic regeneration initiatives and to the Council's corporate priorities and core values. The Strategy demonstrated how good quality green space supported economic regeneration and provided opportunities for people to live a healthy and active lifestyle in a clean and safe environment. It also demonstrated the positive impact green space had on carbon reduction.

The Strategy aimed to ensure that the residents of the Borough had the right amount of green space to cater for their needs in terms of parks, play, sport, nature and green routes. The Strategy sought to provide these sites in places which were accessible and easy to reach for as many people as possible and by grouping facilities together into larger, multi-functional high quality green spaces.

In the last five years a total of over £4.1 million in external funding has been secured towards delivering the projects in the Action Plan and a number of key capital development projects had been completed or were in progress to provide and improve community green space provision. Consultation had also been carried out with resident regarding the use of surplus green space assets.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Recycling stated that the Council was proud of its Green Flag awards and was looking to the results of the Britain in Bloom competition which were expected in September. Attention was also drawn to the 8000 hours of voluntary help which residents had provided, equaling £100,000 in monetary terms.

The Leader commended the willingness of residents to participate and volunteer.

Resolved: That the report be received and progress noted.

5. AN ARTS STRATEGY FOR THE BOROUGH

The Leader welcomed Kerry Jones, Arts Officer from Keele University, Theresa Heskins, Artistic Director at the New Vic Theatre and David Matthews, Director of Learner Engagement and Partnerships and Newcastle under Lyme College to the meeting.

A report was submitted welcoming views from Cabinet on the multi agency Arts Strategy for Newcastle under Lyme that was to be the subject of a public consultation exercise.

The strategy acknowledged the importance of partnership working, addressing itself to the agencies, voluntary and professional organisations within the area who would work in partnership to achieve agreed community outcomes. This commitment would grow support for culture and the arts and by building on existing strengths and developing them to meet community priorities, partner organisations would meet the following challenges:

- Increase participation in the arts
- Support the growth and spread of cultural and creative activity
- Strengthen leadership and resources dedicated to these tasks.
- Measure the improved effectiveness of the arts and culture in tackling community issues

There was a strong desire to develop creative talent in the Borough and help to get Newcastle under Lyme recognised as a priority area for heritage lottery fund investment.

Miss Jones stated that the Strategy would be very beneficial to the University and should allow it to have a wider presence in the town centre. Miss Heskins also commended the Council for creating such a joined up strategy for the arts and stated that it had been a pleasure to be consulted. Miss Heskins stated that the Borough needed to commit to the arts in order to achieve excellence and promote its achievements nationally through enhanced partnership working with groups such as the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Mr Matthews stated that through the partnership approach it was hoped that the new performing arts centre at the college would be able to continue to grow through securing funding and support and that additional students would then be attracted to the college. Mr Matthews also commented that harnessing the creative talent of young people in the Borough would help to promote growth in the town centre and that links needed to be forged between arts, culture and enterprise. So much in Newcastle under Lyme was unique and needed to be promoted which could only be achieved with all partners working together.

The Leader agreed that there was a great variety of unique artistic and cultural heritage in Newcastle under Lyme that needed to be harnessed and promoted.

The Portfolio Holder for Safer Communities also commended the strategy but requested that care be taken not to lose sight of the art itself by focusing too much on the financial questions.

Resolved:

1. That the Arts Strategy be approved for public consultation.
2. That the work of the arts and culture group formed in 2012 be noted.
3. That the Council supports the aspirations of partners for the arts.

6. NEWCASTLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY YEAR TWO ACTION PLAN

A report was submitted concerning the multi agency Arts Strategy for Newcastle under Lyme that was to be the subject of a public consultation exercise. The views of the Cabinet on the Strategy were welcomed.

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Regeneration and Town Centres started that the document which covered the years 2012 to 2017 was an excellent piece of work and that the Council was now at the stage to report on progress for year 1 and consider how to proceed into year 2. The Strategy had been considered by the Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee and feedback from this had been taken on board.

The portfolio holder stated that there had been many successful projects such as the apprenticeship scheme but that other projects such as the Site Allocations Development Plan now needed to be moved on. The Portfolio Holder also requested that the website be updated and utilised more to help encourage businesses to move into the area by providing them with the information required to do this.

The Chair of the Scrutiny Committee agreed with the portfolio holder regarding progress of the plan and highlighted four main areas that the Committee had picked up:

1. It was requested that a simplified version of the plan be provided to all Elected Members.
2. That where possible deadlines be made more robust as it felt that they were somewhat vague at present.
3. That good work had been carried out with young people regarding education and enterprise but that enterprise guidance should be made available to everyone.
4. That it was good to see work being done with different age groups and requested that care be taken to include those in the 50 plus bracket who had been made redundant and could be struggling with out of date skills.

It was agreed that feedback regarding these requests be provided to the next meeting and that updated timescales be reported back to the Scrutiny Committee.

The Portfolio Holder thanked the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee for the input.

Resolved: (a) That receipt of comments from the Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted.

(b) That the review of the Economic Development Strategy Year One Action Plan be noted and that the Year Two Action Plan be approved.

(c) That officers continue to seek Members' approval for the annual Action Plans and to keep Members informed of progress made with the same.

7. TOWN CENTRE CAR PARKING

The Chair welcomed Jonathan Mitchell, Chair of the Town Centre Partnership and Glenda Miller from Knights Solicitors to the meeting.

A report was submitted to inform Cabinet of the outcome of a scrutiny review process and subsequent member discussions that considered a range of options to introduce changes to the car parking fees and charges regime in an attempt to generate greater footfall in the town centre with the express aim of improving its economic fortunes.

Recommendations from the Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee had identified three initiatives for Cabinet to consider:

1. Cashless Parking
2. Pay on Foot System
3. Free parking after 2pm on Thursdays

A 4th initiative had since been added called Nipper Parking, which was 30 minutes free parking, generally near to the centre of the town to allow customers to 'nip' in and out of the town.

Consideration was also being given to increasing the number of free parking days in the town by 5, these days would be agreed in liaison with the Town Centre Partnership. Double ticketing had also been discussed whereby vouchers would be dispensed along with the ticket to spend in certain shops or get the cost of the ticket refunded. A free trial of number plate recognition software was also due to be carried out at no expense to the Council.

It was stated that following the implementation of some or all of these initiatives there would need to be careful monitoring to assess what if any impact they had on the footfall in the town centre.

Mr Mitchell stated that it was vital to increase the footfall in the town centre and enhance its vibrancy and that this had to be done by addressing every aspect of the town centre and getting some momentum going. Miss Miller thanked Cabinet for the invitation to the meeting and hoped that further invites would be made in the future. Miss Miller stated that the regeneration of the town centre was a very emotive subject and that it was agreed by many retailers that parking was indeed critical to the vibrancy of the town. Miss Miller did however state that other initiatives could not be overshadowed by the parking questions and that there were many other areas that needed to be addressed.

The Leader agreed that other initiatives needed to be examined but that at present it was thought that parking was an area that could be addressed immediately and hopefully help to provide data that could be fed into other initiatives. The Borough

Council hoped to set the tone of its future work with the partnership by showing that it was willing to trial new initiatives that could benefit the Borough as a whole and was not afraid to invest money where a case for investment could be proven.

Mr Mitchell stated that Newcastle under Lyme needed to be a destination town and that car parking was just one element that was needed to make this happen.

Mr Mitchell extended an invitation to Cabinet Members to attend a future meeting of the Town Centre Partnership. The Leader thanked Mr Mitchell and the Town Centre Partnership for the work they were carrying out.

Resolved:

- a) That Members approve the proposals set out in the report and authorise officers to take the necessary steps to implement:
 - I. initiatives 2, 3 and 4 on a six-month trial basis commencing 1 October 2013, including liaison with the Town Centre Partnership, and;
 - II. initiative 1 in consultation with the County Council, as soon as practically possible.
- b) That Members note the decision taken to accept the proposals from Bemrose Booth Mobile to implement on a 12-month trial basis the three initiatives described in the report and to accept the related Grant offer.
- c) That the financial implications of the trial upon the Council's revenue and capital budgets be met from the Bemrose Booth Mobile grant offer, as set out in the report.
- d) That the balance of the Bemrose Booth Mobile grant offer be retained to support any ongoing urgent repair/maintenance works of the former St. Giles and St. Georges School Building.
- e) That in respect of initiative 2 the trial be established with the understanding that the Town Centre Partnership would work with local businesses to develop the refund element of the double ticketing scheme.
- f) That Members urge the Town Centre Partnership to establish a retail index scheme to monitor trade in order to evaluate any improvements in, and/or displacement of, trade.
- g) That officers report back to Cabinet with an evaluation of the trial as soon as practically possible after the end of the 6-month trial period.
- h) That officers seek to agree with Cabinet Members the most appropriate approach to consulting stakeholders on the matters referred to in this report.

8. NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME CO-OPERATIVE STRATEGY 2013/2015 - UPDATE

A report was submitted to provide the Cabinet with an update on the development of the Co-operative Strategy 2013-2015. The Strategy was previously approved in draft by Cabinet in February 2013.

The Strategy provided the framework for the Borough Council to develop, in conjunction with others, a Co-operative Council in Newcastle-under-Lyme. The development of a co-operative council was one of the key priorities as set out in the current Council Plan.

The Strategy brought together existing areas of work and provided a common basis for future work programmes as well as providing a framework for future development of the co-operative concept.

The report set out details of a number of areas of work being progressed which were linked to the Co-operative Council concept, and also included an action plan setting out a number of actions related to the development of a Co-operative Council as identified by the LGA Peer Challenge in October 2012 and also via a number of other initiatives since the original draft Strategy was approved in February 2013.

The Portfolio Holder for Transformation, Policy and Partnerships highlighted the Boroughs successes in Britain in Bloom and stated that this was a good example of residents feeling valued through participation and that new ways had to be found to enhance existing partnerships. It was vital that the Council listen to the residents and work closely with the Town Centre Partnership whilst also acting as a civic leader.

The Leader agreed and stated that it was vital for the Council to relinquish control in some areas to enable the people it represents to make decisions about their own communities. A big step forward in relation to this had recently been taken in Kidsgrove where plans to form a Partnership there were starting to take shape and it was agreed that Officers would look into helping this process move forward as a matter of urgency.

Resolved: (a) That Cabinet notes the contents of the report including the action plan to be found at Appendix B.

(b) That Cabinet makes any further amendments or suggestions to the content of the Strategy, noting that this update was considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee at its meeting on 24th June 2013

(c) That the Cabinet requests further circulation of the Strategy to partners and communities as part of an engagement process on the meaning of the 'co-operative' concept for Newcastle and also requests further updates on the Strategy's development at future meetings of the Cabinet.

9. TRANSFORMING WELFARE BENEFITS AND FAIRER CHARGING SERVICES IN STAFFORDSHIRE

Cabinet received a report to approve in principle, the transfer of work currently undertaken by Staffordshire County Council around Welfare Benefits and Fairer Charging Services, to Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, as part of a package of work involving all district and borough councils in Staffordshire. Additionally, to confirm delegated powers to the Executive Director (Resources and Support Services) in consultation with the portfolio holders for Finance and Resources and Stronger and Healthier Neighbourhoods to finally approve the transfer, subject to the satisfactory conclusion of detailed contract negotiations.

The assessment by district and borough councils of Council Tax Reduction and Housing Benefit and the work undertaken separately by Staffordshire County Council

to deliver Welfare Benefits and Fairer Charging Services currently involves a certain amount of duplication, with a proportion of common clients. To access all the help available to them, these clients are required to undergo two broadly similar processes and are needed to evidence their claims to two separate organisations. Transferring the Welfare Benefits and Fairer Charging Services to district and borough councils will lead to a more efficient single point of service delivery. This will improve the client experience, delivering entitlements in a timelier manner and from a locally accessible centre. There will also be cost savings with the revised delivery model which will be shared between the County and district and borough councils.

The Leader stated that there would need to be a clear communication strategy regarding this highlighting why the Borough Council was proceeding in this way and especially why it was now requesting additional financial information from residents. The Leader agreed that he would liaise with the Councils Head of Communications regarding this.

Members noted the importance of stability regarding the service that residents would receive.

Attention was drawn to section 3.6 of the report where it was noted that that the pilot authorities were now out performing the remaining experienced in house County Council team on timescales for processing cases. It was confidently predicted that should the work be transferred permanently to the districts and boroughs that there are still further efficiencies to be made. Concerns were however raised that should one or more local authorities pull out of the scheme that it would all collapse and return to the County Council. It was therefore agreed that The Leader would write to the County Council putting the case that the scheme continue even if one or more local authorities were to pull out, he would also write to other local authorities highlighting the benefits of the scheme (including performance data gathered so far).

Resolved: (a) That in principle, the transfer of work currently undertaken by Staffordshire County Council around Welfare Benefits and Fairer Charging Services for the Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council area is transferred to this authority.

(b) That subject to the satisfactory conclusion of detailed contract negotiations, the Executive Director (Resources and Support Services) in consultation with the portfolio holders for Finance and Resources and Stronger and Healthier Neighbourhoods be delegated to finally approve the transfer of the service.

(c) That the Leader write to the County Council putting the case that the scheme be continued even if other local authorities choose not to participate.

(d) That the Leader write to other Local Authorities highlighting the benefits of the scheme.

10. **REVENUE INVESTMENT AND BUDGET SUPPORT CABINET PANEL**

A report was submitted to inform the Cabinet of the intention to put in place arrangements for the portfolio holder for Finance and Resources to discharge the function of making decisions on expenditure from the Revenue Investment Fund, and from the Budget Support Fund in respect of funding "Invest to Save" schemes, in

response to recommendations of the cross-party Revenue Investment and Budget Support Cabinet Panel.

It was highlighted that this was a cross party panel and process and members were encouraged to attend the meetings. The Chief Executive would liaise with Democratic Services regarding how the panel would operate and the mechanisms for this.

Resolved: (a) That the intention to put in place arrangements for the portfolio holder for Finance and Resources to make decisions on expenditure from the Revenue Investment Fund, and from the Budget Support Fund in respect of funding "Invest to Save" schemes, in response to recommendations of the cross-party Revenue Investment and Budget Support Cabinet Panel, be noted; and

(b) That it be noted that Part 3 of the council's constitution (Scheme of Delegation) will be amended to show the inclusion of this responsibility in the list of responsibilities for the exercise of Cabinet functions.

11. STAFFORDSHIRE LOCAL AUTHORITIES COMMISSIONING AND PROCUREMENT OF A HOME IMPROVEMENT SERVICE

A report was submitted to seek Cabinet approval to the participation of the Council in the procurement of a county wide Home Improvement Agency through a Partnership Agreement, to deliver Supporting People Services and Enhanced Support, including assistance to residents to enable them to repair, adapt or improve their homes.

The Council had utilised the local Home Improvement Agency, Revival for many years to support vulnerable residents to repair their homes and specifically with adaptations through the Disabled Facilities Grants programme. It was appropriate that the Council sought to secure the services through competitive tender to ensure good quality services were offered efficiently. The report outlined the options for procuring the services and the views of the Economic Development and Enterprise Scrutiny Committee to procure with the potential benefits of the working in partnership with the County Council.

The Scrutiny Committee were in agreement with the recommendations as it would be beneficial to have both the advice and service elements of the scheme in one place. Concerns had however been raised regarding whether if another local authority was providing more business for the scheme, it may be given precedence regarding how quickly work was carried out and that safeguards would have to be put in place to avoid this occurring. It was also suggested that not for profit agencies be looked at where possible as this was the situation with the current provider who was considered to be doing a very good job.

Officers stated that there was a Governance Board with a District Representative on to help safeguard against the concerns raised by the Committee. Officers would look into whether a greater weighting in the tendering process could be given to a not for profit organisation. It was also agreed that regular monitoring report would be provided to Cabinet regarding the process. Members agreed that it was vital to get the right provider and the right people in place and that finances should not take precedent over this.

It was thought that a decision by the County Council regarding this issue was imminent and the Leader agreed that he would write to the County Leader highlighting the points raised.

It was also agreed that care had to be taken to maintain continuity at present with the current providers who were now providing an excellent service as and indications that their contract may be ending could lead to decreased take up of the scheme.

Resolved:

(a) That a Participation Agreement be signed with the County Council to enable them to procure the services of a Home Improvement Agency for Newcastle.

(b) That the Executive Director for Regeneration and Development be authorised in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder to agree any minor alterations to the specification and to approve the preferred tender.

(c) That the existing contract with Revival Home Improvement Agency be extended beyond March 2014 until the new service provision commences.

(d) That the Leader of this Council write to the Leader of Staffordshire County Council highlighting the points raised at this meeting.

12. NEWCASTLE TOWN CENTRE PUBLIC REALM PROJECT

A report was submitted to seek Member approval to formalise the allocation of the existing Capital Programme for Town Centre Works to the Newcastle Town Centre Public Realm project.

The report outlined the current position with regard to the Town Centre Public Realm Project and outlined the requirements in order that the project could commission appropriate works to be completed to a standard that was fit for purpose and minimised the requirement for future maintenance works in the project area. It was important that officers were given sufficient direction to enable the relevant aspects to be commissioned within a timely manner and this required the Cabinet to allocate sufficient financial resources. The report outlined the revised timescales and explained the reasons for the budgetary requirement. Additionally, the current approved plans included extending the market trading area into Hassell Street and this required the Council to amend the designated formal trading area.

Officers were working closely with the County Council's Highways team to ensure that improvements were delivered in the most cost effective manner and that where possible proposed designs were value engineered to reduce cost. The scheme was being delivered as a minimum cost scheme, where possible street furniture such as bollards and benches were being re-used

Mr Mitchell highlighted the absolute importance of providing a very good outdoor market in Newcastle to take it into the realm of other towns such as Nantwich and Shrewsbury. The market would need to attract visitors from at least a 20 mile radius.

Concerns were raised regarding the timetable for the project as this had slipped in the past. Officers stated that they were now confident that the timescale was realistic but that there were always risks such as a tender price coming in higher than the

available budget or holes being dug and cables being found there that were not recorded as being there. Officers did confirm that there was a buffer already built in the timetable to mitigate against any more holdups as far as this was possible.

The Chief Executive agreed that a comprehensive report be made available for the Cabinet meeting in October detailing how the project had been run to date and the problems that had led to it being behind schedule. This document would be used as a learning tool for future projects.

Resolved:

- a) That the existing Capital Programme allocation (as detailed in the appendix) for Town Centre Works be allocated to the public realm project.
- b) That the Executive Director for Regeneration and Development be authorised in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Regeneration and Town Centres to procure the required contracts to deliver the project within the agreed budget.

13. HARSHIP RELIEF FOR BUSINESS RATES

A report was submitted requested Cabinet to consider applications for hardship relief in relation to business rates liabilities.

Section 49 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 gave the local authority power to reduce or remit business rates on the grounds of hardship. Each application needs to be assessed with regard to its own individual merits.

Resolved

That the applications for hardship relief detailed at appendix (b) be refused.

14. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

COUNCILLOR GARETH SNELL
Chair