

ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT & PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 11th March, 2021
Time of Commencement: 7.00 pm

Present:	Councillor Gary White (Chair)		
Councillors:	Mark Olszewski Barry Panter Marion Reddish John Tagg	Amelia Rout Dave Jones Andrew Fear Jennifer Cooper	David Grocott Andrew Parker
Officers:	Simon McEneny Daniel Dickinson Georgina Evans David Adams Geoff Durham Shawn Fleet Jordan Ibinson	Executive Director - Commercial Development & Economic Growth Head of Legal & Governance /Monitoring Officer Head of People and Organisational Development Executive Director Operational Services Mayor's Secretary / Member Support Officer Head of Planning and Development Apprentice - Infrastructure Technician	
Also in attendance:	Councillor Trevor Johnson Councillor Paul Northcott	Portfolio Holder – Environment and Recycling Portfolio Holder – Planning and Growth	

Note: In line with Government directions for the CV-19 pandemic, this meeting was conducted using a hybrid method through video conferencing and attendance in person, whilst observing social distancing - in accordance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Gill Heesom.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest stated.

3. MINUTES OF A PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 17 December, 2020 be agreed as a correct record.

4. UPDATE FROM CABINET

There was nothing to report.

5. SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT STRATEGY

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Recycling, Councillor Trevor Johnson introduced the report. During the past two years the country had been concentrating on the sustainability agenda and the threats caused by rising carbon emissions such as loss of habitat and plastic pollution.

In April, 2019, the Council passed a Climate Emergency Motion with the aim of becoming carbon neutral, in respect of the Council's own estates and activities and relating to the Borough's resident and businesses, as soon as possible. In December, 2020 Councillor Trevor Johnson recommended a Sustainable Environment Strategy and Action Plan to the Cabinet for the Council and the Borough which was approved. A copy of the Strategy was appended to the report.

The Council's Executive Director for Operational Services, Dave Adams advised that, underpinning the changes that the Strategy sought to make, there was a commitment that Newcastle-under-Lyme was dedicated to ensuring a sustainable future leading to improvements within the communities and would continue to strive to reduce its own impact on the environment. Reference was made to paragraph 2.3 of the Cabinet report which identified four priority outcomes.

The Strategy would set out a future direction of travel for the Council. The Council would not be starting from a zero base. The section of the Strategy, titled 'Our Current Commitment' gave a wide range of actions, activities and initiatives which would all make a positive contribution towards achieving the aims in these areas. The areas would be: recycling and waste and resource management; Travel and Transport; the built environment; energy and renewables; the natural environment and awareness engagement and behavioural change. The Strategy contained an action plan which covered the next five years. The main focus would be actions which related to the Council's own activities and estate and would include actions which would affect the wider Borough.

Reference was made to paragraph 8 of the Cabinet report, outlining financial and resource implications.

The Council would need to work with its partners in order to deliver some of the aims and to support them in delivering their priorities for change.

Councillor Panter stated that this was one of the most detailed and informative strategies that he had seen. Reference was made to paragraph 2.11 of the Cabinet report which referred to the 2030 target date. Councillor Panter did not think that the date was practical and felt that 2050 was the more practical target.

Dave Adams clarified that, at a previous meeting of this Committee, the matter was discussed and it was resolved to support the date of 2030 being the latest point at which the Council should achieve zero carbon emissions for its own activities, being distinct from supporting the date of 2050 as being the more realistic date for achieving carbon neutrality for the Borough as a whole.

Councillor Jenny Cooper welcomed the Strategy stating that it was important. As part of the education and engagement for the Strategy, could the Council further educate members of the public around the number of times that plastic could be recycled and the number of other single use plastics and alternatives that people could purchase.

Dave Adams noted the comment stating that it was a good proposal.

Councillor Olszewski asked how confident Dave Adams felt that 2030 would be achievable and if there were any doubts, which parts of the Strategy would not be achievable.

Dave Adams stated that this was difficult to answer. 2030 was now less than ten years away and it would be challenging. The Action Plan set out a wide range of actions to work towards that target. Achievability would also depend upon how technology advances for vehicles for example plus the affordability of such new technology. Education and awareness would be key to this to effect behavioural change.

Councillor Olszewski referred to the glass milk and pop bottles that were used in the past which were reused many times over. Those times needed to be looked back upon for a way forward.

The Chair stated that this was, quite rightly an ambitious plan as the Council needed to be leading the way. The plan needed to be reviewed regularly and brought back to this committee twice a year.

Resolved: That the Sustainable Environment Strategy be endorsed and that the comments be noted.

6. TOWN INVESTMENT PLANS FOR KIDSGROVE AND NEWCASTLE

The Council's Executive Director for Commercial Development and Economic Growth, Simon McEneny gave a presentation on the Town Deals.

Kidsgrove Town Deal was the first to be submitted to the MHCLG just before Christmas and on 3 March, 2021 it was announced that the Council had been allocated £16.9m. The Town Deal Board would be asked at an upcoming meeting if they wished to accept the £16.9m and, if so, this would be confirmed back to Government within two months stating how the funds would be reallocated. Once done, business cases would need to be drawn up and confirmed by the Council's S151 Officer. The Government would then release the funding on a project by project basis over twelve months.

Newcastle Town Deal was submitted later – in January and an announcement would be awaited in late spring/early summer, 2021.

A request had been put in to the Government for some additional resource to work up the business cases as the Council did not have that capacity in house. The Government were offering additional twelve months support from external consultants and were asking local authorities to bid for additional funding.

The Chair stated that this was great news with almost £28m granted across the two bids and there was an application in for a further £25m.

The presentation provided information on Advanced Town Deal Funding which showed how £1.75m had been allocated in addition to the Town Deal Funds. This had been allocated in advance of the Town Deals being given. The money had been awarded last August and the Council had been given until the end of March, 2021 to spend £1m in Newcastle and £750,000 in Kidsgrove.

For Kidsgrove, works such as the 3G pitch, works at the Sports Centre and work in Clough Hall Park were undertaken and for Newcastle and Knutton, purchasing the PCT building, a new employment skills hub in Lancaster Buildings, a contribution was made to the demolition of the former Zanzibar building. The last contract for all of these would begin on site on 15 March so the vast majority of money would be spent by the end of March and the Government had allowed the Council to switch budgets in order to show spend on other projects.

Councillor Panter asked about the e-scooter trial and whether there was any evidence as yet on the possible success of the scheme.

Simon McEneny stated the company doing the trial were happy with the take-up which was in line with their aspirations before the trial. More scooters were being deployed across the north of the town centre and the company were considering the possibility of renting the scooters out.

The Chair asked if there were any obstacles in terms of delivery of the projects by the Council.

Simon McEneny confirmed that there were no obstacles. Governance had been set up so the right people were around the table, making the decisions. In addition, plans were already being worked through as if the funding had already been received. Job descriptions had also been written up for project management support.

Resolved: That the information be received.

7. FUTURE HIGH STREETS FUND

The Council's Executive Director for Commercial Development and Economic Growth, Simon McEneny gave a presentation on the Future High Streets funding. An announcement had been made in December, 2020 that the Council had been awarded £11m. Just over £17m had been applied for and confirmation had been received about the award. By the end of January, 2021 the Council had to submit back to the Government how the money would be reallocated and which schemes would be reduced or removed. It had been decided that the Midway car park demolition and public realm improvements could be removed to fit the £11m funding awarded. It was hoped that confirmation of the reallocation would be received next week.

Detailed business cases had been worked on over the last fourteen months looking at the capital and running costs to make them Green Book Compliant. Once the Government were happy with the split they would confirm and issue an award letter.

In order to get things underway, the Council was working up contracts for the demolition of the former Civic Offices which would take place by the end of 2021/early 2022 at which time the plans for the Ryecroft could get underway.

The Chair asked if the reduction to £11m from £17m was proportional across England or were there specific reasons behind the decision.

Simon McEneny advised that the bid was oversubscribed and therefore the Government applied a 69% allocation to all bids across England.

The Chair asked how the decision was reached to remove the Midway and Public Realm improvements.

Simon McEneny advised that the original bid of £17m the priorities were examined. Unlocking Ryecroft for redevelopment would be determined by the demolition of the former Civic Offices which had a certain cost. The car park also had costs which were required to complete the project in full. Public Realm improvements could be dealt with through different funding streams, for example CIL or Section 106 Agreements. The Midway car park demolition could come as a commercial investment or as a project in association with another partner.

The Chair asked if there was a time plan upon awarding of the Fund.

Simon McEneny confirmed that the Civic Offices demolition award would start within 2-3 months. Planning permission had already been obtained and contractors were being lined up. Asbestos surveys had already been undertaken. Partners, such as Aspire would be liaised with as to how they wished to lay out their HQ building. Construction works should commence in 2022.

Resolved: That the information be received and the comments noted.

8. BOROUGH LOCAL PLAN

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Growth, Councillor Paul Northcott introduced a report on the Borough Local Plan. The report had been brought to update Members on the decision to leave the Joint Local Plan with Stoke-on-Trent City Council and to produce the Council's own Borough Local Plan.

Two reports had gone through Cabinet on 9 December, 2020 and 13 January, 2021 to scope out reasons and rationale behind going it alone. During the procedure it was evident that there were significant differences in the two Authorities, for example, the Neighbourhood Development Plans that the Borough had going were quite significant in terms of underpinning the planning process. This was not reflected in the Joint Local Plan at the time.

Whilst working on the Joint Local Plan since 2016 there had been numerous stalling blocks and work had been progressing slowly and information was therefore becoming out of date.

The Council's Head of Planning and Development, Shawn Fleet stated that the key word was agility. Working with Stoke on Trent did have its merits. Common interests were shared around housing and employment markets but there were different interests too such as HS2 and the need to integrate neighbourhood plans was important.

Over the Christmas period some survey work had been undertaken consulting with the public and contacting key consultees and neighbouring councils and also gaining independent advice. Two hundred and sixty five responses came back and 85% were keen to see the delivery of a Borough Plan.

Timetables had been looked at to see if it could be achieved and the key target was the Government's deadline of December, 2023 to get an adopted plan in place.

Working with Lichfield, the National Consultancy and others the Council had looked at what needed to be done. There was an element of taking a step back from the position reached with the Joint Local Plan but it was believed that replanning and following the path of a Borough Plan, the Council could have confidence that the Government deadline would be met.

Key stages would be around issues and options. This was part of the plan that was done for the joint plan but the issues needed to be checked to see if they were still pertinent for the Borough and where the public saw opportunities to deliver development as it moved forward and the growth scenarios that were being considered. Also, settlements in terms of rural and urban areas. This would be looked at in the Autumn with the intention that a draft Plan would be published in September, 2022 identifying sites and looking at detailed policies for people to work around. Over the next year, comments made on the plan would be picked up, examined and the adoption target hit.

Confidence to reach that goal was why the Council had stepped away from the work done on the joint plan and the agenda to reset to a Borough plan in its place. Not only would it pick up on HS2 and neighbourhood plans but being a Borough plan it would also allow the picking up of emerging agendas such as carbon neutrality for the Borough and work on the Future High Streets.

There was a resource element in that the Council was losing some of the skill sets that Stoke had but the Cabinet had committed to bringing in additional staff.

One of the concerns had been losing all of the evidence from the previous joint plan. Fortunately a lot of the work had been structured in terms of being appropriate for both Authorities and some studies had distinct Newcastle chapters making it relatively easy to pick some of the information out. There was a substantial amount of information that could be carried across to the Borough Plan. A lot of evidence would have to be reviewed as a result of Covid to ensure that impacts and opportunities were looked at.

Councillor Panter found it encouraging that Lichfield and a large majority of people favoured a Borough plan.

The Chair stated that he had previously had concerns about moving to a Borough Plan in terms of the time spent on a joint plan and how much of that work had been wasted both from a content and financial point of view and how much needed to be repeated, reinvigorated and reissued to update it.

Shawn Fleet stated that the evidence base was the asset of the whole process which underpinned a lot of the future decision making. This being up to date was paramount. As the plan progressed over the past 7 years some initial evidence was being left behind and the Council went through a process, last year, of updating the evidence with a revised end date of 2037. By taking control, the Council would need to ensure that some of the documents were separated but it could be ensured that evidence accrued could be used effectively.

The Chair asked what the financial implications had been.

Shawn Fleet stated that there had been some implications. Employment and housing studies, particularly, were the core backbone of some of the evidence base. However, with Covid, the information would have needed updating. What had been identified from the joint plan would be sufficient to take the Council through issues and strategic options that would be done in the Autumn. In mid 2022 that would be updated and partially reviewed to ensure that it could be reflected back upon for the post covid economy, particularly for home working. How would this affect the High Street and places of work.

The key test would come at the examination stage in 2023 when the Inspector asks for proof that the Plan is 'sound' and whether it reflected the market, the environment and be reflective of the Borough's future direction.

Councillor Northcott stated that the change was made before the major spend on the final stage of the Joint Local Plan. A lot of officer time would be dedicated to the development of the Plan.

It was not given that the Inspector would accept the Joint Local Plan, bearing in mind the changes that were going to happen. In that instance another Plan would have had to have been produced because evidence was not robust and that would have incurred more cost.

A Borough Local Plan would be tailor made to Newcastle and would more closely reflect its needs. In addition, it would be more robust in terms of challenge going forward.

The Chair asked if there were any implications in moving to this on the Neighbourhood Development Plans that were coming to fruition. Councillor Northcott stated that those would be a snapshot of what was required at a local level. Some adjustments may be needed in the Plans where they had appropriated growth in their area.

The Chair asked about the struggle to bring Planning Officers into the Authority and what Shawn Fleet's view was on attracting them. Shawn Fleet advised that adverts had been sent out a few months ago for a junior post and this had now been appointed to and the successful candidate had started working. Further posts had been worked on and Shawn Fleet was confident that good candidates would come forward for those positions.

Councillor Northcott added that Newcastle was a good Planning Authority and commended Shawn Fleet and Jemma March's teams for their work and commitment.

Resolved: That the information be received and the comments noted

9. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair asked Members to email any ideas for Scrutiny to him which would then be incorporated into the Work Programme.

10. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

11. URGENT BUSINESS

The following item was considered urgent due to its content in relation to the Extraordinary Council meeting being held on 18 March, 2021.

Walley's Quarry Landfill

The Chair advised Members of the special meeting being held on the 18th March and the work of the Scrutiny Review Working Party - Walley's Quarry which would need to be considered by Council.

The usual process would be for the Working Party to report back to this Committee first prior to it being considered by Council. Given the time constraints this would not be possible and therefore, Members were asked for their authority to proceed on that basis.

Members were in agreement.

CLLR GARY WHITE
Chair

Meeting concluded at 8.05 pm