

ECONOMY & PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 7th December, 2023
Time of Commencement: 7.00 pm

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Present:	Councillor Gary White (Chair)		
Councillors:	Bettley-Smith Burnett-Faulkner Edginton-Plunkett	Gorton Grocott Moss	J Waring
Apologies:	Councillor(s) Johnson, D Jones and Panter		
Substitutes:	Councillor Nicholas Crisp Councillor Mark Holland		
Officers:	Nesta Barker Allan Clarke Craig Jordan Simon McEneny	Service Director - Regulatory Services Planning Policy Manager Service Director - Planning Deputy Chief Executive	
Also in attendance:	Councillor Stephen Sweeney	Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder - Finance, Town Centres and Growth	

1. **APOLOGIES**

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest stated.

3. **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 21st September 2023 be agreed as accurate record subject to the following amendment: Cllr Gorton had replaced former Cllr Moffat in the subgroup of the Committee, not the Labour subgroup.

4. **UPDATE FROM CABINET ON ITEMS RAISED BY THE COMMITTEE**

There were no update from Cabinet.

5. **TOWN DEAL AND FUTURE HIGH STREETS FUNDS UPDATE**

The Deputy Leader and the Deputy Chief Executive introduced the latest update on the Town Deal and Future High Street Funds projects.

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The Chair went through each section at a time to make it easier for members to ask questions and responses to be provided.

On Market Improvements:

- Cllr Edgington-Plunkett asked whether there had been an increase in demands from the public to hire stores on the market. – The process hadn't started yet however councillors would be kept informed.
- Cllr Gorton wished to know where the 20 minutes figure for nipper parking time was coming from. – This was a rough estimate of the time needed to park, get something from a shop and come back.

On York Place:

- Cllr Edgington-Plunkett asked what sort of entertainment venue was planned. – This would be a small scale venue fitting around 100 people for groups to come and perform for a wider audience than what is currently possible with a regular pub.

On Ryecroft Car Park:

- Cllr Grocott commented on the fact the funds required seemed to be going up and up and if the figures were now sealed off. – Cabinet had given approval for a budget of up to 12 million pounds and a contract was about to be signed at just under that figure.

On the New Hotel:

- Cllr Edgington-Plunkett enquired about the works scheduled with Capital and Centric along with any timescales – The contractor was due to submit their plans to the Council in January. Subject to those being acceptable and affordable these would be taken forward and Capital and Centric would be made available to respond to questions from members.

The Chair requested that the item be added to the work programme for the next meeting in March provided that the contract is indeed signed.

On Aspire Housing:

- Cllr Gorton asked if there had been any further discussion on Aspire's new headquarters. – Discussions were currently ongoing with the housing provider and other two partners to find suitable locations.

On Astley Performing Arts Centre:

- The Deputy Leader shared his enthusiasm about the building which was nearly ready to be fitted out.

On Knutton and Chesterton:

- Cllr Moss asked if the project would be in jeopardy would a committee to run the village hall not be formed. – Indeed and similarly to Kidsgrove Sport Centre if no responsible party was found to manage the village hall this

wouldn't be built so that it doesn't become both a liability and a risk for the Council.

- Cllr Moss also wished to know about timescales. – Those were linked to the money spent and it was estimated that the Council would have until 2026 for the project to be completed.
- Cllr Grocott asked if there had been any application so far and if support from Staffordshire County Council would be used. – The process of looking had not started but would be taken forward.
- Cllr Moss wondered why the building of changing rooms for the Wammy football was again subject to a tender. – While a contractor had been selected and both Cabinet and Planning permissions had been received the company had subsequently withdrawn their price as the tender was being processed. As a new offer was submitted above the original value this needed to be subject to a new tender to give other companies the chance to submit alternative proposals.
- Cllr Grocott asked about the Project Adjustment Request (PAR) being discussed with Aspire Housing. – This was to be submitted by the Council as part of the Town Deal DLUHC document.

A copy would be shared with Cllr Grocott.

On Walking and Cycling Provisions:

- Cllr Edgington-Plunkett asked what involvement there had been in the borough to share the Council's plans and get views from the public. – This was predominantly a Staffordshire County Council led project and the Borough Council was taking part as a consultee only. The County Council had funded most of the work themselves through their own budgets, and had their own stakeholder engagement activities, rules and procedures, which the town deal had contributed to.

On Digital Society:

- Cllr Edgington-Plunkett and the Deputy Leader expressed their support for the project.

On EV Charging Points:

- Cllr Edgington-Plunkett asked who would supply the EV charging points if not Morgan Sindall. – The company was still building the car park and a tender process was in place to find a new supplier for the charging points.

On Digital Infrastructure:

- The Chair asked what this would be delivering. – The project was to deliver super fast or "giga fast" broadband to the town centre's businesses and residents as well as within a certain radius around the town centre that was not being covered by Virgin or BT Openreach broadband rollout. It would attract types of businesses that need very fast Internet connexion such as creative industries. The view was to going out to the market early next year to get a contractor to deliver it and use the existing infrastructure underground.

On Shared Service Hubs:

- Cllr Grocott asked what the situation with regard to the CIC was. – The Town Council was looking for a CIC and would take responsibility for the management if none were to be found.

The Chair thanked the Deputy Chief Executive for the clarity and format of the report allowing to easily review each section at a time. Keeping this standard going forward would be welcome.

Resolved: That the report on the delivery of the Town Deal and Future High Street Funds projects be noted.

[Watch the debate here](#)

6. **PLANNING ENFORCEMENT & PERFORMANCE**

The Deputy Leader introduced the report on planning enforcement and performance. The Service Director for Planning presented the report.

Members asked questions and responses were provided as follows:

- Cllr Gorton asked if there was any evidence that people were using online forms to report matters and expressed his surprise that officers were not equipped with mobile tablets. – Online forms had only just been introduced and there was no data available to share yet. About the tablets an order would be placed shortly so that these can be provided to officers.

The Chair requested that an update from Cabinet be provided on the latter at the next meeting.

- The Chair asked if The Service Director for Planning thought that one enforcement officer was enough. – The Council would benefit from having additional resources to fully implement the enforcement policy and meet the demands of members and residents.
- The Chair asked how the service director would rate the Council's performance versus that of other such councils. – Given the resources available the Council performed relatively well compared to other instances although there was scope for improvement.
- Cllr Holland wished the Deputy Leader to comment on the resources freed up by the One Council programme which would be delivering better outcomes for residents who could now report issues online. – Indeed the Council has spent £1.2 million on the One Council programme which was now saving in return £1 million a year.

The Chair asked if there was any other views on the resources being stretched and at same time, the workload being reduced in the context of the digitalization of the administration.

Members and officers commented as follows:

- Cllr Grocott wished to know if the member of staff present on the ground was full time. – Indeed he was and supported by a team looking after a wide range of enforcement activity.
- The Deputy Chief Executive commented that it would benefit all services to have more resources available for each department and in the meantime it was hoped that the digitalization of processes would help release time, efforts and money – officers’ tablets being one example.
- Cllr Bettley-Smith said that circumstances changed and wish to see a review of the situation in an appropriate timescale. The Deputy Leader added that the mobile tablets would be another area of improvement.
- Cllr Waring expressed her appreciation of her working relationship with the Planning Enforcement Officer.

The Chair requested that the item be back on the work programme around December 2024.

Resolved: That the content of the report be noted.

[Watch the debate here](#)

7. BOROUGH LOCAL PLAN UPDATE

The Deputy Leader introduced the update on the Borough Local Plan which was then presented by the Planning Policy Manager.

Members asked questions and responses were provided as follows:

- Cllr Gorton asked if any of the brownfield sites had come to light that the Council hadn’t anticipated. – A mix of greenfield and brownfield sites had been suggested over the consultation. The merits of those sites would be assessed for allocation.
- Cllr Grocott asked about timescales. – The 16th January Cabinet report will provide these along with the different stages scheduled for the year ahead. The timetable would be published on the website.

Cllr Gorton expressed his confidence in the process and the work of officers.

Resolved: That the update on the progress of developing a Borough Local Plan be noted.

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8. SOCIAL HOUSING WITHIN THE BOROUGH

Cllr Bettley-Smith reported on the work of the Housing Task and Finish Working Group and introduced the report of Social Housing within the borough. The situation was much better than initially thought and thorough processes were in place with Housing providers to address issues reported by tenants.

Members commented as follows:

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- Cllr Edgington-Plunkett wished to pass on his thanks to the Cllr Bettley-Smith and the Working Group for the work achieved.
- Cllr Gorton congratulated the group on producing a thorough report and having done all the work by the time he joined, and suggested that the recommendation to organise a Teams meeting with Aspire be taken forward, perhaps before the March meeting. Cllr Bettley-Smith commented that ideally this would be made available for all members of the Council. – The Chair responded that he would take views on the matter and discuss this with Cabinet members and officers.
- Cllr Grocott welcomed Aspire Housing willingness to admit mistakes and learn as well as the quality of the report.

The Chair clarified that a Teams session would be organised with Aspire and all members of the Council would be invited to join rather than having a presentation at full Council.

Resolved: 1. That the report that had been prepared in Appendix A, which set out the activities of the Housing Task and Finish Group to date, be noted.

2. That the three following recommendations made by the Group and to provide guidance, as to when and by which date the recommendations should be enacted, be noted:

2.1. As significant enhancement works were being proposed by the RP's, in terms of energy efficiency and mitigating risks such as damp and mould, it made sense to assess the condition of the housing stock once these improvements had been made.

2.2. Aspire Housing had agreed, at the request of the Working Group, that they would be willing to give a presentation, via TEAMS (available for all Councillors), to enable Councillors to hear what progress was being made to improve their housing stock and their response times, along with information on the reporting mechanisms and the complaints escalation process.

2.3. The Committee was advised to resolve to take stock of how the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 and the new, proactive consumer regulation regime was being embedded within the working of Registered Providers in the near future (within 12 months).

3. That Recommendation 2.1 be agreed.

It was requested that Recommendation 2.2 be taken forward with officers and that Recommendation 3 be put to a vote around the time suggested.

[Watch the debate here](#)

9. WORK PROGRAMME

Cllr Gorton asked if the review of the 850 Years Celebrations could be considered as an agenda item for future meetings. – This would be passed on to officers

Cllr Grocott enquired about the situation with regard to the update requested from the BID Manager. – The Chairman had met with the team and would chase. The Deputy Leader expressed his confusion as to why they kept postponing showing up.

Resolved: That the work programme be noted.

[Watch the debate here](#)

10. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no questions from members of the public.

11. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

**Councillor Gary White
Chair**

Meeting concluded at 8.15 pm