

Overview Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 18 January 2018

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr John Burden (Chair)
Cllr David Hurley (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Conrad Broadley
John Caller
Lee Croxton
Gary Harding
Sara Langdale
Shane Mochrie-Cox
Michael Wenban

Note: Cllr Anthony Pritchard, Cabinet Member for Housing. Cllr Derek Shelbrooke, Cabinet Member for Performance/Administration and Cllr Jenny Wallace were also in attendance

Stuart Bobby Director (Corporate Services)
Kevin Burbidge Director (Housing & Regeneration)
Michelle Batstone Corporate Change Manager
Chris Wakeford Committee Services Officer (Scrutiny)

33. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Leslie Hills, Cllr William Lambert and Cllr Makhan Singh; Cllr Gary Harding, Cllr Conrad Broadley and Cllr Shane Mochrie-Cox attended as their respective substitutes.

34. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2017 were signed by the Chair

35. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

36. Service Review Options - Monitoring Report

The Director (Corporate Services) and Corporate Change Manager provided Members of the Overview Scrutiny Committee with an update against the options approved by Members in respect of the Service Review Process.

The Council's Medium-term Financial Strategy 2016-17 to 2019-20, sets out a funding gap by 2019-20 of £2.5m, which has subsequently been revised to £2.9m. The strategy presents a number of workstreams that have been put in place to 'bridge the gap' in funding that the Council will face, a key workstream being the implementation of the Service Review Options.

Eight service reviews have been completed and the options identified by officers and agreed by the Cabinet amount to £1,461,870 as detailed in the report and appendix two:-

- Economic Development & Town Centre Management;
- Public Health & Communities;
- Parking & Amenities;
- Revenues & Benefits;
- Regulatory Services;
- Planning & Regeneration Services;
- Customer & Theatre Services; and
- Direct Services Operation (DSO).

The Director (Corporate Services) advised that the total service review savings reflected in the Medium Term Financial Plan to date was £1,017,840.

In addition to the delivery of the Service Review Options, work was also underway to implement actions against the other four areas identified in the Medium-term Financial Strategy and an update against these workstreams was provided in the report:-

- Property Acquisitions Strategy;
- Fees and Charges activity;
- Shared Services progression; and
- Budgetary Challenge Measures.

The Director (Corporate Services) fielded questions from the Committee and highlighted the following:

- The Property Acquisition Strategy (Phase 2); the expected value of activity is £397,000. This is based on experience from the previous property acquisitions which have delivered a net income of £400,000. The Council has already completed on a property in Sittingbourne which has taken around £75,000 off the total and further properties are being looked into.
- The Director (Corporate Services) agreed to take back Members concerns over the current tourism offer in the Market, including the quality of the offering and the temporary nature of the current setup. A briefing paper will be provided to Members that sets out the original tourism offer and how that compares with what is being delivered now. The paper will also include detail on how many tourists go to the kiosk and what they ask.

Resolved that the Committee noted the Service Review Options - Monitoring Report

37. Call in - Cabinet Item 7. Cessation of the Revenues & Benefits Shared Service

The Director (Corporate Services) explained that the Cabinet had formally approved the progression of a shared service for the delivery of Revenues & Benefits with Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council (TMBC) and delegated authority to the Director (Corporate Services), in consultation with the Lead Member for Performance and Administration, to take all necessary practical, financial and legal actions required to enable the arrangement to be put in place.

The Director (Corporate Services) advised that, since that date, officers from both Gravesham Borough Council and TMBC have been actively progressing the various workstreams in order to work towards the agreed implementation date of 1 July 2018. However, it became clear that due to a number of different reasons, as detailed in section two of the report, the best decision would be to cease the shared service.

The Director (Corporate Services) highlighted the reason for the cessation of the Revenues & Benefits Shared Service as follows:

- **Imminent Roll-out of Universal Credit** - May 2018, volatility exists, changes to the Localised Support for Council Tax scheme are necessary and required staffing levels are not yet known.
- **Future direction for Shared Services** - Recent discussions amongst North Kent Leaders have requested that further consideration should be given to opportunities for sharing more services across the North Kent cluster of authorities; those being Dartford, Gravesham, Medway, Maidstone and Swale.
- **Technical Difficulties** – there are a number of technical challenges and inter-relationships involving Revenues and Benefits which would need to be overcome in order for there to be successful partnership between the two authorities.

The Director (Corporate Services) fielded questions from the Committee and highlighted the following:

- The technical difficulties weren't discovered until both authorities got into the real 'nuts and bolts' of the proposed common platform solution for customers and officers which identified differences in the way in which customer account information was encrypted.
- The Director (Corporate Services) agreed to provide Members with the total amount of time officers spent on the Revenues & Benefits Shared Service and the cost.
- The savings from the proposed shared service were estimated at £100k for each authority.
- There is currently no proposal for the Council to engage in a shared service for Revenues and Benefits within the North Kent cluster of authorities. Any decision on future shared services would have to go through Cabinet.
- The Director (Corporate Services) confirmed that a risk assessment was carried out for the proposed Revenues & Benefits Shared Service and he agreed to circulate the risk assessment to Members of the Committee.

Resolved that the decision by Cabinet to cease the progression of the Revenues & Benefits Shared Service be noted

Note: Cllr Derek Shelbrooke, Cabinet Member for Performance/Administration spoke with the leave of the Chair on this item.

38. Call in - Cabinet Item 10. Joint Working with Ebbsfleet Development Corporation (EDC) in respect of Potential Housing Development Sites

The Director (Housing & Regeneration) highlighted the report that was presented to Cabinet which detailed ongoing discussions with Ebbsfleet Development Corporation (EDC) to bring forward housing development within the borough and sought Cabinet authority to progress this work beyond the discussion stage.

The Director (Housing and Regeneration) advised that EDC was charged with delivering a total of 15,000 homes which cannot be achieved within the area covered by the organisation. Therefore, EDC officers have been working with officers from Dartford and Gravesham Borough Councils to identify potential sites within their 'area of influence' where their assistance could bring forward further housing to assist in delivery of that target.

To enable an open discussion of potential options for joint working, officers shared with EDC details of its own landholdings, together with details of 'stalled' sites where their abilities to become involved in a way not open to local authorities might assist in moving permitted, or previously permitted, schemes forward.

As part of this exercise, as well as the potential for using EDC funds to undertake feasibility work, with repayment occurring when the site is sold or developed, officers have worked together to identify other funding for such purposes, e.g. One Public Estate (OPE).

Two sites have been identified for initial consideration, both of which have previously been identified by Members in 2014 for inclusion in the Local Plan 'call for sites' exercise. Those sites include General Fund land at Milton Place, including the corner site owned by Fairview Homes and the site of the Shears Green Community Centre (HRA), which costs the Council more to maintain than it receives in income and which will have major repair requirements in the near future.

A number of other GBC-owned sites are considered potentially suitable for a further phase of this work, but initial investigations will be undertaken by officers to identify potential 'show stoppers' before being progressed further. Initial thoughts have highlighted the following sites to consider as a second phase, which were also included within GBC's submission in the 'call for sites' or are 'stalled':-

- Rembrandt Drive, Gravesend;
- Dering Way, Gravesend; and
- Canal Basin Regeneration Area, Gravesend.

Members were informed that the Homes and Communities Agency had been rebranded to Homes England and tasked with taking a more active role in relation to compulsory purchase, by working closely with local authorities to use their compulsory purchase powers to support the development and regeneration of land for housing.

Cllr Anthony Pritchard, Cabinet Member for Housing fielded questions from the Committee and highlighted the following:

- The Cabinet are against any inappropriate development of green belt land.
- No decision has been made on the two sites yet (Milton Place and Shears Green Community Centre) they are just being considered.
- The Cabinet Member for Housing explained that he is happy to put the case to rebuild and not rebuild the Shears Green Community Centre, the options need to be looked at very carefully.

The Director (Housing & Regeneration) fielded questions from the Committee and highlighted the following:

- There is a need to better understand the site and usage of Shears Green Community Centre in order to select the best option going forward.
- Highways England and EDC are looking to work with GBC to find solutions for the Canal Basin. If EDC decide to become directly involved with the Canal Basin; GBC won't be involved, it will be between EDC and the private sector.
- The Milton Place site is part owned by Farview. EDC has an exclusivity agreement with Fairview and are proposing one with GBC, but officers have explained that the Council would only pay a fair proportion of any costs that relate to GBC land.

Members of the Committee highlighted the following concerns:

- There should be engagement with the wider community on the future of Shears Green Community Centre.
- Shears Green Community Centre should be clearly advertised on the Council's website.
- The Community Cabinet Committee should consider and review the Shears Green Community Centre.
- Any future development at the Canal Basin / Riverside should maintain the canal restoration and retain the use of the river front for boating etc.

The Chair requested that the above-mentioned concerns of the Committee are noted, the Shears Green Community Centre be considered and reviewed by the Community Cabinet Committee and the final decision on this matter go to Cabinet so it is available for call in by the Overview Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved that the decision by Cabinet on Joint Working with Ebbsfleet Development Corporation (EDC) in respect of Potential Housing Development Sites be noted

Note: Cllr Anthony Pritchard, Cabinet Member for Housing spoke with the leave of the Chair on this item.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.55 pm