

Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee

Monday, 28 September 2020

7.30pm

Present:

Cllr Brian Sangha (Chair)
Cllr Lauren Sullivan (Vice-Chair)

Cllrs: Ejaz Aslam
Harold Craske
Brian Francis
Baljit Hayre
Les Hoskins
Bob Lane
Emma Morley
Alan Ridgers

Wendy Lane	Assistant Director (Planning)
Simon Hookway	Assistant Director (Communities)
Keith Grimley	Senior Economic Development Officer
Ben Clarke	Committee & Scrutiny Assistant (Minutes)

37. Apologies

An apology of absence was received from Cllr Leslie Hills. Cllr Ejaz Aslam substituted.

38. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting Tuesday, 22 June were signed by the Chair.

39. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest.

40. Corporate Performance Report: Q1 2020-21

Members of the Strategic Environment Committee were presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter One 2020-21 (April to June 2020).

The Assistant Director (Planning) introduced the report and informed Members that the entirety of quarter one was conducted while under lockdown

The Assistant Director (Communities) presented Members with a number of slides that outlined key information regarding the Economic Development Departments performance over quarter one; those slides could be found through the link below:

<https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b13187/Supplementary%20-%20Economic%20Development%20Slides%20Monday%2028-Sep-2020%2019.30%20Strategic%20Environment%20Cabine.pdf?T=9>

Following the presentation, the Assistant Director (Communities) fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- The team were currently awaiting further information on the Kickstart Scheme to be released from the Government; the Council were unaware why it had been decided that groups of thirty young people were the focus. The scheme was viewed as an opportunity to engage with local businesses in meeting the employment needs of young people locally.
- It was understood that payments will not be made through the Council as an intermediary, they will be paid directly to the businesses and more clarity is required in respect of the role of an intermediary. There was a slight increase in town centre shop vacancies before Covid-19 which came about as a result of some of the shops in Town having to close due to the redevelopment/refurbishment of areas/properties. An example of that was a unit that was closed down and split into two as well as a number of kiosks in the St George's Centre which were closed during the refurbishment works. However, it is likely that the full impact of Covid-19 on vacancies was yet to be seen
- With regards to footfall, the town centre had already been facing an ongoing decline in the average footfall due to the rise of online shopping and the change in available retail shops within the Town. However, Gravesend was in a good position going forward due to the new developments moving forward such as the Reef development, Heritage Quarter and London Resort; Gravesend also had good transportation routes to London via the high speed line
- With regards to the increased Youth Unemployment figure, the DWP had been encouraged to put in place local partnership work, alongside the large number of training providers out there; the youth unemployment rate had increased and actions in response will be reported back to Committee. The Senior Economic Development Officer had been in contact with North Kent College and held discussions around what they could make available locally. Discussions were also held with NWK for a joint approach to Comms such as a website portal which held information on available jobs/work experience in Gravesham and through social media to ensure that as many young people as possible were aware of the opportunities available to them
- Prior to Covid-19, the team held a firm understanding of the vacant units and the position they were in; the owners or agents were contacted to find out if the unit had been placed on the market and was easily accessible to interested buyers/lettings. The last few months the team had been focused on business support grants for those affected by Covid-19 but the focus had shifted back to the team's normal responsibilities and empty units were being followed up
- The team had considered looking at change of uses for some units; one idea was to create Covid-19 secure business units where workers could hire a desk to work from if they were unable to work in their usual workplace or at home
- There would most likely be some benefits with regards to Business Rates next year and two thirds of businesses in the Town Centre had already benefited from the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme before the outbreak of Covid-19
- As part of a new package of support aimed at training and reskilling jobseekers, the DWP had doubled the amount of work coaches available to young people
- There were incentives for businesses to move into units within the Enterprise Zone; currently there were not many units in that location but the team were working on bringing further units there in the future. Any incentive could be useful, but could be targeted to attract the businesses that Gravesham wanted within the new developments in the Town

There had been reported cases where an incentive was given to a business for a certain number of years and then upon expiry of the incentive they left the Town. However, local experience suggests that has not been the case here. The Assistant Director (Planning) presented Members with a number of slides that outlined key information regarding the Planning Departments performance over quarter one; those slides could be found through the link below:

<https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b13188/Supplementary%20-%20Planning%20Performance%20Slides%20Monday%2028-Sep-2020%2019.30%20Strategic%20Environment%20Cabine.pdf?T=9>

Following the presentation, the Assistant Director (Planning) fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- There were a range of mechanisms in place for when a member of the public wanted to contact the Planning Service; previously when a person sought pre-application advice they needed to phone into the office and make the payment in person/over the phone. With help from the Corporate Change Team and IT Services, the whole process has been shifted online; Planning Officers uploaded the information and pre-application advice to an online document management system which allowed the customer to access the information from home. The Planning Team had been working towards a paperless office whilst still maintaining an effective service to meet all of the customers' needs
- The service has had a longstanding aspiration for an agent's forum. The team had been investigating what other local authorities do. Rather than make assumptions, it was decided that the agents would be contacted to see what they most wanted out of the forum which, at least initially, would be virtual. A piece of work was ongoing to pull together a list of the key agents and create a list of questions for them to answer regarding what they wanted to be able to do through the portal e.g. virtual meetings/submitting questions/time scales etc

The Chair thanked Members for their in depth questions and thanked the Assistant Director (Communities) and the Assistant Director (Planning) for maintaining a high level of performance during a turbulent quarter.

41. Update report on economic development strategy themes

The Committee were presented with a report that summarised the steps that were being taken to draw from and link into economic recovery work at a county and regional level, together with an update on progress with the Economic Growth Strategy.

The Senior Economic Development Officer guided Members through the report and highlighted key points from the following sections:

- Economic Snapshot
- Local Authority Response
- South East Local Enterprise Partnership and Thames Estuary Growth Board
- Business Grant Scheme Closure
- Economic Growth Strategy Progress
- Business Communication
- Kent and Medway Growth Hub 'Recovery Helpline'

The Chair thanked the officer for his presentation and raised a question about the recent response to the consultation for London Resort regarding the skills employability and jobs for local people theme.

The Assistant Director (Planning) advised that the Council recognised the value that would come from the development of London Resort due to the amount of jobs it would create and the sustainability that came with those jobs. There were also ongoing discussions about local labour agreements, maintaining positive relationships with existing local businesses, adding a Gravesham heritage feel to the Resort and kick-starting careers for people learning new trades/skills.

The Senior Economic Development Officer fielded several questions from Members and explained that:

- The broadband scheme to extend superfast broadband to 1200 homes and businesses was a successful bid from KCC that aimed to cover all of Kent's rural areas that suffered with poor broadband or had no connectivity at all. The economic development team had received some of the postcodes of the areas that would benefit from the broadband installation and Members were welcomed to inquire about the areas that would receive the boost
- The programmes of funding available were different to the funding that was available prior to the pandemic; HM Treasury had been active in providing business support grants over the last few months. However business recovery seems to be at the forefront of central government funding decisions now and it was considered likely that new funding is likely to be available to local schemes to bid for.. The team's approach was to make the Council's priorities known to key partners so that when schemes are released, the Council would be in the best position possible and be ready to put in successful bids.
- One of the team's roles was to understand what skills were required for people to gain employment and how to work alongside local colleges as part of local efforts to create a suitably skilled talent pool to satisfy the demands of local people and employers. Apprenticeships are an increasingly popular form of education which allow skills to develop to form a career and their increased availability locally, is likely to improve employment opportunities and the availability of a skilled workforce within Gravesham.
- A common discussion being held was getting into schools from an earlier age and discussing future skills development and employment. Schools' careers services are now partly delivered through the Enterprise Advisor Network which is comprised of volunteers from a range of career backgrounds. These individuals help schools to develop their career programmes and talk to the students about their experiences. Recently the Senior Economic Development Officer met with Cllr Sullivan to discuss the Lower Thames Crossing and how they might engage with the local schools during the course of the development but that plan was still in its very early stage of development.
- A representative of Gravesham Council did not sit on the Thames Estuary Growth Board and the Chair Kate Willard had yet to visit Gravesham however the Council still had influence on the Board and were able to put forward Spring proposals. Kate Willard follows the Council on social media and her press secretary is aware of Gravesham's priorities.
- The Council were of the view that there was talent everywhere in Gravesham, not just within the Grammar Schools

- A virtual Gravesham Business Network was being planned for later in the autumn and was envisaged to include consultation on the Council's Economic Growth Strategy. The main reason for the membership increase of one hundred members was due to the increased opportunities to engage with businesses through the sending out of the grant applications and invites to join the network. It was a great opportunity for local businesses to comment on Gravesham's economy and become more involved

With regards to a Members question about the feasibility of getting schemes into schools for young people, the Committee were informed by Cllr Sullivan that KCC had recommissioned the Connections service which previously worked with young people in Gravesham.

Concern was raised by a Member over 6.7 of the report, which covered the rural economy, as almost four fifths of Gravesham was classified as rural and yet only a very small section of the report with minor updates was dedicated to the rural economy. In future reports, the Senior Economic Development Officer was asked to provide a more detailed update.

With regards to the Rural Economy information in this report, further information was requested regarding:

- The proposals for a small number of rural employment sites
- If rural jobs were increasing in the rural area or urban jobs had moved to the rural area
- The broadband scheme
 - how many houses were waiting for the superfast broadband
 - how the scheme would be advertised to rural residents
 - What sort of connectivity would they be receiving and how fast was the broadband

The Senior Economic Development Officer agreed that section 6.7 was relatively short but advised that even though only a few points had been highlighted in the report specifically regarding the rural economy, with the exception of the Town Centre items, most of the other items related to the Borough as whole.

At the Chair's request, the Senior Economic Development Officer agreed to come back to the Committee with further information regarding the Broadband Scheme.

The Chair summed up the points made by Members and thanked the Senior Economic Development Officer for an information update.

42. Presentation on use classes order change

The Committee received a presentation from the Assistant Director (Planning) on the use classes order changes.

The presentation was published and could be found through the following link:

<https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b13189/Supplementary%20-%20Presentation%20on%20Use%20Classes%20Order%20Changes%20Monday%2028-Sep-2020%2019.30%20Strategic%20Envi.pdf?T=9>

The Chair thanked the officer for her comprehensive presentation and Members asked that it be emailed to all Members after the meeting.

The Assistant Director (Planning) advised that its format had been written so that it could be shared with members of the Planning Committee but she was happy for it to be circulated to all Members.

Following a question on if the changes made it easier for a shop to change its use, the Assistant Director (Planning) explained that the proposals were designed to make it easier for shops to change their uses as it was recognised that Town Centres needed to have more flexibility. However if a shop needed to carry out external works to the building, planning permission could be required.

The Chair observed that many retail shops had changed to residential development over the years.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director (Planning) for an information presentation.

43. Presentation on current Government planning consultations

The Assistant Director (Planning) presented the Committee with a presentation on the current Government planning consultations.

The presentation was published and could be found through the following link:

<https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b13190/Supplementary%20-%20Presentation%20on%20Current%20Government%20Planning%20Consultations%20Monday%2028-Sep-2020%2019.30.pdf?T=9>

The Chair queried the Assistant Director (Planning) on whether she thought the role of local Councillors and Councils would increase or decrease (with far greater control by central Government) in terms of deciding what went into the Local Plan.

The Assistant Director (Planning) explained that the Government were concerned about certain areas where they felt that some Councillors may not have recognised the need to develop and were more inclined to listen to the groups that were anti-development thus making decisions that were not in line with Government thinking. The Local Plan was most effective when Councillors considered the needs of their wards, held discussions with their constituents and could indicate land that could be suitable for development. The Assistant Director (Planning) explained that at previous meetings with Parish Council Chairs that the Leader had asked them to think of developments that their Parishes needed so that officers could try to accommodate that as the Local Plan was developed.

The Assistant Director (Planning) further explained other changes proposed to the Local Plan and reminded Members that it was not just about residential development but also about jobs, infrastructure and how people moved around the area. There was a concern that there would be a blanket approach which wouldn't be suitable as many areas were different; each Local Plan needed to meet the needs of the local community.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director (Planning) for an information presentation and thanked Members for their contributions to the meeting as well as their challenging questions to officers.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 21:16pm.