

## Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee

Monday, 30 November 2020

7.30pm

### Present:

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

Cllrs: Harold Craske  
Brian Francis  
Baljit Hayre  
Leslie Hills  
Les Hoskins  
Bob Lane  
Jordan Meade  
Emma Morley

Kevin Burbidge	Director (Planning and Development)
Simon Hookway	Assistant Director (Communities)
Shazad Ghani	Planning Manager (Policy)
Keith Grimley	Senior Economic Development Officer
Ben Clarke	Committee & Scrutiny Assistant (Minutes)

### 23. Apologies

An apology of absence was received from Cllr Alan Ridgers. Cllr Jordan Meade substituted.

### 24. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting Monday, 28 September 2020 were signed by the Chair.

### 25. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest.

### 26. Planning Performance

The Committee were presented with the third report of a regular series that were intended to be presented every six months to inform Members on current performance in respect of the Planning Service.

Members were asked too:

- a) Discuss and comment upon the information provided; and
- b) Identify any other areas of performance they wished to see included in future reports

The Director (Planning and Development) provided a presentation to the Committee and outlined key points.

The presentation could be found through the following link:

- [\(Public Pack\)Planning Performance Presentation Agenda Supplement for Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee, 30/11/2020 19:30 \(gravesham.gov.uk\)](https://www.gravesham.gov.uk/Document/View/11574)

The Planning Manager (Policy) gave a verbal update to Members on the most recent planning consultation and the Local Plan progress to date:

- The Regulation 18 Stage 2 Consultation had been underway since the 23 October and it had been extended until the end of December 2020; a number of responses had been received from residents with the key messages being that they did not agree with the number of dwellings that had to be provided within Gravesham, that they did not want greenbelt land developed and they wanted the Council to ensure all brownfield sites within the urban area are delivered
- The consultation document set out that the Council has to deliver an annual Government housing target of 655 houses, this is based on the Government's current Standard Method. This can vary from year to year.
- The Government has consulted on revisions to the Standard Method, however the outcome of the consultation is awaited. Should changes to the Standard Method, result in changes to Gravesham's housing targets, then this will be taken into account after Regulation 18 Stage 2 and will inform Regulation 19;
- There has been a focus on delivering brownfield / previously developed sites in recent years, examples include the Maternity Block, Clifton Slipways, the Canal Basin, the Charter and several more
- In addition, the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment identifies several additional brownfield sites for development within the Town Centre; Parrock Street Car Park, Wickes and the Civic Centre (upon relocation of current offices). However, all of the brownfield developments would not deliver the Governments set housing target which is why in keeping with the commitment made as part of the Local Plan Core Strategy, consideration has been given to development of land currently designated as green belt.
- As part of ongoing duty-to-cooperate discussions, the Council has entered into discussions with neighbouring local authorities to see if any of Gravesham's housing need could be met by them, these authorities have their own land supply issues and were not likely to be able to assist

Following the presentation and verbal update, the Director (Planning and Development) fielded questions from Members and explained that:

- Green Belt planning applications took longer to process than non-Green Belt applications as officers had to consider more factors during the process such as preserving openness, policies that restricted the scale of permissible extensions and sometimes lengthy negotiations with applicants on such matters
- The Council is in talks with Highways England and the Planning Inspectorate regarding the withdrawal of the Lower Thames Crossing Development Consent Order (DCO) application; some information had been received which the Council is reviewing. There were a few fairly significant reasons for their withdrawal such as their need to reconsider the construction traffic, navigational risks for boats on the Thames relating to a Thurrock jetty for use in moving materials and a revisit of their Habitats Regulations Assessment. Members were directed to look at the Planning

Inspectorate's website which held further information and notices regarding the LTC and their intention to submit a new planning application in 2021

- The Planning Inspectorate informed the Council through various Government bulletins that there would be delays in processing planning appeals as they had taken a different approach, including trying to avoid site visits due to Covid-19. They have been doing their best to catch up on their planning appeals case load but it will take time to get through them.
- The Council's website holds information regarding the pre-application service, timetables and costs; when pre application submissions are processed, typically the officer that dealt with the pre app case would also deal with the full case. However that was subject to change if the officers workload was too great at the time of receipt, etc. All Planning Officers consulted with each other and if an officer took on a different case then they would be briefed by the officer who originally took the case on. The Director (Planning and Development) agreed to forward Members further information regarding timescales and the costs of pre applications. Members noted that some significant cases may have had to be prioritised over resident cases
- Any sites eventually determined for development through the Local Plan would be released from the Green Belt so that the planning restrictions for such land would not apply to those developments. To meet the current Government target, it was inevitable that some Green Belt would need to be released as all available brownfield sites in Gravesham, if fully developed, would not meet the target alone
- Whenever a Government consultation was released the Council did its best to respond accordingly; the Planning Team noted that the housing numbers set by the Government were not far off Gravesham's own assessment but it was recognised that the new algorithm had significantly increased targets in other Districts
- The proposed interim standard method would reduce Gravesham's housing need from 655 units to 405 units per annum but, due to the impact it had elsewhere in Kent and the country more widely, the Government agreed to review that method again and they will publish the results in the coming months. As a result, Gravesham can only work to the figure of 655 units at present in order to prepare for what is hoped will be the worst case scenario

Concerns were raised by several Members of the Committee:

- The Statement of Community Involvement had been ignored by the Council and the Local Plan had never been submitted to the Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee for discussion
- The 2300 page consultation document was too broad and complex for the public to understand and was only available online which neglected residents without access to a computer
- Several changes had also been made to the consultation during the course of the pandemic which the public may have missed and a further extension of time was necessary to consider the documents thoroughly
- The previous consultation in 2018 been not taken into account, it was suggested, as the site allocations and designs were similar to that consultation which thousands of Gravesham residents had rejected
- Further briefings need to be given to both local elected Members and the Parish Councils informing them of the consultation and the Local Plan

In response to those concerns, the Planning Policy Manager advised that:

- The Government made changes to the Planning Practice Guidance over the course of the pandemic as the preferred traditional methods of distributing consultation documents and receiving responses could not be followed. As a result, the Government encouraged everyone to complete the consultation online; unfortunately the nature of the consultations documents meant that they were complex and not always easy to read
- Over 3,000 responses were received at the Regulation 18 Stage 1 consultation and the Council were aware of the public concerns regarding potential Green Belt development, impact upon infrastructure and their preferences. Fewer responses were expected to be received during Stage 2 given that unlike Regulation 18 Stage 1, a household questionnaire was not sent to every household and it is being undertaken online
- With regards to the changes made to the consultation document and a further extension of the deadline, one paragraph was amended to provide greater clarity however it did not add anything significant to the document and so an extension was not required. Moving forward, Cabinet would get the opportunity to consider all of the responses the Council receives as well as the various options available with a view to make a determination of the most appropriate course of action
- In 2018, the consultation exercise consulted on options for potential locations in the Green Belt for development and the vast majority of responses received did not support development on land designated as Green Belt. However the Council still had to take into account the Government requirements through the National Planning Policy Framework and could not reject any Green Belt development just because the residents did not like it. Instead the Council had to balance the views of residents against the requirements of Government. Whilst the preferred strategy of residents was to focus development in urban areas, it is recognised that land designated as Green Belt would have to be reviewed to meet the Government's housing target. Other local authorities across the Country were in a similar position with their Local Plans and the Council did not want to submit a Local Plan to the Planning Inspectorate which would be rejected immediately. Therefore, residents and stakeholders responses would be taken into account, but the Council would need to ensure that Government guidance, policy, regulations and legislation is followed and if exceptional circumstances exist, that would justify the release of land designated as Green Belt for development

The Chair added that, since the process had begun for the preparation of the consultation, it was reported to and approved at Cabinet as well as the timetable of the consultation which was included in the report submitted to Cabinet. With regards to Members not having the opportunity to discuss the consultation, the Chair advised that he agreed the delegated decision of going to consultation formally and the Chair of Overview Scrutiny could have called it into Overview & Scrutiny Committee for discussion, but he did not. The Council had used its best endeavours to keep all forty four Members involved and a robust process was followed; Members will continue to be apprised of the outcomes of the consultations through Cabinet as well as Overview Scrutiny if a call in was made. With regards to the Statement of Community Involvement, it was reported at Cabinet and was also called into Overview Scrutiny where it was discussed fully. The Chair concluded addressing Members concerns by informing them that the Local Plan would be progressed with the involvement of all Members and that would continue until it was formally adopted.

In response to a question regarding the Council's feelings towards the responses received so far, the Chair advised that there was always room for improvement with consultations and the onset of Covid-19 had made it especially more difficult to engage with the Community

groups on a direct basis than in previous consultations. The Leader has recently met with the Local Parish Council Chairmen and informed them of the consultation in order to ensure that their Parishes were involved as much as possible. The Chair encouraged Members to talk to residents within their Wards and asked them to respond to the consultation directly online; there were forty nine question on the consultation document however they did not all have to be filled out; local groups/people could fill out only a small number of those questions that related to them and it would be very helpful.

The Chair thanked Members for their comments and thanked the officers for their detailed responses.

## **27. Response to Rising Unemployment**

The Assistant Director (Communities) informed the Committee of the steps that the Council is considering to respond to the growing unemployment position in the Borough through working effectively with its partners and as a major employer by expanding opportunities into work for young people.

The Senior Economic Development Officer highlighted key points from the following sections within the report to Members:

- Unemployment in Gravesham
- Kickstart Scheme
- Complimentary Actions & Initiatives
- Potential Work Opportunities for Young People within the Council

The Chair noted that the Council had become increasingly closer with the local business community over the last few years and had real influence in creating effective partnerships between the Council and local organisations.

The Assistant Director (Communities) and the Senior Economic Development Officer fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- The Kickstart Scheme was available to employers to fund the creation of new 6-month job placements for young people (aged 16-24-years-old) who were currently on universal credit and at risk of long-term unemployment Funding for the Kickstart Scheme was based on the number of placements that could be provided by the Council/businesses; a minimum of thirty placements was required and so local businesses were also being encouraged to put up further placements for young people in order to expand the amount of available spaces. The Council hoped to create placements both in the Council and local businesses and messages would be distributed with the help of the DWP and North Kent College
- Gravesham had reported a higher level of NEET's and individuals were at higher risk of being left behind due to Covid-19; the Senior Economic Development Officer was working with KCC and other partners on the issue. An update will be brought to the Committee once the work was further underway
- The virtual youth hubs were still in the process of being created; an update will be brought to the Committee in the future
- Gravesham had always had comparatively higher youth unemployment than the rest of Kent but the figures were more on par with the national average; further work will be undertaken by the Council to understand why youth unemployment had risen so

sharply in the Borough, but may relate to the level of job vacancies within the Borough.

- Members could assist by signposting people to the relevant services and informing residents in their own wards of the opportunities that were available to them, especially young people and the Kickstart Scheme. The team will look into ways that Councillors could get more involved and help distribute information to their ward residents.
- The Senior Economic Development Officer advised Members that he would circulate information regarding opportunities for mentoring via the Groundwork Trust outside the meeting
- Over many years, the Council hosted an annual careers fair which was an opportunity for local young people to engage with local employers and learn about possible career paths etc. Sectoral career/job fairs may be the way forward.
- The Senior Economic Development Officer advised Members that he would circulate information regarding the Federation of Small Business partners as they were keen to have local Councillors get involved
- The Assistant Director (Communities) did not have the information to hand on the two vacant apprenticeship posts but he assured the Committee that the aim would be to fill those posts. It was reported that cohorts of apprenticeships varied from year to year and that many found a permanent role within the Council workforce upon completion of their apprenticeships; a review is being undertaken to see if the apprenticeship programme can be improved further and more detail can be included within a future report regarding the apprenticeship programme
- There was a public document which split youth unemployment figures between the different wards in Gravesham; the Assistant Director (Communities) agreed to circulate it to Members

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director (Communities) and the Senior Economic Development Officer for their detailed run through of the report; the Chair also thanked the Members for their suggestions and was pleased that discussions were ongoing to review how Members could contribute at ward level.

## **28. Q2 2020-21 Performance Report**

The Committee were presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Two 2020-21 (July to September 2020).

The Chair advised that the Policy Commitments that pertained to Planning had already been discussed thoroughly this evening during the Planning Performance item and encouraged discussion on any other corporate data which hadn't been raised so far.

The Assistant Director (Communities) guided Members through the report and highlighted key points from the Policy Commitments that pertained to Communities.

In response to a question regarding the increasing vacancy rate within the Town Centre and the Council's policy of allowing retail units to convert to residential, the Director (Planning and Development) advised that the planning policy set out what was allowed in the Town and they had taken a fairly flexible approach on a case by case basis to ensure businesses could trade and residential units could be converted where appropriate. Officers were reviewing employment spaces more broadly as well as leisure type events and many of the development proposals were moving ahead despite the setback caused by Covid-19.

In response to a question regarding the decline in Town Centre footfall since the onset of Covid-19, the Assistant Director (Communities) advised that the footfall had recovered to 80% compared to the previous year which was better when compared to other centres, especially city centres. In future reports, comparisons with national/regional figures can be included. The Assistant Director (Communities) added that future projections of footfall within the new tier system that was coming into effect from 02 December 2020 was difficult to predict; it could increase due to a surge in Christmas shopping but the team will monitor all progress and report it back to the next Committee meeting.

The Chair thanked the officers for their responses and Members for their engagement during the course of the meeting.

### **Close of meeting**

The meeting ended at 21:23pm.