

Cabinet

Monday, 04 October 2021

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr John Burden (Chair)
Cllr Lee Croxton (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Shane Mochrie-Cox
Lauren Sullivan
Narinderjit Singh Thandi
Jenny Wallace

Stuart Bobby Chief Executive
Nick Brown Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive
Melanie Norris Director (Communities)
Sarah Parfitt Director (Corporate Services)
Daniel Killian Director (Housing)
Wendy Lane Assistant Director (Planning)
Jan Guylar Head of Legal Shared Services
Pat Knight Head of Revenues and Benefits
Andy Rayfield Communications Manager
Brenda Howard Training & Policy Officer
Ben Clarke Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

33. Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Lenny Rolles.

34. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held on Monday, 07 September 2021 were signed by the Chair.

35. To declare any interest members may have in the items contained on this agenda. When declaring an interest a member must state what their interest is.

No declarations of interest.

36. Delegated Decisions - Cabinet Members

There were no further decisions for Cabinet to be updated on.

37. Minutes of the meeting of the Gravesham Joint Transportation Board held on Wednesday, 8 September 2021

The Cabinet received the minutes of the meeting of the Gravesham Joint Transportation Board held on Wednesday, 8 September 2021

The Chief Executive informed Members that he had sent the letter to the relevant Director of KCC and was awaiting a response; the response would be shared with the Cabinet in due course.

The Chair clarified that the letter set out Gravesham's disappointment that KCC officers had failed to attend several Gravesham JTB meetings as well as Crime & Disorder Scrutiny Committee meetings. The Chair advised that if a response was not received then the issue would be dealt with through other channels.

The Cabinet noted the minutes.

38. RPDL Board Structure revision

The Cabinet were provided with an update on the Board membership of Rosherville Property Development Limited and their authority was sought to update the Board structure in line with the Council's current management structure.

The Chief Executive advised that at the end of the 2020-21 financial year, the Director (Planning & Development) retired (with effect from 1 April 2021). As a result of that retirement, there was a vacant Director position within the company. It was recommended to Members that the role of Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration) assumed the vacant post on the Rosherville Property Development Limited Board.

Resolved that Cabinet:

1. Noted the information contained within the report.
2. Approved the revised Board Structure as set out in paragraph 2.5 of the report.
3. Agreed for the Corporate Change Manager, in consultation with the Leader of the Executive, to notify the Board of Rosherville Property Development Limited and Rosherville Limited at the next Board meeting.

That the revised Board structure for Rosherville Property Development Limited be approved and for the Corporate Change Manager, in consultation with the Leader of the Executive, to notify the Board of Rosherville Property Development Limited and Rosherville Limited at the next Board meetings.

39. Adoption of the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan

The Cabinet were presented with the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan 2021-2026.

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 there was a statutory requirement for local authorities to produce Management Plans for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) within their boundaries and to review them every five years. Where the AONB covered more than one local authority area, then the CRoW Act required them to act jointly in preparing a Management Plan. The Kent Downs AONB Management Plan was prepared by the Kent AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) on behalf of the 12 constituent local authorities. The JAC had prepared a final version of the document for the respective local authorities to adopt.

Cllr Shane Mochrie-Cox pointed out a typo in the report; the decision was public not private and the report was still reported as going to Chief Executives Briefing.

The Assistant Director (Planning) fielded questions from the Cabinet and explained that:

- The AONB document could be enhanced by additional documents and it could be varied by the Council; there was nothing in the document which would affect the Council's ability to undertake anything or impede the decision making process
- The AONB Management Plan was available publicly on the Kent Downs website as well as the early drafts of the AONB document. On Gravesham's website, there was a page specifically dedicated to landscape which held various links to studies and included a link to the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan
- If Members decided that they wanted the document to become even more accessible then it would need to be raised with the JAC; concerns had been raised previously that having the document in PDF format was not suitable as some text readers that the public used couldn't read PDF files
- The responsibility for the Management Plan lay with the Council but there were Member led groups at other authorities who all fed into the existing document which resulted in multiple iterations of the Management Plan. The final Management Plan was prepared by the Kent AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) on behalf of the 12 constituent local authorities
- The views of land owners were important as much of the AONB land was managed by them and their views were needed for the Plan as much as the people who used the land recreationally
- The Council contributed financially to the Management Plan but the contribution was modest and it would be more expensive overall if the Council attempted to create a Plan on their own
- Gravesham's website linked the public to the previously agreed Kent Downs AONB Management Plan but once Member approval was received, the link would be updated to take the public to the 2021-2026 Management Plan. The Assistant Director (Planning) agreed to check that the document was accessible for those who had difficulty reading PDF documents
- Representations received through the consultation were directed to officers employed by the JAC so that they could pull all of the views together into a single document but the views received were from Members from each of the twelve local authorities and outside bodies; Members views were fundamental to the creation of the Management Plan

In response to Members concerns regarding public accessibility of the document, the Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive advised that prior to the Cabinet meeting Cllr Sullivan had raised the need to ensure that the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan was actively promoted to the public and accordingly the Council's Communications Team were already working on this.

Resolved that Cabinet:

1. Approved the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2021-2026 (Appendix 2) for adoption;
2. Agreed that adoption of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2021-2026 take effect on a date to be confirmed by the Kent Downs AONB Unit;
3. Agreed that the Assistant Director (Planning) be given delegated powers to accept reasonable minor changes to the document prior to the Plan's formal adoption.

40. Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2022-23

Members were updated on the progress made on the review of the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme and their approval was sought to proceed with a public consultation on changing the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme from April 2022.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits guided Members through the report and raised the following key points:

- The proposals in the report only affected working age claimants, it did not affect the scheme for pensionable age claimants which was set on a national basis
- Item 1.4 of the report listed the shortcomings of the current Council Tax Reduction Scheme
- Item 2 of the report outlined the proposal for the new Council Tax Reduction Scheme; one of the most important changes was that under the new Scheme the service would accept claims for Universal Credit as claims for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme as well
- One of the biggest issues currently was that, every time there was a financial change to residents claim, a new Council Tax bill had to be issued to them, which meant the claimant could potentially receive twelve new Council Tax bills in a year. That was confusing to claimants and was a source of complaint
- The vast majority of claimants would see their amounts received increase or unchanged whilst some cases would see a reduction however the service was aware of all those who would see a reduction in their claims amount. All of those affected negatively, would be contacted by the service and directed to support from other sources
- The service legally had to conduct a consultation; once agreement was received, the consultation would commence for ten weeks on 15 October 2021 and last until 24 December 2021. Appendix three listed the draft consultation questions.
- Responses to the consultation would be analysed and brought back to Cabinet on 31 January 2022, with the final proposed scheme presented to Full Council alongside the Council Tax budget setting report on 22 February 2022. The new Council Tax bills would be calculated from 01 April 2022

The Chair stated that it was an important document that tried to make the best out of a national benefit system that had a lot of issues; it was Gravesham Council's intention to make life easier for claimants and ensure that all of Gravesham's residents received the support that they may be entitled to.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits fielded questions from the Cabinet and explained that:

- It was recognised that the consultation document was quite long; the Service was currently working with Communications to determine if the consultation document language could be improved and made more accessible. However, Members should note that there were a number of changes proposed and the Service had to consult on each of them; the reasoning behind the changes as well as the benefits and negatives of each change had been explained. The introduction was very detailed and would be trimmed back where possible
- Officers would be writing to all claimants and a random selection of non-claimants regarding the changes in order to encourage a broad response and make sure all claimants were aware of impending changes that could affect them. If any people

were having trouble filling in the consultation, they would be encouraged to contact the service so that an officer could go through it with them. Face to face appointments would be held as and when required

- Third party organisations would also be invited to assist the Service with reaching out to residents that they were aware of that needed support but wouldn't make contact with the Council on their own
- The Head of Revenues and Benefits agreed to contact Communications to look at rewording the phrasing on page 160 for 'Protect claimants from exceptional hardship'
- The Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) was a new software that the Service used to obtain an understanding of a claimant's current financial position; it helped to identify if there were any changes to their financial circumstances such as the amount of universal credit they received reducing. Through identification of such changes, officers could see if a resident was about to fall into financial crisis and then engage with them and provide support before that happened
- The consultation was running on a tight deadline but it was doable; weekly updates would be received on the cases and the responses from the consultation would be analysed over the ten-week period. Experience of similar timetables at neighbouring authorities proved it could work
- As mentioned previously, Communications were being consulted to make the document more accessible which included using more plain English language where possible
- The sample of non-claimants contacted would be random residents not in receipt of support from the Council Tax Reduction Scheme; 2000 non-claimants including those of pensionable age would be contacted.
- Sections 13 and 14 of the consultation asked questions about who was providing the response and the responses received could be analysed by the responses to these questions. The answers to those questions would allow the Service to understand where the responses had come from in the Borough and tell officers how best to respond

The Director (Corporate Services) advised that the Service recognised the importance of trying to actively engage with residents and the Head of Revenues and Benefits would be seeking out groups that represented individuals who the Council could not reach as well as engage with focus group activities as much as possible. The Director (Corporate Services) assured Members that the Service would do everything in their power to make sure everyone who needed to be supported was contacted but ultimately the Service relied on residents engaging in the process.

The Chair reminded Members that consultation was essential in order to obtain residents views and it was important to gain the views of non-claimants as well as claimants as non-claimants could become claimants one day. The Chair noted the concern raised regarding weighting and advised that the Cabinet was only being asked to agree to the consultation documents tonight and the final proposed Scheme would return to the Cabinet with more information before approval was sought.

Resolved that Cabinet:

1. Noted the work undertaken on the review of the current Council Tax Reduction (CTR) Scheme

2. Agreed to proceed with a public consultation with a view to changing the Council Tax Reduction Scheme from April 2022 as set out in Section Two of the report
3. Agreed the draft consultation documents (Appendix 3) and gave delegated authority to the Director (Corporate Services), in consultation with the Leader of the Executive and Portfolio Holder for Performance & Administration to finalise the consultation documents.

41. Armoury Drive Development - Contract Award

The Cabinet's authority was sought to award a build contract for the development of six new Council homes on land at Armoury Drive.

The Director (Housing) highlighted key points from the report to Members.

Cllr Wallace voiced her support for the contract as it would bring much needed housing to the Borough.

Resolved that Cabinet gave delegated authority to the Director (Housing), in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing Services and Section 151 Officer, to award a build contract to the successful contractor following a selection process via the Kent Business Portal for the construction of six new Council homes consisting of 4 x 2 bed maisonettes and 2 x 1 bed bungalows with the provision of associated parking, cycle/refuse storage and landscaping.

42. Exclusion

Resolved pursuant to Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 that the public be excluded during the following item of business because it was likely in view of the nature of business to be transacted that, if members of the public were present during this item, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 in Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

43. Armoury Drive Development - Contract Award - Part B Appendix

The Cabinet were presented with the financial details of the Armoury Drive contract.

The Cabinet noted the details.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:18pm.