

Cabinet

Monday, 21 March 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

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

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

Note: Cllr Baljit Hayre, Leslie Hills and Jordan Meade were also in attendance.

Stuart Bobby	Chief Executive
Nick Brown	Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive
Daniel Killian	Director (Housing)
Melanie Norris	Director (Communities)
Sarah Parfitt	Director (Corporate Services)
Nicole Arthur	Service Manager (Housing Operations)
Carlie Simmonds	Committee Services Manager (Minutes)

24. Apologies

No apologies for absence were received.

25. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Monday 21 February 2022 were signed by the Chair.

26. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Lenny Rolles declared an interest in agenda items 14 - Rosherville Business Plan 2022-25 and 15 - Establishment of Rosherville Repairs & Maintenance Local Authority Trading Company as he is a Director and Chair of the Rosherville Limited Board. Cllr Lenny Rolles left the Chamber during consideration of these items.

27. Delegated Decisions - Cabinet Members

No decisions other than those already circulated had been made.

28. The Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) Wave 1 funding award

The Cabinet was informed that the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) Wave 1 was released by the Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) on 23 August 2021 and invited Registered Providers of social housing including Private and Local Authority, to apply for funding to be used to improve the energy performance of social housing.

The key rules for the use of the funding were that eligible homes must be within EPC bands D, E, F and G, ensuring that priority was given to the worst energy performing homes. The aim was to raise the EPC ratings of these homes to band C, in preparation for the widespread adoption of decarbonised heating systems. Works should also meet the space heating requirement of 90kwh/m²/yr and justification should be provided for each property if this was not likely to be met.

The Council applied for the funding and was notified on 7 February 2022 that it had been successful in its bid of £823,337.11, with Gravesham being only one of two Councils in Kent to secure the funding.

The funding will contribute 51% towards the total project cost of £1,623,507.78 with Gravesham contributing the remaining 49%, £800,170.67.

The Service Manager (Housing Operations) advised that 364 properties with a range of EPC bandings D-F had been identified using the Council's energy performance database software, Parity Portfolio. These properties will benefit from a range of fabric measures consisting of external wall insulation, double glazing, loft and cavity wall insulation.

Project delivery timescales had been set by BEIS and the initial completion date of 31 January 2023 had been extended to 31 March 2023, providing one year to procure a partner and deliver the project.

The Cabinet thanked the Service Manager (Housing Operations) and her team for their hard work in securing the bid.

Resolved that

1. the grant award notification be noted and the decision to accept the award taken by the Director (Housing), in consultation with the S.151 Officer be ratified; and
2. the addition of the project to the current year capital programme be approved, recognising that 51% of the cost of the project is to be met from external funding and 49% funded by the Council.

29. Procurement of DSO Building Management Contracts

The Cabinet was informed that, as a landlord, Gravesham Borough Council (GBC) had a statutory duty to ensure its housing stock was properly maintained, that equipment was serviced and that any responsive repairs were completed within a timely manner and it was essential that external service providers were in place to assist with the delivery of required works.

The Council's current Procurement Strategy actively encourages the use of frameworks, which consist of a list of pre-approved suppliers for effective procurement arrangements via mini-tender or direct award to deliver high quality services to tenants.

The report detailed the following contracts which were due to expire along with the relevant frameworks, annual levels of anticipated capital spend, total contract value and duration of contract:-

- Cyclical Decorating (Axis Europe)
- Roofing Replacements (Breyer Group)
- Wet Rooms & Level Access (Pilon)
- Mobility Lifts (Apex Lifts)
- Water Hygiene (H2O Nationwide Ltd)
- Asbestos Surveys (Riverside) Asbestos Removals (PA Group)

In addition to the above, the Council would also need to procure the following contracts:-

- Energy Efficiency Measures (Whole House Retrofit) - includes loft, cavity, external wall insulation and Solar PV)
- Energy Efficiency Measures (Ground Source Heat Pumps) – Renewable energy and heating technology

The contracts will be procured via the South East Consortium.

The Service Manager (Housing Operations) advised that the Public Services (Social Value) Act came into force on 31 January 2013. It required those who commission public services to think about how they can also secure wider social, economic and environmental benefits. Prospective contractors will be asked as part of the process to outline what social value commitments they could bring to GBC if they were successful.

The Cabinet requested that local companies be offered the opportunity to be prospective contractors for GBC as this would contribute toward the Council's climate change strategy.

Resolved that the that the Director (Housing) in consultation with the S151 Officer and Lead Member be given delegated authority to conduct the procurement process and award the contracts for DSO Building Management using procurement frameworks by way of mini tender and direct award as outlined in the report.

30. LGA Peer Challenge - Action Plan Update

The Cabinet was informed that that in October 2019, the Council welcomed a Peer Challenge Team from the Local Government Association (LGA) onsite in order for them to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge of the Council. This was then followed-up with a further virtual review undertaken by the LGA in March 2021.

As a result of the follow-up review, the Peer Challenge Team prepared a short report setting out their findings; the team reviewed progress against the actions resulting from the original review in October 2019 and recommended a number of follow-up actions.

The Peer Challenge report and accompanying action plan was presented to the Cabinet in September 2021 and it was agreed that a report be brought back to the Cabinet in March 2022 to provide an update on progress against the revised action plan.

Appendix one to the report provided Members with a copy of the action plan that was previously agreed along with updates against each of the actions identified. 22 actions, in total, were identified with one action being signed off by the Peer Challenge Team in their follow up review. The action plan set out 10 recommendations, with 21 individual action points. 15 action points had been fully completed (71%) with the remaining six action points (29%) due to be completed by the end of the 2022 calendar year. However, all outstanding actions were underway and five of those were due to be completed in the next two months.

The Chief Executive highlighted that some of the recommendations referred to the Local Plan and that the delivery of the Plan was heavily dependent on elements that were under the control of external organisations.

In relation to hybrid working, the Leader advised that he was supportive of hybrid working, however, with regard to hybrid meetings he felt that further work needed to be undertaken to align both the equipment and systems as the current setup was not suitable. Hybrid meetings would not be introduced until 2023.

Moving forward, the actions outstanding will be included within the operational business plans for the relevant departments and will form part of the department's regular performance monitoring processes. Officers will ensure that Members are kept abreast of these activities through the regular briefings with the Leader of the Executive and Cabinet Portfolio Holders.

The Cabinet thanked officers for the work that had been undertaken to date resulting in 71% of the actions being completed particularly in light of the COVID pandemic.

The Cabinet noted the information contained within the report.

31. Development of the Corporate Risk Register 2022-2023

The Cabinet was informed that the Risk Management Strategy set out the approach that had been adopted by the Council for identifying, evaluating, managing and recording risks to which it is exposed. A review of the strategy is carried out annually and, where necessary, presented to the Cabinet for approval if it is subject to any updates and amendments.

The Director (Corporate Services) advised that no material updates or amendments to the Strategy were necessary.

In preparing the draft Corporate Risk Register for 2022-23, Management Team, Senior Officers and Members were requested to provide details of existing risks that continue to score high and should be carried forward to the 2022- 2023 register and to provide details of any new risks that should be considered for assessment and inclusion. The risks identified were as follows:-

Existing risks

1. Ongoing financial viability of the council
2. Changes in national priorities and legislation
3. Organisational capacity/resilience
4. Cyberattack resulting in data breach or corruption of data
5. Investment Risk

New risks

1. Universal Credit
2. IT infrastructure is not updated to meet the needs of the organisation
3. Adoption and delivery of sound Local Plan

The risks that generated a “high” residual risk score and were above the Council’s strategic risk tolerance level had been included in the 2022-2023 register. These risks were:-

1. On-going financial viability of the council.
2. Changes in national priorities and legislation.
3. Organisational Capacity reliance.
4. Cyberattack resulting in data breach or corruption of data.
5. Investment Risk.
6. Adoption and delivery of sound Local Plan.

The Director (Corporate Services) advised that the draft register had been considered by the Finance and Audit Committee on 7 March 2022. Progress made against the actions in relation to each risk recorded in the register will be monitored quarterly by the Risk Management Working Group and progress information will be presented via a half yearly report to the Finance & Audit Committee.

In relation to risk 2 (Changes in national priorities and legislative change), it was requested that the risk also refers to local changes as local changes can have a significant impact on the Council and its priorities, budgets etc.

The Leader highlighted that the Local Plan had been included in the register (risk 8). The Council was required to have an up to date Local Plan in place by the end of 2023 or face government sanction/intervention that could result in the Council losing its control to protect the Borough from inappropriate or poor quality development.

In relation to risk 8, it was requested that the ‘Cabinet Portfolio’ section be updated to state the relevant Portfolio instead of an individual name.

The Chief Executive informed the Cabinet that he had attended the District Councils’ Network conference which was also attended by the Minister for Housing. The Chief Executive provided Members with an update on the areas that were discussed at the conference.

Resolved that, subject to the above amendments being made to risks 2 and 8, the Corporate Risk Register that has been developed for 2022-2023 be approved prior to it being presented to Council.

32. Support for energy bills - the Council Tax Rebate 2022/2023

The Cabinet was informed that on 3 February 2022, the Government announced a package of support known as the Energy Bills Rebate to help households with rising energy bills, worth £9.1 billion in 2022-2023. This included:-

- £200 discount on their energy bill this autumn for domestic electricity customers in Great Britain. This will be paid back automatically over the next 5 years;
- £150 non-repayable rebate for households in England in council tax bands A – D, known as the Council Tax Rebate; and
- £144 million of discretionary funding for billing authorities to support households who are in need but are not eligible for the Council Tax Rebate, known as the Discretionary Fund.

The Director (Corporate Services) informed Members that a total £5,546,250 had been allocated to the Council. The sum consisted of:-

- £5,297,100 for the core scheme of Council Tax Rebate 2022-2023. This was equivalent of paying £150 to 35,314 households, which was required to be distributed to eligible households by 30 September 2022; and
- £249,150 for the discretionary fund. This was equivalent of paying £150 to 1,661 households, which was required to be distributed by 30 November 2022.

In relation to the Council Tax Rebate, the Government had provided an explanatory sentence and information leaflet to be included in council tax demand notices (bills) issued to households. Where the Council holds live direct debit instructions for a liable council taxpayer of an eligible household, the guidance states that an automatic payment should be made as early as possible in the 2022-23 financial year, provided that there was assurance that the household was eligible and the bank details had been verified. At the time of preparing the report, bank details were held for 20,285 council tax payers out of 36,113 properties in band A-D in the Borough. There had been press coverage to encourage Direct Debit take-up since late February. Where the Council does not hold live direct debit instructions for an eligible household, all reasonable efforts to contact the household will be made to make them aware of the scheme and invite them to make a claim.

In relation to the Discretionary Fund, the guidance advised that the Council could determine locally how best to make use of this funding to provide payments to other households who were energy bill payers but not covered by the Council Tax Rebate. This could include households living in properties valued in bands E – H (currently 6,463 properties) that were on income related benefits such as Council Tax Reduction (currently 233 claimants in bands E-H) or those where the energy bills payers were not liable for council tax. The Director (Corporate Services) advised that the intention would be to work closely with colleagues across Kent to ensure commonality with the discretionary scheme.

The service will also work closely with the Communications Team, Digital Team and Customer Services to ensure that households were provided with clear and timely information about the Council Tax Rebate scheme and Discretionary Fund.

Members expressed concern regarding the allocation process, potential shortfall, the burden that had been placed on local authorities at such a critical time and potential complaints that may be received following the cut-off dates.

The Director (Corporate Services) advised that there would be a shortfall in the funds allocated however the Council had been advised that there will possibly be a reconciliation exercise later in 2022. The Chief Executive will be raising this via the District Councils' Network.

The Director (Corporate Services) advised that she would keep the Leader informed on the operation of the scheme, indicative costs etc.

Resolved that:-

1. delegated authority be given to the Director (Corporate Services), in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Performance & Administration, to develop a discretionary Council Tax Rebate scheme and associated policy, and to make the necessary arrangements to assess eligibility and determine award of funding to eligible households; and
2. delegated authority be given to the Director (Corporate Services) to make any further technical amendments to the scheme where further government advice is issued and ensure that the Portfolio Holder for Performance & Administration is kept informed of any such amendments required.

33. Minutes of meeting of Climate Change Advisory Board

The Cabinet noted the minutes of the Climate Change Advisory Board held on Monday 24 January 2022.

34. Exclusion

Resolved that 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 the item, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information.

35. Rosherville Business Plan 2022-25

The Cabinet was presented with the business plan for Rosherville Limited for the period 2022-25.

Resolved that the business plan for Rosherville Limited at appendix one be approved.

Note: Cllr Lenny Rolles left the Chamber during consideration of this item.

36. Establishment of Rosherville Repairs & Maintenance Local Authority Trading Company

The Cabinet was presented with a business case, on behalf of the Board of Rosherville Limited, for the formation of a subsidiary company – Rosherville Repairs & Maintenance Limited.

Resolved that:-

1. the formation of the Rosherville Repairs & Maintenance Limited subsidiary company, including the provision of £66,623 seed funding to assist the company with initial set up costs be approved; and
2. authority be provided for the Director (Housing) in conjunction with the Rosherville Limited Company Secretary to make the necessary arrangements to register the company with Companies House.

Note: Cllr Lenny Rolles left the Chamber during consideration of this item.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 9.00 pm