

Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee

Monday, 25 September 2023

19:30pm

Present:

Cllr Shane Mochrie-Cox (Chair)
Cllr Alison Williams (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Ejaz Aslam
Rajinder Atwal
Gurjit Kaur Bains
David Beattie
Gavin Larkins
Jordan Meade
Ektaveen Thandi

Wendy Lane Assistant Director (Planning)
Tom Reynolds Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration)
Glyn Tully Associate Director, Levitt Bernstein
Renzo Campisi Senior Architect, Levitt Bernstein
Ben Clarke Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

1. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Karina O'Malley; Cllr Ektaveen Thandi substituted.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee held on Wednesday, 29 March 2023 were signed by the Chair.

3. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Meade declared several interests:

- He was a member of the Local Government Association's People and Places Board
- He was a member of the EDC's Planning Committee
- With regards to it item 8 – he was the Vice-Chair and Trustee of Gravesham's Street Pastor Charity
- With regards to it item 8 - he was an advisor to the House of Lords but hadn't been directly involved with the Levelling up Bill

4. Thanks - Simon Hookway

The Committee asked that their thanks be recorded for Simon Hookway (Assistant Director Communities) who had recently retired last week after 36 years of service to Gravesham Borough Council and applauded his tremendous work with the Committee and the Council.

5. Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee - setting the scene

The Committee were provided with a report that gave them an overview of the Planning Service.

The Assistant Director (Planning) advised Members that the majority of Planning was set in statute but there were a range of areas with flexibility, and it was best for them to have a broader understanding of the Planning Service.

The Assistant Director (Planning) guided Members through the report and outlined key points regarding the portfolios following areas:

- Development Management
- Planning Enforcement
- Building Control
- Environmental Management
- Conservation
- Planning Policy

The Assistant Director (Planning) explained to Members that the contact details for the best officer to approach within in each Planning area was listed in the report.

Members noted the report.

6. Design for Gravesham

The Committee was presented with a report that provided them with an update on the development of the borough wide design code, Design for Gravesham.

The Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration) took Members through the report which summarised the background to the project, stakeholder engagement to date, the emerging, draft vision and principles of the document prepared by place-making specialists Levitt Bernstein and the associated next steps in the document becoming a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), subject to approval of Cabinet.

The Associate Director and Senior Architect from Levitt Bernstein delivered a presentation explaining further details about the design code and its impact on Gravesham; the presentation was included within the agenda and could be accessed through the below link:

- [\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee, 25/09/2023 19:30 \(gravesham.gov.uk\)](#)

The Chair added that elected Members from both political parties attended the first two stages of consultation for the design code and robust discussions were had on the subject between Members and the public.

The Chair stated that the Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration) had brought along two hard copies of the emerging draft of a summary document for Members to review. The Chair assured Members that they would each receive a hard copy of this document. The Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration) explained that the draft document presented at the Committee tonight, described the emerging vision and principles for the code and included an example page of one of the key elements from each principle.

The Chair reminded Members that the document was still in its draft form and further changes would be made to respond to the second stage of stakeholder engagement.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Associate Director and Senior Architect from Levitt Bernstein explained that:

- Design for Gravesham is a borough wide design code. It is a once in a ten-year opportunity to steward community and place led regeneration by creating a Policy document that sets out Gravesham's expectations for high quality and sustainable regeneration and development that delivers holistically for people and place in Gravesham - responding to the needs of Gravesham's diverse community and the borough's unique identifies, places, towns, villages and neighbourhoods. The Design Code will be adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), subject to approval of Cabinet. The document will then be used by planning officers in the assessment of planning applications. The development of a borough wide design code responds to the government's Regeneration and Levelling Up bill, which at time of drafting, is in the reporting stage in the House of Lords.
- The national model design code and its principles were considered and used as a model for the design code for Gravesham, but Gravesham's code is unique to the area and the vision and principles have been drafted in response to engagement with the community. The Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration) added that the latest draft of the document referenced the national design code and how it was used to assist in creating the design code for Gravesham.
- LB noted that the design code was borough wide and instead of highlighting specific sites or areas for development, it focused on an all-encompassing list of 'musts' and 'shoulds' for proposed development/regeneration to respond to.
- A design code specialist had been engaged in the development of the latest code; he gave Levitt Bernstein helpful feedback, mainly around increasing the clarity and conciseness of the message that was being conveyed, which has been incorporated into the document.
- One of the common themes throughout the engagement phase was a desire to improve access to the riverside; the public enjoyed going to the prom and the surrounding riverside but access to the area via cycling or walking wasn't as good as via car. LB noted that the draft design code responds to this. Discussion had also been held with KCC about improving active travel and the public realm for walkers and cyclists. The Chair added that the document shouldn't be seen as a 'war on cars' but until the cost elements of public transport was regulated better it was important to ensure mixed modes of transport including cycling and walking were available to residents in Gravesham
- Levitt Bernstein had taken into consideration the Roger Scruton Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission and the place making strategies underpinned the main document; the main draft document referenced place narrative, topography and landscape which all fed into the bigger ideas for the borough. The Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration) added that the design code would support holistic regeneration that would respond to local needs and support a rich mix of opportunities to enhance quality of life and livelihoods, place and environment.
- The Chair advised that it didn't matter if the developers had their own design code as they would still have to review Gravesham's design code and factor that into the process when creating the overall design of a development. Developers having

access to the design code early on would ensure the development was created, from the start, with Gravesham's requirements in mind.

A number of comments were raised by the Committee:

- Under 'Emerging Vision', the map should include reference to the Mosque and amend 'Culture' to 'Culture and Religion.'
- Under 'Design Principles', it lists 'lighting' under 'Public Space' but further reference was needed as to how the development would be made more secure as that was a key priority for women and young girls walking around the Town at night
- Overall, the document didn't feel like 'Gravesend'; some Members felt it had been created with a 'London lens' as it was apartment heavy, and tree lined streets had not been referenced.
- The presentation lacked any references to beauty, placemaking, the provision to ensure developments reflected the local character of the borough or what made Gravesham unique.

In response to Members comment, Levitt Bernstein agreed to review and amend the map and consider how the design code can be strengthened to draw out further the unique character of Gravesham.

The Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration) thanked Members for their feedback and advised that the Gravesham layer was incredibly important and this would be further strengthened in the draft code. He also highlighted that the community engagement undertaken had themed the emerging vision and principles and further engagement was planned. The draft code references throughout the heritage of the borough, the Prom and riverside open spaces, alongside its historic town and characterful Kentish villages.

Regarding security of new developments, the Code would work in tangent with Secured by Design (SBD), which is an official police security initiative that worked to improve the security of buildings and their immediate surroundings to provide safe places to live, work, shop and visit.

In reference to a concern regarding the lack of reference in the presentation to beauty and preservation of local character in the Borough, the Chair explained that all of the necessary references were in the main draft document however the document was vast and it had been condensed for the presentation. The Chair assured Members that the Council had listened to residents and what people wanted. The ultimate goal of the code was to ensure that it represented Gravesham and its interests with regards to sustainable development that reflected the character of the borough; Levitt Bernstein was partly chosen (as the specialist developers of the code), as they recognised that Gravesham was a collection of unique places with a rich heritage that needed to be considered within the code.

Concern was raised by a Member that the Committee were being asked to comment on a document which excluded vital information from the main draft document, but the Chair assured the Committee that they would all have access to the main document in due course as part of the planned consultation later this year.

In response to concern raised by a Member, the Chair assured the Committee that the design code would be a decision by Cabinet and therefore be open to being called in by the Overview Scrutiny Committee for review; it would not be dealt with by emergency provisions and be open to scrutiny and discussion. Due to the Committee cycle, it might not be possible

to bring the next draft of the document to the Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee in November 2023. However, all Members would be able to feed in further comments on the design code during stage three of the constitution which would run for a period of four weeks and start later this year.

The Senior Architect, Levitt Bernstein assured Members that all public feedback had been noted including the feedback that had been left on social media posts rather than the actual survey. An executive summary document had been created which amalgamated all of the public responses during stage two of the consultation.

The Chair concluded the item and advised Members that the relevant documents and links would be circulate outside of the meeting and they would attempt to get the next draft version of the document submitted to the Committee in November 2023.

Members noted the draft document.

7. Planning in Gravesham Key Principles

The Committee were provided with a presentation on the key principles of Planning in Gravesham.

The presentation had been published and could be accessed via the below link:

- [\(Public Pack\)Supplementary - Planning in Gravesham Key Principles Presentation Agenda Supplement for Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee, 25/09/2023 19:30](#)

The Assistant Director (Planning) advised that it was a working document which, at the Chairs request, gave greater clarity and detail on the components of the Planning Service, its strategic aims, and examples of planning application submissions.

The Chair stated that the key principles would become a strategic document that was fair and consistent and treated everyone equally.

The Chair noted that many developers and some households had the expectation of receiving planning advice for free when they should be paying for pre -application advice which was unfair to the taxpayer. Residents with general inquiries should be find the information needed via our website and links, but if any local specific advice concerning planning applications was required then they would need to pay for the pre-application advice service.

Members praised the themes of fairness and consistency throughout the presentation and felt that those were two principles that should underpin the planning process, but concern was raised that the Planning Inspectorate made too many inconsistent planning decisions on similar projects which affected local residents.

The Chair agreed that the Planning Inspectorate were inconsistent but advised that Members should make it clear to the residents that the Council had no powers over the decision of the Planning Inspectorate. However, the Council would have a consistent approach to its own planning process and decision making.

Following comments concerning clarifying information on conservation areas for residents, the Assistant Director (Planning) explained that there was a big issue with window and door replacement in conservation areas several years ago. Part of the issue was a lack of understanding around the value of the doors/windows and the need for a specific appearance in those areas. Residents living in the area were unaware how the change of appearance of properties affected the area. To combat residents buying the wrong doors,/windows and having to change them to the correct appearance a Conservation Area guide was created which improved residents understanding of what materials they had to use if they wanted to make any changes or replacements. Recently there had been further requests to remove UPVC and composite windows and install windows that were right for the conservation area they lived in; the correct windows did not usually result in a significantly higher cost in most areas. With the additional consideration of climate change, there had been some amendments made to the guidance.

The Assistant Director (Planning) explained that the document would work alongside the Corporate Plan and the monitoring of things, such as responding to a planning application if it is invalid within five working days for minor and house holder applications, would be carried out by the performance indicators that would be reported to Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee through quarterly reports. If the Committee wanted any specific data monitored then it could be requested and added in as a performance indicators. Data was reported to the Government but the Council needed to know what the Government required so that multiple sets of similar data weren't reported for the service. The Government recently announced that planning application fees would be increasing from April 2024 but in the expectation that planning services would continue to improve

The Chair advised that the annual report for the Committee would include quantitative and qualitative data; a similar Council would need to be found to compare statistics too as neighbouring authorities such as Medway Council were too large to compare accurately too.

The Chair advised that the Strategy would be discussed further at the Committee in November 2023.

8. Corporate Register of Partnerships and Shared Working Arrangements - Strategic Environment Committee

The Committee was informed of the council's involvement in partnerships that were within the remit of the committee which was an annual item to the Committee.

The current partnerships that most directly relate to the work of the Strategic Environment Committee were as follows:

- CCTV Services Partnership
- Gravesham Community Safety Partnership (CSP)
- G-Safe Town Centre Crime Reduction (Radionet) Scheme
- Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership

Members noted the information.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 21:22pm.