

Overview Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 17 October 2019

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Jordan Meade (Chair)

Cllr Steve Thompson (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Conrad Broadley
Les Hoskins
Bob Lane
Elizabeth Mulheran
Christina Rolles
Peter Scollard

Please note: Cllr Brian Sangha was also in attendance.

David Hughes Chief Executive
Kevin Burbidge Director (Planning & Development)
Wendy Lane Assistant Director (Planning)
Ben Clarke Committee & Scrutiny Assistant (Minutes)

122. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Leslie Hills and Cllr Alan Ridgers. Cllr Bob Lane and Cllr Les Hoskins substituted respectively.

123. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held Thursday, 19 September 2019 were signed by the Chair.

124. Declarations of interest

Cllr Broadley declared an interest in regards to Item 6 – Scrutiny Review – Maritime Strategy Review Group as he was the Chair of several boating clubs

125. Call ins

The Chair called in the following item from the Cabinet meeting of 07 October 2019:

Item 6. Local Plan - Statement of Community Involvement

The Chair explained that his reason for calling in the item was to evaluate the effectiveness and inclusiveness of the proposed consultation as set out in the Statement of Community Involvement, attached at appendix two.

The Chair thanked the Director (Planning & Development), the Assistant Director (Planning) and Cllr Brian Sangha for attending the meeting at his request. Additionally, the Chair gave his personal thanks to Cllr Brian Sangha for meeting with himself and Cllr Bob Lane recently,

delivering on his commitment to work with all parties and maintain a healthy working relationship.

The Director (Planning & Development) presented the Committee with the Statement of Community Involvement, which was approved at the Cabinet meeting. The Statement of Community Involvement sets out the Council's approach to consultation on planning matters such as the Local Plan, Planning Applications and Neighbourhood Planning. The current Statement of Community Involvement was adopted in March 2007; it was therefore necessary for the Council to undertake a review.

The Chair opened the meeting to the floor and allowed the Committee Members to ask their questions to the officers; the Director (Housing & Development) and the Assistant Director (Planning) explained the following:

- With regard to consultations from the EDC, as the decision-making authority but without plan-making powers, the EDC are expected to deliver Gravesham Council's planning policies. The Council works with the EDC as it is developing a range of non-statutory guidance. However, the Council is just a consultee on planning applications submitted to the EDC and primarily responds to neighbourhood notifications received when there was a direct impact to Gravesham's residents, businesses or environment stemming from an application
- The EDC has requested the Council to formally adopt their guidance documents and the Council were previously asked to formally endorse their implementation framework; the Leader is a member of the EDC Board and as such is privy to all of the Part B private information if anything of concern should be fed back to the Council
- Currently the Council has no powers or input with regard to the decision making process of EDC and the Council were only considered a neighbouring consultee. However most of their project work was shared with officers during development. Officer input was also sought from EDC on various issues and projects before the decision making process.
- The Council will reach out to the public, to ask for their input on consultations, through many mediums aside from social media such as releasing press statements, advertisements in the 'Your Borough' and links on the website etc. The goal with the consultations was to not only reach the residents but also people with links to the area, workers in the Borough, special interest groups and the youth
- Public/Town Hall meetings were conducted in the past and they were found to be of very little help in taking forward policy formulation by providing a stage for outspoken and aggressive voices to be the only ones heard. Many of the quieter members of the public had trouble trying to get their points across to officers; that is why it was found more beneficial to hold drop in sessions. At the drop ins, officers could converse with many different residents about their queries, issues and needs which would be fed back into the Local Plan process
- Gravesham, as a local authority, did have a duty to cooperate with the neighbouring authorities on cross border issues including consideration of making provision for some of their housing need and vice versa, if requested. Discussions had been held at officer level with Dartford and Medway as Gravesham is in the same housing market as them; Sevenoaks had their own market and Tonbridge & Malling were split across two markets
- Dartford's decisions to allow Bluewater to expand and take current and future footfall from Gravesham have not, as yet, been followed up by an agreement to take the

housing needs of those households. In previous Gravesham BC consultations the public have identified brownfield sites in Dartford as their preferred locations which could be utilised for development instead of Green Belt land. Dartford has indicated that Gravesham will be asked to help them to meet their land for travellers need. Before anything is agreed by either local authority, a stringent set of criteria had to be met such as what evidence did we and they have that housing/traveller needs couldn't be met, proof that Green Belt land couldn't be utilised for housing and any other additional evidence that proved that the local authority couldn't meet their housing/traveller need and required neighbouring cooperation

- Discussions had been solely officer based but any statement of common ground between neighbouring authorities would have to be approved by Members first; Cabinet would decide what route to take with the decision as it was part of the spatial strategy
- In the future, Instagram may be looked at for engaging the younger generation, with videos, with regard to the Local Plan; all videos will also have subtitle capabilities

The Committee addressed questions to Cllr Brian Sangha and received the following responses:

- It was vital to ensure all Ward Members were engaged in the process of how things moved forward with regard to the Local Plan as their input was highly sought after and they would be able to better answer questions and address issues from their constituents
- The Strategic Environment Committee was only an advisory Committee but it will still play an important role in the various development stages of the Local Plan as it will allow discussions to be had on officers' views and proposals. Additionally that Committee will be able to give a steer on how Ward Members were to be engaged
- As part of the in-house training programme for Members, briefings and workshop days will look to be created in the future which inform Members on the progress with the Local Plan. Parish Councils and other local groups that represented areas such as Istead Rise and Chalk will be a lot more involved in the process going forward as well so that the whole Borough will have the opportunity to be engaged
- Future documents will not be comprised of 300 plus pages of technical information; the documents will be condensed and developed into more friendly formats without a lot of technical planning policy terminology. They will be written in laymen's language making it easier for both Members and the public to understand
- Discussions have been held on the creation of a regular bulletin which would be sent out periodically with updates on the Local Plan and helpful information
- Andy Rayfield, the Communication's Manager, will be informed fully of the need to put out clear and understandable information to the public regarding all consultations and Local Plan information
- The resources that will be available to Members to arm them with the correct information for public engagement haven't been completely figured out as of yet. However they will have all the correct information in the future which will give them the confidence to be able to come to the Overview Scrutiny Committee and relay all the information they have learned

The Chair was encouraged that social media would play a larger role in reaching greater audiences but was disheartened that it was agreed at the previous Cabinet meeting that Gravesham would not be entering into two way responses with online comments to promote the consultation. He agreed that it would be impossible to answer every single comment but

he suggested that comments could be responded to strategically; one response for every fifth comment for example. They could then be reminded to post their comments via the consultation link otherwise they would not be formally received and taken heed of.

The Assistant Director (Planning) described the positive and negatives to social media and advised Members that the team learnt that to combat misinformation it was beneficial to produce FAQs documents which were regularly updated to reflect issues raised in responses including those via social media. The 'frequently asked questions' documents allowed users to see answers to questions that couldn't be answered in the consultation document. They also answered the standard questions of legality and due process such as why Green Belt land had to be considered for release and why the Council was legally obligated to follow Government law etc. At the same time, the Assistant Director (Planning) agreed that our social media should be mindful of the need to regularly remind users that comments needed to be formally submitted.

The Chair recognised that the Local Plan was a daunting document for members of the public and raised further concerns over their understanding of the process behind it. He therefore requested the Communications Manager create an informal one page document that outlined the basics of the Local Plan process that could be easily understood by the public and read on smart devices.

The Director (Planning & Development) informed the Chair that the new Communications Manager was a very able officer who had previously worked in a communications company that dealt with planning matters and was very astute at converting planning language into understandable terms.

The Committee raised general concern over the consultee's responses being counted and taken into consideration by the Council; the Director (Planning & Development) assured Members that all relevant responses were taken into consideration properly. He referred to the report to Cabinet in respect of the Development Management Policies document which was very clear about what the Council received and the changes that were made because of those responses.

The Chair questioned the Assistant Director (Planning) on what 'best practice' meant in the context of identifying stake holders; the Assistant Director (Planning) explained that appeal decisions or judicial reviews were mainly used as the basis for 'best practice'. That was due to the those decisions being given extra consideration for moral justice issues such as impact on quality of life and following legislation defined by planning regulations.

The Chair pressed upon the point of holding Town Hall/Public meetings to educate residents on the process of the Local Plan; the Director (Planning & Development) advised that this approach had previously been unhelpful, had been considered and rejected and thus he couldn't commit to anything, but promised to take the notion away to consider resource requirements, how the meetings could be controlled, possible invitees and the benefits of holding such meetings before reaching a decision. Cllr Sangha echoed the Directors (Planning & Development) comments regarding public meetings and assured the Committee they weren't off the table but needed further thought first.

The Vice-Chair suggested that Members held ward based presentations rather than town hall meetings to get the relevant information distributed across the Borough. An online presentation based system called 'Slido' (<https://www.sli.do/>) could be utilised for the purpose; it allowed live interaction with users contributing their questions via their

smartphones with the presenter being in control of everything. The Vice-Chair felt strongly that the dissemination of information at ward level was Members' responsibility.

Following a discussion on amendment of the Statement of Community Involvement and assurances on cross party working the Director (Planning & Development) advised that there was no need to amend the Statement to include the commitment of a Members toolkit to prepare them for distributing information on the Local Plan. The Director (Planning & Development) further stated that they needed to take it back, review best practice first and discuss it further with Members and the Communications Manager. The Committee were also reminded that the Statement was only a minimum of what was needed to be carried out.

Cllr Sangha gave his assurance to the Committee that he and the officers present would take away all that was discussed at the meeting and report back to the Overview Scrutiny Committee in the future.

The Chair thanked Cllr Sangha for his assurance to the Committee and for officers commitment to help Members disseminate Local Plan information to their residents.

126. Scrutiny Reviews - Oral Update

Street Cleanliness Scrutiny Review Group

The Chair invited the Vice-Chair to speak to the Committee regarding the Street Cleanliness Scrutiny Review.

The Vice-Chair updated the Committee on the Street Cleanliness Scrutiny Review and its arrangements:

- Firstly, the Vice-Chair apologised to the Committee as he had been very ill since the last meeting to discuss the Terms of Reference and was unable to progress as much as he wanted. Additionally, apologies were given for Cllr Croxston as he was unable to attend the meeting tonight
- Cllr Croxston asked the Vice-Chair, at the request of the Director (Housing & Operations) and the Director (Corporate Services), if he would amend the Terms of Reference to reduce the scope of the review as it was officers view that it was too wide covering and very onerous on the requirements of officers
- After careful consideration, the Vice-Chair advised that he had no objection to reviewing the arrangements for proceeding the review and reminded the Committee that the 6 month target was indeed a target and not a definitive deadline

The Vice-Chair inquired about the comment regarding onerousness for officers and sought clarification if the review asked too much from officers to be achievable.

The Chief Executive clarified that the level of work needed for the climate change working group far exceeded what was originally planned for and it involved a lot of the officers that would be required for the Street Cleanliness Review. Due to that carbon neutral commitment and the requirements under the resolution to bring a report back to Full Council in six months (Decembers Full Council meeting), the officers involved in the review group would be too hard pressed to meet the scrutiny reviews six month target as well.

The Chief Executive had already relayed the concerns to the leader and it had been accepted that a phased approach would be necessary with regards to the review. The Chief

Executive asked the Committee if they would be willing to accept a phased approach breaking down the review into smaller manageable chunks.

The Vice-Chair thanked the Chief Executive for the explanation and expressed his concern for officer's wellbeing as well; he suggested the following way forward:

- The first meeting of the Scrutiny Sub-Group needed to be held during the week of 21-25 October 2019 to investigate what a phased approach would mean and how the review group should operate
- The four work streams noted for the review couldn't be easily dealt with one by one as they interlinked across the work stream and directorates. The first subcommittee meeting would also ask lead officers to look at how the work streams interlink with each other
- The 6 month target could remain the target; it was not a set in stone deadline and it may take longer. An interim report could be submitted to Cabinet in March detailing the progress made, giving Members a chance to discuss it at the next Full Council meeting
- The suggested start time from the Committee Services Officer (Scrutiny) was 4pm-5pm for the meetings however due to Members having different working hours, the meetings of the Street Cleanliness Scrutiny Review Group would commence at 7pm

The Committee agreed with the Vice-Chairs suggested way forward.

Maritime Strategy Scrutiny Review Group

The Vice-Chair made a request to the Chair that the starting times of his Scrutiny Review group also started at 7pm to help the Labour Members attend the meetings.

The Chair shared his concern with the Vice-Chair about timing and advised that he would consider the request as best he could but could not fully agree to it as in some cases external bodies would be invited to the review group meetings and the timing would depend on their availability. The Chair agreed to liaise with the Committee Services Officer (Scrutiny) on a case by case basis to determine the time and date of the meetings.

The Chair gave an update on the Maritime Strategy Review Group:

- He met with the Town & Twinning Manager to discuss strategic partnerships that the Council may already have and asked for a list to be created so that they could be contacted and invited to future Committees. They could then be asked to attend the sub groups to deliver presentations and give further information
- The Chair was unable to attend a people & place meeting so Cllr Wardle attended in his stead; he will be giving up update on that meeting at a future Committee meeting
- The Chair met with the Leisure & Resilience Manager to review recreational usage of the river
- The Chair also met with the Assistant Director (Communities) and the new Economic Development Officer to see how the sub group could also review economic and maritime development
- A meeting was held with the Assistant Director (Planning) to look at how the review could be incorporated into the Local Plan process; future discussions will be held

- Once the Committee Services Officer (Scrutiny) had returned from leave a meeting would be booked with support from the Port of London Authority (PLA)

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8:52pm.