

Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 19 November 2018

7.30pm

Present:

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

Cllrs: Derek Ashenden
 Harold Craske
 Brian Francis
 Gary Harding
 Baljit Hayre
 Bob Lane
 Emma Morley
 Frank Wardle

Kevin Burbidge	Director (Planning & Development)
Wendy Lane	Assistant Director (Planning)
Simon Hookway	Assistant Director (Communities)
Keith Grimley	Senior Economic Development Officer
Simon Harrison	Head of Design – Ebbsfleet Development Corporation (EDC)
Ben Clarke	Committee & Scrutiny Assistant (Minutes)

15. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Conrad Broadley. Cllr Frank Wardle substituted.

16. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting Tuesday, 17 September 2019 were signed by the Chair.

17. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Lauren Sullivan declared an interest in item 5: Ebbsfleet Public Realm Strategy as she was the Council's nominated Member to sit on the EDC Planning Committee.

Cllr Harold Craske also declared an interest in the same item as he was the Council's nominated substitute for the EDC planning Committee.

18. Ebbsfleet Public Realm Strategy

The Chair welcomed the Head of Design – EDC to the Committee and reminded everyone to speak clearly when using their microphones.

The Head of Design – EDC gave a detailed presentation to the Committee on the Ebbsfleet Public Realm Strategy; the presentation can be accessed through the below link:

<http://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b12371/Supplementary%20Pack%20-%20EDC%20Public%20Realm%20Strategy%20Presentation%20Tuesday%202019-Nov-2019%2019.30%20Strategic%20E.pdf?T=9>

Following the presentation, Members had their questions answered by the Head of Design – EDC:

- A stewardship policy was being discussed by EDC with the ambition of setting up a legacy organisation that will take on the responsibility of the management companies that were responsible for the maintenance of green spaces in non-adopted residential streets for all planned future developments. For the residential streets that have been adopted, EDC were exploring options to take over the maintenance of the green spaces on behalf of KCC
- The EDC employed a professor from Sheffield, who was an expert in the field of sustainable planting, to review the Public Realm Strategy and give advice on the types of trees that would be climate change resilient until 2060. The Strategy factored in the costs of maintenance to all planned trees as well as setting out the different types of trees that would be needed in relation to the different sized streets
- Additionally, the Strategy detailed technical guidance on the below ground maintenance of the root systems of the trees so that they don't grow out of control after a number of years and cause structural issues in the developments. The extra work to the trees and the roots would increase the upfront capital cost but reduce the future costs of overall maintenance fees
- The issue of using local firms to supply plants and other shrubbery will be taken back to EDC to be discussed so that advice can be given to the developers to source locally although the EDC have very little influence over their direct suppliers
- The evaluation framework was often used when there was a disagreement between the consulting teams and the design teams. A workshop is convened with various teams of different specialists at KCC and scores given across all nine areas as a collective responsibility rather than individual specialisms; that method removed all adversity and allowed for a collaborative approach. If there was a disagreement during the design process then the scoring would be undertaken at the application stage
- The phrase '*EDC is presenting the Public Realm Strategy to Gravesham Borough Council for endorsement, to maximise the material weighting of the document within the planning system*' meant that, with the endorsement of the relevant local authority and engagement from a public consultation, more weight could be given to the document in the planning decision-making process and be far more likely to achieve the desired outcomes laid out in the framework. Additionally, if the EDC did not have the endorsement of Gravesham Borough Council, then they could be challenged much more easily by developers / landowners within the planning system
- The presentation given was just an executive summary of the official Public Realm Strategy document which was 180 pages long and has been available on the EDCs website since June 2019 in PDF format. As the document was technical in nature, it is intended that the document be split into independent web pages to make it easier to search and comprehend
- The intention was to develop a small complimentary guide setting out to the public how they can engage with the consultation; that is being planned for rollout in February 2020
- There are 2000 homes in the Garden City which are occupied and will be the target of the consultation; the residents were eager to get involved in the development of new homes in the area. Additionally, Dartford, Gravesham and neighbourhood

residents groups would also be involved as the neighbouring communities. All of those groups will form the basis of the engagement programme

- The Strategy referenced accessibility for disabled members of the public in best practice standards but didn't define any specific standards yet. The EDC had started a piece of work on accessibility and a paper will be submitted to the Board setting out what the preferred approach was for accessible design with regards to buildings and spaces. The aim for the future was to have a document that outlined a best practice that was over and above the standard building regulations

The Chair thanked the Head of Design for an informative presentation and urged him to take the following points back to the EDC for consideration:

1. As mentioned previously, the point of the EDC advising developers to source their products such as plants, trees and paving etc locally was essential
2. 65% of the space in the Garden City was classified as public realm or parks so the EDC were urged to continue to develop their community engagement plan to ensure all possible views were considered
3. A plan had to be in place to ensure the management companies that would have responsibility for the maintenance of the public realms were good companies that would listen to residents and not allow all of the green spaces to wither away after ten years

The Head of Design – EDC assured the Chair he would take the first two points back to the EDC and offered a further explanation in relation to the third point:

- The EDC fully recognised the concern over the management companies and that is why the stewardship of the public realms was currently being worked on. The EDC were looking at different models to ensure the green spaces were looked after by a trustworthy management company. One approach being investigated was to develop a trust that had a public governance system built into it that would provide sufficient revenue for the management companies to sustain the maintenance of the facilities for the foreseeable future

The Director (Planning & Development) advised that the Chief Executive of the EDC had given GBC access to the research undertaken by the professor that gave details of sustainable planting in this time of climate change. The plants can be utilised as natural barriers to prevent access in certain areas and enhance access in other areas; the opportunity has been followed up with the Director (Housing & Operations).

The Chair thanked the Head of Design – EDC for his time and information and hoped that he would report the progress of the Strategy back to the Committee in the future.

After a short discussion, on the endorsement of the document as whole or just the principles seen in the presentation, it was agreed that the Strategic Environment Committee would endorse the principles of the Public Realm Strategy.

19. Draft Economic Development Strategy

The Assistant Director (Communities) introduced the new Senior Economic Development Officer to the Committee who has joined the Economic Development team and will contribute to the development of the proposed Strategy.

Members were provided with a presentation on the draft Economic Development Strategy and were asked to comment on the emerging objectives for the Strategy; the presentation can be accessed through the below link:

<http://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b12372/Supplementary%20Pack%20-%20Economic%20Development%20Strategy%20Presentation%20Tuesday%2019-Nov-2019%2019.30%20Strate.pdf?T=9>

Member's attention was drawn to section three of the report which described the challenges that Gravesham's economy faced and needed to be addressed if it the Council's ambition for a vibrant and productive economy was to be realised. The challenges included:

- Lowest productivity levels – Gravesham had the lowest productivity levels and the smallest local economy in Kent & Medway when compared with other Kent Districts
- Lower job density – Gravesham's job density was low, with a ratio of 0.62 jobs available for each person aged between 16 and 64 (the 'working age' cohort), compared with a figure of 0.87 for the South East
- Lower wage levels – Statistical analysis demonstrate that local residents who commuted out of the local area for work, enjoyed markedly higher earnings
- Higher unemployment – Unemployment in Gravesham (3.4%) continued to report above the Kent figure (2.6%)
- Lower attainment and skill levels – On average, Gravesham residents of working age have lower attainment and skill levels than other parts of the South East and nationally

On a more positive note, the Assistant Director (Communities) advised that Gravesham was seeing a growth in small businesses with around 4000 of them operating within Gravesham; their three year survival rates stood at 65% which was higher than the rest of the County.

To combat some of the challenges Gravesham faced and fundamental to achieving a more productive local economy was an expansion in the number, variety and quality of job opportunities in the Borough. Investment in new employment space and skills were essential to that objective and in ensuring that local residents could access better paid jobs within the Borough. Investors needed to be informed of the planned changes to Gravesham and how well connected Gravesend was with the high speed train links to London.

The following objectives, listed on pages 12-15, were proposed and considered by the Committee in response to the challenges set out in Section 3 of the report:

- Objective 1: Place Branding to Promote Gravesham as a Place 'Open for Business'
- Objective 2: New employment land and premises to enable businesses to grow
- Objective 3: Enhancing the Borough's Infrastructure to Re-inforce Accessibility & Connectivity Advantages
- Objective 4: Supporting Enterprise to Encourage Business Growth

- Objective 5: Skills & employability to ensure that the local workforce is equipped with appropriate skills to access employment opportunities
- Objective 6: Recognising the Changes that are taking place in the rural economy and its contribution to overall local economic growth
- Objective 7: To identify the Implications of the Councils climate change commitments in support of sustainable economic development

The Senior Economic Development Officer informed the Committee of the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) and its role in the developing the Strategy; SELEPS three strategic opportunities, as outlined in the presentation, were:

- UK's Global Gateway
- Communities for the Future
- Coastal Catalyst

The South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) was working towards publishing a Local Industrial Strategy by the end of March 2020 in accordance with the productivity and competitiveness focus of the UK's Industrial Strategy in respect of productivity. To date SELEP has been focused on its strategy for economic growth, skills, transport and infrastructure through its Strategic Economic Plan and its Skills Strategy 2018-2023.

To inform SELEP's strategy, Kent County Council, Medway Council, and the 12 Kent Districts were working with the Kent & Medway Economic Partnership to develop a Kent & Medway Enterprise and Productivity Strategy. That will identify Kent & Medway's contribution to achieving change in the South East and focus on addressing a disparity between Kent & Medway's competitiveness and the rest of the South East.

Those strategies were also important in that they will set the framework for future investments that can take place through the Government's Local Growth Funding which was allocated via SELEP. It was therefore timely that the Council refined its priorities for growth to benefit from future funding programmes.

The Chair thanked the officers for an informative presentation and asked that all the slides from the presentation were circulated to the Committee.

Following the presentation, the Director (Planning & Development) and Assistant Director (Communities) fielded questions from the Committee:

- A possible reason for the higher survival rate of small business was due to Gravesham being a location that was cheaper to rent and cheaper labour being available. Connectivity was also one of Gravesham's greatest assets, especially with the HS1 service to London; additionally the support network for the business community and collaboration between businesses was of a very high level within Gravesham. Some work to establish the exact reasons for small businesses thriving would be worthwhile.
- Gravesham needed to be able to communicate its priorities well; for instance to increase the job density rate more land and premises would have to be made available to expand the workforce and increase growth within the Borough

- Many of the smaller businesses that operated out of their home addresses were under the radar due to their size and location; additionally the Council recognised that some businesses wished to stay at the same level and did not want to expand. The businesses that wanted to move up and expand would be offered assistance where possible
- The SELEP doesn't have direct representation from the Council; the SELEP is a federated model that worked through the Kent & Medway Economic Partnership. The Leader sat on that Partnership and the Director (Planning & Development) was allowed to support the Leader at the meetings.
- External funding was received from SELEP to fund the infrastructure work carried out at Rathmore Road.
- A number of other schemes in the Town Centre were funded through SELEP: improvements to the Town Pier, the Wayfaring Scheme and various Cycle Strategies. Funding has also been put in place to acquire land with Kent Highways Authority at Barrack Row to facilitate the development of the interchange and enhance the bus stops in Garrick Street. ANPR cameras were also being investigated to prevent drivers going through the bus gate at Garrick Street
- Local small businesses work together to support each other; the next meeting of the Business Network was scheduled for Thursday, 28 November 2019 at 08:00am if Members desired to attend
- The team will look at promoting small businesses in each edition of the Your Borough magazine; the highlighting of successful small businesses can be linked back to the place branding of Gravesham
- The team focus on vacant properties within the Town Centre as it is vital to have businesses active within the properties. Vacancies have a fundamental impact on business rates income. Work was being carried out in the background to determine why properties were empty and what actions need to be taken to ensure that they are marketed to potential businesses
- A promotional document will be created in partnership with the branding exercise highlighting the connectivity of Gravesham and its links to London
- An action plan will be written up alongside the Strategy as soon as possible and then be brought back to the Committee for further comment to allow it to move forward in the future
- The Council do have a connection with North Kent College however those ties needed to be strengthened and their engagement sought with the Council's priorities with regards to apprenticeships and employability, etc

The Chair added that the EDC were also looking at upskilling the local workforce as the Garden City development will require people with a higher degree of skills; they are working with Greenwich University to see how the level of skills can be increased.

The Chair offered the below comments in relation to the Objectives:

- The wording on Objective 6 needed strengthening as 78% of the Borough was Green Belt land and considered 'rural economy'. The wording needed to include more about how support would be grown and the rural economy would be retained
- The Objectives needed to be placed in an order of priority to Gravesham; upskilling the workforce and the rural economy were important issues that needed further development.
- A clear delivery and action plan needed to be created to support the achievement of the aspirations of the Economic Development Strategy

20. Planning Performance

Members were presented with a short presentation outlining the performance of the Council's Planning Services; the presentation can be accessed through the below link:

<http://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b12373/Supplementary%20Pack%20-%20Planning%20Performance%20Presentation%20Tuesday%2019-Nov-2019%2019.30%20Strategic%20Enviro.pdf?T=9>

The Director (Planning & Development) advised that the report was produced at the request of Members and was the first of a regular series intended to be presented every six months to inform Members on current performance in respect of the planning service. The report included performance information on all the teams based within the Planning Service: Development Management, Planning Enforcement and Planning Policy.

The Director (Planning & Development) advised the Committee that as it was the first report it gave background information, the required processes and what the constraints were that the service faced; performance figures from the last two year period were included. The Director (Planning & Development) asked Members to identify any other areas of performance that they wished to see within the next six monthly performance report.

The Director (Planning & Development) highlighted difficulties the Planning Service at Gravesham faced:

- Staff vacancies were an issue as over the last couple of years (seen on slide 2) the Development Management and Planning Policy teams have been down at least two members of staff, with turnover having an added impact
- Currently there are three posts out to advert as another officer is leaving the Service at the end of the week
- A difficulty the Service faced linked to the vacancies was the consistency of them as when one staff member left, another joined resulting in a state of forever training up new officers costing officer time and resources
- Fully qualified Planners were an increasingly scarce resource as they were highly sought after by the private sector and local authorities couldn't match the salaries offered by those private companies. For example, Gravesham lost several senior Planners to the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, which offers higher salaries

The Director (Planning & Development) explained that on a more positive note, the Council had been lucky to attract a small number of recent graduates who would be trained up within Gravesham with the aspiration of making them qualified Planners. Additionally, a number of female staff had been employed who all worked flexible hours as part of their childcare arrangements; even though they only worked three days a week each they provided their years of experience to the role making them valuable. Further information can be included on resourcing in the next update report.

The Director (Planning & Development) highlighted further key headlines from the report and presentation regarding the types of planning Appeals, planning decisions and national figures.

The Director (Planning & Development) and the Assistant Director (Planning) fielded questions from the Committee explaining that:

- The Council paid national wages that were in line with the salaries in other Borough Councils; 'golden hellos' have been seen in other local authorities but they are not exercised at Gravesham as they were seen as divisive for the existing staff
- The cost of training up graduates to a higher level of education was not a great amount when compared to the loyalty that was received from officers who have had their careers furthered by the Council. Additionally some of the cost of training could be offset through various means, including the Apprenticeships Levy
- Some Councils have struggled to attract fully qualified Planners and as such have taken the Planners out of the NJC pay scale to be able to pay more but Gravesham had not reached that level of need and will continue to pay in line with the NJC pay scale
- Most building tends to take place during the summer but planning permission has to be in place first so planning permission was sought all year round; a full analysis on the busiest time for submission of planning applications has not been conducted
- The recent Peer Challenge highlighted the friendliness of staff and the work of the team
- Gravesham's Planning Department has the most flexible working arrangements of any Planning Department in the County due to its IT equipment; staff could work from anywhere at all with the equipment they have been provided with. They can access all of the necessary documents on their Surface Pros meaning flexible working due to childcare etc was not an issue. Due to that flexibility and the range of helpful equipment, it increased the attractiveness of working at Gravesham ; the hope was that more candidates would come through hearing of Gravesham arrangements from word of mouth between other local authorities
- A consultancy agency has been used in the past with mixed results; Richard McEllistrum (Interim Planning Development Manager) has been very successful at GBC however previous experience of other agency staff has been less than positive. Additionally, some staff resented the idea of the agency staff getting paid more for the same job however it was pointed out that they weren't receiving any pension payments, only getting paid for working hours and the agency took a substantial cut of the increased pay
- When an application was received via the planning portal there was a period of five working days to validate the application for minors and ten for majors; officers were alerted via an electronic notification. Some applications did take a lot longer to validate but that was usually down to the applications not being complete or the fee not being paid
- Key sites around Gravesend were being monitored including the old Police Station, the Heritage Quarter, the planned development at Lord Street, the old M Block Hospital land and the Clifton Slipways development; a number of those developments were already moving forward. No threats of compulsory purchases orders have been given but GBC were still prepared to go down that route if it was absolutely necessary
- The Council took applicants for jobs who state that they have a disability seriously and accommodated where possible; indeed on job specifications it was highlighted that if disabled applicants met the minimum criteria requirements they would be shortlisted for an interview. Unfortunately the disabled applicants that the Council received so far for planning roles have not met the minimum criteria requirements. The Council was fully aware of its responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act

The Director (Planning & Development) agreed to include the following information in the next six monthly update report:

- A guide on the quality of the first submission of planning applications and if they were validated within the five / ten working days of receipt
- Figures on the percentage of planning applications that were submitted correctly the first time and the degree of improvement after six months
- Further information on key Brownfield sites that had their development stalled, key sites within Gravesend that needed developing and the progress of the planned development.

The Director (Planning & Development) agreed with the Chair's comments and offered the below response to the third point:

- A working group was already meeting and looking at the key sites that had been sitting unused in the Town for a long time and work with the owners of the pieces of land to bring development forward

The Chair thanked the Director (Planning & Development) and Assistant Director (Planning) for the comprehensive report and asked for the next report to focus less on background and more on trends, reasons for exceptional/dipping performance and what improvements have been made during the six month period.

The Committee asked that congratulations be passed back to the Planning Teams for their fantastic work and their delivery of the significant improvements to the department during the last two years.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 9:42pm.