

Commercial Services Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 2 June 2020

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Lenny Rolles (Chair)
Cllr Sarah Gow (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Gurdip Ram Bungar
Leslie Pearton
Anthony Pritchard
Tony Rana
Tony Rice
Gurbax Singh
Denise Tiran
Gurjit Kaur Bains

Sarah Parfitt Director (Corporate Services)
Elizabeth Thornton Service Manager (Property & Regulatory Services)
Simon Walsh Service Manager (Communities)
Lauren Wallis Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

1. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Jordan Meade and Cllr Gurjit Bains attended as his substitute.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2020 were signed by the Chair.

3. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Lenny Rolles, Cllr Sarah Gow and Cllr Tony Rice all declared another interest in Item 5 – Coronavirus: Commercial Services Cabinet Portfolio Impact in that the report mentioned Rosherville Limited, and all named Councillors were Directors of this company.

4. Coronavirus: Commercial Services Cabinet Portfolio Impact

The Service Manager (Property & Regulatory Services) introduced the report which provided an update on the Council's investment activities and she highlighted the following:

- Since 23 March 2020 the Council had not sought to identify or progress any property investment opportunities.
- This was the first quarter of commercial rents and it was too early to assess the impact on the Council's commercial income and officers had been supporting its commercial tenants on a case by case basis.
- It was also too early to consider the impact of the Covid-19 situation of the capital values of Council-owned commercial assets and the wider investment portfolio which could take from 3 to 6 months to become apparent.

The Chair reflected on the background of the report and thanked everyone at the Council and within this Portfolio who had worked hard to step up to the challenges brought by the lockdown. This had included assisting 7,995 vulnerable people and 140 food packages being distributed. He also recognised the voluntary workers, the Gurdwara and the foodbanks, the Borough Councillors and officers and all those across the Borough who had pulled out all the stops during the ongoing crisis. Following a request that a statement via the newspapers be issued thanking all those who had assisted across the Borough, the Chair undertook to put this suggestion to the Leader of the Council.

A number of Councillors endorsed and echoed the Chair with regard to the exemplary performance of Council officers.

The following points were raised during discussion on this report:

- Following a question on whether the Council had contacted commercial tenants to check on whether they needed assistance, Members were informed that tenants who needed help had, in the main, contacted the Council. In addition, it was sometimes difficult to contact tenants as they were not usually present at the commercial property and this was often the only contact number the Council held. The Director (Corporate Services) added that support was also offered by the Council through the Government's business support grants scheme. The Economic Development team was also communicating with the business community and the Borough Council had constantly promoted the message, including in the Gravesend Messenger, that residents and businesses should contact the Council for advice and support.
- The Director (Corporate Services) confirmed that 10% of commercial tenants had contacted the Council seeking support and alternative arrangements to meet their payments to the Council.
- Members were advised that 1,111 Business Support Grants totalling £13.6m had been paid. It was noted that the Council had performed well in national statistics and, in the latest release by the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, had been positioned fifth in the country. The Chair applauded this great achievement.
- Following a question on commercial investments, Members were advised that any change in the capital value of properties owned by the Council lagged behind the market so the effect of the pandemic would only become apparent in three to six months.
- A suggestion was made that it might be useful for every commercial tenant to have a risk assessment to allow the Council to plan for any oncoming impacts. The Committee was advised that by the end of this quarter, the Council would be in a better position to identify tenants experiencing difficulties in meeting their rent payments and officers would then contact these tenants to find out how to assist them.

Resolved that the report be noted.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 7.55 pm