

Overview Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 13 January 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Jordan Meade (Chair)
Cllr Baljit Hayre (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Conrad Broadley
Gurdip Ram Bungar
Sarah Gow
Diane Morton
Peter Scollard
Gurbax Singh
Frank Wardle

Also in attendance: Cllr John Burden, Leader of the Executive
Cllr Lee Croxton, Cllr Dakota Dibben and Aaron Elliott

Richard Bain Managing Director Jetstream Tours
Brian Corbett Chair, London River Heritage Harbour Group
Sandra Soder Local Historian

Melanie Norris Director (Communities)
Sarah Parfitt Director (Corporate Services)
Lisa Nyon Assistant Director (Corporate Services)
Elizabeth Thornton Service Manager (Property and Regulatory)
Chris Wakeford Committee Services Manager (Minutes)

16. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Gurjit Kaur Bains and Cllr Leslie Hills; Cllr Frank Wardle and Cllr Conrad Broadley appeared as their respective substitutes.

17. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview Scrutiny Committee held on 14 October 2021 were signed by the Chair.

18. Declarations of interest

Cllr Conrad Broadley declared an 'other interest' in Item 5. and Item 9: Call in of Cabinet Item 11. Town Pier and Pontoon Part A Report and Cabinet Item 14. Town Pier and Pontoon Part B Report in respect of his interest in nautical matters in that he owned several types of boat and was the Chairman of the Dartford and Crayford Creek Restoration Trust, the Chairman of the Broadness Cruising Club, the Director of the Northfleet Harbour Restoration

Trust, a member of Gravesend Sailing Club and a KCC Councillor for Northfleet & Gravesend West.

Cllr Jordan Meade declared an 'other interest' in Item 5. and Item 9: Call in of Cabinet Item 11. Town Pier and Pontoon Part A Report and Cabinet Item 14. Town Pier and Pontoon Part B Report in that he is a National Trustee and Director of the Maritime Volunteer Service and a KCC Councillor for Gravesend East.

19. Call Ins - Cabinet Item 11. Town Pier and Pontoon Part A Report

The Service Manager (Property and Regulatory) presented the Committee with the Town Pier and Pontoon Part A report that went to Cabinet on 4 January 2022. The report sought authorisation to agree the sale of the Town Pier and Pontoon, West Street, Gravesend in order to facilitate rapid river transport solutions for the Town.

The Service Manager (Property and Regulatory) drew Members attention to the following sections of the report:

Section 4. Context

Section 5. Heads of Terms and related matters

Section 7. Financial considerations

Section 8. Risks and opportunities

The financial impacts of the sale to the council would result in savings being made to the revenue budget, a capital receipt and a re-direction of the Town Pier and Pontoon reserve balance.

Should the sale go ahead the balance in the reserve would no longer be needed and would be re-directed to the Climate Change Reserve and utilised to support the delivery of actions underpinning the council's Climate Change Strategy.

The Chair explained his reasons for calling in this matter as detailed below:

- To ensure that the taxpayer is achieving value for money.
- To explore whether the draft Terms adequately protect public access.
- To explore whether the draft Terms adequately safeguard the Pier's heritage.
- To explore further the impact that the sale will have on local businesses and recreational access to the River.
- To understand further the Council's need to sell this asset.

The Chair welcomed three 'witnesses' who had been invited to the Committee to provide their views on this matter.

Sandra Soder, Local Historian, highlighted her views as follows:

- The pier has a rich history
- The rights of landing at the pier should remain in Gravesend hands.
- Thames Clippers have numerous large vessels that will need to have low emissions as part of the 2025 Act. Will they use hydrogen? Where will this be stored and transferred? Will it be too expensive to run?

Brian Corbett, Chair of London River Heritage Harbour Group highlighted his views as follows:

- London boroughs are turning their back on maritime heritage and it looks like Gravesham is following.
- Gravesend Town Pier and Pontoon is a community asset. The Council should delay the sale for at least six months to examine alternative means of securing the interests of the river and wider communities.
- The river provides an important link between land based areas and floating heritage. Why would the Council want to offload it?
- Hopefully the service provided from the Town Pier & Pontoon will be for everyone's benefit but not if exclusive rights are granted.

Richard Bain, Managing Director Jetstream Tours, highlighted his views as follows:

- The Jetstream Tour Gravesend to Tilbury Ferry has not been consulted on this matter – who was contacted in KCC about Heads of Terms?
- The Council only made this public knowledge for the Cabinet meeting on 4 January 2022. No one was given the opportunity to make a counter offer.
- Thames Clippers reserve the right to offload passengers at London Piers; they do not need to pay pier tolls.
- Jetstream Tours could lose the Pontoon and Tilbury landing and end up closing and the Council will use Thames Clippers.

Cllr John Burden, Leader of the Executive highlighted the following:

- Actual income received for the pier and pontoon (2016/17 to 2020/21) has amounted to £35,970, compared to actual revenue costs incurred over the same period being £530,360, the Council cannot continue like that.
- The Council are not river users like the PLA or other river companies. The Council's business is on land so a river user is needed.
- The Council does support the Gravesend to Tilbury Ferry. When Kent County Council proposed to remove subsidy; GBC argued to keep it.
- The Council has ensured the transfer retains the right for a ferry service at the Pontoon.
- The Council is keen to get a London commuter service from the Pontoon; to not engage would be turning our back on the river.
- Practices to ensure the maintenance and upkeep will need to be controlled by planning law; there are protections in place.
- The Council will be able to take over (buy-back) if Thames Clippers do not perform.

- The Council is under severe pressure from central government as there is no government support so the Council cannot continue subsidising something that has a significant loss and is not part of its core business.
- The historical context of the Town Pier and Pontoon is being protected in the terms of sale.

Following questions from the Committee; Cllr John Burden, Leader of the Executive and officers present highlighted the following:

- The Service Manager (Property and Regulatory) explained that KCC were notified in writing on 7 December 2021, this included the setting out of Heads of Terms for ferry provision and for its protection and also mentioned GBC were taking a Part B report to Cabinet in January 2022. A response from KCC asking for clarification was received at the end of December.
- The Director (Corporate Services) clarified that no records / documents relating to KCC's contribution (£856,480) for the construction of the Pontoon have been found. However, the Council ledger does show the money was received by the Council.
- Cllr John Burden, Leader of the Executive reiterated that the Council will champion the retention of the ferry service from the Pontoon.
- The Service Manager (Property and Regulatory) advised that the causeway under the Pier is excluded from the title. The steps and stairs are not as clear but not useable due to the fact they are behind the river wall. Whatever the Council owns will be included in the transfer.

The Chair thanked the witnesses, Members and officers for attending and contributing to the meeting.

20. Oral Update from the Sub-Group Chair on the progress of the Scrutiny Topic Review.

Cllr Baljit Hayre, Chair of the Scrutiny Review Scrutiny Review of Street Cleanliness, littering, and Fly-tipping throughout the Borough provided the following update:

- The Terms of Reference for the review were agreed on 16 September 2021
- Dates were sent out for the first meeting of the review group but the Assistant Director (Operations) was not available until the end of December.
- New meeting dates for the group have now been circulated with the aim of meeting at the end of January / beginning of February to progress the review.

21. Exclusion

Resolved that pursuant to Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 that the public be excluded from any item included in Part B of the agenda because it is likely in view of the nature of business to be transacted that if members of the public were present during this item, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

22. Call Ins - Cabinet Item 14. Town Pier and Pontoon Part B Report

The Overview Scrutiny Committee considered, and discussed in detail, the Part B information pertaining to the Town Pier and Pontoon report.

It was moved by Cllr Conrad Broadley and seconded by Cllr Diane Morton that:-

This matter be referred back to Cabinet to consider and clarify the heads of terms, public access, the landing stage, access rights, the causeway and the competitiveness of the ferry.

The motion was put to the meeting and declared to be lost by 4 votes to 5

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 9.17 pm