

Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 09 December 2021

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Harold Craske
Brian Francis
Gary Harding
Baljit Hayre
Les Hoskins
Bob Lane
Jordan Meade
Lyn Milner

Please note: Cllr John Burden was also in attendance.

Wendy Lane Assistant Director (Planning)
Simon Hookway Assistant Director (Communities)
Ben Clarke Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

82. Apologies

Apologies of absence were received from Cllr Leslie Hills, Cllr Dakota Dibben and Cllr Emma Morley. Cllr Jordan Meade, Cllr Gary Harding and Cllr Lyn Milner acted as their respective substitutes.

Apologies of absence were also received from the Service Manager (Planning) and the Senior Economic Development Officer.

83. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee held on Monday, 27 September 2021 were signed by the Chair

84. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

85. Economic Development Strategy

The Committee were provided with a report on the activity undertaken to promote the draft Economic Growth Strategy and feedback received from businesses and residents.

The Committee were directed to appendix three to the report which held the draft Economic Growth Strategy for Gravesham 2019-23.

The Assistant Director (Communities) informed Members that the objective in consulting on the Economic Growth Strategy was to seek opinion from a broad range of community and business stakeholders; to receive their input to the finalised strategy document but also to engage their longer-term interest in action planning for the seven key themes. The response levels to the consultation were disappointing, despite use of a range of media to consult, and it was a challenge to get business users to engage them on the issue and the Assistant Director (Communities) was unsure as to why that is so.

However, the feedback that was received was helpful and was summarised on page 13 of the report. The Assistant Director (Communities) assured Members that the comments received would be taken on board and used to amend the Strategy.

The Committee would be brought regular updates on the actions laid out within the Strategy.

In response to Members questions, the Assistant Director (Communities) and the Assistant Director (Planning) explained that:

- The consultation took place between 21 September and 31 October 2021 and was now closed; 26 responses were received
- The responses received weren't expected to make any significant changes to the Strategy; a one-page document outlining the changes that were made to the Strategy would be agreed with the Chair and then made available to the Committee
- The seven themes of the Strategy weren't laid out in order of importance; one of the proposed changes to the Strategy was putting a greater emphasis on theme 7 supporting sustainable economic growth through delivering the Councils climate change commitments. In addition, there would be the Kent Gravesham Business Awards and greater emphasis would be put upon sourcing local produce and celebrating local skills
- Land available for businesses to grow locally was a concern shared by the Economic Development Team; it was essential to have land so that local businesses could expand and encourage investment. A number of projects were being brought forward such as the Council working with the EDC to bring further development at Northfleet Embankment East
- There was currently no planning development earmarked for the Tollgate site; originally a planning application was submitted by BP but it went to a judicial review after complaints from the petrol garage next to the site. After much back and forth, in the end the Council decided to refuse the planning application; following that decision BP appealed but then withdrew their appeal shortly after. The Assistant Director (Planning) agreed to undertake an exercise to find out the latest information to see if any development was planned for the site and report back to Members outside of the meeting
- The Assistant Director (Communities) responded to Member's concerns regarding survey question three and thought that the respondents may have felt that the strategy had not covered their concerns around town centre and heritage – both areas dealt with via other strategy work. The Assistant Director (Communities) advised that the low response may have distorted this response and this was not reflected in the other comments made during the consultation
- A discussion was had around prioritisation, and it was agreed that promoting skills for the local workforce and climate changes actions should be further up the priority list.

Further work needed to be undertaken to see what the Council needed to do to deliver the aims of the Strategy

With leave of the Chair, Cllr Burden addressed the Committee regarding planning issues in Gravesham, the need to build on industrial land and the need to make local skilled employment areas stronger instead of attracting external larger companies that would use the land for industrial work.

Members raised concern that even though the Strategy excelled at identifying the Borough's strengths and weaknesses there was nothing in the plan that specified how the weaknesses would be addressed. Gravesham suffered from a lack of larger companies that offered high value jobs and there was very little to offer on higher education, but those areas were not addressed in the Strategy.

The Chair agreed with the concerns raised and highlighted the issues Gravesham faced such as lack of space for new companies and higher education buildings and lack of colleges that taught high level skills in the area. The Chair advised that the new Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration) would be conducting brand exercises to encourage more businesses to locate to Gravesham and to help local businesses expand. The Chair implored Members to email any ideas they had to the Chair or senior officers regarding the issue.

Cllr Burden agreed with the points raised and advised that it was an issue that had been tried to be addressed for the last thirty years by different administrations; Gravesham did need more larger employers and more high levels jobs to be brought to the Borough. London Resort may help to ease the issue, but it brought its own issues with the Environmental impact and the highways impact.

Following a request from the Chair, the Assistant Director (Planning) agreed to ask the Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration) to the next committee meeting to discuss his role and the work he was undertaking including the branding to encourage new businesses to the Borough.

Members noted the proposal to continue to engage with external stakeholders as action plans were developed.

86. Kent Design Guide Consultation

The Committee were informed that the consultation was being run online by KCC and was available at <https://letstalk.kent.gov.uk/kentdesignguide> and the Kent Design Guide was available at <https://kentdg.wpengine.com/> as an interactive website.

The Assistant Director (Planning) gave Members an overview of the consultation and outlined the key points concerning the Kent Design Guide.

- The draft Kent Design Guide followed the format of design guidance that was set out in the National Design Guidance published in 2019. It was predominantly set design guidance around 10 key characteristics that were there to help shape spaces and communities
- The districts of Kent were working together to reinvigorate the Kent Design Guide through the consultation but it had taken a long time as different Councils wanted

different things and various Council already had their own guides in place for such things as parking standards or cycling and walking etc

- The Kent Design Guide acted as an overarching framework which gave some degree of certainty to developers who desired consistency across Kent; developers didn't like that each Council may have different standards which created more work for the developers to follow each districts standard. The Kent Design Guide allowed them to know what rules were in place and what was expected of them as a minimum
- Gravesham had its own page on the Kent Design Guide website which showed the Borough in a positive light
- The Assistant Director (Planning) highlighted that the website includes new Kent parking guidance due to be adopted in Spring 2022. She brought this to Member's attention as KCC@s assumption was that these would supersede all other parking standards including the SPG4 which is the adopted standard used by Gravesham
- Another issue was whether or not Gravesham could adopt the Guide as it was fluid document; that meant that Gravesham might agree with the document on day one and adopt it but some time after the document could change and the Council may be inherently supporting a document that was now unsuitable for Gravesham
- Version document control would also be key as the policy had to be locked in place for planning appeals

The Assistant Director (Planning) advised that the consultation was due to finish on 17 January 2022 and Members could request for more generalised comments to be submitted to the consultation if they wished.

In response to Members questions, the Assistant Director (Planning) explained that:

- The decision to adopt the guide was down to the administration but it wasn't unreasonable to endorse a certain version of the fluid document and clarify what the Council accepted and what wasn't accepted. That way would allow for some manoeuvrability if the original document that was endorsed was significantly changed from what was agreed
- The Council had had issues in the past with other documents such as 'Growth without Gridlock' which the Council largely supported but couldn't support the part regarding the Lower Thames Crossing. The Assistant Director (Planning) agreed to raise the issue of the Council only agreeing to a certain version of the document if there were later changes that the Council couldn't support, in the consultation
- Gravesham were asked to give material for the web page but the Council did not provide any information for case studies as it was not known what criteria KCC used to determine case studies. Further clarification would need to be sought from KCC with regards to the decision making aspects. In the past there was a Kent Design Partnership which Kevin Burbidge was apart of and all decisions were made through that Board but that was when the County had Strategy Planning responsibilities i.e. development of the Structure Plan and this is no longer the case
- The website and the approach were completely new and it needed to be viewed in a fresh manner to see if the new style guide met the needs of officers, Members and developers. The Assistant Director (Planning) advised that the new Assistant Director (Strategic Regeneration) was a practical architect and his advice would be key in determining how useful the policy was and if it would allow for better planning applications to be submitted
- The Assistant Director (Planning) assumed that the response submitted regarding the Kent Design Guide would be submitted on behalf of the whole Council, not

individually although it was up to Members if the response was Member led or officer led. A Kent Chief Planners meeting was scheduled for next week to provide informal advice and the Kent Chief Planners were a key stakeholder for the Kent Design Guide

- The national design guide was guidance only but the Government had made it clear in their own guidance that the model should be given weight in the planning system. Members could endorse the guide as formal guidance or formally adopt it as guidance; the issue underpinning the most recent guidance was that it expected all Councils to have their own local design guides. The Leader had previously highlighted the approach taken in Ebbsfleet and felt something similar should be progressed by Gravesham
- With regards to promoting the Councils own developments, the Assistant Director (Planning) advised that once developments such as those at Valley Drive, Whitehill and the Charter were completed they would be put forward for case study as they were strong promotions of the Councils best developments and affordable housing
- The Assistant Director (Planning) agreed to look into the five key principles listed under 'Suitable Designs' and check to see if they had been referenced against the Councils climate change ambitions and if they were robust enough

Members thanked the Assistant Director (Planning) for an informative presentation.

87. Draft Planning Enforcement Strategy

The Committee were presented with the draft Planning Enforcement Strategy and their views were sought.

Members made the following comments regarding reporting a Planning breach through the website:

- The current method of reporting a Planning breach on the Councils website was clunky and needed to be amended to become more efficient and simplified.
- There should be a single link on the front page of the website that, when clicked, took the user straight to the page where they could report planning breaches
- The form itself asked for the users details before it asked for the details of the breach and there was nothing on the form to inform users that their details would be completely protected. A passage needed to be included telling the user that their details would be protected, not shared with anyone else and used only if absolutely necessary
- The form layout should be amended to ask for the potential planning breach details first and then take the personal details last; users were more likely to give their personal details if they had already filled out the rest of the form

In response to Members concerns/comments the Assistant Director (Planning) explained that:

- The Council had recently moved to a new website provider and the Digital Team were spending a lot of time looking at accessibility and wayfaring; a meeting was held the other day with the Digital Team and Planning Enforcement and one of the first questions asked what was the three key areas that should be located in three buttons at the top of Planning Enforcement Page

- The three areas deemed most important were around pre-planning application advice, looking for active planning applications and reporting a planning breach. Advice was also being sought from the officers in teams that dealt with people first hand and those officers that dealt with people through the contact centre in order to gather more information that would make the website more helpful to the public
- With regards to the reporting process for planning breaches, the Assistant Director (Planning) agreed to review the form and take Members comments on board. However, someone reporting a breach had to give their personal details on the form otherwise their complaint couldn't be accepted; the current confidentiality and privacy statement was clear about what was done with personal details. The Assistant Director (Planning) advised that there were a few issues with data sharing and representation but agreed to look into what could be done make it more clearer to the public what the Council did with their details

Following further comments and questions regarding the draft Planning Enforcement Strategy, the Assistant Director (Planning) advised that:

- COU was an acronym and stood for 'change of use'
- It was planned to create a one page document written from the perspective of Cllr Sullivan that summarised the Planning Enforcement Strategy laying out what breaches the Council would enforce and what the Council wouldn't enforce. The document would be written up using simple, easy to read language and terminology and then uploaded to the website to provide clarification to the public on what the Strategy meant
- When a breach was reported through the e-form on the website, a reference number was not generated as the data had to be rekeyed into Uniform. At times, officers found a lot of people reporting the same breaches and multiple reports would be logged on Uniform as one definitive record. The record on Uniform would have a number which Enforcement officers would use to report developments against the case
- The Assistant Director (Planning) agreed to investigate outside of the meeting how Ward Members could be updated about enforcement cases at various sites within their wards
- The Strategy would be published and made available on the Councils website; advertisement of the Strategy's publication would be carried out through the Councils various social media channels and an article in the 'Your Borough' magazine. The Assistant Director (Planning) agreed to discuss further advertisement of the Strategy with Cllr Sullivan outside of the meeting

In response to several concerns raised by a Member about a particular case, the Chair advised that she would catch up with Cllr Lane outside of the meeting.

The Committee endorsed the draft Planning Enforcement Strategy.

88. Corporate Performance Report Q2

The Committee was presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Two 2021-22 (July to September 2021).

The Assistant Director (Planning) directed Members to appendix two to the report which provided Members with a statistical overview of the Council's performance against each performance indicator for quarter two.

The Chair thanked the officers for a detailed report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:43pm.