

Cabinet

Monday, 30 May 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr John Burden (Chair)
Cllr Lee Croxton (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Shane Mochrie-Cox
 Lauren Sullivan
 Narinderjit Singh Thandi
 Jenny Wallace

Please note: Cllr Hoskins and Cllr Elliott were also in attendance.

Nick Brown Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive
Sarah Parfitt Director (Corporate Services)
Simon Hookway Assistant Director (Communities)
Darren Everden Assistant Director (Transformation & IT)
Mark Osborn Assistant Director (Housing Development & Enabling)
Andy Rayfield Communications Manager
Ben Clarke Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Lenny Rolles, the Chief Executive and the Director (Housing).

2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held on Monday, 21 March 2022 were signed by the Chair.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Delegated Decisions - Cabinet Members

There were no further decisions for Cabinet to be updated on.

5. Investment Partnership

The Cabinet was presented with a proposal to establish an Investment Partnership with a housebuilder to help accelerate the development of affordable housing within the Borough on sites owned by the Council. The investment partnership model had been introduced successfully by a number of other local authorities as it provided the specialist resources

required to work up appropriate proposals for planning applications giving an efficient and effective route to the delivery of high-quality new homes.

The Assistant Director (Housing Development & Enabling) guided Members through each section of the report explaining the details behind the proposal and the benefits of creating an Investment Partnership.

The Assistant Director (Housing Development & Enabling) assured Members that once the Investment Partnership had been successfully formed, an update report would be brought back to Cabinet to keep Members fully apprised.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director (Housing Development & Enabling) for a comprehensive report and further added that it was essential that Members were fully involved during the process as it would be a Member led partnership. The Chair advised that two Members would be directly involved and sit on whatever Group or Board was formed to discuss the work of the Investment Partnership.

The Chair had discussed membership with Cllr Meade and it had been agreed that in order to help mitigate conflicts of interests two Members would be appointed; Cllr Rolles would represent Labour and Cllr Broadley would represent the Conservatives.

The Assistant Director (Housing Development & Enabling) fielded questions from Members and explained that:

- The proposal was to have an even 50/50 split of control between the Council and the developer which meant that neither party had a casting vote or majority control; decisions had to be agreed between both parties otherwise work couldn't be progressed. An uneven split would ultimately lead to conflicts within the Partnership
- Design of the houses being built was a key part of the process and Gravesham's involvement in the partnership would enable Members to be involved in decisions regarding design
- Engagement with stakeholders, social values and building developments that benefitted the wider community not just local residents were key considerations for choosing a partner
- The 50/50 split in control was a safeguard as it meant both parties had a veto, and one party could not unfairly make a decision without agreement from the other party

In response to a Member question, the Communications Manager advised that over the last few years, the Council had put out several messages regarding the drive to build more Council owned houses in the Borough.

Cllr Wallace praised the report and felt that the positives outweighed the negatives with regard to entering into an Investment Partnership; Gravesham was in need of affordable housing to help local residents in need on the housing register. A 50/50 split in control meant that developers would not have the advantage and working with partners may allow previously locked sites in the Borough to become unlocked for strategic regeneration.

The Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive informed Members of the work that was being undertaken to create a Design Code for Gravesham; Members would be able to submit their input to the Design Code and use that Code as a controlling factor in the design process. The Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive was certain that the Code

would enable Gravesham to retain its unique architecture in the Borough and encouraged all Members to get involved.

Resolved that Members:

1. Granted delegated authority to the Director (Housing) in consultation with the Leader of the Council, Director (Corporate Services) (in the role of S151 officer), and the Council's Monitoring Officer to agree on the most appropriate and efficient route in selecting a partner to form an Investment Partnership.
2. Granted delegated authority to the Director (Housing) in consultation with the Leader of the Council, Director (Corporate Services) (in the role of S151 officer), and the Council's Monitoring Officer to take all the necessary practical, financial, and legal actions required to establish an Investment Partnership (IP) to help accelerate housing delivery in the borough through council-owned sites once a partner had been selected.
3. Endorsed the Council's Purpose and Objectives of an Investment Partnership and the Council's Investment Partnership Requirements as set out in Appendix Two and Three to the report, which would be used to help identify and select a suitable partner.

6. Corporate Performance Report: Q4 2021-22

The Cabinet was presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Four 2021-22 (January to March 2022).

The Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive informed Members that appendix one to the report provided them with a statistical overview of the council's performance against the Corporate Plan for Quarter Four 2021-22, covering the period January to March 2022. A Q4 quarter performance report would be submitted to each Cabinet Committee for Member discussion.

The Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive advised the Cabinet that the overall report had seen a lot of progress since the pandemic with improvement in many indicators, particularly in relation to community and economic activity and visits to Community events.

The Chair was happy with the figures presented in the report and hoped that further Member discussion would be had on the performance figures at each Cabinet Committee.

7. Financial Pressures and Risks

The Cabinet was provided with a report that gave an update of the service delivery pressures and financial risks to the Council, local residents and businesses over the next few months which stemmed from the current economic situation. The report concluded that the current economic situation had the potential to negatively affect the Community and the report set out how the Council would support local residents over the coming months.

The Director (Corporate Services) updated the Cabinet on the latest information received from the Government since the publication of the report:

- The energy price cap was due to rise to £2,760 in October 2022 which was a 40% increase from the price cap set at April 2022
- Since October 2021 there had almost been a £1,500 increase in the energy price cap which was likely to be causing additional pressure to local residents
- To balance that additional cost, the Chancellor had announced further support to households through one-off payments to those on benefits, disabled residents and Pensioners.
- The Chancellor also reviewed the proposed £200 energy bill loan which would have been applied to energy bills in autumn and repaid over five years; the £200 loan had been changed to a £400 non-repayable grant applied to energy bills from October
- These cost of living measures would be part funded by a temporary targeted profits levy on energy companies.

The Chair praised the usefulness of the report as it helped Members to understand the financial pressures the Council and the wider Community faced; additionally, the case studies in appendix one were a reminder of the real pressures facing residents now and the need for those needing support to come and talk to the council. The report also reminded Members of the need to be prudent with spend and mindful of the council's overall financial position.

Cllr Croxton echoed the Chair's comments and sought assurances that the report would be accessible to everyone as the information was important to the public. The Director (Corporate Services) assured the Cabinet that the report had been published on the Council's website and could be accessed by the public.

The Communications Manager advised that the report could also be linked to the Council's social media pages with wording agreed by the Chair as well promoting the report on the front page of the Council's website.

The Chair wanted the public to be aware that if they had fallen on hard times or needed some additional support then they could come to the Council where they would be directed to internal officers or to outside organisations such as Citizens Advice where help would be given. The Chair stressed the importance of using the Council's internal systems within the Benefits Team to identify those residents in need and provide them with all the support that they may not know they were entitled to. The Cabinet echoed the Chair's comments.

The Chair advised that it was important to mention that significant increases to energy bills also affected fuel, food and travel bills which created further financial pressures for local residents and meant that more residents would be pushed into a place where they needed support. The Council had to reinforce the message that they were there to provide people with support that they were entitled to.

8. IT & Digital Strategy

The Cabinet were informed of the new Information Technology and Digital Strategy covering the period 2022-2026 which was the first time the two strategies had been brought together under one document.

The Assistant Director (Transformation & IT) guided Members through the report and outlined key aspects of the Strategy.

Members were informed that the IT & Digital Strategy Member training session scheduled for 28 June 2022 would discuss the Strategy in detail as well as discuss what the best IT equipment was for Members in their daily roles moving forward.

The Chair appreciated the report but reminded the Assistant Director (Transformation & IT) that not everyone was able to use computers and many people were not inclined to learn how to use various technologies. The Chair wanted officers to be available if a member of the public or a Member wanted to talk over the phone or visit in person as having only IT solutions available meant that some members of the public would not receive the support they may need.

The Cabinet endorsed the Chair's comments and voiced their own experiences where only having IT solutions available had caused an issue.

Following further concern from Cllr Mochrie-Cox about computers making decisions and creating policies instead of officers, the Assistant Director (Transformation & IT) explained that technology would only augment decision making by ensuring that officers had the best data available to make informed decisions themselves rather than by computers.

The Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive reassured the Cabinet that the Council had a varied approach to accessing council services with multiple different platforms across the organisation; officers could speak to the public in person, via live chat and via telephone which meant that everyone should be able to contact the Council without any trouble. However, technology was still important as many residents preferred to fill out forms on the website or send emails as their work life meant they couldn't use traditional contact channels during the day. The website was being continually improved and all platforms to contact the Council were accessible.

In defence of both the website and the new telephone system, the Chair stated that both systems had only recently been swapped over to completely new models which meant that Members needed to give them time to settle in and be fully updated. However, the Leader reinforced the point that not everyone had the same needs or technical expertise and the Council needed to remain accessible to everyone.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director (Corporate Services) for the report.

9. Environmental Enforcement Services Update

The Cabinet was presented with a report that informed them of the improvements in enforcement actions since the creation of the dedicated Environmental Enforcement Team and the successful prosecution of several cases of prominent fly-tipping.

The Assistant Director (Communities) guided Members through the report informing them of the costs of clearing up fly-tipping and the successful media campaign of Gravesham's prosecutions which had led to a reduction in reports of fly-tipping in the Borough for 2021-22.

The Assistant Director (Communities) advised that since the publication of the report, further cases had been taken to court, with costs exceeding £1,500. However, other cases did not receive the successful prosecutions the Council were hoping for. The Assistant Director (Communities) assured Members that the team were learning from these and is working with legal colleagues to improve the presentation of cases to ensure successful prosecution.

In terms of costs, the fines given to fly-tippers in successful prosecutions were nowhere near the total cost of clear up of fly-tipped rubbish and the Assistant Director (Communities) felt that the case should be made to Government to increase the maximum cost of a fixed penalty notice and extend powers, e.g. clean up of fly-tipped rubbish on private land.

The Chair stated that when a case was taken to court, a successful prosecution was not always guaranteed but he stressed the importance of a loss not deterring officers from taking cases to court as it was vital that the Council prosecuted fly-tipping cases wherever possible. The Chair was pleased that officers are keen to learn from unsuccessful cases and to prosecute as many cases as possible.

Cllr Mochrie-Cox praised the Enforcement Team and stated that the step change from prosecuting small amounts of litter being dropped on the street to prosecuting large cases of fly-tipping had helped alter behaviour in the Borough. Officers had been informed that it was important to take cases to court as much as possible to deter future fly-tipping but due to the relatively low fines being issued, some companies most likely factored that possible enforcement charge into their fly tipping. Cllr Mochrie-Cox wanted new laws introduced which increased fines and allowed the Council to recover the cost of clean-up of fly-tipped rubbish. Additionally, the aforementioned point regarding private land was important as the Council could not clear up rubbish dumped on private land which meant that private landowners were having to pay huge sums to clear their land.

Cllr Mochrie-Cox paid tribute to the Enforcement Team for their excellent work over the last year and also paid tribute to the Communications Team for their media coverage of successful prosecutions and their campaigns to raise awareness of littering enforcement.

The Communications Manager thanked Cllr Mochrie-Cox and advised that Sarah Knight carried out most of the comms work around the prosecutions and fly-tipping as she was very passionate about the issue.

The Communications Manager added that a press release regarding this report had been agreed with Cllr Mochrie-Cox and was ready to be circulated.

The Chair thanked officers for an excellent report and asked that the media coverage of the report be released soon.

10. Minutes of the meeting of the Gravesham Joint Transportation Board held on Wednesday, 9 March 2022

The Cabinet was presented with minutes of the meeting of the Gravesham Joint Transportation Board held on Wednesday 09 March 2022

The Cabinet noted the minutes.

11. Minutes of the meeting of the Crime & Disorder Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 15 March 2022

The Cabinet was presented with the minutes of the meeting of the Crime & Disorder Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 15 March 2022

The Cabinet noted the minutes.

12. Exclusion

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

13. Draft Rosherville Remuneration Policy

The Cabinet's approval was sought for the draft Remuneration Policy for the Rosherville group of companies.

The Director (Environment) & Deputy Chief Executive advised that the draft policy attached at appendix one to the report was prepared in consultation with the HR Team who ensured it was reflective of Gravesham Council's terms and conditions.

The Chair was happy to see that Rosherville staff would be treated the same as staff employed by the Council and supported staff if they wanted to choose to join a Union of their choice.

Resolved that Members approved the Remuneration Policy for the Rosherville group of companies at appendix one.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:24pm.