

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MONDAY, 14 SEPTEMBER 2020

PRESENT: Councillors James Robbins (Chair), Steve Weisinger (Vice-Chair), Emma Bushell, Matthew Courtliff, Paul Dixon, Jim Grant, Jane Milner-Barry, Barbara Parry, Kevin Parry, Roger Smith, Andy Spry, Timothy Swinyard and Rahul Tarar.

Also in attendance were: Councillors David Renard (Leader of the Council), Russell Holland (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Commercialisation, Education and Skills), Brian Ford (Cabinet Member for Adults and Health), Dale Heenan (Cabinet Member for Town Centre, Culture and Heritage), Rob Jandy (Cabinet Member for Organisational Excellence), Mary Martin (Cabinet Member for Children's Services), Cathy Martyn (Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety), Maureen Penny (Cabinet Member for Highways, Maintenance and Waste Services) and Gary Sumner (Cabinet Member for Strategic Infrastructure, Transport and Planning).

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Junab Ali.

14. Declarations of Interest

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting. The following declarations were made:

- Councillor Barbara Parry made a personal, non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of agenda item 5 (Consideration of Cabinet Decisions) as she is employed at The Ridgeway School (part of the White Horse Federation).
- Councillor Kevin Parry made a personal, non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of agenda item 6 (Cabinet Member Question and Answer Session - Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety) as he is the owner of a rented property.
- Councillor Barbara Parry made a personal, non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of agenda item 6 (Cabinet Member Question and Answer Session - Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety) as she is the owner of a rented property.

15. Minutes

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 10th August 2020 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

16. Public Question Time

There were no questions submitted under this item.

17. Consideration of Cabinet Decisions

The Committee considered a report introducing decisions arising from the Cabinet meeting held on 9th September 2020.

Minute 17. Swindon Borough Council Covid-19 Recovery Update

Councillors David Renard (Leader of the Council) and Rob Jandy (Cabinet Member for Organisational Excellence), responded to questions put by Councillors Emma Bushell, Jim Grant, Jane Milner-Barry, Barbara Parry and Rahul Tarar on the following matters:

- The differing Covid league tables being published in the media, with the national watch list being the one used by Government to determine what measures are needed in a given area, and Swindon's position on those tables.
- The analysis undertaken on the economic recovery from the Covid crisis by Centre for Cities, which has identified that Swindon is a robust place compared to others in the area.
- The Leader's challenge to the Centre for Cities report in January 2020 regarding air quality in Swindon, the details of which will be circulated to members of the Committee subsequent to the meeting.
- Covid testing capacity issues and its potential impact on the accuracy of case rate figures within Swindon.
- The plans for maximising local media opportunities, as well as national communications to parents, regarding Covid symptoms of children at school and guidance on what to do.
- That potential savings from officers working at home have not been calculated.
- The engagement with staff during lockdown which has included: a staff survey around two or three weeks in to lockdown regarding mental health; a risk assessment questionnaire around eight weeks ago regarding working from home, mental health, and any equipment needs; a 'Click and Collect' service for Display Screen Equipment, and; a survey that will be going out this week regarding working from home and looking at a hybrid model of office space in the future.
- How the £930k allocated by Government to the Council for supporting the implementation of the Local Outbreak Management Plan has been allocated and spent.
- The latest status with regards to booking Covid tests in Swindon, which is being impacted by national testing capacity issues, and the issues residents are experiencing such as IT glitches and being referred to testing centres outside a reasonable travelling distance. The Committee noted that a new testing site will be coming online this week in Swindon which will provide additional capacity.
- How the laboratory testing is a national programme delivered at a local level with the Council having little influence over the ability to increase capacity. Concerns are, however, fed into regional and national chains.
- The communications in place, such as the Council's media feeds and the 'Your Swindon Newsletter', which provide regular updates to residents on these matters.
- The work being done with bus companies to reinforce public safety messages and requirements. The Committee noted that a driver would be entitled to tell passengers to wear a mask but has no enforcement ability.

Resolved – (1) That Minute 17 of the Cabinet be noted.

(2) That information requested by members during the course of the Committee's consideration of this item be forwarded to them via the Committee Clerk.

Minute 18. Budget Management Update (September)

Councillors Renard and Russell Holland (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for

Commercialisation, Education and Skills) responded to questions put by Councillor Jim Grant and the Chair on the following matters:

- The total cost pressures arising from responding to Covid (a combination of actual spending plus loss of anticipated income) being £18.7m, of which £13m has been received from Government leaving a gap of £5.7m. The Committee noted that a further Government grant is expected but the value is as yet unknown.
- Projections for the cost of responding to a second wave of Covid, which is difficult to predict but the figures are reviewed and updated constantly.
- The possible use of Reserves in responding to the Covid crisis and managing additional demand on services. The Committee noted that in previous years the Reserves has been balanced or underspent.
- Spend to date against the Emergency Active Travel Fund, the details of which will be circulated to members subsequent to the meeting.
- The Swindon Advertiser interviews in August with Councillors David Renard and Maureen Penny regarding the Emergency Active Travel Fund, which had appeared to contradict each other.

Resolved – (1) That Minute 18 of the Cabinet be noted.

(2) That information requested by members during the course of the Committee's consideration of this item be forwarded to them via the Committee Clerk.

Minute 19. Capital Monitoring Quarter 1 update

Councillors Renard and Holland responded to questions put by Councillor Jim Grant on the following matters:

- The Capital Financing Requirement (in total) being distinct from actual levels of debt, with the borrowing requirement being £494m and the actual debt being £247m (General Fund) and £104m (Housing Revenue Account).
- How the spend on projects, as set out in the Capital Budget, is presented to Council in February each year for decision, is accessible via the Council's website, and indicates how debt has accrued.
- The reasoning for the allocation of £25,000 for traffic calming measures in Thames Avenue.

Resolved – That Minute 19 of the Cabinet be noted.

Minute 20. Swindon Borough Local Development Scheme Review 2020

Councillor Gary Sumner (Cabinet Member for Strategic Infrastructure, Transport and Planning) responded to questions put by Councillors Emma Bushell and Jane Milner-Barry on the following matters:

- The adequacy of the staffing levels within the planning department and examples of non-essential work streams that are at risk of being minimised as stated in the report. The Committee noted that additional resources have been placed in the planning policy and planning enforcement teams, and that a restructure is planned to move resources into the areas of most need.
- The recent legislation, which came into force on 1st September 2020, allowing changes of use within different Use Classes of commercial properties (for example)

without planning consent, as compared to permitted development rights for office conversions which has been in place for some time.

- Proposed changes to Government planning policy (currently out for consultation), some highlights from which include:
 - The possibility of amending permitted development rights to include the necessity to make contributions through the infrastructure levy.
 - Changes to Local Plans and large outline planning consents.
 - The viability of funding schemes in an environment where public money is scarce.
- The possibility of office buildings within Swindon being at risk of demolition where they have been unoccupied for more than six months.
- The potential impact from Government revising the standard methodology used to calculate housing requirements, and the expectation that around 1450 houses per annum may have to be planned for within Swindon as a result.
- The transitional period for Local Authorities at the Regulation 19 stage of the Local Plan Review during which the Local Plan will be used prior to the adoption of any new planning requirements set out by Government.

Resolved – That Minute 20 of the Cabinet be noted.

Minute 21. School Place Planning Study 2020

Resolved – That Minute 21 of the Cabinet be noted.

18. Cabinet Member Question and Answer Session - Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety

Councillor Cathy Martyn (Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety) was in attendance and presented to the Committee a report summarising progress and performance in respect of the key objectives of her role, which are to:

- Provide the strategic direction for the management of all aspects of the Council's social housing.
- Provide strategic direction to reduce and prevent homelessness where possible.
- Promote partnership engagement to address rough sleeping.
- Provide strategic leadership to promote safe public areas.
- Set the strategic vision for the Borough's continuing social development.
- To work with other Cabinet Members to Manage Demand within the portfolio.
- Ensure that the Council's agreed priorities within the portfolio are delivered.

The Cabinet Member is responsible for securing the following Vision Pledge:

- Pledge 26: To prevent homelessness where possible using additional measures including the temporary winter housing provision and enabling a day centre to prevent rough sleepers from returning to the streets.

The Cabinet Member also has delegated responsibility for:

- Allocations and Advice Services
- Empty Homes
- Estate and Tenancy Management
- Housing Enabling and Strategic Services

- Homeline Services
- Homelessness
- Housing Right to Buy/Sales Services
- Neighbourhood Wardens
- Private Sector Housing Renovation Grants
- Sheltered Accommodation
- Environmental and Public Protection Services Gypsies, Travellers and Unauthorised Encampments
- Reducing Drugs, Alcohol and Substance misuse
- Control Room Operations
- Reducing anti-social behaviour
- Reducing domestic abuse
- Community Safety Partnership
- Licensing
- Trading Standards
- Environmental Health
- Parishes

Councillor Martyn responded to questions put by Councillors Emma Bushell, Paul Dixon, Jim Grant, Jane Milner-Barry, Kevin Parry and the Chair on the following matters:

- The current number of residents on the waiting list for a council property, the details of which are to be circulated to members subsequent to the meeting.
- The impact on demand for social housing as a result of the financial fallout from Covid and the forthcoming end of the moratorium on private sector evictions and whether the Council's development programme of 300 affordable new homes will adequately meet any increased need.
- The expected introduction of Covid Enforcement Marshals and the similar work already being undertaken by Public Health Officers in conjunction with Environmental Health and Police colleagues. The Committee noted that it is unlikely the Marshals will have enforcement powers, that extra funding will not be provided for local authorities to employ them, and that further guidance is awaited from Government.
- The cohort of clients that have been booking and using The Haven via the appointments system, the details of which will be circulated to members of the Committee subsequent to the meeting.
- The predicted number of residents (both private and public sector) who are at risk of homelessness when the Government extension to Section 21 is lifted after 20 September 2020, and what the Council is doing to manage and help those in rent arrears and other financial difficulties.
- The support provided by the Housing Team to those who have recently contacted the Council in relation to their potential eviction, or ongoing problems they are having with paying their rent and requesting additional support. The Committee noted that this includes creating Personal Development Plans, and making sure there is a strong housing supply from private landlords willing to partner with the Council should there be a lack of temporary accommodation once the moratorium is lifted.
- The reduction in the number of complaints received relating to bonfires following the re-opening of the Household Waste Recycling Centre and lockdown easing, with an

appropriate response planned should further lockdown restrictions be imposed and bonfires become an issue again.

- The number of patients being discharged from health and care facilities in to Council-provided supported housing.
- The cohort involved in the Harm Reduction Programme, the details of which will be circulated to members of the Committee subsequent to the meeting.
- Proposals for the St Ives Court site, which is not classed as a priority from a housing improvement point of view, which had previously included £495k allocated for remedial works.
- The restrictions to the services usually supplied by the homelessness voluntary sector as a result of Covid, and the actions taken by the Council to ensure that main operational activities have continued and that any gaps are being identified and filled where possible.
- The covert and non-covert activities undertaken by Licensing Officers during lockdown to monitor premises suspected of breaking the rules, such as providing advice and serving Prohibition Notices, the details of which will be circulated to members of the Committee subsequent to the meeting.
- The criminal activities and public disorder currently being experienced in the Pinehurst and Penhill communities, and the engagement work being undertaken with local Ward Councillors and the Police to address these matters.
- The potential for passive house accreditation at the sites being developed by the Council but which will remain as low carbon projects due to the large difference in building costs, the details of which will be circulated to members of the Committee subsequent to the meeting.
- The Council's plans to achieve its commitment to reach zero carbon by 2030 which include different types of heating systems and internal wall insulation.

Resolved – (1) That Councillor Martyn be thanked for attending the meeting to present her performance report and for her full and open responses to members' questions and observations on the issues raised.

(2) That information requested by members during the course of the Committee's consideration of this item be forwarded to them via the Committee Clerk.

19. Work Programme 2020/2021

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Legal Officer setting out the topics for inclusion in the 2020/2021 Scrutiny Work Programme, as agreed by the Committee at its meeting on 7th July 2020, and updated during the course of the Municipal Year.

20. Status of Requests for Action and / or Information

The Committee received an updated report advising on the status of outstanding issues and member requests for information.

Resolved – That the report on the status of outstanding issues and member requests for information be noted.