

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

RESOURCES POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Wednesday, 20th January, 2016

Present:- Councillors Sarah Bevan (Chair), Bob Goodman (Vice-Chair), Christopher Pearce, Jasper Becker, Colin Barrett, Chris Dando and Andrew Furse

36 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

37 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chairman drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

38 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

There were none.

39 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Bob Goodman declared an interest in item 9 'Commercial Estate' as he has clients who lease properties from the Council.

40 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

41 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE DEPUTATIONS, STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING

There was none.

42 MINUTES

The Panel confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record and they were duly signed by the Chairman.

43 COUNCIL TAX AND BUSINESS RATE LIABILITY FOR STUDENT ACCOMMODATION

Ian Savigar, Divisional Director for Customer Services introduced the report.

Panel members made the following points and asked the following questions:

In response to a query from Councillor Barrett, the officer explained that those with a student exemption are all those on a qualifying course.

There was some discussion around charging students in language schools but it was noted that they are sometimes only attending for a short time.

Councillor Gerrish asked if there is a process to identify a student who has graduated but remains in place. The officer stated that these details are crossed checked as when the qualifying course ends the exemption ends and they will be issued with a revised bill.

Councillor Furse stated that there is a significant student population in the area but the authority does not gain any help with its services. He suggested that there should be some recognition of the impact.

The Panel **RESOLVED** unanimously to support the points in the Council motion of November 2014 and refer the following to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Efficiency, Councillor Charles Gerrish for his consideration:

- Ask our MPs to lobby their party in Government for changes in the current legislation;
- Write to Central Government to have the legislation changed on student exemptions to either:
 1. Consider a Council Tax levy;
 2. Return to concession compensation;
 3. Council Tax levy on Universities/providers.
- Write to all other University Cities asking them to lobby their MPs for changes in the legislation as they too are being affected in the same way as BANES.

44 COMMERCIAL ESTATE

Richard Long Head of Property Services gave a presentation to the Panel which covered the following:

- Commercial Estate
- Gross rental income over the last six years
- Rent arrears
- Voids
- Growth of secure net income
- Asset management plans
- Acquisition and restructures
- Funding options of future acquisitions and restructures
- Cost of managing the Commercial Estate
- Critical Partner

Panel members made the following points and asked the following questions:

In response to a query from Councillor Barrett, the officer explained that the cost of advice taken equates to £40k per year and that the budget to manage the Commercial Estate includes the money for consultant advice.

Councillor Goodman stated that he was disappointed to receive the information on the day of the meeting and asked three questions (1) What has the growth been since 2013? (2) Was the target of £1.5million achieved and (3) Regarding the three properties, once the borrowing is taken out, is there anything left? The officer responded that (1) He had not asked for the exercise to be repeated after 2013 which is why there are no figures. (2) The target was achieved and will now be one of the KPIs and (3) It is part of the net contribution. The Strategic Director explained the borrowing in the short term is 0.5% and long term is 4% which contributed to achieving the target.

Councillor Furse referred to the arrears graphs and asked why there were two peaks (June 2013 and June 2015) and why is there a move away from retail. The officer explained that the repair and maintenance recoveries and insurance recoveries explain the two peaks. He explained that there is an aim to release the authority from dependence on retail so acquisitions are being focused on non-retail. The Cabinet Member explained that this is about broadening risk.

Councillor Dando stated that he thought the news was quite good and asked for an update report (with an example Asset Management Plan) in 6 months.

45 WEST OF ENGLAND DEVOLUTION UPDATE

The Divisional Director of Strategy and Performance, David Trethewey gave a presentation to the Panel which covered the following:

- Devolution
- The West of England Proposition
- Regional Strengths
- Regional Challenges
- Objectives
- The proposition
- Governance
- Next Steps

Panel members made the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Barrett asked how much work has been done before it is known whether or not there will be an elected mayor. The officer explained that a Strategic Governance Review was set up in the summer. He further explained that the Government ministers have explained that a directly elected Mayor is not definite, it would depend on what is being devolved. The Strategic Director for Resources Andrew Pate, explained that it is not about imposing something on our existing governance, it is about additional powers, money and freedoms. He further explained that the authority are only at the 'in principle stage' at the present time and that the details of the working arrangements will be agreed in the final stages.

Councillor Goodman asked what the implications are of one authority not joining when the other three have agreed. The Divisional Director explained that the question is about the viability of delivering the deal so it would depend on the level of involvement.

Councillor Pearce asked what kind of powers would be involved. The Strategic Director explained that the four authorities would not be joined politically, the new powers would be added on top and a mayor would run this extra part. The Divisional Director explained that this authority is interested in going for devolved power around things that help drive the economy such as: housing and planning; first refusal on government land disposals; tourism levy.

Councillor Becker asked if Whitehall is cutting back on its departments and what budget this involved. The Divisional Director explained that the government is cutting back 40% in each department and that the budget involved here would be the DCLG (Department of Community and Local Government).

Councillor Barrett asked if members would play a lead role, the Strategic Director explained that the Council leaders would lead on talks with ministers on this.

46 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

Councillor Charles Gerrish, Cabinet Member for Finance and Efficiency explained that he would be having meetings to discuss the Commercial Estate report and stated that it was an informative piece of work.

He stated that his work was focused on producing a balanced budget. He explained that since the Government announcement on 22nd December there had been much work gone into resolving the queries in it. He thanked officers for this work.

47 PANEL WORKPLAN

The Panel noted the workplan items.

The meeting ended at 6.20 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services