

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

MINUTES OF CORPORATE POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING

Tuesday, 12th March, 2024

Present:- **Councillors** Robin Moss, Lucy Hodge, Ian Halsall, Hal MacFie, Onkar Saini, Toby Simon, Colin Blackburn and Ruth Malloy (in place of Oli Henman)

Apologies for absence: Councillors: Malcolm Treby

56 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

57 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

58 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Oli Henman gave his apologies.

Councillor Malcolm Treby gave his apologies.

59 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

60 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

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

There were none.

62 MINUTES

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

63 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

There was none.

64 HERITAGE SERVICES BUSINESS PLAN

The Chair invited Councillor Paul Roper, Cabinet Member for Economic and Cultural Sustainable Development and Robert Campbell, Head of Heritage Services to introduce the report.

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

Councillor Halsall stated that the good news in the report was testament to all teams involved. He added that it was good news regarding access to the records office. He asked about the upper area in the Victoria Art Gallery and when the roof repair was expected so that there was a limit to this cultural loss. The officer explained that there had been a historical underinvestment in the roof and there was no choice now but to fix it so the gallery is closed until this can be done otherwise art could be damaged. The extent of the work is unknown until an inspection is carried out. He explained that listed building consent is expected in March/April and an inspection will follow. It is possible that there will need to be further listed building consent but if not, it is hoped that it can open in September. Confirmation can be given once the extent of the damage is known.

Councillor Blackburn stated that the report is shown as a Business Plan but is actually an Executive Summary. He asked what was being done to make things happen in terms of returning markets and protecting the asset. He asked what the big jump in education visitor numbers cost. He stated that income per visitor seems to be reducing but no reason is given for this. The Cabinet Member stated that 'Visit West' is used to promote the city. He explained that Asian tourism has not recovered since the pandemic, but this may be a geopolitical issue. The officer added that we do market in China on social media and trade delegations. We were only put back on the pre-approved travel destination last year. We are proactive and the market is likely to return in 2025/26. Regarding educational visitor costs, the officer did not have the exact costs but explained that there was a large education audience (around 16-19 thousand pupils) which is in line with a mandate set for the Council as an investment in improving the lives of local people. He stated that this is a long-term investment which will ensure future support of the monument. Councillor Moss stated that this is missing from the risk register in terms of the impact on profitability. Also, as numbers increase – visitor enjoyment may go down – a difficult balance. He agreed that educational experience is of benefit going forwards. The officer agreed regarding the balance between commercial activities and socially minded activities but added that some philanthropic donations can be linked to socially minded activities – the aim is to diversify the income streams to mitigate risk in times such as the pandemic.

Councillor Blackburn stated that scrutiny members are here to help but do need more details in reports.

Councillor Simon asked if a gazebo could be constructed for the people queuing for the Roman Baths which would enhance the visitor experience. He asked if the Pump Room Catering contract could be extended to allow for opening in the evenings. He also asked about combined tickets as many cities have, which include a package for public transport/open top bus tours and visitor attractions which may help to drive footfall.

Councillor MacFie asked about Heritage Services in terms of Northeast Somerset and if so, could it be included in the report. The officer explained that the schools programme includes all schools in BANES. He added that there had been a pop-up museum on Keynsham High Street and there had been a festival of archaeology in Stanton Drew. He stated that there will be more things like this going forwards.

Councillor Saini asked about the timeline for repayment of the Capital Grant; How the fund-raising scheme is structured and about the role and responsibility of independent charities. The officer explained that the grant is the responsibility of the Corporate Estate so he would refer to his colleagues. He explained the fund-raising structure as a well-trodden path – there are anchor givers such as the Arts Council and National Lottery Heritage Fund. He explained that the role of independent charities is the same model as the Roman Baths and that will apply to the Fashion Museum.

Councillor Halsall asked about Discovery Cards and asked if people could just take a utility bill to gain access. The officer explained that the benefits are wider than just free access to venues – there are discounts elsewhere and the card is a vehicle for other businesses to sign up to it. He further explained that the technology behind the cards is holding us back from remote sign up at present but will be moving towards that system. There has been increased sign up – 24k before the pandemic and now there are 40k.

Councillor Hodge asked if there is a risk to other services if a surplus in this service is not achieved (this is not shown in the risk analysis). She asked about ticket prices increases and concessions. She also asked about visitor driven staffing. The officer stated that he was not sure about the risk to other services, but the risk always depends on footfall. He stated that he would supply the Panel with the ticket price information with variable pricing strategy and concessions. In terms of visitor driven staffing, he explained that staff numbers are increased at times of high visitor numbers.

In a response to questions from Councillor Malloy, the officer explained that the Heritage Advisory Board has external voices which have expertise in different aspects of the Heritage Sector. He explained that the aim is to bring these voices to have a stronger bearing earlier on in the budget process. In terms of cultural audit, he explained that an internal audit is happening now before the summer. He stated that the service is always happy to work with the Great Spa Towns as the opportunities arise.

Councillor Moss asked if the paintings in storage could be used in the Guildhall. Councillor Hodge asked if a variety of genders could be portrayed. The officer stated that he was happy to consider this, taking into account practicalities and cost.

65 COMMERCIAL ESTATE UPDATE

The Chair invited Councillor Mark Elliott, Cabinet Member for Resources and Richard Long, Head of Commercial Estate to introduce the report.

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

Councillor Blackburn stated that he would like more information in order to understand the Commercial Estate. He asked about the recent budget which had identified a number of properties up for sale in order to pay off the WECA Post Office loan. He also asked about the amount of money needed for repairs and the impact of the voids. The Cabinet Member explained that the sale of properties was not in the Commercial or Corporate Estate but part of treasury management. The officer explained that he had been campaigning to get a war chest to address disrepair and resources are being combined to bring some properties back. He explained that disposals are dealt with in a different team and a partner is being commissioned to help form a process for declaring certain assets surplus. The Cabinet Member for Economic and Cultural Sustainable Development explained that currently data on Corporate Assets is held on 7/8 IT systems and work is being done on the specifications for a new system. There is a move to a new corporate landlord model. He explained that payments to WECA will be made over the next 5 years and part of this may be found in the disposal of Corporate Assets.

Councillor Halsall asked if most people in arrears eventually fulfil the debt and is there a cost to chase people. The Cabinet Member for Resources explained that there is a red/green split – some we are expecting to be paid and some is seen as risk. The officer added that we now chase all debt.

Councillor Hodge asked if there is a strategy to address outstanding works. The officer explained that it was done purely on the dateline. He explained that there is a backlog on maintenance and work is being done with the resources available, currently there is a focus on 18 properties.

Councillor Simon asked about the £220k debt (rated green but now 4 quarters old). He also asked if conversions to residential use can be part of a strategy to address housing. The officer stated that the debt is made up of areas where we are in dispute with the tenant over the level of debt. On the second point, he explained that we must comply with the Article 4 directive (which protects employment space) which means properties must have been marketed for employment purposes.

Councillor Saini asked about the key drivers of the Commercial Estate and how we compare regarding IPD (standard property index). He asked about notable trends and strategies to optimise performance going forwards. The officer explained that there had been concern about the trend for online shopping and how this would affect retail. Regarding the IPD, we are on par with similar mixed bag portfolio areas. He further explained that there is a landlords' forum to ensure local landowners support each other and the BID to collaborate on events.

Councillor Halsall asked if there is a list of properties and if there are any commercial properties outside of the district. The officer explained that the Council has records of titles and land ownerships. We can raise this with corporate landlords group – there is no reason not to make the list public. Regarding properties outside of the district – there are several including 2 office buildings in Aztec West and industrial buildings in Melksham and Chippenham. None of these defaulted during the pandemic.

Councillor Hodge asked if any of the pop-up businesses in void properties go on to have a long term let. The officer explained that there are pop ups in both commercial and corporate properties and some transition into long term lets.

Councillor Moss asked about the boundary between corporate and commercial properties, he stated that it would be useful to see where the line is drawn. Councillors could have access to commercial information as they are corporate trustees. He asked about the Community Asset Transfer process and asked about benchmarking opportunities with places such as York and Chester. The officer explained that we are a member of a historic cities group, but the nature of each estate is very different. Councillor Roper (Cabinet Member for Economic and Cultural Sustainable Development) explained that the split between the commercial and corporate estate is complex with regard to Community Asset Transfer.

66 PANEL WORKPLAN

The Panel noted the workplan.

Councillor Moss explained that there are ongoing discussions with Group Leaders and Cabinet Members regarding the presentation of items at PDS Panel meetings.

The meeting ended at 5.44 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services