

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

MINUTES OF CORPORATE POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING

Tuesday, 14th November, 2023

Present:- **Councillors** Robin Moss, Lucy Hodge, Ian Halsall, Oli Henman, Hal MacFie, Onkar Saini, Toby Simon, Malcolm Treby and Colin Blackburn

24 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

25 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

There were none.

27 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

28 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

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

The Panel noted the statement that had been circulated by Councillor Karen Walker (a copy is appended to these minutes).

30 MINUTES

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

31 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

The Chair explained that any updates would be contained in the following items.

32 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME - CONSULTATION UPDATE

Councillor Mark Elliott, Cabinet Member for Resources (supported by Damien Peak) introduced the report. He reported that overall, the responses have been pretty positive, including that from the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). He stated that there were some negative responses from those who would be negatively affected by changes. He further added that a significant minority did not understand the proposals which underlines the need for further and clearer communications.

The officer outlined some of the themes of the responses – he underlined the need for clearer communications to signpost people to financial and mental health support. He concluded that it had been a successful consultation and explained that a full detailed analysis would be reported to Council.

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

Councillor Simon commented that the consultation had done well in reaching hard to engage groups. He noted that Council will make the final decision. The officer stated that responses can be bias depending on how the changes would affect the responder.

Councillor Halsall stated that it was imperative that the message is put across to those affected.

Following a request from Councillor Hodge, the officer set out the numbers on those affected:

2,700 – households would benefit
1,000 – households would lose out
190 – household would see no change

The Cabinet Member stated that this is not a cost saving exercise and that the aim is to improve the equity of the scheme and protect the most vulnerable. The officer stated that these aims must be made clear.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officer.

33 DEVELOPING ECONOMIC STRATEGY

Councillor Paul Roper, Cabinet Member for Economic and Cultural Sustainable Development, introduced the report. He stated that this was an exciting moment as the last economic strategy was 10 years old. He stated that it is refreshingly compact in size and reflects many of the aspirations of this administration. It has been developed with stakeholders and informed by principles of doughnut economics. He further explained that it looks beyond purely economic indicators and has three themes: infrastructure, innovation and opportunity. The Cabinet Member explained that this would be considered by Cabinet in January 2024.

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

Councillor Henman asked how doughnut framing allows BANES to set the economy for the future. The Cabinet Member explained that it allows us to set out our stall as to what we want to achieve.

Councillor MacFie referenced the GVA figures regarding the 3.8% local growth compared to the national figure of 21.8% and asked about the plan to bring up the local growth rate. The Cabinet Member stated that the strategy does not focus specifically on GVA. There is a unique set of circumstances such as – a high portion of (wealthy) residents who do not work; high dependence on hospitality and tourism and lost industrial players (MOD). He stated that the success of the strategy is not based on GVA alone.

Councillor Simon asked if the document was amendable and gave some comments for potential inclusion:

- Electricity supply, maybe include grid connection issues
- Affordable housing – sometimes market price housing is more affordable. Build the right size housing and bear down construction cost growth
- Skills – the role of WECA and the Mayor. The Further Education (FE) sector.
- Riverside innovation corridor

The Cabinet Member noted the above comments. The Director of Sustainable Communities commented that the document is a draft and can be amended.

Councillor Hodge stated that it is a useful document, she stated that the 10 metrics at the end are things we were going to do anyway. She suggested 2 sections are boxed so they are not lost in the narrative.

Councillor Blackburn stated that on first impression the document is a wish list but the 'how' and 'why' are not always answered. He gave some examples:

- Affordable housing is mentioned but no explanation of how this will happen.
- It is stated that BANES is number 1 for micro businesses but does not say why (which could then be learned from).
- South Quays is mentioned but it does not say how effective this has been – there are still empty floors.
- 5G is lacking and is not addressed
- Somer Valley Enterprise Zone (SVEZ) is mentioned but the transportation side of it is not explained.

He stated that he is pleased that there is a plan.

Councillor Treby stated that it was great to have some KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) but only Net Zero is qualitative. He stated that we already have a Climate Emergency Strategy and Ecological Emergency Strategy so the Economic Strategy should primarily focus on growing the economy.

Councillor Saini asked how the strategy incorporates practice for long term economic sustainability. The Director stated that economic sustainability is the aim of the strategy.

Councillor Saini asked about human capital in terms of education and skills programmes. The Cabinet Member explained 'Project Forward' which is a collaboration with Bath Spa and Bath University and developing a syllabus in 4 areas: sustainability/digital/health and employability skills.

Councillor Moss thanked the Cabinet Member, he stated that the strategy is an aspirational wish list. He reiterated the point regarding GVA and being significantly behind the national growth figure and added that it might be useful to include other areas in England and Wales (outside of London). He also suggested that it would be useful to mention that BANES is unusual as it contains an urban hub and rural hinterland. Councillor Moss stated that deprivation is mentioned regarding Twerton and Whiteway but other pockets of deprivation should also be considered such as areas in Keynsham, Radstock and Westfield.

Councillor Moss stated that Tourism is a sustainability and economic issue – many people visit Bath for the day which increases traffic and does not fully support hospitality (hotels). We need to sell Bath and North East Somerset as a 2/3 day destination. Regarding the Somer Valley Enterprise Zone, he stated that he was not convinced that it is the answer to a lot of problems, could it take business away from the high street and is there a more suitable brownfield site.

The Cabinet Member addressed the points raised above – he commented that 'wish list' is a fair statement but that is not a reason not to set out the strategy. He acknowledged that financial flexibility is low but that there still needs to be a plan. He explained that having a strategy gives greater access to success with grant funding. He hoped for a future refinancing of local government. Regarding Bath Quays, he explained that it was close to having the vast majority of units let. He pointed to the 10-point delivery plan and explained that some things were being done already and more can be done with funding. He acknowledged that there were differing opinions on the SVEZ but highlighted the fact that this would bring jobs which helps to address some issues of deprivation. He added that the delivery of the SVEZ is not yet determined in terms of how many units are developed. He also explained that the delay in the decision was due to the consultation being extended.

Councillor Moss stated that some areas of deprivation in the Somer Valley are not solely a consequence of joblessness.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member.

34 2024/25 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Councillor Mark Elliott, Cabinet Member for Resources (supported by Andy Rothery, Chief Finance Officer (151)) introduced the report. The Cabinet Member explained that local government funding is pretty broken and that a number of Council's have declared bankruptcy. He explained that Council Tax covers a third of the operating costs of the authority and other income comes from things we charge for. He stated that the pressure on budgets in social care is enormous. He explained that the budget would be finalised and agreed at Council in February 2024.

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

Councillor MacFie referred to the expenditure in adult and childcare and asked for assurances that this would be addressed. He asked that an item on the budget regarding childcare be brought to the Panel. The Cabinet Member agreed that an item on this aspect of the budget could be brought to the Panel in terms of what can be done regarding rises in this budget area.

Councillor Halsall stated that students who study in the city cannot then afford to live here. He asked if HMOs (Houses of Multiple Occupation) disadvantage the authority as they do not pay Council Tax. The Cabinet Member stated that Universities do add to the city but can be economically detrimental.

In response to a question from Councillor Simon regarding SEND funding, the officer explained that this funding came from the dedicated schools grant which is managed by the Council. The pressure is very high on this – the Council is part of a safety valve programme which is a funding package to help Council's out of deficit.

Councillor Simon asked if there is a regional programme regarding accommodation for looked after children. The officer stated that a regional programme has not been adopted and that Councils are talking about how provision/properties can be brought into use.

Councillor Blackburn asked about the Revenue Support Grant and about what representations were being made in terms of a possible new Government. The Cabinet Member stated that Government funding had reduced from £31m down to £800k. He stated that conversations with potential future government could be more productive than any such conversations with the current Government. The officer explained that the F20 group (a group of authorities) had written to the government and are doing what they can to lobby.

Councillor Blackburn queried the fact that there was no mention of the Commercial Estate. The Cabinet Member agreed that a report on this could come to the Panel. He explained that the Commercial Estate was performing fairly well but not up to pre Covid levels. He added that rental values had fallen in Commercial properties. He is satisfied that officers are doing a good job.

Councillor Hodge asked what the social care contingency is. The officer explained that the social care reserve was put into last years budget so is no longer a reserve. Councillor Hodge asked about budget re basing. The officer agreed across all services. Regarding budget adjustment, he explained that there had been risk assessment around pay.

Councillor Saini asked what the timeframe would be if we cannot close the funding gap. The Cabinet Member stated that the Council has to set a balanced budget every year.

Councillor Simon asked if an increase in planning fees could help. The officer stated that planning caseloads are volatile.

Councillor Henman pointed to the glimmers of hope around heritage services and asked if this income could be enhanced. The Cabinet Member stated that he is delighted that visitor numbers are not up to pre Covid levels but that spend per visitor

is up. He assured the Panel that measures were being considered to sustain and increase this income. He added that the Fashion Museum will add to the heritage offering with its world class collection.

Councillor Hodge thanked the Cabinet Member for the detail in the report. The Cabinet Member credited officers who worked on it.

Councillor Moss stated that it is an extremely difficult time and made the following points (*Cabinet Member/officer responses shown in italics*):

- Regarding the F20 group, can you share the membership with the Panel. *The officer agreed.*
- Welcome a future item on Commercial Estate and business centre.
- Heritage – some concern about simply driving numbers up as this may spoil the experience. *The Cabinet Member agreed that the focus should be on the quality of the experience.*
- Regarding adult and children’s services – it would be great to come up with a solution.
- License levy – scheme in Middlesbrough could be good to look into. Also an accommodation/tourist levy – in Manchester there is a levy for hotel operators. *The officer agreed to look into this.*

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officer.

35 PANEL WORKPLAN

Panel members noted the workplan with the following additions suggested at this meeting:

Childrens Budget
Commercial Estate

The meeting ended at 5.48 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services