

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

MINUTES OF CORPORATE POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING

Tuesday, 25th March, 2025

Present:- **Councillors** Ian Halsall, Hal MacFie, Toby Simon, Colin Blackburn, George Tomlin, Duncan Hounsell, David Biddleston (in place of Robin Moss) and Lucy Hodge (in place of Malcolm Treby)

Apologies for absence: Councillors:

135 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Scrutiny Officer opened the meeting and, noting apologies from the Chair and Vice Chair, asked for nominations for Chair of the meeting today. Following a nomination from Councillor Blackburn, seconded by Councillor Simon – Councillor Hodge was elected Chair for the meeting.

Councillor Hodge welcomed everyone to the meeting.

136 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

137 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Moss sent his apologies and was substituted by Councillor Biddleston.

Councillor Treby sent his apologies and was substituted by Councillor Hodge.

138 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

139 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

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

Bob Goodman made a statement regarding Commercial Estate. Mr Goodman stated that, in his opinion, the Estates Department in the 1980's was one of the best. He added that the report to the Panel is uninspiring and called for a fresh, independent, public report. He stated that he had concerns regarding Aequis.

141 MINUTES

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

142 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

Councillor Elliott, Cabinet Member for Resources, updated the Panel on the following:

- A good news story regarding the former Jollys store in Milsom Street. We have had a difficult tenant and moving to a reliable, prestigious tenant in Morleys. We are spending money on the roof repair. Morleys move in during the Autumn and the store should open next February/March.

Councillor Roper, Cabinet Member for Economic and Cultural Sustainable Development, updated the Panel on the following:

- Fashion Museum – we are waiting to hear from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.
- Corporate Estate – the open week in parade gardens had many visitors. The entrance fee has been dropped.
- Regeneration Team are making advancements with the market square and town hall in Midsomer Norton.
- Somer Valley Enterprise Zone – the CPO process is behind schedule at present.
- The Association of Leading Visitor Attractions put the Roman Baths at 2nd place (1st place – Stone Henge).

Councillor Blackburn asked about the former tenant in Milsom Street and asked about the repairing lease. The officer stated that it was a repairing lease until 2018 when House of Fraser went into administration.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Members.

143 AEQUUS PERFORMANCE UPDATE

Councillor Guy, Leader of the Council, introduced the report. He explained that Aequus has been transformed from selling off the crown jewels to a company that is tackling affordable housing. Councillor Blackburn stated that he was a Councillor when Aequus was set up and that he did not recognise that description of the objectives of the company. Councillor Guy stated that it may not have been set up in that way but had become that. Councillor Blackburn stated that that is not what Councillors voted for when it was set up. Councillor Guy acknowledged the point made and explained that, when he became a Councillor, Aequus was selling Council assets and has now been transformed and is helping to tackle the housing crisis.

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

Councillor Simon ask about projects in Milsom and Stall Street. The officer explained that units are being developed above shops as retail units do not always want use of

upper floors. Sometimes there needs to be separate access. No exact number at present.

Councillor Biddleston stated that it was great to hear ambitions for social housing. He stated that the Audit Committee had asked for a visit as this helps. Councillor Guy stated that it could be arranged for members to view examples of converted units that had been empty for decades.

Councillor Blackburn asked about interest rates regarding ADL and how this is mitigated as BANES is the banker. The officer explained that these are relatively short loans (1-3 years) and set at certain levels. The Director explained that the credit rating of the company is improving as the company matures. We never want to expose the Council to financial risk. It is sensible and prudent.

Councillor MacFie asked what proportion of the 1000s of units in the pipeline are originally BANES owned. Councillor Guy explained that there will be a limit to the amount that is in our property portfolio, we encourage Aequus to look further afield.

Councillor Blackburn asked about South Quays where the commercial development went ahead before the planned apartments. The Director explained that Aequus are looking at a new planning application.

Councillor Blackburn referred to the aim to reach EPCA on everything and asked about how difficult this will be. He also referred to snagging costs at Sladebrook. Councillor Guy stated that the EPCA target is extremely ambitious but the commitment is for all new builds. Sometimes we cannot quite manage it, it is bespoke for each property. Councillor McCabe, Cabinet Member for Built Environment, Housing and Sustainable Development explained that a building becomes a retrofit when we look at it again. He stated that we do have the technology and skills to meet the challenges. The officer added that the Council do not have control once the building is sold.

The Chair thanked the Leader, Cabinet Member and officers.

144 QUARTER 3 BUDGET MONITORING UPDATE

Councillor Elliott, Cabinet Member for Resources introduced the report. He explained that, despite challenges, there is a reasonable expectation that we can get this year back into balance. There are still extraordinary pressures on Children's Services. We are addressing this in the long terms with in-house provision. Overall we are moving in the right direction.

The Executive Director updated the Panel on the external review of the Home to School Transport service and stated that there had been good feedback as well as improvements suggested. A key focus is loan taxi journeys - we are moving to an in-house model. She stated that there had also been good feedback regarding Children's Services. We are working on demand management/sufficiency and front door early help. We are also working with colleagues in the health service with regard to payments for certain provisions.

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

Councillor Hounsell asked about the future on respite care. The Executive Director explained that there has been a pause on Newton House, we are engaged with families but currently, no change in service. The Chair informed the Panel that the Children, Adults, Health and Wellbeing Panel would be considering respite care at their next meeting.

Councillor Simon asked about suggestions that the Council had lost the anchor tenant for Bath Quays. The Director explained that there is a floor and a half that is vacant. There had not been adequate forecasting so factors mean that the forecast position has not been achieved. The market has improved and we are encouraged.

Councillor MacFie asked about the deficit with regards to the Dedicated Schools Budget. The Cabinet Member explained that this is a safety valve (Central Government) programme which is an issue across all Councils. Councillor Simon stated that this does cost us in terms of borrowing. The Cabinet Member agreed.

Councillor Biddleston stated that the Government have underfunded in the area of SEND and asked if we are significantly oversubscribed in terms of EHCPs. The Cabinet Member stated that the rule change means that there has been a dramatic increase in EHCPs. In his view this is one of the most serious problems that central government should get hold of. We hope early intervention and support in school will help.

The Executive Director stated that she would investigate the information we have regarding empty taxis in response to a query from Councillor Biddleston.

The Cabinet Member stated that he would ask for data regarding a breakdown of charges for parking in response to a request from Councillor Blackburn.

In response to a query from Councillor Blackburn regarding the Council Tax increase and impact on people eligible for the Council Tax Support Scheme, the Cabinet Member stated that there will be a scaled rise. The scheme has been successful.

Councillor Simon asked about Community Support Contracts. The Executive Director stated that we are trying to give certainty to providers.

In response to a query from Councillor Simon regarding technical skill and resource to get things done (regarding the Capital underspend), the Cabinet Member explained that there had been service issues eg. Surveyors, but this had now been rectified. The Director explained that this had been an industry wide resource challenge (including fleet/equipment in the construction sector). He explained that the Capital Programme is set with contingency so the aim would never be to spend 100%.

Councillor Hodge asked if the Panel could receive feedback on Home to School Transport in 6 months (November, when we know the school intake).

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officers.

145 COMMERCIAL ESTATE UPDATE

Councillor Elliott, Cabinet Member for Resources, introduced the item and gave a presentation which covered the following:

- The Commercial Estate, Principal Objective: To generate resilient net income
- The Commercial Estate rental income and lettings income
- Commercial Estate Voids
- The Commercial Estate rent arrears
- The Commercial Estate Capital Works Programme
- Climate & Environment Emergency Performance

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

Councillor Tomlin asked for an update regarding the voids. The officer explained that all terms had been agreed and documentation was being prepared. Regarding the position of the Corporate Estate debt, the officer explained that during the separation of Corporate and Commercial Estate, a number of assets were held for Corporate purposes and a debt incurred.

Councillor Blackburn asked about dilapidation. He asked how we manage the risk and do we expect tenants to pick up the repairs. The officer explained that internal repair can be recovered via a service charge agreement. We are not borrowing more than 30% capital gains.

Councillor Hodge asked if there could be a report back to Panel in the Autumn with regards to voids awaiting work.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officer.

146 CORPORATE ESTATE UPDATE

Councillor Roper, Cabinet Member for Economic and Cultural Sustainable Development, introduced the report and gave a presentation which covered the following:

- Corporate Estate and Development
- Smarter structure – 5 pillars
- Estates Utilities
- Estate Decarbonisation – supported by Renewable Energy team

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officer for the update which had been requested by the Panel.

147 PANEL WORKPLAN

The Panel noted the workplan and the following suggestions for future items:

- Corporate Performance Indicators
- Libraries Update
- More information on enhancing communication with residents

The meeting ended at 5.56 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services