

Minutes

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

22nd November 2017



Present

Councillors	Present	Councillors	Present
P Barlow (Vice Chairman)	Yes	G Maclure	Apologies
Mrs M Cunningham	Yes	Mrs I Parker	Yes
Mrs D Garrod	Yes	R Ramage	Yes
J Goodman	Apologies	B Rose	Yes
A Hensman	Yes	P Schwier	Yes
P Horner	Yes	C Siddall (Chairman)	Yes

17 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

INFORMATION: The following interest was declared:-

Councillor Baugh declared a Non-Pecuniary Interest in Agenda Item 5 – ‘Scrutiny of the Priorities for 2018-19 and Initial Budget Position.’ as a Director of the Braintree District Museum Trust.

Councillor Mckee declared a Non-Pecuniary Interest in Agenda Item 5 – ‘Scrutiny of the Priorities for 2018-19 and Initial Budget Position.’ as Director and Chairman of Trustees of the Braintree District Museum Trust.

Councillor Pell declared a Non-Pecuniary Interest in Agenda Item 5 – ‘Scrutiny of the Priorities for 2018-19 and Initial Budget Position.’ as a member of the Halstead Community Centre Charity Company.

In accordance with the Code of Conduct, Councillors Baugh, Mckee and Pell remained in the meeting and took part in the debate and decision when the Item was considered.

18 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

INFORMATION: There were no questions asked, or statements made.

19 **MINUTES**

DECISION: That the Minutes of the 20th September 2017 of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

SCRUTINY OF THE PRIORITIES FOR 2018-19 AND INITIAL BUDGET POSITION.

INFORMATION: Members received a presentation from Councillor Bebb, Cabinet Member, Performance and Efficiency and Councillor McKee, Cabinet Member, Corporate Services and Asset Management on the Council's Priorities for 2018-19 and Budget Position.

The presentation slides can be viewed at:

<http://braintree.cmis.uk.com/braintree/Meetings/tabid/70/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/397/Meeting/700/Committee/4/Default.aspx#>

Cabinet Members provided the following information in response to questions raised by Committee Members and other Members present:

- It was reported that the Business Rates Retention Pilot Scheme would run for one year, 2018/19.
- The Home Renovation Grant was available to private individuals in order to keep housing stock at a high quality; this was subject to a strict criteria for awarding grants.
- In respect of the proposal to withdraw the refuse and recycling calendars in the District, Members were advised that people still missed bin collections regardless of having a calendar and it was worth trialling the withdrawal of calendars which may encourage people to switch to digital and use social media or apps to find out bin collection dates. It was also reported that some calendars would still be produced and available upon request for those residents unable to access online facilities.
- In respect to the Factory Site in Silver End, the Council did not own this site and therefore did not have any authority to develop this area; it was a privately owned site. It was reported that officers had been working to encourage the owner to bring the site forward.
- Members were advised that the Council did still bid for contracts outside of the District; however it was recognised that the Council had to be cautious when bidding for external contracts in order to maintain the quality of services provided within the District. The Council were looking at bringing in additional resources through the Better at Business programme to help develop commercial skills, however the impact on the capacity of staff and vehicles needed to be taken in to consideration.
- As part of the stock transfer, an insurance policy was put in place for 10 years to cover warranties given by the Council regarding environmental issues that may arise. This insurance had now expired and it was recognised that the risks were too great to not renew. Following a tender exercise the Council had taken out a policy with Zurich which was identified as the best value for money. The insurance premia of £98,560 would be paid up front, however it would be accounted for on an annual basis over the 10 year period.

- The Council were not currently restricted in terms of where they could make investments geographically, although the general view of Central Government was that it was not satisfied with Councils borrowing money and then investing in property outside of their boundary. Members were advised that the only major investment BDC had made outside of the District was at Colchester, which was purchased using its own capital and not borrowed money.
- It was reported that the Council understood the need to be cautious not to discourage people from visiting the Town Centres as a result of increased car parking charges. Members were advised that the increase to car parking charges was not substantial and therefore should not significantly affect the footfall of visitors to the Town Centres. Members were also reminded that car parking charges had not been increased over three years.
- Members were advised that it was difficult to predict how many appeals would be received and what the cost for these would be. An initial provision of £300,000 had been agreed for appeals but this will be fully utilised in the current year. A request has therefore been made to replenish this provision with a further sum of £300,000.
- In respect of Community Transport provision, following consultation with residents and customers the fees for the Community Transport Scheme had been increased slightly. It was reported that there had been support for the increase of fees on the basis that the level of service provided was maintained. Members were advised that the Council could look for future savings to be made if the County Council chose to reduce funding, however this would not be considered until next year in order gain an idea of what the reductions may be. The increase in fees would cover the reduction in funding received this year.
- In respect of the Business Rates Retention Scheme, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Local Government Association (LGA) were looking at local authorities need to spend factors as part of the Fair Funding Review and it is expected that the needs of rural areas would be taken into consideration.
- The Council were aware of the risk of being sued by parents of children who use play areas with faulty/damaged equipment. The Councils approach to manage this risk was to ensure that any play areas that were owned or maintained by the Council were kept in pristine condition in order to minimise the risk of injury. The proposed refurbishments related to two play areas, these were Meadowside, Braintree, and Spa Road, Witham.
- Following the statement from Central Government enabling Councils to charge up to 100% Council Tax on empty homes, it was reported that there were around 200 long term empty homes in the District (vacant for over 2 years) these were currently charged at a 50% surcharge; to charge an additional 50% on top of this would only generate the Council around £16,000. Members were advised that the Council did not budget for income from empty homes on the basis that it was preferred these homes were re-occupied rather than being left empty.
- Members were advised that there were two heating systems at the Braintree District Museum and these had been maintained by the Museum Trust since 2005. It was of expert opinion that the heating systems needed to be replaced in order to

make the building sustainable. The Trust did not have the necessary funds required to replace the heating system should it fail completely. A professional estimate had been carried to review the short and long term solutions. BDC had only assisted in the short term solutions, with the long term being maintained by the Trust. Extending the space of Museum was something the Trust were looking into.

- The Council had set a target for the amount of Council Tax to be collected in year (98.5%), if more or less than target was actually collected then this was recorded in the Collection Fund. The Council had been very successful at collecting Council Tax and whilst the surplus on the Collection Fund has to be repaid to Council Tax payers the Council has agreed in recent years to share this with Town and Parish Councils. The total surplus allocated to the District Council is around £182,000 of which £33,000 is to be distributed between Town and Parish Councils.

*Post meeting note: During the meeting a number of questions were asked by Members where a written response would be required. Following the meeting these responses had since been produced and were as follows:

- Traditionally the Council sends its own waste vehicles to auction through a reputable and experienced vehicle auction house, as this is seen as the best way of maximising income from their sale. Reserve prices are agreed with the auctioneer based on current market conditions therefore ensuring good value. In the past the income from some vehicles has exceeded expectations, taking into account that vehicles are generally 7 years old with very high mileage and at the end of their serviceable life when sold.
- Earlier this year all of the In Cab Technology Units were upgraded to iPads allowing photographs to be taken in real time relating to waste that is not out on the prescribed day of collection, which reduces resource time spent returning for erroneous missed collections with associated costs. Operations crews also record evidence of contaminated recycling and where access to a street is restricted due to parked vehicles etc. We have a dedicated Systems Administrator who uses the technology to optimise collection rounds to reduce mileage and non-productive travelling time. Managers monitor the progress of routes daily using the live data and where required redeploy resources to support the completion of routes where required. The technology provides enhanced customer service as well as the overall operational performance of the service.
- Segmentation analysis is used to understand customers habits and their use of the Council's car parks from various information obtained from the ticket machines. This includes commonly used tariffs, length of stay (short stay v long stay), time of arrival - peak and off-peak periods. The information is used when determining the tariff structure, increases in parking tariffs, as well as any concessions offered etc.
- The budget of £120k includes £40k for each of the play areas/gym trails that have been identified for refurbishment. The remaining £40k is a provision to undertaking repairs to the Council's youth facilities and equipment in Braintree, Witham and Halstead, in line with the annual inspection reports and recommendations.

The Chairman thanked Cabinet Members for their attendance and expressed his gratitude for their contribution to the meeting.

DECISION: That Members noted the report.

21 **FIFTH EVIDENCE GATHERING SESSION FOR THE SCRUTINY REVIEW INTO EMPLOYMENT SITES AND PREMISES**

INFORMATION: Members were advised that three new cross boundary garden communities were being proposed in the Braintree Local Plan which would help to deliver housing growth in the long term. Two of the garden communities were located in the Braintree District, The West of Braintree and Colchester/Braintree borders. As well as delivering new houses, the garden communities would be a key part of the economic strategy of the District and would deliver new employment land, retail facilities and infrastructure which would benefit the new community and existing residents and businesses.

Members were provided with two studies which examined the economic development potential of the garden communities. The first was the Garden Communities Employment and Demographic Studies which modeled a range of employment and growth scenarios across the garden communities and made recommendations on how the ambitious scenarios could be achieved. The second report was the Economic Narrative for the Garden Communities which brought together all the studies on the economics of the garden communities to date and made recommendations on the next steps.

Members were advised that following the release of the Government's Autumn Budget, it was proposed to simplify the process of applications to convert retail and other commercial premises to housing. It was recognised that this could compromise the Council's ability within its Local Plan to provide employment sites in the District. It was proposed by Members that if this proposal was a Government policy for consultation then the District Council should ensure that representations should be made.

It was agreed by Members that should they have any further comments or questions regarding the reports on the North Essex Garden Communities Employment and Demographic Studies and the North Essex Garden Communities Economic Narrative publication that they should direct these to Emma Goodings, Head of Economic Development and Planning Policy.

22 **DECISION PLANNER**

INFORMATION: That the Decision Planner for the period 1st December 2017 to 31st March 2018 be noted.

23 **UPDATE ON TASK AND FINISH GROUPS**

INFORMATION: Members were updated on the progress of the Task and Finish Group.

Members were advised that the Task and Finish Group Scrutiny Review into Tourism had held its third meeting on 2nd November where they were joined by representatives from West Street Vineyard and Love Essex. The Group were well on track and due to hold their next meeting on 14th December.

The meeting commenced at 7.15pm and closed at 9.34pm.

Councillor C Siddall
(Chairman)