

DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY, 25 JUNE 2020

Councillors Present: James Cole, Lee Dillon (Vice-Chairman), Gareth Hurley, Alan Law (Chairman), Ross Mackinnon, Thomas Marino, Steve Masters, Garth Simpson and Tony Vickers

Also Present: John Ashworth (Executive Director - Place), Nick Carter (Chief Executive), Gary Lugg (Head of Development & Planning) and Gabrielle Mancini (Economic Development Officer), Gordon Oliver (Corporate Policy Support) and James Townsend

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Jeff Brooks

Councillor(s) Absent:

PART I

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

4. Economic Development Strategy and Delivery Plan

Gabrielle Mancini provided introduced a report that provided an outline of West Berkshire Council's Economic Development Strategy and Delivery Plan. She noted that the strategy would be refreshed and a supplement report including the response to Covid-19 would also be produced. She clarified that the strategy was written before prior to Covid-19. She further noted that West Berkshire's economy was performing well before Covid-19. She highlighted how there were a number of positives in the district's economy, such as having a strong technology presence, a very mixed economy and its proximity to Heathrow. However, she also noted that there were a number of persistent negatives. She highlighted persistent inequalities, such as life expectancy with a 10 year age gap between the most and least deprived and housing inequality. She further noted that the strategy was centred on 'green and inclusive growth'. She stated that the key themes of the strategy were people, places, infrastructure and business environment, which were taken from the Berkshire Local Industrial Strategy. This strategy considered not just town centres but also rural communities. Infrastructure, both physical and digital. She stated that the business and environment theme reflected on what the Council and partners can do to make sure the 'open for business' message is backed up by sound policy making and a 'soft landing package' for those who choose to operate here. In order to deliver this strategy, £80,000 had been allocated to recruitment of an economic development officer and to provide a working budget. An additional £40,000 had been secured from Newbury West Berkshire Economic Development Company.

Councillor Tony Vickers asked why the strategy did not mention Covid-19. He stated that he understood that it was written before the pandemic, however he stated that this could not be discussed in depth with no mention of Covid-19.

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Councillor Alan Law stated that recovery plans would be looked at in detail when they were ready. He noted that the Economic Development strategy was taking a long-term viewpoint. He further noted that there would be amendments made because of Covid-19.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon stated that the Council did not know how long Covid-19 would last and that the core principles of the strategy were solid.

Councillor Vickers stated that he thought the report would make some reference to Covid-19 and the changes that the council is considering.

Councillor Law noted that in 12 months' time there would be a review of how the strategy was performing. He further stated that it was not the role of scrutiny to get into the detail of how the recovery from Covid-19 would be done. He stated that officers were developing a plan for the recovery, which Nick Carter would outline later in the meeting

Councillor Adrian Abbs raised concern over the use of the word 'hope' in the strategy. He stated that this raised concerns over how solid the strategy was. He also expressed concern over a lack of key performance indicators (KPIs) and measurements of its success.

Councillor Steve Masters stated that the strategy needed more emphasis on environmental policies and the part they will play in the economic development of West Berkshire. He noted how the Council declared a climate emergency and that the strategy needed more consideration of this. He stated that Covid-19 provided an opportunity to do things differently with the environment in terms of economic development.

Councillor James Cole stated that he was not keen on the use of 'future-proof' in the strategy. He further noted that he would like to see some strengthening around tougher planning for green issues. He pointed to gigabit capability installation as an example. He asked why these developments would be subject to viability.

Councillor Mackinnon, in response to Councillor Abbs, stated that the use of the word 'hope' centred on the desire to work with partners. He also noted that the delivery plan contained a number of KPI's. In response to Councillor Masters' point on a climate emergency, he stated that this was mentioned on pages 11, 14, 16 and 17 in the strategy.

Gary Lugg, in response to Councillor James Cole, stated that it was not the viability of putting in gigabit connection, but rather that this does not impact on viability of the development coming forward.

Councillor Law stated that he believed it was a good, high level strategy, but that it was missing a few key issues. Firstly, he stated that the strategy did not state how the delivery plan will operate. He also noted that it had no emphasis on focusing on the 10-15 existing major employers in West Berkshire and ensuring that they are retained. Furthermore, he stated that the section labelled 'West Berkshire in numbers' did not mention that 50% of the people who live in West Berkshire work outside and 50% who work here live outside, which had implications for housing and there was a need to work with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to ensure economic growth in neighbouring areas. Lastly, he stated that the Economic Development Company was a key partner of the Council and will help deliver the plan, however there was nothing on the company (goals, targets, who operates it) in the strategy. He also referred to the delivery plan and stated that although there were KPIs, he thought some were not in the Council's control. He also noted that the delivery plan was missing any reference to who was responsible for establishing Newbury College as a 'satellite' university. He stated that ownership of items on the delivery plan would help with commitment towards the delivery of the plan.

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Councillor James Cole stated that the name 'Newbury West Berkshire' sounded Newbury centric and asked whether it should be called West Berkshire Economic Development Company instead.

Councillor Mackinnon stated that he couldn't say why it was called 'Newbury West Berkshire' but that he could reassure that the strategy focused on the whole of West Berkshire.

Councillor Dillon stated that the name was part of a marketing strategy and the idea that Newbury was better known than West Berkshire and was more effective at attracting business and investment.

Councillor Vickers queried the role of the development company. He stated that inclusion and mention of eastern areas of West Berkshire in the strategy would help get the message across to the community. He also stated that the Council did not do much for businesses in terms of waste collection. He also asked how the re-structuring in the Council would help to deliver the strategy.

Councillor Gareth Hurley stated that there was no mention of Tilehurst, Purley, Streatley and Pangbourne apart from the AONB in the strategy. He noted that people in the east of the district would query this. He further noted that it would be better if these wards were mentioned in detail. Lastly, he noted that it would be good if infrastructure enhancements were more ambitious.

Nick Carter stated that 'Newbury West Berkshire' is as Councillor Dillon stated and the view was taken that Newbury was recognised more than West Berkshire. He stated that it was very similar to the Thames Valley Berkshire LEP and was a marketing move, however he assured that the plan was for the whole of West Berkshire. He further stated that some investment had been put into the strategy where it was struggling. He indicated that he had heard a number of criticisms around the need to spend more time understanding what businesses need and he stated that the Economic Development Company would help to facilitate this. He also noted that the budget that was approved by the Council did agree to put more investment in economic development, which should be reflected in the strategy. Inward investment for companies looking to come to West Berkshire would also be led by the Economic Development Company. In relation to the re-orientation of the Council to be more business-friendly, he noted that extra resources had been put into the economic development team through the appointment of another officer and there was also an Economic Development Board, and 'Open for Business' was a key theme in the Council Strategy.

Councillor Law stated that the strategy was a marketing pitch to residents, not just business investors and needed to reference communities across the district.

Nick Carter introduced a presentation on the Recovery Strategy of the Council. He noted that the Council did not fully understand the local economic impact of Covid-19 at the time of the meeting. He indicated that the draft strategy would be circulated to members within the next couple of weeks. He noted that work had already been done through measures such as deferring business rates for April and May; allocating £27 million grant funding for businesses; distributing a further £1.225 million in discretionary funding; providing detailed advice and guidance on the Council's website; and providing business advice through the Berkshire Growth Hub. He indicated that the Council had continued lobbying for more funding from Government to support local business. He also provided some insight on the challenges ahead in economic recovery from Covid-19, such as 15.1% of those employed in West Berkshire being in industries most affected by Covid-19, such as retail and leisure, the disproportionate impact on young people, and the West Berkshire Universal Credit claimant rate, which is expected to rise to 3.7%. He also noted

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that West Berkshire was home to a wide-ranging ICT, digital, science, technology and financial services that had been less affected by Covid-19 and were likely to recover faster than other industries. However, he noted that it was an ongoing and emerging situation and that a second spike may come.

Nick Carter provided further information on the recovery phases in West Berkshire.

- 1) **Supporting businesses to re-open** through measures such as signage / road closures in town centres, streamlined tables and chairs licences, and providing advice for businesses.
- 2) **Mitigating the structural economic impact**, through measures such as progressing the Newbury Town Centre Masterplan, updating the Economic Development Strategy, making improvements to digital infrastructure to facilitate home working, and the submission of funding bids to TVBLEP for local projects.

Councillor Dillon asked what 'making the council business friendly' meant in reality.

Nick Carter stated that he meant 'more business friendly'. He also noted that there were a number of measures being taken to make this a reality, such as a restructuring in planning to have a greater focus on big business applications.

Gary Lugg added to this point and stated that there was now a third team set up in planning. Those now included household applications and east and west planning teams that focused on commercial applications and process them more quickly. He stated that this also provided a closer link between planning and economic development. Furthermore, he highlighted the development order for Greenham Business Park.

Councillor Law stated that with planning applications, it used to be a 'first come first served basis'. He asked whether giving commercial applications priority had happened.

Gary Lugg confirmed that it had, with two designated teams now dealing with commercial applications.

Councillor Dillon, in reference to Nick Carter's presentation, asked with Universal Credit claimant rates going up would there be any support available for people to pay their Council tax. He also highlighted the need for broadband to support home working. He stated that the connection charge was high and whether the Council could do anything to help. He also noted that a number of pubs in Newbury needed a response on licenses to use outdoor space.

Nick Carter stated that the Council would be helping to support those who were struggling to pay their Council Tax. In reference to broadband and its costs he noted that this would come down to the market and that competition has brought down some costs. He stated it was unlikely that the Council could assist in broadband costs for homes. He also noted that the Council would be assisting providers where installation was not commercially viable.

Gabrielle Mancini stated that a number of licensing applications had been brought to attention in recent days and had reached agreement. She also noted that table and chairs licences had been accelerated and the Council had adapted before national Government on this. With regard to granting licences she noted that the requirements were on the website. She noted that there had been a delay in processing some applications because of awaiting confirmation on social distancing guidelines and because of a lack of resource but that these applications were now being dealt with.

Councillor Law stated that it would be wise if the Council could acknowledge applications.

Councillor Abbs raised concerns around the business advice and asked whether it would be non-entrepreneurs giving the advice. In reference to West Berkshire comprising a

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strong ICT and science sector, he noted that the district lost Bayer and that it now came down to Vodafone and MicroFocus. He asked about the depth of this sector past big businesses. Finally, he noted that it would be wise to pursue a deal with Vodafone on the installation of 5G to premises.

Nick Carter stated that business advice would be via the LEP and that the Council would sign-post people to the LEP. He further noted that it was not public servants providing business advice, but local entrepreneurs. He also stated that the Growth Hub advice was linked closely to Oxford Innovation. Furthermore, he noted that the ICT and science was not just reliant on big businesses and that West Berkshire had a large number of relatively small companies in this sector.

Gabrielle Mancini picked up the comments around 5G. She noted that the challenge was that West Berkshire struggled to attract 'pilot status' as it was not deemed urban or rural enough on the criteria factors. However, she further noted that the LEP is actively pursuing a trial to roll out the infrastructure. She concluded that work was underway to ensure that digital infrastructure provision would be integrated into the next Local Plan.

Councillor Abbs stated that Gabrielle Mancini's focus is on fibre and the need for gigabit in the home was not proven. He noted that he was worried about rural and not so rural communities that are still trying to get fibre to their homes.

Councillor Vickers stated that in the hospitality industry there was great confusion on what the Leader of the council said about the opening up of the town centre. He stated that it had now been resolved but he stated that there was an issue with the Council not communicating well with local businesses.

Councillor Mackinnon stated that if a business does not apply for a licence, the Council could not grant it, and if the business does not escalate concerns then the Council cannot respond. He noted that when applications were received, they were dealt with in good time.

Councillor Law stated that this issue should be dealt with separately as it was not relevant to the strategy.

Councillor Abbs noted that a key issue was restoring confidence in the high street. He stated that he had not seen much to deal with this in relation to Covid-19 in the Recovery Strategy through initiatives such as PPE and hand-gels.

Nick Carter stated that a lot of work had been done to ensure the town centres were safe in terms of signage and advice to local businesses through public protection, which was guided by Public Health.

Gabrielle Mancini stated that the Economic Development Team had worked with Public Health on evidence based interventions around cleanliness of the town centre and investing so that people would feel confident of returning to the town centre. She also stated that those who are going out onto the high street were spending on the high street and supporting local businesses.

Nick Carter stated that PPE guidelines were being followed, but it was not required in offices, but sanitiser is being used.

Gabrielle Mancini stated that through the Public Protection Partnership, guidelines were being given to businesses around PPE.

Councillor Abbs indicated that he wanted to know what the Council could do in practical terms (e.g. hand sanitisers at car parks).

Councillor Hurley stated that the businesses in Pangbourne had adapted well to social distancing and guidelines for businesses.

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Councillor Law asked Nick Carter when the recovery plan would be finalised.

Nick Carter stated that it would be finalised in early July.

5. Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission Work Programme

The Commission considered its work programme for 2020/21.

Councillor Alan Law stated that the Recovery Plan would be reviewed in July 2021. He also noted it may be wise to have a review of how the Council dealt with Covid-19. He further stated that the next OSMC meeting would be on 28 July to discuss the London Road Industrial Estate review.

Resolved that the work programme be noted.

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 8.15 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature