

CABINET WORKING PARTY - PROJECTS

Minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet Working Party - Projects held on Wednesday, 21 September 2022 in the remotely via Zoom at 10.00 am

Committee Members Present: Mr T Adams (Chairman) Ms V Gay
Mr R Kershaw Mr E Seward

Members attending: also

Officers in Attendance: Chief Executive, Democratic Services Manager, Director for Place & Climate Change, Project Manager North Walsham Heritage Action Zone and Programme & Projects Manager

Also in attendance:

Apologies for Absence: Mrs A Fitch-Tillett

8 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr A Fitch-Tillett.
The Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth also submitted his apologies.

9 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held 18th May were approved as a correct record

10 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received.

11 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

12 PROJECT UPDATE REPORTS

1. North Walsham Heritage Action Zone Project

Cllr R Kershaw, Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Growth, introduced this item. He began by saying that the project had now entered Phase 2, with work starting on the Market Place. The plans for the market place had been redrawn to reuse materials which would save money and time and reduce any inconvenience caused. Church Approach was now looking very smart with the benches installed and only a few snagging issues to resolve. Business in the new market had held up well and he said that the time had come to be more positive about the project. It was important to start promoting the wider beneficial impact of the work that was being undertaken and the improvement to the town. He said that he was pleased with the project but he felt that it was now time to focus on positive promotion and move forwards with a proactive communications campaign. He added that once the work on Church Approach was complete, he would like to see a report setting out the timeliness of it and where improvements could have been made.

The Chairman asked about the impact of cost inflation on the price of materials purchased for the project and whether the Portfolio Holder and officers were happy with the communications push in advance of the planned work – particularly regarding access to the shops and parking. Cllr Kershaw replied that he felt an opportunity had been missed, particularly regarding parking and that more signage could have been out in place. Regarding the cost of materials, he said that thanks to the work done by the Project Manager in early January to purchase materials in advance, there was some protection from inflation. It was on the risk register and would be closely monitored.

The Project Manager agreed, adding that she had tried to mitigate against rising materials costs when it became clear several months ago that prices were rising rapidly. The issue now was getting supplies delivered on time, even if they had been ordered 3-4 months ago. She said that there was a huge amount of work going on now in terms of communication and an article on the project was in the September issue of 'Just North Walsham'. There was a challenge in terms of cross-messaging but a clear route for messaging had been established and it was hoped that communication would remain positive and consistent going forwards.

The Chairman asked whether signage for the car parks had been resolved. Cllr Kershaw replied that this was still being resolved.

The Chief Executive said that he agreed with the comments so far. It was a huge project and it had been very farsighted to pre-order materials to mitigate against inflation. He said that he agreed with Cllr Kershaw that it was time to be openly proud of the scheme and the investment made by the Council. He added that there should be a focus on setting out the wider context of the future growth of the town and that the council was facilitating the evolution of the town centre. He went on to say that anything involving the HAZ needed to be signed off in advance by Historic England and this was a challenge. This made responding on the ground difficult. It was known that there was a small number of voluble people with vested interests who were not supportive of the project but there were positive comments – particularly the location of the new market and these should be built on. He added that it was important that the Council was able to lead on such messaging. On two occasions recently, specifically the unveiling of Church Approach and the announcement of the new travel hub, the Council had not been able to lead on the communication as it was pushed out on social media by other groups first. This was very frustrating as the Council had been crucial in delivering these projects.

Cllr E Seward said that he agreed with the comments so far. The bus interchange and the toilet refurbishment had now been completed and the development adjacent to the Shambles was impressive but had been behind schedule. He said that there was a lot happening but it was not always clear what was being progressed. He highlighted the work at the market place, the Cedars and the resurfacing of the Mundesley Road car park. In addition the Building Improvement Grants were currently underway, with two approved so far and the completion of the wall behind the Shambles. This totalled five projects that were currently 'live', with two more to go – the Vicarage Street toilets and the Lokes. There was £700k for economic regeneration that could fund this work. In terms of moving forward, a tighter management control and reporting system was required that covered every aspect of the project, not just the HAZ element. It needed one senior manager with oversight. Tight control of projects was also required – as demonstrated by the recent work on the Shambles. Regular reports were required, ideally on a weekly basis so that any slippage could be quickly addressed.

Cllr Seward agreed that there was an internal communications issue and that

sometimes things were happening that members and some officers were not aware of. There did not seem to be collaboration between departments. It was imperative that Local Members were kept up to date as they were often stopped in the town and asked questions that they could not respond to which was not helpful. He concluded by saying that he was excited by the project but also aware that some of the funding needed to be spent during the current financial year or it would be lost and he did not want the momentum to slip.

Cllr V Gay agreed that the Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) project should not be treated as a 'silo' on its own. There was a great story to be told, beginning with the District Council seizing the chance to apply for the funding, and then, once it was received, moved ahead with implementing the work, whilst having the foresight to purchase materials in advance to ensure that the project was not delayed. She said this was the story of a pro-active Council and it had not been told yet. Cllr Gay then added that as the opening date for the new toilets at Vicarage Street approached, it was vital that the Council demonstrated that they had listened to the extensive consultation and acted on it. The same applied to the Lokes in the town, they had been part of the original plan and the Council had bought a piece of land to support the vision for them. She concluded by saying that the Shambles was also a good story and there could have been more done to explain why there were delays as the reasons were interesting. She said that she understood some of the restrictions regarding media and members had ensured that their piece for the local free paper was quite general and didn't go into too much detail. This meant that the argument for bringing everything together was absolutely vital and she was fully supportive.

The Communications & PR Manager said that he agreed with the comments so far and supported the cohesive approach. He reminded members that for the first two years of the project, there were no concrete works to talk about just the vision of the project and the ongoing consultations. In the last six months, however, the scheme had entered a new phase and there were visible changes now which made it much more interesting to cover from a communications point of view. He acknowledged that there were some practical difficulties which made the situation challenging, including poor communication between departments at the Council and external challenge from some business owners. All of this meant that the communications landscape was very difficult. To be truly effective, communications for a project of this size, needed speed – or the ability to push out information quickly and positivity. Everyone needed to be giving the same positive message. One way of achieving this would be to refer people to a central point of contact. This would facilitate a consistent, considered response.

The Chairman requested that a single point of contact should be agreed and notified to members and officers.

The Chief Executive agreed and said that he would action this. He added that it didn't just sit with officers to address this issue. He referred to several posts on social media recently regarding car parking issues when members had responded directly to comments without engaging with the Council's Communications Team. He said that it had been agreed some time ago that Cllr R Kershaw, as Portfolio Holder and Cllr V Gay as the Local Member, would be the principle respondents on behalf of elected members and initial responses should be channelled via the Communications & PR Manager.

Cllr Kershaw said that Local Members were trying to be helpful by responding to social media posts but sometimes this could backfire and pausing to take a more considered approach would be more beneficial.

Cllr E Seward said that the issue with the car park in Mundesley Road was that signs had been erected to say that work would commence on 19th September but no one in the Communications Team was aware of this and neither were the Local Members aware. Once NNDC's Property Services Team decided to undertake the works on the 19th September, they should have informed the Communications Team to initiate the necessary messaging.

The Project Manager concurred with the comments regarding messaging. She said that everyone should stick to a clear corporate message. She reminded everyone that the travel hub was a separate project and not part of the HAZ scheme but they were closely linked and it had been important that the messaging on the travel hub was clear and that it emphasised that it was a partnership effort. She added that the HAZ project was not just about improvement works.

Cllr N Lloyd said that he understood why members felt compelled to respond to comments on social media, it was an attempt to ensure people understood the reasons behind certain actions and decisions and was done for the right reasons. However, he did support the need for a clear corporate message and a more proactive approach.

The Chairman commented that it might be helpful to give some feedback to Historic England on the pace and timeliness of communications.

The Chief Executive said that he would pick this up after the meeting, following further discussion with the Project Manager. He suggested that a mid-term review with HE could be beneficial – regarding the timeliness of communications and some other issues relating to the Cedars and terms for letting the building.

Cllr W Fredericks commented that in previous meetings, the Chief Executive had suggested that there was a lot more promotional work that could be done in the town. She wondered why this hadn't happened and said that if she wasn't a member of Cabinet, she wouldn't have known about the HAZ project and what was being achieved.

The Chairman asked about the current situation regarding the Building Improvement Grants (BIGs). The Project Manager replied that six applications had now been approved. Three of them had started work and one was completed. She explained that it was a very complicated scheme as most of the eligible buildings were listed and they may require planning permission to make any changes, which was a lengthy process. She added that it was also challenging to get contractors to undertake the work at the moment and this was causing delays. A large amount of funding was now committed to this part of the scheme and work was underway to prioritise those with the biggest visual impact.

The Chairman asked how many of the Building Improvement Grants would be awarded. The Project Manager replied that it was hard to say. There was one project that the team had been working with for over a year and they had just reached the point where they were going out to tender for the building work. Cllr R Kershaw added that there had been 28 applications for BIG funding and there was no possibility of funding them all, however, their interest would be logged for the future. He said it was a real concern that it took so long to get through the very complex process and there was a real risk that the lengthy process would result in the funding being withdrawn. The Project Manager said that it was a particular challenge in North Walsham because of the age and type of the buildings that were being worked

on. Officers were being as pro-active as possible, by providing designs for shop fronts to try and speed up the process.

Cllr Gay said that it was helpful for people to understand how complex the process was because it was about protecting and restoring historic buildings for the future. She suggested that it could be covered in Outlook, the Council's magazine.

2. Fakenham Roundabout

The Chairman said that there had been some concerns about the rising cost of this project and it had been suggested that there was further dialogue with the County Council on this.

The Director for Place & Climate Change said that the Chief Executive had submitted a bid for additional funding and the Council was awaiting feedback on this. There had been a planned meeting with the landowner, Trinity College, but this had unfortunately been delayed. Otherwise, there was nothing else to update on at the current time.

Cllr E Seward said that a huge amount of extra money was needed for this project and the Council could not accommodate this on its own. He then sought clarification on the impact of nutrient neutrality on the scheme, as he understood Fakenham to be covered by the guidance on this. The Director for Place & Climate Change replied that it was covered for the residential element of the development but not for the roundabout.

3. Local Plan

The Chairman asked about the impact of nutrient neutrality on the timescale for Local plan production. Cllr A Brown, Portfolio Holder for Planning, replied that there was already significant slippage in the Local Plan timetable. Several local authorities were holding back on submitting their Local Plan due to the impact of nutrient neutrality. He said that it was hugely challenging. It had been hoped to submit the Local Plan to the Inspector under Regulation 22 around now but this was now more likely to be early 2023. He said that he felt the Council was in a good position and although there was additional work to do on some elements of the Plan, he was confident it could be submitted soon.

Cllr E Seward asked whether a change of Prime Minister was likely to instigate a relaxation of the regime around nutrient neutrality. Cllr Brown replied that it had been suggested that it was caused by Brussels red tape – which was not true. It was a ruling from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and any challenge to this would probably not succeed.

Cllr N Lloyd asked whether there was an intention to update the public who had responded to the section 19 consultation on the current situation. Cllr Brown replied that there would be a report collating all of the responses to the next meeting of the Working Party in October.

Cllr W Fredericks said that developers were getting increasingly concerned about the delay to the Local Plan and the impact on housing delivery.

4. Net Zero Strategy and Action Plan

The Climate & Environmental Policy Manager summarised the report. She began by explaining that the focus had been undertaken on putting all the governance

procedures in place.

She then spoke about recent successes, including the launch of an animation which had reached 22k people and the huge amount of work which had been done in relation to Greenbuild 202. The satellite and online events that had been held in the run-up to the live event had been very well attended. Unfortunately, the main event had been cancelled following the death of her Majesty the Queen and the team was now reviewing the format of Greenbuild for the future.

She then outlined key projects that had been prioritised for the team. These included identifying Council owned assets for decarbonisation. A new surveyor with experience in this sector had recently been recruited. There had also been discussions with tenants in these buildings on energy saving options. The Council's temporary housing stock had been identified as an area where action could be taken quickly – particularly for lighting and energy efficiency. She added that the installation of LED lighting throughout the main council offices was progressing well.

The Chairman commented that it was very disappointing that Greenbuild had been cancelled. He then asked about the Council's carbon footprint. He was concerned that an increase in travel to the office and the purchase of more temporary accommodation, could have a negative impact on attempts to reduce the carbon footprint. He added that Bristol City Council worked in partnership with a company to deliver carbon reduction projects and wondered whether this was worth exploring in the future. The Climate & Environmental Policy Manager replied that there were several companies that would undertake this sort of work on the Council's behalf.

Cllr N Lloyd said that it was possible that the Council's carbon footprint would go up over the current four year administration. A carbon busting project was needed now to address this issue. He added that the focus of the team had been on organising Greenbuild and now the emphasis switched to tree planting. It was a small team and this impacted heavily on resource. Corporate backing was now needed to address climate change. A consistent approach to addressing basic issues such as screens left on in the office, heaters under desks and the encouragement of car sharing. He said he was very concerned indeed that not enough was being done. The Chairman said that he shared his concerns and more resources must be directed to addressing the issue.

Cllr R Kershaw asked whether the Government business grant scheme for energy support applied to the Council. He added that until there was funding available to help insulate housing stock, he could not see that it was feasible for the Council to undertake this work. Cllr Lloyd replied that South Cambridgeshire DC had a large housing stock and they had an insulation programme in place which was very effective and which would have a significant impact on their carbon footprint. He agreed that more support was needed from the Government but he was genuinely concerned that if the Council did not act soon, it would not make any progress. He highlighted that the Council still had several diesel vehicles in its fleet. It wasn't good enough.

Cllr E Seward commented that the Council had a strategy but was open to the challenge that not enough was being done. He said that it was important that each project was clearly set out and any costs highlighted and budgeted for. A clear programme for the next 3 -4 years was imperative. He referred to the installation of LED lighting and suggested that members were updated on the project and the savings made.

Cllr W Fredericks said that there were several local building firms that were seeking

to become qualified as installers for energy efficiency schemes. She suggested that the Council could assist with promoting training for this and encouraging more builders to undertake the relevant qualifications.

5. The Reef Leisure Centre, Sheringham

In the absence of the Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth, the Chief Executive provided an update. He said that there was a new Project Manager due to be appointed shortly and it was anticipated that the Project Completion Review would be their first substantive piece of work.

Cllr Gay, Portfolio Holder for Leisure, said that she had contacted the Chief Executive on 29th July outlining her concerns that there was no sign-off for the project and the finances had not yet been concluded. She said that she understood that the Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth was going to write a letter to the contractors, Metnor, for the Chief Executive to sign requesting that the accounts were closed down. She had not received an update at all since the end of July. She agreed it was important to have a final project report.

The Chief Executive said that a new project manager had been appointed since he last met with Cllr Gay. Regarding the letter, he said that the Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth had told him that there would not be a final account until 12 months after the project was completed and therefore no letter had been sent. Cllr Gay sought reassurance that the Council would not be put at risk by not having settled the final account. The Chief Executive replied that the Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth had informed him that it was standard practice to wait for 12 months to allow for any defects to occur and be dealt with under warranty.

Cllr Gay then said that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee had twice requested attendance from herself and the Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth to provide an update. She had advised them that there was nothing to update the committee on yet. She asked whether she should inform them that they should wait until the project review report was completed. The Chief Executive agreed, saying that it would come to Cllr Gay first and would then go to Overview & Scrutiny Committee for discussion. He advised Cllr Gay that the project review report should be ready by the end of the year and should be able to go to the Committee on 11th January 2023. The Climate & Environmental Policy Manager said that there had been some correspondence regarding the settling of the final account for the Reef. It would be a year old at the start of November. There were some outstanding issues regarding the performance of the pool which needed to be resolved. The final Sport England funding also needed to be drawn down. Cllr Gay thanked her for the update, particularly as she had moved into a different role now.

13 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The meeting ended at 11.38 am.

Chairman