

GROWTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Growth Scrutiny Committee of the Bolsover District Council held in a Virtual Meeting and in the Council Chamber on Friday, 23rd October 2020 at 10:00 hours.

PRESENT:-

Members:-

Councillor Jen Wilson in the Chair

Councillors Tricia Clough (Vice-Chair), Derek Adams, Jim Clifton, David Dixon, Chris Kane, Tom Kirkham and Tom Munro.

Officers:- Sarah Sternberg (Solicitor to the Council & Monitoring Officer), Pam Brown (Head of Leader's Executive and Partnerships), Karl Apps (Joint Housing Strategy and Growth Manager), Thomas Evans (Joint Empty Property Officer), Jessica Clayton (Partnership Strategy & Policy Officer), Joanne Wilson (Scrutiny and Elections Officer), Alison Bluff (Governance Officer) and Donna Cairns (Senior Governance Officer).

Also in attendance at the meeting were Councillors Councillor Sandra Peake (Portfolio Holder - Housing and Community Safety) and Councillor Mary Dooley (Portfolio Holder - Partnerships and Transformation).

GRO26-20/21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Peter Roberts and James Watson.

GRO27-20/21 URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

There were no urgent items of business to be consider.

GRO28-20/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

GRO29-20/21 MINUTES

Moved by Councillor Jen Wilson and seconded by Councillor Derek Adams
RESOLVED that the minutes of a meeting of a Growth Scrutiny Committee held on 9th September 2020 be approved as a true and correct record.

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GRO30-20/21 LIST OF KEY DECISIONS AND ITEMS TO BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE

Committee considered the List of Key Decisions and Items to be considered in private document.

Moved by Councillor Jen Wilson and seconded by Councillor Tricia Clough

RESOLVED that the List of Key Decisions and Items to be considered in private document be noted.

GRO31-20/21 UPDATE ON SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY 2006-20 AND REVISED SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY 2020-23 AND PARTNERSHIP RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Committee received a presentation from the Head of Leader's Executive and Partnerships and the Partnership Strategy and Policy Officer on the Sustainable Community Strategy and Partnership response to Covid-19.

The Partnership Strategy and Policy Officer explained to Members the meaning of "sustainable" in the context of the strategy. It was interpreted by the Partnership as a way of living which is resilient, viable and enduring, aiming for future generations to live as we do now, however improved without compromising their quality of life, the economy, the environment and society, working holistically with each other.

It was noted that the Sustainable Community Strategy was to enable the partnership to work together with the community with a common vision of "a diverse, healthy, fair and prosperous district, building on the strengths of our industrial past to become a vibrant and thriving community capable of meeting the challenges and opportunities of the future."

The Sustainable Community Strategy was the key document for Bolsover Partnership and for all participants in the Partnership to work towards. There were four sectors represented on the partnership: public, private, community and voluntary. Thematic Action Groups agreed the Partnership priorities, which were refreshed regularly. The Council's aims were to contribute to the Corporate Plan/Ambition.

The presentation outlined how the structure of the delivery of the Strategy was achieved, with Thematic Action Groups reporting to the Executive Board.

Committee had received copies of the April 2019 to March 2020 Funding and Performance Monitoring Report for Bolsover Partnership, from which examples were drawn on the impact and successes of the previous Sustainable Community Strategy, demonstrating the difference that had been made.

The first example provided was the contribution made to improving the environment. An issue that was raised years ago related to the unacceptable levels of litter. To highlight the difference that had been made, it was reported that in 2006 just 14% of waste was being recycled, now it was over 40% and growing.

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Another example was the sharing of the community's heritage and culture. Programmes included Limestone Journeys, First Art, and the Olympic legacy, with the Olympic Torch coming through the District; a legacy of sporting activities had continued since that time.

A further success reported was the rise in employment levels, particularly over the last few years. Bolsover District had consistently performed better than the East Midlands and England average, including a 7% jobs growth between 2007 and 2017. It was noted that a few years ago, employment growth and jobs in Bolsover District bucked the national trend due to collaboration between partners with local businesses to take advantage of opportunities that were arising.

It was also reported that gaps in health inequality had reduced, where public health indicators that tracked this showed the District had moved closed to national averages. The Chair of the Partnership had shared progress and best practice developed by the Partnership at a national conference in respect of public health improvements and the difference that can be made.

In relation to deprivation, improvements had been made which had moved Bolsover District from the 20th most deprived areas in England to 84th based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. National funding streams had contributed to this area of work such as the Single Regeneration Budget, Neighbourhood Renewal Funding, Working Neighbourhoods Fund etc.

Improvements in housing stock across the District were also highlighted. In 2003, around 40% of housing stock was deemed to be not decent. Around half of that was local authority housing. In 2010, the Council and partners worked hard to achieve the decent homes standard.

The presentation went on to outline the development of the new Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) for 2020 – 2023, the structure of the Bolsover Partnership and its work. The new timeframe for the Strategy aligned with the Council's Ambition (corporate plan).

Committee were advised that the Strategy had four key themes:

- A Safer Better Community
- Getting Better All The Time
- A Better Place to Live
- A Better Place To Learn, Thrive and Work

The Partnership worked through five thematic groups:

- Community Safety
- Health and Wellbeing
- Low Carbon, Housing and Environment
- Culture and Tourism
- Skills and Employment

Other associated groups and sectors that the Partnership worked with included Parish and Town Councils, young people, older people, community and voluntary sectors and local enterprise partnerships.

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Members were advised that in commissioning activity, the following steps would be taken. Action Groups would agree ideas and projects using SCS priorities for their theme, a focus would be jointly agreed and evidence would be used to support the specific need (using data, anecdotal information and community feedback). Consideration would be given to future sustainability, with plans put forward to the Commissioning Group for consideration. Successful projects would be recommended to Executive Board for ratification.

The presentation also set out how performance is monitored to ensure that more people are in work, getting healthier, and less deprived, and that the economy is growing. Performance monitoring included early notification of things not going to plan, data and outcomes captured and social return on investment calculations being undertaken. Action would also be taken to redirect projects and funding where necessary.

Examples of projects lead or supported by Bolsover Partnership included:

- Raising Aspirations, which had started in the District but had now spread across the county.
- Bolsover Wellness
- I-Venture/Namibia Bound
- Working Together for Older People
- Extreme Sports Academy

Members queried page 23 of the Strategy which referred to the provision of positive activities for young people being linked to anti-social behaviour. It was commented that it was not only young people who caused anti-social behaviour and it was suggested that this be widened to other groups. The Partnership Strategy and Policy Officer agreed to pass this recommendation on to the Community Safety Partnership as it was their Action Plan.

Committee queried the composition of the Thematic Action Groups and the Executive Board and it was explained that the Thematic Action Groups were made up of relevant officers and leads from across the partnership organisations, including council officers. For example, the Health and Wellbeing group is led by DCC Public Health and the Community Safety group was led by the Council's Community Safety Partnership and the Police. The Executive Board was made up of representatives from across the partner organisations and each Thematic Group.

Members queried how Growth Scrutiny Committee can better align its work with the Employment and Skills Group and find out more about the work of the Group. It was reported that the Group is led by the Council's Partnership Team and current areas of work included a Skills Audit of the district and being part of a bid for the establishment of an Institute of Technology. Members were encouraged to approach the Partnership Team to connect with the work of any of the Thematic Groups.

Response to Covid-19

The Head of Leader's Executive and Partnerships went on to present an outline of the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic through partnership working. The Head of Leader's Executive and Partnerships created a Community Response Team. The Team incorporated staff from the Leisure Service, who were furloughed and the services of

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contact centre staff to receive front line calls for support.

The Team was swiftly operational and provided food parcels and supported prescription/medicine requests and deliveries. The Team also co-ordinated the supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

The project had extensive impact on the team from a wellbeing perspective, taking quite distressing calls from customers, some who were elderly, lonely and isolated. This work had been a big support for those customers.

The success of the project was recognised, as no-one was refused support. All service areas went above and beyond what was required in difficult circumstances. The Leisure Operations Manager and Customer Services Manager were praised for the work in leading the Leisure and Contact Centres input.

During this time, the Partnership Team had also been responsible for processing a number of government grant schemes to support local business re-opening and continuing to operate, for example, grants for equipment to put Covid-Secure arrangements in place.

The Leader had commended the way in which all staff involved ensured the Council responded to the situation positively.

As a rise in Covid-19 cases was being observed, with a second wave, it was noted that the situation was changing daily and was being closely monitored. The District was in Tier 1 currently however it was anticipated that this may change in the near future. The Council would be ready to respond to any increase in demand for community support, however it was noted that other community organisations were also operating well, such as food banks, and it was anticipated that more partnership working with voluntary and community sector organisations would take place.

Members praised all Council staff for their response to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly the Community Support Team. It was noted that new skills and functions had to be used by staff across the Council and they had all responded well in the challenging circumstances.

It was queried whether the Community Support Team required the Leader's authorisation to be set up. The Head of Leader's Executive and Partnerships confirmed the Council would have set this up in any event, but that the Leader's support was instrumental in driving it forward.

It was also discussed that more economic support would become available for local businesses if the District were to move into Tier 2 restrictions.

Councillor Mary Dooley, Portfolio Holder – Partnerships and Leisure, commented that she was extremely proud to be Portfolio Holder for these service areas and that the teams had done a fantastic job in their achievements with the Community Support Team and the Partnership Team more widely through Bolsover Partnership.

The Portfolio Holder and officers were thanked for attending the meeting and for providing the presentation.

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Moved by Councillor Jen Wilson and seconded by Councillor Tricia Clough

RESOLVED – that the objectives of the new Strategy and the performance update to Committee be noted.

GRO32-20/21 BDC EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY 2021-24 - CONSULTATION

Committee considered a report on the first draft of the Empty Property Strategy. The Strategy set out the Council's objectives in relation to bringing empty properties back into use.

Members were informed that there were approximately 750 properties in the District that had been empty for more than 6 months as at August 2020. This was an increase of approx. 100 since 2019, however it was noted that comparatively, this was not as bad as some other local authority areas which had seen numbers double due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was believed that many of these empty properties were short term 'transactional' cases and it was anticipated that this number would decrease again in coming months as estate agents had reported seeing sales and lettings levels increase recently.

Empty properties represented a waste resource and were the main focus of the empty property strategy.

The draft strategy tied together the three main strands of empty property work: advice, assistance and enforcement, and it presented a framework for co-ordinated work to shape an Empty Property Action Plan. The strategy was also to have a key role in helping to secure potential external funding for housing related projects across the District.

The Joint Empty Properties Officer took Committee through the Strategy, explaining the key parts and their rationale. The promotional work undertaken by the service was outlined, demonstrating the steps taken to actively engage with owners of empty properties. This included highlighting available support/ financing for options to bring the property back into use.

Councillor Tom Munro joined the meeting and Councillor Tricia Clough left the meeting at this point.

Committee were advised that legislation enabled the Council to charge an additional premium, or uplift, on council tax for empty properties, increasing for each additional year it remained vacant. For example, 200% of the usual council tax rate could be charged for a property empty for over two years. This power was not yet used by the Council however a working group had been set up to explore this option.

The Joint Empty Properties Officer informed Members that he works closely with Environmental Health and other services through the Corporate Enforcement Group, to work collaboratively to tackle empty properties where they cause issues in the community.

Consultation on the strategy was to be carried out at various stages throughout the development process with internal and external organisation, including public, private and voluntary sectors.

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Members were concerned that the VAT discount on refurbishments after a property was empty for two years might act as an incentive to leave the property empty until it was eligible for the discount. The Joint Empty Properties Officer advised that this was unlikely as the discount was not well known and only promoted to owners/landlords with properties already empty for two years.

A Member queried whether the Compulsory Purchase Order power could be used in respect of properties where tenants were causing anti-social behaviour. The Joint Empty Properties Officer advised that in relation to the empty property procedure, the property would have to be vacant, unless the occupants were only squatters. The Solicitor to the Council commented that there were various circumstances in which Councils could use Compulsory Purchase Orders but she believed that anti-social behaviour caused by private sector rental properties was not one of them.

It was noted that the use of Compulsory Purchase Orders was only considered as a last resort.

Committee discussed the proposal to consider Council Tax premiums for long term empty properties and asked how this proposal would be determined. It was confirmed that an officer working group was looking at the options and this would be reported to Executive and Council for approval when setting the Council Tax rates. A Member commented that there would be a conflict of interest for Members with second homes.

A Member also queried whether there was any schemes in which veterans could be involved in bringing empty properties back into use. The Joint Housing Strategy and Growth Manager advised that there had been similar schemes run previously by Groundwork Creswell, however nothing was currently planned. It was possible that this could be incorporated in any apprenticeship and kick-starter schemes as part of the Bolsover Homes programme.

The Scrutiny and Elections Officer advised Committee that the Customer Service and Transformation Scrutiny Committee had been conducting a review of the housing allocations policy and this included consideration of the priority given to veterans.

Committee discussed empty commercial properties and whether Council owned vacant units could be offered at low rents for start-up businesses. The Joint Housing Strategy and Growth Manager advised that this was a matter for the Estates team in liaison with economic growth. However it was noted that the market for commercial units such as office spaces had changed due to the pandemic and demand for office space had decreased with more people working from home. Many businesses were looking to downsize.

In relation to privately owned commercial properties that were vacant, these were often converted to residential dwellings. Whilst this had an impact in reducing available commercial units, it could also be seen to have a positive impact on Town Centres when empty units in these areas become dwellings due to the increase in footfall and local shopping as a result.

A Member gave an example of an empty property in their ward, the former Co-op building in Whitwell, and how it was in the process of being converted into flats. It was commented that this would help to meet the demand for affordable single occupancy accommodation in the area.

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It was queried whether there were any powers or options for dealing with empty properties that were not covered in the Strategy. The Joint Empty Properties Officer confirmed that an option to identify a mortgage lender where a property has a mortgage on it, and to contact the lender to encourage the owner to take action, particularly if they may be in breach of mortgage conditions where the property has been left empty. He agreed to add reference to this into the Strategy.

Committee also discussed whether a selective licensing scheme could be introduced. The Joint Empty Properties Officer advised that these schemes could only be introduced where there are issues in a particular area caused by the private rental sector. He did not believe that there were any such areas within Bolsover District at this time, however Members were requested to contact him if they were aware of any issues within their wards. It was noted that there had previously been issues in Shirebrook with private landlords, however through working with other departments such as Environmental Health, it was considered that these issues had significantly improved and a selective licensing scheme would not be necessary.

The Scrutiny and Elections Officer also passed on the comment from another Member who was not present, that the action plan attached to the Strategy did not contain any specific mention of involvement with Members. The Joint Empty Property Officer confirmed he was keen to have input from Members with knowledge of their local areas.

Councillor Sandra Peake, Portfolio Holder – Housing, offered her thanks to the Joint Empty Property Officer and the Joint Housing Strategy and Growth Manager for their presentation of the Strategy. She also praised the team for their work in this area, commenting on how difficult it can be to get in touch with owners and that this can involve dealing with very difficult and varied circumstances. She encouraged all Members to contact the team with details of any properties in their area that they suspect are empty or are causing issues.

The Portfolio Holder and Officers were thanked for attending the meeting and for providing the presentation.

Moved by Councillor Jen Wilson and seconded by Councillor Derek Adams

RESOLVED – that the Committee notes the report and agrees to support the initial draft of the Empty Property Strategy.

Councillors Chris Kane, Mary Dooley and Sandra Peake left the meeting at this point.

GRO33-20/21 WORK PROGRAMME 2020/2021

Committee considered their Work Programme 2020/21.

Members were advised that the scheduled meeting in November could not go ahead as a formal meeting due to resourcing issues. It was agreed that this meeting could be held informally if officers would be available. If not, an alternative date would be agreed.

If possible, the Housing Strategy item would be deferred until the December meeting. It was agreed that the informal part of the December meeting should be held on a separate date unless the length of the formal part is reduced.

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Moved by Councillor Tom Munro and seconded by Councillor David Dixon
RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

The meeting concluded at 12:00 hours.