

Improvement & Innovation Advisory Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 5 December 2023 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Bayley (Chairman)

Cllr. Thornton (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs. Abraham, Clayton, G. Darrington, Malone, James Morgan, Varley, Waterton and White

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Hogarth and Manamperi

Cllrs. Barnett, P. Darrington, and Robinson were also present.

20. Minutes

Members discussed the minutes of the previous meeting. Members discussed amending Minute 18 to better reflect the questions regarding clear deliverables and repetition within the Plan. The Chairman highlighted that the Portfolio Holder's responses to these issues were minuted, and that minutes were not verbatim. Members further noted that the Governance Committee would be reviewing the procedures surrounding recordings of meetings, which may make them more accessible. It was agreed that the minutes would not be amended, as the minutes of this meeting reference the discussion held.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held 26 September 2023 be approved, and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

21. Declarations of interest

There were none.

22. Actions form previous meeting

There were none.

23. Update from Portfolio Holder

The Portfolio Holder and Leader gave an update on the services within their portfolio. The Economic Development Team and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund Project Officer were named Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Champion of the Year at the Institute of Economic Development Annual Awards. The award celebrated his work in helping the both the council and other organisations better support those with visual impairments, and have appropriate interventions in place when they join. These

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included having guide assistants, making adjustments to language used, and adapting systems such as finance, IT, and learning development.

The Stangrove Estate programme was progressing within budget, and was due to complete in March 2024. Two new car parking lots were already open for residents to use. This would help address local residents' concerns regarding the development's impact to on-street parking. 8 of the 13 homes built had been purchased by Quercus Housing and would be used for affordable housing. The remaining five would be marketed for private sale. The Portfolio Holder shared some pictures of the development.

Other developments that supported the Council Plan, Town Centre Strategies, the Economic Development Plan, and the emerging Local Plan were ongoing. Several of these proposals required recosting, to address inflation, and would be brought through the committee system when prepared.

The Council intended to hold a public consultation in February 2024 regarding the Council- and KCC-owned Land East of High Street, Sevenoaks. This would test public opinion on early concepts and gather suggestions from stakeholders and residents.

A report regarding a new business park would be brought to the Finance & Investment Advisory Committee in January 2024. Members of the committee were invited to attend.

The Council had been shortlisted for the UK Employer of the Year at the Investors in People Awards, and were the highest ranked public sector organisation. The Council did not win, but had received valuable feedback from the programme.

A trainer had been identified to provide Equalities Training for Members. This would be held on 10 January in the Council Chamber.

24. Referral from Cabinet or the Audit Committee

There were none.

25. Budget 2024/25: Review of Service Dashboards and Service Change Impact Assessments (SCIAs)

The Head of Finance presented the report which set out updates to the 2024/25 budget process within the existing framework of the 10-year budget and savings plan.

Some changes had been made to future assumptions and they would be continued to be reviewed during the budget process. The key cost driver continued to be inflation, with pressure coming through on service demand, the pay award and the cost of goods and services. The items listed in Appendix E reported a current annual budget gap of £1.368m. Members were advised that they were likely to have to make more

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difficult decisions during the 2024/25 budget setting process than they had had to make for many years.

Informed by the latest information from Government and discussions from Cabinet, it was proposed that the Council once again set a balanced 10-year budget and continued to aim to be financially self-sufficient with no direct funding from Government through additional Revenue Support Grant or New Homes Bonus.

In response to questions, the officer explained that the budget retroactively incorporated external funding, but did not assume its existence for the purposes of balancing the budget. Balancing the budget over 10 years allowed for greater flexibility in addressing large surprise costs.

The report presented a growth item that had been identified which needed to be considered, and requested further suggestions from the Advisory Committee, before finalising the budget for 2024/25.

The Committee considered the savings proposals as set out in Appendices G and H, which were for a reduction in the contact hours of the Customer Solutions service, and for a new Commercial Property fees and charges schedule. Members asked questions regarding the proposals, and were advised that the increases in fees and charges were on a cost-recovery basis, as they related to statutory services. Members supported both proposals.

Members gave further consideration to additional suggestions for growth and savings which had been suggested by Members. Those suggestions relevant to this Advisory Committee were as follows:

- Drop the IIP Accreditation
- Land Charges Service Review
- Improvements to the Procurement Strategy
- Investigate over-delivery on certain Performance Indicators

Following debate, Members agreed that only the second and third suggestions should be referred to Cabinet for further consideration. It was noted that the third suggestion was being investigated outside of the budget process through the Audit Committee.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Members noted that consideration had been given to impacts under the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Resolved: That it be recommended to Cabinet that

- a) The savings proposals (SCIA 13, SCIA 14) identified in Appendices G&H to the report applicable to this Advisory Committee, be considered; and that
- b) Cabinet consider the following suggestion:

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- Land Charges Service Review
- Improvements to the Procurement Strategy

26. Rural England Prosperity Fund Update

The Economic Development Officer - Business Support & Town Centres presented the report, which updated the committee on the monitoring of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural England Prosperity Fund. Both programmes were subject to extensive government-led monitoring, and all reports submitted by the Council had been approved with no concerns. The programme covered 15 project areas, and aimed to maximise the Economic Development Strategy work alongside it. Some projects were delivered in partnership with neighbouring authorities; members were advised that, where this was the case, all funding put forward by Sevenoaks was distributed to recipients within the district. Members heard a brief overview of the grant programmes which had been delivered.

In response to questions, members were advised that every area in the district had been allocated funding. All of the available funding had been allocated through the investment plan, as agreed by Members. The Committee viewed a [video](#) produced by the council to raise awareness of Small Business Saturday, as part of the Town Centre Programme. Members discussed the programme, and requested that further data regarding impressions and responses to the video and similar projects be included in future updates.

Members discussed the forecast projects. They were advised that these were town council projects which would be confirmed when brought forward to the Council. Funding had been allocated for them through the Town Centre funding, but their specifics had yet to be agreed. The programme extended for 3 years; judgements regarding its continuation beyond that could not be made.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

27. Economic Development Strategy

The Economic Development Officer - Business Support & Town Centres presented the report, which updated the committee on the first year of the Economic Development Strategy. The Strategy had no additional funding associated with it, and thus partnership working and available funding were maximised. The UKSPF investment plan was aligned with the EDS, which has meant the funding could deliver projects covering both areas.

The Strategy was a framework centred on supporting the local economy. This approach kept a level of flexibility within the Strategy, which would allow it to adapt to external circumstances and opportunities. 86% of actions were either Green- or Amber- coded, which meant progress had been made towards the objective. The 5% of actions which were Red-coloured were being actively worked on, to bring them to amber before the completion of the strategy.

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Members asked questions regarding broadband coverage within the district and its impact on professional services. The officer explained that the council were engaging with Kent County Council regarding the Broadband Delivery Plan, to add value within the district. It was noted that smaller businesses had taken advantage of the Meeting Point hub and similar businesses, which could guarantee strong internet connections. Community-led solutions for broadband in rural areas were also a possible avenue to address this.

Members asked questions of clarification regarding specific projects. The redevelopment of 96 High Street, Sevenoaks had been linked to the Land east of High Street, Sevenoaks, and would be included within the proposed consultation in February 2024. Several ideas were being investigated, but stakeholder engagement was necessary before further developing them.

Members discussed the report, and raised some areas of potential further investigation, including the re-establishing the Otford Road Park and Ride and the impact of sustained roadworks on local businesses.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

28. Work plan

The Work Plan was noted with the following additions:

29 February 2024

- Digital Transformation & Customer Insights – Six Month Update
- Communications Strategy

18 June 2024

- Land East of High Street, Sevenoaks – Consultation Results
- Performance Indicator Reviews
- Annual Complaints Report

Members discussed possible additions to the work plan, including a review of the suggestion that committee meetings be held in the day, and an update on Bevan Place. Officers would investigate the first option, and an update on Bevan Place would be included in the Portfolio Holder's update at the meeting in February.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 8.20 pm

CHAIRMAN

