

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Monday, 4th October, 2021
6.00 - 7.35 pm

Attendees	
Councillors:	Chris Mason (Chair), Dilys Barrell, Nigel Britter, Jo Stafford and Tim Harman (Reserve)
Also in attendance:	Bev Thomas, Harry Mayo, Chief Executive, Gareth Edmundson, Director of Planning-Tracey Crews, Jackie Jobes, Darren Knight, David Oakhill and Mark Sheldon

Minutes

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllrs. Flynn, Nelson and Sankey. Cllr. Harman substituted for Cllr. Nelson.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr. Barrell noted that her son worked for Cheltenham Borough Homes, in case it was relevant to the Housing Delivery Strategy item.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

Cllr. Barrell asked that the last line of her HOSC update in item 9 be amended to read 'significant changes in healthcare'. With that in mind, it was:

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the 5th July meeting be approved and signed as a correct record.

4. PUBLIC AND MEMBER QUESTIONS, CALLS FOR ACTIONS AND PETITIONS

There were none.

5. MATTERS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE

There were none.

6. HOUSING DELIVERY STRATEGY/DEVELOPMENT DELIVERY UPDATE

David Oakhill (Senior Development Manager) presented his discussion paper, noting that the council had set an ambitious vision with a considerable development agenda, including Golden Valley, a step change in housing delivery and the raising of environmental and sustainable standards. This was set in the context of the council's climate pledge and Covid-19 recovery and regeneration initiatives, in which housing played an important role.

He updated members on key developments, including the Golden Valley acquisition, the lifting of HRA borrowing caps and CBH's subsequent capital programme proposals, all of which shaped the delivery of new homes. Subject to restrictions, the council and CBH would deliver homes across four categories: affordable housing, estate regeneration, private rental stock and homes for sale on the open market. He stressed that the council also acted as an enabler of housing delivery, both through its planning process and the sale of land for development.

The Asset Management Plan was under review and would be presented before Council in the winter, setting the overarching framework for how all council assets would be managed. Housing delivery would form an integral part of this.

One member queried how environmental and sustainability standards would be raised. The Senior Development Manager responded that in the case of the Golden Valley development, a large part of the procurement process had focused on sustainability. He would be able to offer a fuller picture once the ongoing negotiations were closed. CBH formed a large part of this, and was currently working on its future work programme with the goal of carbon neutral homes at its heart. He acknowledged that it was much easier to control environmental standards in homes the council built than it was in those it bought.

One member asked whether the construction phase would be carbon neutral. The Senior Development Manager clarified that carbon neutrality generally referred to the completed homes, as it was much harder to guarantee in the construction phase, although they always aimed for the highest possible degree of sustainability. He hoped that technologies would emerge over time that enabled more sustainable construction phases.

One member queried what proportion of homes at the Golden Valley development would be affordable. The Senior Development Manager responded that the Joint Core Strategy had allocated a number of large strategic sites for development (of which the Golden Valley was one) with 35% of all housing to be affordable. In the case of a smaller site, anywhere between 10 and 499 homes, they would expect 40% to be affordable.

The Chair thanked the Senior Development Manager for his contribution and looked forward to future updates as the developments progressed.

7. TOWN CENTRE PROJECTS & PROGRAMMES

Tracey Crews (Director of Planning) gave a strategic oversight of what was happening in the Town Centre, focusing on how plans agreed by the council fit together. These included the past activities of the Cheltenham Development Task Force, which focused on town centre regeneration including the Brewery, Transport Plan, North Place and the public realm. The Place Vision worked alongside this, articulating the key areas of interest as business, culture and community working together. Connecting Cheltenham was a further plan for transport in the town, with a focus on tackling the climate emergency and increasing connectivity in the town centre. In the area of public realm project delivery, over £1m had been invested so far by the council, GCC and the European Regional Development Fund, with a further estimated £1.4m coming in the next year.

The pandemic had had a significant impact on the town centre in many ways, most notably through job losses, furlough, social distancing, deprivation and re-skilling. She not acknowledged that not all these issues were new (for example, physical retailers going online-only and leaving the High Street) but Covid had caused them to accelerate. It was important to look at possible opportunities arising from the crisis, such as the rise in cyber and tech, and stressed the need to build on the town's strengths.

She added that the Development Task Force had been replaced by the Economic Recovery Task Force (CERTF). Key principles included partnerships, engagement, leadership and collaboration, and many aspects of the council's work could contribute to this. The CERTF could help drive the town's economic recovery through swift and brave interventions in response to challenges, while the Welcome Back Funding provided investment of over £200,000. Inward investment would also be achieved by promoting Cheltenham as 'open for business', alongside partnership working and place management. She reassured members that environmental and sustainability concerns would be central to this, particularly in terms of understanding the human impact on the town centre and how residents and visitors moved around the town, but emphasised that this needed the support and delivery by GCC as the Highways authority.

Jackie Jobes (Townscape Manager) added that reimagining the town centre would be a core tenet of the post-Covid economic recovery, and that the decline of high streets nationwide was well-documented long before Covid hit. The most immediate aspects of reimagining Cheltenham's town centre were to progress the High Street paving works which had been postponed due to the pandemic, and to restart the Cambray Place development in spring 2022. They also needed to address the temporary street furniture on Boots Corner and deliver the Minster Gardens. She noted that the E-scooter trials had been extended until March 2022.

She emphasised that the key question was what the Town Centre had to offer, and how it could compete with other areas. They needed to encourage a wide variety of uses and look at whether the planning system encourages and restricts innovation. Cheltenham's town centre was relatively large, and work had been undertaken with the Economic Recovery Task Force to break it down into five zones based on their characteristics: Minster Quarter, Regency Quarter, Montpellier Quarter, Central Quarter and the Lower High Street.

It was worth looking closely at frameworks like the '15 minute city', in which everyone living in the town was able to access essential urban services within a 15 minute walk or bike. This would require spatial redistribution of land uses and activities but could contribute hugely to the council's climate goals.

The Director of Planning added that developments like Golden Valley should have a borough-wide impact, rather than being limited to West Cheltenham. The question was how to ensure a ripple effect across the town in terms of culture, retail, jobs and community. The town centre needed to be an attractive opportunity for businesses and provide a catalyst for new developments, while boosting the delivery of sustainable homes and infrastructure together with addressing the climate change emergency.

She suggested that there was work to be done to bring coherence to the range of projects and initiatives taking place in Cheltenham, and to set them in the

context of the council's overarching priorities. It was important to define the purpose and priority of projects, as well as the town centre itself and its network of inter-relationships. Frameworks like the Place Vision had to be linked throughout, and key target areas should be identified. Collaborative working was essential, in particular with the county council and its Highways team. The Citizen Space consultation platform, soon to be implemented, would enable more effective public consultation.

One member noted that the change in retail environment was a national and possibly global issue, which had been sped up by the pandemic but was already in motion before. Could the council work with towns and cities across the country who were facing the same problem, and not just locally? The Director of Planning responded that it was vital to learn from other areas wherever possible. The council had commissioned a year-long program with Maybe to support companies struggling to adapt to online engagement with their business, which was especially key during the early months of the pandemic as requirements for businesses changed so rapidly. They continued to work closely with the BID, and the best possible practice was always sought through collaboration and conversation.

One member asked whether it was likely that more housing would appear in the town centre as retail dropped off. The Director of Planning responded that in order to keep the principle of community at the heart of the town centre and High Street, it meant looking at things that were not just retail and business. The High Street was not dead, but it was always important to look at alternative uses.

One member was concerned that the town centre would be the only focus, and asked for further detail on planned linkages with other parts of the town. The Townscape Manager agreed that the town centre could not sustain the town on its own, so it was important to look outwards at smaller communities outside the centre. This was fundamental to the 15 minute city concept.

One member asked about the upkeep and maintenance of what the council already has. The Townscape Manager responded that the upkeep of roads and pavements was a county council area, but noted that strong relationships were being built with GCC to ensure an effective partnership and ensure any maintenance issues were not long lasting.

One member asked about the potential for conflict between the needs of residents and the night-time economy, and the need for consultation regarding things like the 15 minute city idea. The Townscape Manager responded that they were working closely with councillors on this, particularly with regard to the Connecting Cheltenham plan. Projects like the Arle Court roundabout works were all about increasing capacity, while plans were in motion for a significant transport hub project which would hopefully begin in January. She emphasised that you could fit far more bikes and pedestrians in the town centre than cars, and the health benefits were also huge. The member agreed, but noted that this might be viewed differently by visitors and those living on the outskirts. They asked whether the views of residents in the town centre would be just as important as those from business. The Director of Planning agreed and acknowledged the need to take into account local concerns as well as the broader strategic approach. The key question was how to capture visitors coming in all directions, and give them options to get into the town centre in an easy and sustainable way.

Members praised the detailed presentation, and one member suggested it ought to be delivered to all members at some point in the future. The Director of Planning was happy to lead a member seminar on the topic, which Democratic Services would organise.

8. FEEDBACK FROM OTHER SCRUTINY MEETINGS ATTENDED

Cllr. McCloskey's update from the Gloucestershire Economic Growth O&S Committee on 15th September and Cllr. Brownsteen's update from the Police and Crime Panel on 28th September 2021 were taken as read.

9. CABINET BRIEFING

The Leader's briefing was taken as read.

Cllr. Mason added that at the last Chair's briefing, he and Cllrs. Hegenbarth and Payne had been briefed by officers about the relatively short timescales that the government permitted for bids and grants. They had found that some bid windows were so short that a key officer being unavailable for any reason could mean the authority would not be able to submit a bid, and had agreed to raise this with the Leader and ask her to write to the government to request they review it. The Leader responded that she was happy to do this, and agreed that the process could be frustrating and ineffective. Local authorities often struggle with capacity and windows for bids and grants often came in at short notice. She suggested also taking the issue to the District Councils Network and South West Councils to seek buy-in from other authorities. The Chief Executive added that this issue was on the radar of the Executive Leadership Team, which had raised it with the relevant government department.

10. REVIEW OF SCRUTINY WORKPLAN

The scrutiny workplan was circulated with the agenda.

11. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 - EXEMPT INFORMATION

12. MUNICIPAL OFFICES: OPTIONS APPRAISAL

Members resolved to move into exempt session.

Mark Sheldon (Director of Projects) presented a discussion paper on the future of the Municipal Offices and responded to questions from members.

13. EXEMPT MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the 5th July meeting be approved and signed as a correct record.

14. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

1st November 2021.

Chris Mason
Chairman