

PLACE AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

NOTES OF INFORMAL MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 21 SEPTEMBER 2021

Present: Cllrs Shane Bartlett (Chairman), Rod Adkins, Jon Andrews, Brian Heatley, David Shortell and David Tooke

Apologies: Cllrs Andy Canning, Mike Parkes, Mark Roberts (on other Council business) and Bill Trite

Also present: Cllr Barry Goringe, Cllr Cherry Brooks, Cllr Ray Bryan, Cllr Simon Christopher, Cllr Jean Dunseith, Cllr Beryl Ezzard, Cllr Matthew Hall, Cllr Nick Ireland, Cllr Sherry Jespersen, Cllr Carole Jones, Cllr Rebecca Knox, Cllr Nocturin Lacey-Clarke, Cllr David Morgan, Cllr Louie O'Leary, Cllr Andrew Parry, Cllr Jane Somper, Cllr Andrew Starr, Cllr David Taylor, Cllr David Walsh and Cllr Peter Wharf

Officers present (for all or part of the meeting):

John Sellgren (Executive Director, Place), Aidan Dunn (Executive Director - Corporate Development S151), Jonathan Mair (Corporate Director - Legal & Democratic Service Monitoring Officer), Jim McManus (Corporate Director - Finance and Commercial), Ade Adebayo (Interim Service Lead Assets and Property), Ben Lancaster, Paul Scothern (Manager- Assets & Property), Sarah Cairns (Service Manager - Major Projects), Mark Simons (Senior Consultation and Engagement Officer), Jennifer Lewis (Service Manager for Communications and Engagement), Grace Evans (Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer), Marc Eyre (Service Manager for Assurance), James Fisher (Data Protection Officer), James Potten (Communications Business Partner - Place) and Lindsey Watson (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN FOR THE MEETING

The Chairman noted that the Vice-chairman had sent his apologies for the meeting and therefore the committee would need to elect a Vice-chairman for the meeting.

It was proposed by D Shortell seconded by B Heatley

Agreed

That J Andrews be elected Vice-chairman for the meeting.

27. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from A Canning, M Parkes, M Roberts (on other Council business) and B Trite.

28. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

29. Chairman's Update

The Chairman provided the following statement:

'In the light of the situation with Covid-19 case rates, Dorset Council's Chief Executive - Matt Prosser has exercised his delegated powers to continue to hold virtual informal committee meetings.

Where a decision is required, committee members will express a 'minded to' decision in respect of recommendations set out in officer reports, with decisions being taken under officer delegated authority in the light of 'minded to' decisions expressed by members in the virtual meetings. Any decisions or recommendations required will be confirmed by the appropriate officer at the conclusion of the committee's debate on an agenda item.'

In addition, the Chairman welcomed Ade Adebayo, recently appointed Interim Service Lead Assets and Property to Dorset Council and to the meeting of the Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

30. Public Participation

A question had been submitted from a member of the public. A copy of the question read out at the meeting and the response provided, is set out at Appendix 1.

31. Questions from Members

There were no questions from councillors.

32. Property Strategy and Asset Management Plan Quarterly Monitoring Presentation

The Executive Director of Place provided a presentation which set out progress on the actions associated with the council's Property Strategy and Asset Management Plan.

Points were discussed in the following areas:

- Links with Adult and Children's Services and housing issues
- Capacity within the team to work towards the actions. There was confidence that resources were in the right place
- A councillor webinar on archives would be arranged
- A wide range of implications, including financial, were taken into consideration in the review of assets
- Major disposals would be considered by Cabinet and all councillors were able to attend and ask questions

- Recognition of the role of ward councillors, town councils and the Dorset Association of Town and Parish Councils in discussing local assets
- Councillors could contact officers with any queries on assets in their ward
- The balance to be made in progressing disposals whilst achieving the best solution
- Work continued with community land trusts and town and parish councils
- Customer Services were undertaking work in respect of hub offices
- Detail provided of the Dorset Workplace Strategy work being undertaken
- The Executive Director of Place paid tribute to staff for their continued work during the team's restructure and Covid-19 Pandemic.

The Chairman noted that the future timing of the report could be considered and adapted as required.

33. **Dorset Council Consultation Process**

The committee received and considered a report of the Service Manager – Communications and Engagement and Senior Consultation Officer, which provided an overview of Dorset Council's consultation process.

Councillors considered the contents of the report and points were raised in the following areas:

- How the council gauged the success of consultations undertaken. Examples were provided of recent consultation exercises
- A variety of communication methods were used to get messages out
- The team were working with young people to develop effective engagement with this age group, including through the use of social media
- The importance of consultation was recognised and examples provided of where this was working well
- Different levels of responses to consultations and the potential use of summary documents to ensure that policies and documents were accessible and easier to understand
- The importance of the list of current consultations.

5 MINUTE ADJOURNMENT

The Chairman announced that there would be a five minute adjournment at this point in the meeting.

34. **Local Land Charges Service Update**

Arising from the committee's review of the performance dashboard at the last meeting, a report was provided by the Head of Legal Services in respect of the current position with the Local Land Charges Service.

The Corporate Director, Legal and Democratic, thanked the committee for bringing the item for discussion in a public meeting. He also thanked officers in the team and colleagues in other services for the work undertaken to address the challenges in the service. He apologised to those people whose searches had been delayed and confirmed his commitment to bring about improvement and to bring the service back to where it was hoped it would be.

In presenting the report, the Head of Legal Services provided the current response times and an update on staffing issues.

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Development and Change apologised for the delays in the service and noted the reasons for the delays. He paid tribute to the hard work of staff in legal and planning and noted that, although not short-term fixes, the reasons behind the delays were being addressed.

Councillors considered the issues arising from the report and during discussion the following points were raised:

- The Portfolio Holder for Planning highlighted the key role of land charges and both thanked and supported staff for their work in this area. In addition he indicated that he would bring a quarterly planning performance report to the committee at future meetings
- Support and thanks were expressed for the work being undertaken by officers in both land charges and planning. The duty of care for staff was recognised
- It was agreed that councillors would be kept better informed, in order to be able to respond to questions and comments from the public
- Representations had been made to MPs in respect of the pressures put on local councils during this time
- As the service migrated to a single register, the level of manual checking would be reduced
- The Head of Legal Services provided an overview of staffing and budget issues in the area

In accordance with the Constitution, at this point in the meeting it was proposed by J Andrews seconded by D Shortell that the meeting continue beyond 3 hours. This was supported by the committee.

- The Head of Legal Services provided information on the project plan for migration of the service to a single IT system
- There was a need for timely and effective communications with the public and the Head of Legal Services would discuss this with the Communications Team
- The Chairman requested that a further report be brought to the next meeting of the committee to provide an update on performance and response times
- The Chairman also requested a further report to a future meeting of the committee about project governance and arrangements for the convergence of the land charges registers.

35. Information Compliance - Key Performance Indicators

Arising from the committee's review of performance information at the last meeting, a report was received from the Service Manager for Assurance, to set out actions being taken to improve the current key performance indicators relating to information requests made to the Council.

Councillors considered the report and raised points in the following areas:

- There was a need to better understand what the common Freedom of Information requests to the council were and whether some information could be made more readily available online
- A review of the performance indicators in this area could assist in providing further information to show how far outside of the target date, requests were
- In respect of Subject Access Requests, the potential for outsourcing particular elements would be investigated in order to speed up the process in certain parts

The Chairman requested a further report to the next meeting of the committee in November to update on the discussions in respect of Subject Access Requests and review of the performance indicators.

36. Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan

Councillors reviewed the committee's forward plan and noted items to be considered at the next meeting of the committee on 16 November 2021.

Comments were made as follows:

- J Andrews noted that he would be submitting a review request related to community transport
- A question was asked on progress with the local plan and this would be picked up with the Chairman following the meeting
- The quarterly planning performance report would be added to the committee's forward plan.

37. Cabinet Forward Plan and Decisions

The committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan and decisions taken at recent meetings, which the committee could use in order to identify potential areas for post decision review.

38. Urgent items

There were no urgent items.

39. Exempt Business

There was no exempt business.

APPENDIX 1 - PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Agenda item 4 - Public Participation

Question from Tom Gawler

Could a response please be given as to how the Land Charges Department could possibly be in such disarray 12 months after first implementing a new IT system and 16 months after volumes of work first began to significantly increase due to increasing volumes of transactions in the housing market. To take more than 3 months to complete a local search from information already held within the council's records (dressed up as "61 working days" on the Council's website) is completely unacceptable after all this time. To continue to say that the department is "working towards" bringing the services levels back to a more acceptable level is just not good enough – what action has been taken precisely and why hasn't that action provided results?

Response from Jonathan Mair, Corporate Director – Legal and Democratic

The purpose of the item about the Land Charges Service on the Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee's agenda today is to enable councillors to enquire into why there are delays in responding to searches and the steps that are being taken to improve the service.

The advice of council officers is that it would be an error to attribute the delays in responding to searches to the implementation of a new IT system alone.

Consideration of the report and the opportunity to question officers will enable councillors to establish the part played by the very significant increase in the numbers of searches that we continue to receive and to consider the other factors set out in the report. It will also give the Scrutiny Committee the opportunity to identify any actions that they expect over and above those already being taken to improve the service.

Duration of meeting: 10.00 am - 1.25 pm

Chairman

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