



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on 15th December 2022

ECONOMY SCRUTINY PANEL
20th September 2022 at 7.00pm
(Postponed from 13th September 2022)

Present:

Councillor Freeston (in the Chair)

Councillors Callison, Parkinson (substitute for Reynolds), Smith, Wheatley and Wilson.

Officers in attendance:

- David Baker (EQUANS - Contract Business Manager)
- Wendy Fisher (Estate and Business Development Manager, Assets)
- Damien Jaines-White (Assistant Director Regeneration)
- Maggie Johnson (Head of Economy and Funding)
- Simon Jones (Assistant Director Law, Governance and Assets)
- Guy Lonsdale (Finance Group Manager)
- Jo Robinson (Assistant Director Policy, Strategy and Resources)
- Paul Thorpe (Operations Director, EQUANS)
- David Tipple (Relationship Manager)

Also in attendance:

- Councillor Jackson (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder Economy, Net Zero, Skills and Housing)
- Councillor Harness (Portfolio Holder Finance, Resources and Assets)
- Councillor S Swinburn (Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport)
- Councillor Patrick
- Councillor Shutt

There were no members of the press or public present.

SPE.18 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from this meeting were received from Councillors Dawkins, Lindley and Reynolds.

SPE.19 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received in respect of any item on the agenda for this meeting.

SPE.20 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meetings of the Economy Scrutiny Panel held on the 13th June 2022 and 12th July 2022 be agreed as a correct record.

SPE.21 QUESTION TIME

There were no questions from members of the public for this meeting.

SPE.22 FORWARD PLAN

The panel received the published Forward Plan and members were asked to identify any items for examination by this Panel via the pre-decision call-in procedure.

RESOLVED – That the Forward Plan be noted.

SPE.23 CALL-IN: GYPSY AND TRAVELLER NEGOTIATED STOPPING AGREEMENTS

The panel considered a formal request from Councillor Patrick and Councillor Shutt to call-in a decision of Cabinet regarding Gypsy and Traveller Negotiated Stopping Agreements. Please note, with the permission of members calling in this item, this was being considered outside the constitutional 28 days.

The Chair invited the councillors who had called the decision in to explain their reasons for doing so.

Councillor Patrick did not feel that the decision was in the best interests of the residents of the Borough or the traveller communities. He was aware of the use of stopover agreements in places such as Leeds but felt that North East Lincolnshire was very different geographically. He also raised concerns about potential social tensions. Councillor Patrick felt that there was insufficient transparency and engagement behind the decision.

Councillor Shutt agreed with the need for greater transparency and asked why a list of potential sites had not been circulated. While he welcomed the detailed cost analysis, he felt there was a lack of detail behind the approach that would be taken.

The Chair invited Councillor Harness, Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets, to respond to the call-in and explain the decision taken by Cabinet.

Councillor Harness noted that the proposal was one that many authorities were looking at and the council had to find something that was suitable for our residents and the traveller community. He referred to the assessment included within the report submitted to Cabinet, which also included details of visitor numbers. He added that, to date, this year there had been two visits on private land and one on council-owned tier one land. It was felt that a formal stopover site was no longer required due to the historic low visitor numbers. Councillor Harness found comfort that this proposal had come from the traveller community. He noted that the appendices to the report set out definitions for tier one and tier two sites and he explained the process that would be followed.

The Chair invited Panel members to comment.

There were comments from panel members in support of Cabinet's decision, particularly as it looked to resolve a long-standing issue and provided a less rigid approach. However, there were concerns voiced by some panel members about the lack of transparency with not releasing details of the potential sites.

Officers noted that the proposed approach was focused on managing visits rather than identifying sites.

Councillor Wilson moved that the call-in be supported and the decision be reversed to allow a shortlist of land, if any, to be drawn up for consideration and to be the subject of consultation for further debate. This was seconded by Councillor Wheatley. This proposal was put to the vote and was lost by two votes to four.

The Chair proposed that the decision be freed up for immediate implementation. This was seconded by Councillor Callison.

Councillor Wilson moved an amendment that the decision be freed up for implementation subject to the survey undertaken by Equans being released to all Members. This was seconded by Councillor Wheatley. The amendment was put to the vote and was lost by two votes to four.

The panel voted on the Chair's proposal to release the decision for implementation and, by four votes to two, it was

RESOLVED – That the decision of Cabinet on 20th July 2022 regarding Gypsy and Traveller Negotiated Stopping Agreements be released for immediate implementation.

SPE.24 FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT 2022/23 - QUARTER 1

The panel considered a report from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets providing key information and analysis of the Council's position and performance for the first quarter of the 2022/23 financial year. This report was considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 8th September, 2022 and was referred to all scrutiny panels to consider matters within their terms of reference.

A panel member enquired whether resolving the forecasted £8m overspend within Children's Services would impact on budgets within the remit of this panel.

Mr Lonsdale responded that there was an expectation across all services that a balanced budget position would be achieved by the end of the financial year. Mitigating actions within Children's Services would be looked at prior to seeking savings elsewhere. He noted that some revenue underspend had been reported in the Economy and Growth area but the scope for further savings was limited given the contractual elements in this area.

The panel member also enquired about the impact of borrowing on services within the remit of this panel.

Mr Lonsdale noted that in the current economic environment it was appropriate to revisit affordability and a stringent business case process was in place. Payback on investment should always be clear and there were a number of different controls to provide assurance.

The Chair enquired whether there were any early indications of changes to local government funding as a result of the country having a new Prime Minister in place.

Mr Lonsdale responded that prior to the change of Prime Minister there were indications of a two year financial settlement which would have given local government greater certainty over funding. He hoped that there would be some clarity following the new administration's mini-budget this week.

A panel member voiced concerns over budget pressures, borrowing costs and the additional pressures arising from the cost of living crisis.

Mr Lonsdale responded that the council would need to make decisions on allocation of resources through its budget process. The council was not alone in facing these challenges and he hoped that there would be a settlement that aligned to the pressures being faced by local government.

RESOLVED – That the report now submitted, be noted.

SPE.25 REGENERATION PARTNERSHIP PERFORMANCE REPORT - QUARTER 1

The panel considered a report containing a summary of the Regeneration Partnership's performance against key indicators for the period April to June 2022.

The Chair noted that this was Mr Tipple's last meeting before leaving the authority and thanked him, on behalf of the panel, for his valuable support to the panel.

The Chair requested an update on the current position with electric vehicle charging points in the borough.

Mr Thorpe reported that the council had not been successful in its grant funding application but a meeting was due to be held in the next week to consider how future bids could be improved.

A panel member enquired about the number of empty homes in the borough and whether it was increasing.

Ms Robinson noted that this was referred to in the Council Plan Performance Report and numbers appeared to be substantially increasing. However, a flaw had been identified in the way this was being reported when the focus needed to be on long term empty properties. A more accurate picture would be presented in the quarter two Council Plan report but she believed the long term figures to be roughly in line with those previously published and they were starting to decrease.

The panel suggested that it would be helpful to have a breakdown of these properties by ward.

A panel member felt that it would be useful to have a broader outline of the current challenges being faced in bringing empty homes back into use. It was noted that an update on this issue was due to be submitted to this panel at its meeting in January 2023.

RESOLVED – That the report now submitted be noted.

SPE.26 COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022/23 – QUARTER 1

The panel considered a report from the Leader of the Council providing oversight of performance against the council plan for the first quarter of the 2022/23 financial year. This report was considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 8th September, 2022 and was referred to all scrutiny panels to consider matters within their terms of reference.

The Panel broadly welcomed the report and the information presented. It was suggested that there needed to be consistency in the way data was presented in terms of numbers or percentages. The 'traffic light' system of indicating progress was also questioned in terms of how it reproduced when printing in black and white.

RESOLVED – That the report now submitted, and the panel's observations on formatting as referred to above, be noted.

SPE.27 RIVERHEAD SQUARE PHASE 2 - DESIGN PROPOSALS

The Chair observed at the start of this meeting that this item had been deferred to a future meeting of this panel.

SPE.28 FRESHNEY PLACE

The panel considered a report from the Leader of the Council providing an update on the Freshney Place leisure scheme. This report was scheduled to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 21st September 2022 and was submitted to this panel for pre-decision scrutiny. The panel received a presentation setting out the design proposals.

The panel made the following comments:

- Concerns about service to the proposed new market space and how stallholders would get their provisions. It was noted that a traffic consultant was looking at these issues and working with tenants.
- How would the loss of the current Market Hall car park be mitigated, including income pressures as well as the impact on parking in the town centre and surrounding streets. It was noted that this was being further explored and a commitment had been given to keep ward councillor updated.
- Concern was raised about the lifespan of building materials and potential drainage issues from the proposed pitched roofs.
- It was felt that the rear view of the proposed cinema appeared to be quite plain and needed to be softer as it would remain in full view of residents and traffic passing by.

RESOLVED – That the report and the panel's comments above be noted.

SPE.29 TRACKING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF SCRUTINY

The panel received a report from the Statutory Scrutiny Officer (Assistant Chief Executive) tracking the recommendations of the Economy Scrutiny Panel.

RESOLVED – That the report now submitted be noted.

SPE.30 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

There were no members' questions to the Portfolio Holder.

SPE.31 CALLING-IN OF DECISIONS

There were no formal requests from members to call in decisions taken at recent meetings.

There being no further business, and noting that there had been no need to exclude the press and public for any further consideration of the Freshney Place item, the Chair declared the meeting closed at 9.03 p.m.