

## **Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board**

**Wednesday, 25<sup>th</sup> November, 2020 at 6.00 pm**  
**On Microsoft Teams**

### **Present:**

Councillor R Burston (Chair)

Councillor C Barnett (Vice-Chair)

Councillors T Crumpton, A Finch, J Foster, L Jones, A Millward, J Roberts, P Sahota, D Tyler and S Waltho.

### **Dudley MBC Officers**

M Williams (Acting Deputy Chief Executive), I Newman (Director of Finance and Legal), P Mountford (Head of Planning and Regeneration), S Griffiths – Democratic Services Manager/Statutory Scrutiny Officer and M Johal – Senior Democratic Services Officer

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#### **1 Apology**

An apology for absence from the meeting was received on behalf of Councillor J Cooper.

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#### **2 Minutes**

##### **Resolved**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2020, be approved as a correct record and signed.

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### 3 **Update on Annual Centres Healthcheck Survey**

A report of the Director of Regeneration and Enterprise was submitted on the work undertaken to monitor the vacancy rates of retail units within the Borough's strategic centre, town centres, district and local centres and the potential impact of vacant retail units to the Council's finances. The report also provided an overview on the work being undertaken to support the recovery of the Borough's Town Centres and High Streets more generally.

Arising from the presentation the following comments and queries were made by Members and responses were provided, where appropriate, as follows:-

- The future of Town Centres and High Streets was referred to, particularly that Town Centres had changed over time and continued to change with various issues having an impact on the economy. Given the current Pandemic it was not expected that retail would return to normal and therefore it was suggested that vacant/hard to let units be converted to residential developments to avoid premises becoming dilapidated.

The Head of Planning and Regeneration indicated that there had been changes in planning legislation for permitted development rights which enabled the conversion of shops and offices to residential use without the need for planning permission in some cases. This was already being seen across the Borough's High Streets and Town Centres and may help to diversify the types of property uses within High Street helping to increase footfall and making Town Centres a vibrant place to shop, live and socialise. It was noted, however, that there were still some concerns regarding the quality of some residential conversions via permitted development where planning permission was not required.

- The information contained in the report was welcomed and provided a snapshot of how Town Centres were performing showing steady figures in terms of vacancy rates and depicted Halesowen Town Centre as being more vibrant. However, it was considered that key detailed information was missing on the performance of the Borough's local centres and Members would welcome information on how the current situation was affecting centres in their Wards. It was important to monitor the position with local centres as they had a community cohesion role and a place for the community to socialise. It was requested that information on local centres be analysed with a view to identifying those centres that were thriving and financial support being provided by the Council to those businesses that were struggling, as necessary.

In responding, the Head of Planning and Regeneration acknowledged and noted the point made but stated that a link had been provided in the Annual Survey providing further information relating to local and District Town Centres.

- The level of detail on how High Streets and Town Centres were performing in terms of occupancy rates was acknowledged but details of Action Plans to address areas where there were significant issues was queried. Also, it was commented that regeneration of an area did not always attract businesses and the High Oak, Pensnett project was alluded to. Although investment had been made to build an infrastructure to improve flow of traffic, together with a large car park being built, it had still failed to attract and retain retail businesses in that area resulting in vacant shops and it was queried what actions were being taken to address the matter.

A Member commented on the infrastructure improvements in Pensnett and indicated that some shops had closed whilst improvements were taking place and it was suggested that support be provided to affected businesses to enable them to reopen following completion of work.

The Head of Planning and Regeneration indicated that there were various growth corridors, and as part of the existing core strategy/ Black Country Plan, elements related to the hierarchy of Town Centres which helped establish where new investment was needed. With regard to Pensnett, it was acknowledged that a huge amount of investment had been injected as part of the DY5 Enterprise Zone. Although there had been some new retail developments heading into Kingswinford it was recognised that there was the need to consult with Ward members to realise aspirations for wider investment.

- The need to look at regeneration of High Streets for conversion to living accommodation which would also ease growing pressure on greenbelts was reiterated. Living in Town Centres would also reduce reliance on cars and businesses would be regenerated as people required the use of shops and a vibrant nightlife. Reference was made to Gornal being one of the most thriving centres in the Borough with no vacant shops and a proposed development in the form of a supermarket with a pharmacy was alluded to.
- In response to a query the Head of Planning and Regeneration and the Director of Finance and Legal explained the position relating to business rates, as detailed in paragraphs 11 to 15, clarifying that unoccupied businesses initially received a 3-month exemption when properties became vacant which came at a cost to the Council. Paragraph 15 related to the current situation in terms of the Pandemic where occupied retail properties received 100% business rate relief paid for by Central Government for one year only.

- It was acknowledged that the key element for regeneration was to focus on increased residential developments in the Town Centre and it was pointed out that the Council was actively working with developers in St Thomas's to drive forward this change to increase footfall and to create a vibrant night time economy. The Council were also actively supporting local businesses through the Pandemic and had created a virtual Christmas online store as part of the channel shift and as part of the Covid response. The Acting Deputy Chief Executive acknowledged comments made and stated that the community desired a safe environment to live in providing quality accommodation and a community built around them, together with a good public transport network. The need for office space would diminish given that employees worked from home providing an opportunity to create quality accommodation and it was vital to consult with the community on what they wanted so their needs could be met.
- A Member suggested that an audit of properties in the Borough be undertaken providing information on those businesses that were thriving and those that were struggling to enable appropriate scrutiny of the issue. It was acknowledged that employees were working from home potentially releasing office space for conversion to residential dwellings/apartments. The need to have an appropriate infrastructure for people to live in was recognised together with a reliable public transport network which could reduce the use of cars having a positive environmental impact. Although the investment in Brierley Hill was welcomed, it was suggested that smaller amounts of monies in smaller Town Centres would provide a much better change for the community and funding should be sought and allocated in this regard. Further details were needed to enable the appropriate Scrutiny Committee to consider the matter.

The Head of Planning and Regeneration acknowledged the comments made and indicated that wider intelligence of business usage could be looked at.

- Although it was acknowledged that the information relating to smaller Town Centres was provided in the link, it was considered that it would have been better to have included that information in the main report. Reference was made to problems encountered in obtaining funding for smaller Town Centres and issues encountered with the Halesowen BID in collecting BID payments. It was considered that a BID was an important part of the plan to develop Town Centres and it was queried whether sufficient support was provided, where needed, and how much work had been undertaken to ensure the number of vacant units were decreasing.

In terms of the Halesowen BID it was commented that the Council had undertaken a huge amount of work with representatives and supported the BID to effectively forward fund some of the BID levy where they were struggling to receive payments. The Council met with representatives of the Board on a regular basis and they would continue to offer support moving forward. The Director of Finance and Legal provided an explanation on issues encountered in collecting payments which was due to a combination of factors including the need to explain to business owners that they were relieved from paying business rates but not the business levy.

- Reference was made to staff working from home and it was commented that staff needed to socialise with their colleagues as employees could become isolated at home. Therefore, as part of the regeneration discussions to provide residential developments from vacant units, consideration should also be given to providing a hub with workspace for staff to use where they could be provided with the opportunity to interact with others.

The Head of Planning and Regeneration stated that a considerable amount of innovative work was undertaken by residential developers in providing integrated space to achieve a work/life balance by creating a community and public realm space. The Council encouraged this as part of design elements when looking at planning applications. It was acknowledged that the Council could consider touch down incubation type spaces for employees to use in Council owned properties.

## **Resolved**

- (1) That the information contained in the report on the work undertaken to monitor the number of vacancy rates of retail units on an annual basis, be noted.
- (2) That the ongoing work being undertaken to support the recovery of businesses within Town Centres and High Streets, as well as the emerging plans in Dudley and Brierley Hill Town Centres, be noted.
- (3) That a further report providing details, as indicated above, be submitted to the relevant Scrutiny Committee in the next Municipal Year.

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## **4 Future Designation of Overview and Scrutiny Committees**

A joint report of the Director of Finance and Legal and the Monitoring Officer was submitted on the future designation of Scrutiny Committees for implementation in the 2021/22 municipal year.

Arising from the presentation of the report Members concurred with the information contained in the report and the proposed recommendations. However, it was suggested that the Board be replaced with a meeting of Chairs and Vice-Chairs of Scrutiny Committees to discuss ways to strengthen scrutiny across the Council and to consider training and development for Members.

A former Chair of the Board referred to Local Government Association mentoring sessions and on the previous offer from Rotherham Council for Members to visit them to observe their day long scrutiny meetings which could still be pursued. It was also suggested that when establishing the proposed Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs meeting, consideration be given to the format and it was suggested that allowances should not be paid, the Chair be rotated and that formal documents be circulated to ensure a structured meeting took place. A Member also suggested that consideration be given to Member attendance at this meeting to be made compulsory.

The Acting Deputy Chief Executive commented on Future Council and the opportunity to scrutinise technology, workforce and facilities which was currently appropriate given the circumstances attributed to the Pandemic. This Committee could also focus on training requirements.

The Board noted a suggestion made that consideration be given to dedicated scrutiny support.

### **Resolved**

- (1) That the existing designation of Scrutiny Committees be retained for the remainder of this municipal year to complete the Annual Scrutiny Programme for 2020/21.
- (2) That recommendations be included in the annual review of the Constitution concerning the re-designation of Scrutiny Committees for the 2021/22 municipal year, as set out in paragraph 10 of the report submitted, together with the establishment of a meeting of the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs, as referred to above.
- (3) That the proposals for budget scrutiny arrangements, as set out in paragraphs 15 to 18, be supported.

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## **5 Feedback from Scrutiny Committees**

The Board received an update on the work being undertaken by Scrutiny Committees and Working Groups.

The meeting ended at 7.08 pm

CHAIR

