

Minutes of the Corporate and Economic Strategy Select Committee

Wednesday, 6th September, 2023 at 6.00 pm
At Saltwells Education Development Centre, Bowling Green Road, Netherton

Present:

Councillor D Stanley (Chair)
Councillor S Henley (Vice-Chair)
Councillors A Aston, J Foster, A Hopwood, E Lawrence, N Neale, T Russon, P Sahota and K Westwood.

Officers:

P Mountford (Head of Economic Growth and Skills), P Parker (Head of Communications and Public Affairs), N Biddle (Head of Digital and Customer Services), M Cox (Strategic Development Surveyor), C Blunn (Corporate Performance and Programme Manager), S Haycox (Corporate Performance Support) and K Taylor (Senior Democratic Services Officer).

15 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors C Eccles and L Johnson.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer updated Members of a change in membership in particular that Councillor L Johnson had been appointed to the Committee replacing Councillor A Davies.

16 **Appointment of Substitute Member**

It was noted that Councillor J Foster had been appointed to serve as a substitute Member for Councillor C Eccles for this meeting of the Committee only.

17 **Declarations of Interest**

No member made a declaration of interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct.

18 **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12th July, 2023, be approved as a correct record and signed.

19 **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

20 **Stalled Sites – Strategies for bringing back into use privately owned vacant land and property**

A report of the Director of Regeneration and Enterprise was submitted on the strategies deployed in the last twelve months, by the Local Authority to bring back into use privately owned land and property which remained derelict or untidy or where development was stalled.

The Head of Economic Growth and Skills gave a presentation to the Committee and in doing so referred to the work undertaken by the Stalled and Derelict Sites Working Group across multiple service areas regarding land and property identified as problem or derelict sites where development had stalled. Following a consultation process, which included Member Ward Walks, an initial list containing 68 sites was developed by Officers. This list was revised to produce a priority list of 20 sites which was endorsed by informal Cabinet in November, 2021. The 20 priority sites had been categorised to enable a targeted and focused approach to delivery to allow resources to be better managed. A summary of the four categories were outlined at the meeting.

It was noted that a cross directorate multi-disciplinary task and finish working group had been established to oversee actions to sites that were in categories 3 and 4, with delivery options and work plans being developed.

The Head of Economic Growth and Skills reported that Homes England revenue funding totalling £60,000 had been secured to enable the Council to procure specialist property development and legal expertise to advise on the most appropriate course of actions for each site. It was confirmed that Thomas Lister with Freeths solicitors and PCPT Architects had been appointed to consider and report on routes to bringing each site forward to include associated risks. Following the presentation of their findings and engagement with private sector developers and registered providers, a high-level plan including spend profile for the programme was developed.

Members were updated on the position of the Stalled and Derelict sites programme, including 6 sites that were making substantial progress towards early development, 6 sites progressing with engagement with owners, 3 sites where potential enforcement action had been identified and 5 sites where development options were needed to be reviewed including potential use of Compulsory Purchase Orders.

An overview of case studies where positive action on derelict sites was outlined, including the work undertaken to the redevelopment of Market Street, Stourbridge and 122-128 Colley Gate, Cradley. It was noted that the Council had completed the purchase of the remaining three units in 122-128 Colley Gate, Cradley, following the serving of a Compulsory Purchase Order in January, 2023. It was anticipated that Stalled and Derelict sites funding would be utilised for the demolition of the four sites for the redevelopment of an 8-unit affordable housing scheme.

It was noted that Corporate Landlord were progressing to bring the Enville Street, Stourbridge site to the open market disposals with benefit of planning permission for the development of a housing led 10-unit scheme.

In order to assist the decision-making process and align officer time and programme budget, nine sites had been selected for more focused work in areas including 10-12 Tipton Road, Dudley, Former Foresters Pub and lands rear of Brierley Hill and New Hawne Colliery, Halesowen.

The Head of Economic Growth and Skills referred to the changing role of the Housing Revenue Account and the implications to the delivery route of sites within the programme, and in doing so confirmed that engagement had commenced, via Thomas Lister, with regional private sector developers and other registered providers already working in the borough, via a soft market testing questionnaire.

It was noted that a blanket cabinet approval to acquire and extinguish interest in land and new rights by agreement or through a Compulsory Purchase Order for all sites to assist in discussions with landowners was also being considered.

Members asked questions, made comments and responses were given where appropriate as follows: -

- a) The Chair commented positively on the presentation given and the significant progress made over the past twelve months.
- b) In responding to a question raised by Councillor E Lawrence, the Strategic Development Surveyor confirmed that an Enforced Sale allowed the Council to recover charges registered against a property or land through the sale of the property or land. A Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) is an Order made by an authorised body (such as the council), requesting powers to acquire land compulsorily where the landowners or occupiers are not willing to sell by agreement or agreement on terms cannot be reached.

- c) Reference was made to the inclusion of listed buildings within the Borough into the programme, the Head of Economic Growth and Skills confirmed that some listed buildings had been identified within the initial list of 68 sites. It was suggested however that listed buildings may be considered under a separate process given that many buildings required refurbishment rather than redevelopment, and undertook to discuss further with J Pilkington, Principal Historic Environment Officer.
- d) In view of the limited resources available and the lack of a dedicated team, initial focus would be given to the nine individual sites identified. Once completed the remaining sites would be re-prioritised for the next tranche of priority accordingly.
- e) In responding to a question raised by Councillor A Aston, the Head of Economic Growth and Skills confirmed that the initial list of 68 sites that were identified resulted from a mixture of intelligence received from both officers and ward members and included existing enforcement cases.
- f) Councillor A Aston considered that 68 sites was a low number for Dudley and sought clarification as to whether additional sites could be included to the programme. In responding, the Head of Economic Growth and Skills confirmed that the work was an ongoing rolling programme however it was recognised that dedicated resources would be required to expand the programme further.
- g) Councillor P Sahota welcomed the report submitted and the direction of travel of the programme and suggested that the Council could measure success by reviewing data between 2017 and 2020 specifically in relation to section / enforcement orders used in order to provide a benchmark of work undertaken.

- h) Councillor P Sahota sought clarification on work progressing on the remaining 48 sites identified and what measures were being considered including those that may require a Section 215 notice. He further suggested that a list identifying the locations of the 68 sites would be beneficial and queried why the majority of Category 1 and 2 sites were predominately situated within Halesowen and Stourbridge areas.

In responding, the Head of Economic Growth and Skills assured Members that positive progress was being made to the remaining 48 sites and undertook to circulate further information to the Committee including a map identifying all 68 sites.

- i) Councillor P Sahota acknowledged that a dedicated team and additional resources were needed to ensure the success and delivery of the programme.
- j) In responding to a question raised by the Chair in relation to the old general post office building in Dudley, it was noted that consideration was being given to the site being part of the levelling up agenda and that viability funding would likely be required to support the future redevelopment of the site.
- k) Councillor T Russon commented positively on the presentation given and welcomed the opportunity in receiving an accessible list of all sites and regular updates.
- l) In responding to a suggestion made by Councillor T Russon of an online directory of available rentable amenities within Dudley, including garages, the Head of Economic Growth and Skills undertook to discuss further with the Technology, Systems and Services Department.
- m) Councillor J Foster raised concerns that the remaining 48 listed could be extended further from sites identified by Ward Members and that the programme did not appear to categorise properties that were deteriorating. It was also suggested that a number of properties throughout the borough were not owned by people living within the community.

The Head of Economic Growth and Skills acknowledged comments made and confirmed that the appointment of external legal consultants allowed the opportunity for challenging conversations with land owners and developers in order to take forward difficult sites.

- n) Councillor J Foster referred to the Planning Committee Member Training and considered that the training received in relation to compulsory purchase orders was too technical and suggested that future training should include an invitation to a Local Government Association Peer Member, to share success stories and provide an Elected Member perspective.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted be noted.
- (2) That the progress made since the report was submitted to the Future Council Scrutiny Committee on 7th September, 2022, be noted.
- (3) That the positive actions being undertaken by services in seeking to bring back into use privately owned land and property which remained vacant and derelict, be acknowledged.
- (4) That the limitations of statutory powers in requiring private landowners to bring forward vacant and derelict sites for development be recognised.
- (5) That the Head of Economic Growth and Skills:
 - (i) circulate information on progress made to the remaining 48 sites to the Committee including a map identifying all 68 sites;
 - (ii) liaise with the Technology, Systems and Services Department with regard to an accessible list of all sites including regular updates and an online directory of available rentable amenities within Dudley;
 - (iii) liaise with Democratic Services with regard to future Planning Committee Member training.

21 **Consultation Process Review across the Authority**

A report of the Deputy Chief Executive was submitted on consultation activity across the authority and future improvements to processes.

In presenting the report submitted, the Head of Communications and Public Affairs confirmed that the consultation process review commenced in Autumn 2022, following a report submitted to the former Future Council Scrutiny Committee Working Group, whereby the Chief Executive's Office was recommended to lead a review of consultation processes across all directorates, to collate information and identify best practice areas to inform a consistent corporate approach.

To support the project, an officer working group was established to baseline all current forms of consultation to understand the different approaches and identify best practice, develop a forward plan of planned consultation exercises over the next twelve months and develop a framework and guidance for all directorates to ensure a consistent approach. The draft Consultation Framework and Guidance was attached as Appendix B to the report submitted.

An internal survey was circulated to enable the performance management team to capture external consultation activity taking place across the organisation. 17 responses were received which highlighted that the majority carried out up to five external consultations each year unless based on need or associated to either a project or major improvements to services. Although it was acknowledged that 17 responses to the survey was low, upon investigation, it was identified that a number of responses were submitted on behalf of a number of service areas.

Consideration was being given to a corporate software licence to ensure that the local authority abided by regulations, with the possibility of the 'MyDudley' platform being utilised to eliminate issues with licences and to create a one platform approach to enable the Council to be better engaged with residents and ensure policies were being met. It was noted that services would continue to use the paid software packages if a licence was not held.

Reference was made to the draft Consultation Framework and Guidance which would help teams identify areas they needed to consider together with tools available when carrying out consultations in a consistent approach across the Council.

Members were advised that the Council did not have a single, corporate department with an oversight or responsibility for consultations taking place across all directorates and services in the local authority, which was formerly undertaken by a centralised strategic intelligence and policy unit. In order to re-establish corporate ownership of all consultation activity, appropriate budget and resource would need to be identified.

In referring to software solutions, the Head of Digital and Customer Services reported that MyDudley platform provided a comprehensive and extended service allowing residents to provide feedback on consultations.

In concluding, the Head of Communications and Public Affairs expressed his thanks and gratitude for the work undertaken by the officer working group.

Members asked questions, made comments and responses were given where appropriate as follows: -

- a) In responding to a question raised by Councillor A Aston in relation to the consultee database utilised by the Local Authority, the Head of Communications and Public Affairs confirmed that Granicus UK, the company appointed to co-design and deliver the new MyDudley platform, was a subscription based service which should expand the existing consultee network.
- b) Councillor P Sahota welcomed the report submitted however raised concerns of the low response rate to the internal survey undertaken.

In responding, the Corporate Performance Programme Manager confirmed that the survey had been endorsed and communicated through the Strategic Executive Board and Heads of Services.

- c) Councillor P Sahota further shared concerns that fourteen people had responded to the survey indicating that Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) were not carried out to ensure that there were no barriers to participation or disadvantage to any protected groups from participation whilst conducting consultations. The response suggested that the culture of EIAs was not taken seriously across the Council, and Councillor P Sahota considered that completing EIAs was an essential requirement of all Councils.

In acknowledging the comments made, the Head of Communications and Public Affairs and the Corporate Performance Programme Manager confirmed that the Consultation Framework and Guidance contained a dedicated section to encourage and ensure the authority adhered to legal regulations for EIAs. The database would highlight where officers had indicated that an EIA had not been completed, however without a dedicated team to support the database, this would not be possible to monitor.

- d) It was reported that the consultation survey had identified six service areas had utilised a free online survey form to carry out their consultations, which had consequences towards security issues and GPDR regulations. Members were assured that discussions had been held with L Bourne, Data Protection and Information Governance Manager, which had resulted in a dedicated section incorporated within the Consultation Framework and Guidance.

- e) Councillor J Foster referred to the Consultation Strategy previously adopted by the Council which was highly regarded nationally as a result of the level of engagement undertaken by officers alongside Ward Members within local communities. She suggested that the information presented did not imply that the established officer working group was not undertaking this level of engagement. The reliance on virtual and remote consultations would lose the ability to maintain direct contact with residents and communities.

In responding, the Head of Communications and Public Affairs confirmed that a distinction had been made between engagement and consultation recognising that many teams carried out engagement with service users as part of their business including outreach work with residents and community groups.

Further to comments made, Councillor J Foster considered that engagement and consultation should not be separated and that the number of community groups targeted were reducing in numbers and the majority not representative of the community.

- f) Councillor E Lawrence commented positively on the report and extensive work undertaken. Following comments made in relation to using the MyDudley platform through Granicus UK, Councillor E Lawrence queried whether a specific module could be purchased to assist with the consultation process.

In responding, the Head of Digital and Customer Services confirmed that a number of modules had been future proofed with an agreed price for further functionality, including one to be used for consultations, which can be procured when requested.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted be noted.
- (2) That Dudley Council does not have a single, corporate department with an oversight or responsibility for consultations taking place across all directorates and services in the local authority, be noted.
- (3) That the scale and complexity of consultation activity undertaken across the local authority service areas and how best practice has been used to inform a consistent corporate approach, be noted.

- (4) That the new Consultation Framework and the database produced for guidance by the Chief Executive's performance management team and key stakeholders across the organisation, as outlined in Appendix B of the report submitted, be supported.
 - (5) That the officer working group to identify the best software solution be supported.
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22 **MyDudley Digital Platform Update**

A report of the Director of Digital, Customer and Commercial Services was submitted on the MyDudley programme.

In presenting the report submitted, the Head of Digital and Customer Services confirmed that the platform had been procured and the contract awarded to Granicus UK in April, 2023 noting that the project contained key milestones to develop and enable a new self service channel whilst ensuring best value for money for Dudley. The functionality of the platform included customer portal, customer service hub, councillor portal and staff portals.

The Head of Digital and Customer Services assured Members of the commitment in understanding how different groups and communities use existing council services and that the MyDudley implementation plan aligned to the feedback gained from the community engagement. Future roll out of services would continue to be informed by data and engagement.

It was noted that a number of engagement sessions and surveys had been undertaken by the Digital and Customer Service team to understand how residents use digital technology and what the Council needed to do to make those technologies meet the needs of different communities. Community engagement sessions had been delivered in partnership with Healthwatch Dudley and attended by residents and carers with wide ranging age, ability and accessibility needs.

The branding of the platform created a personal feeling associated to the Dudley Borough with community groups selecting the name, MyDudley. Whilst it was recognised that online self-service would be used by many of the residents, this was just an enhancement to the services and not a replacement way to contact the council, retaining support for those in-person or over the phone when needed.

In July, 2023, the MyDudley Roadshow event was launched with residents invited to complete a survey about how they and the Council could work together to improve online access to council services. The two-week roadshow consisted of sixteen events including visits to leisure centres, community centres, cultural centres together with a promotional double decker bus visiting different town centres, during the second week, with internal and external promotion in car parks, marketplaces and GP Surgeries.

It was reported that 3,073 residents completed surveys with initial results highlighting the opportunity to increase the number of residents who would use online services and 80% of residents claiming that they would possibly use online services in the future.

A high-level implementation timeline was outlined in Appendix C of the report submitted reflecting the needs and preferences of residents. The first phase of the delivery of MyDudley would focus on the customer portal giving the residents the ability to create a secure account and track their enquiries; raise an enquiry about waste, bins and recycling; report anti-social behaviour; book tip appointments and reporting issues in their neighbourhood. The importance in demonstrating “you said, we did” within the platform was emphasised.

The issues associated with the current Councillor Contact platform was acknowledged, however it was noted that the service would be migrated to the new platform allowing for improvements to be made and providing opportunity to track requests, enable communication between service areas and councillors and empower Members to digitally self-serve. Priority would be given to ensuring Members were provided with a more consistent experience centred around key themes including accessibility, simplicity, language and visibility of cases.

The Head of Digital and Customer Services referred to the governance implemented within the programme including the establishment of the Councillor Digital Forum which reported to the Digital Board.

It was noted that the Medium Term Financial Strategy spend was approved on the basis the project would realise savings as customer contact reduced following an anticipated increase in self-serve by residents, however the rate of resident self-service against the target reduction would be monitored.

Reference was made to the motivation to build a service catered to all needs with Equality Impact Assessments completed to ensure all groups were catered for. Following the awarding of the contract and having a better understanding of resident priorities, a further assessment would be completed that aligned to the implementation.

In concluding, the Head of Digital and Customer Services stated that the resident focussed implementation required officers to be flexible and take an iterative approach, being prepared to change plans where resident feedback suggested a need.

Members asked questions, made comments and responses were given where appropriate as follows: -

- (a) The Chair commented positively on the information presented and referred to a site visit he had recently undertaken together with the Vice-Chair to Dudley Council Plus.
- (b) Councillor J Foster was encouraged of the number of Equality Impact Assessments undertaken, however sought clarification as to why the decision had been made to not consult with children and young people.

In responding, the Head of Digital and Customer Services confirmed that the engagement was data driven and focused primarily on services where customers contacted the Council directly but was happy to take on board comments made.

- (c) Councillor N Neale welcomed the report submitted and referred to issues associated with reporting on Councillor Contact and suggested that cross data and referencing was needed between residents and ward members reporting the same issue. She also suggested that council owned buildings including libraries and leisure centres could be equipped with the right technology to enable users to provide feedback direct to the Council.

The Head of Digital and Customer Services confirmed that she would consider the suggestion made and advised that the new system would allow Elected Members to copy recipients, including residents and Members, into the request for information.

- (d) Councillor P Sahota welcomed the report submitted and queried how the system compared to other local authorities.

In responding, the Head of Digital and Customer Services confirmed that currently 110 Local Authorities operated the same platform, and that extensive market testing had been undertaken on a variety of products and Members were assured that the new system would benefit Dudley.

- (e) Councillor A Aston considered that the success of the project would be determined by the implementation of the platform and whether issues and requests for services were resolved.

In responding, the Head of Digital and Customer Services acknowledged the comments made and suggested that the system would identify points of failure immediately and agreed that the success of the technology depended on the quality of the business model.

- (f) Councillor P Sahota suggested that performance management was essential in the implementation and delivery of the system.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report submitted be noted.

23 Corporate and Economic Strategy Select Committee Progress Tracker and Future Business

Following agreement by the Chair, Councillor J Foster raised an urgent item in relation to the recent national developments regarding Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) in schools in England. Although it was acknowledged that communication bulletins had been circulated confirming that local authority led schools and academies were unaffected, Councillor J Foster suggested that an audit of all council buildings, including libraries, leisure centres and community centres, be undertaken to establish whether RAAC had been used in any of the buildings, and Members advised accordingly.

In response to comments made, the Head of Communications and Public Affairs undertook to discuss further with appropriate officers and arrange for a communications bulletin to be circulated to all Elected Members.

Resolved

- (1) That the Corporate and Economic Strategy Select Committee Progress Tracker and Future Business, as outlined in the report, be noted.
 - (2) That the Head of Communications and Public Affairs be requested to consult with appropriate officers regarding RAAC in council buildings, and arrange for a communications bulletin to be circulated to all Elected Members accordingly.
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24 Questions Under Council Procedure Rule 11.8

There were no questions to the Chair pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 11.8.

25 Comments of the Chair

The Chair thanked all Members and Officers for attending and the positive and constructive discussions and contributions made during the meeting.

The meeting ended at 7.55pm

CHAIR