



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on 29 July 2021

ECONOMY SCRUTINY PANEL

9th March 2021

Present:

Councillor Furneaux (in the Chair)

Councillors Barfield, Cairns, Callison, Harness, Hasthorpe, Sheridan and Wilson

Officers in attendance:

- Dave Baker (Contract Business Manager - Engie)
- Carolina Borgstrom (Assistant Director Environment)
- Anne Campbell (Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)
- Katie Chadwick (Home Options and Development Manager)
- Pauline Cooke (Head of Development Management Team - Engie)
- Wendy Fisher (Estates and Business Development Manager, Assets)
- Luke Greaves (Head of Highways and Transport – Engie)
- Simon Jones (Assistant Director Law, Governance and Assets [Monitoring Officer])
- Martin Lear (Deputy Head of Highways and Transport - Engie)
- Guy Lonsdale (Finance Group Manager, Deputy Section 151 Officer)
- Phil McConnell (Deputy Partnership Director – Engie)
- Mark Nearney (Assistant Director Housing, Highways and Planning)
- Philip Quinn (Contract Performance Manager - Engie)
- Anthony Snell (Senior Transport Officer - Engie)
- Paul Thorpe (Head of Operations – Engie)
- Dave Tipple (Relationship Manager)
- Clive Tritton (Strategic Regeneration Advisor)
- Jacqui Wells (Head of Housing - Engie)

Also in attendance:

- Councillor Procter (Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth, Housing and Tourism)
- Councillor Shreeve (Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets)

SPE.77 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence from members of the panel for this meeting.

Apologies were received from Councillor Philip Jackson, Leader of the Council

SPE.78 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Councillor Wilson declared a personal interest in SPE.86, there being mention of further education in the report. Councillor Wilson is employed by a company which uses the facilities at CATCH.

Councillor Barfield declared a personal interest in SPE.83, Housing Strategy Action Plan, should there be any discussion relating to private rented accommodation. Councillor Barfield and his spouse are landlords of several properties in North East Lincolnshire.

Councillor Harness declared a personal interest in SPE.83, Housing Strategy Action Plan, should there be any discussion relating to private rented accommodation. Councillor Harness is landlord of a property in North East Lincolnshire.

SPE.79 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Economy Scrutiny Panel held on 12th January 2021 be agreed as a correct record.

SPE.80 QUESTION TIME

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

SPE.81 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.82 DELIVERY OF LOCAL TRANSPORT PLAN 2021/2024

The panel received a report from the from the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport on the above. The report was submitted to the panel for pre-decision consideration and comment prior to anticipated decision by Cabinet.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport introduced his report and Mr Nearney and Mr Snell provided a short presentation highlighting the key elements.

Members raised the following issues:

Regarding priority repairs to dangerous potholes, raised manhole covers and a hotline for reporting by the public, Mr Greaves advised that the call-centre handled all calls and passed these through to the service. Any hazardous or dangerous situations requiring emergency repairs would be handled straightaway. These issues were undertaken ad-hoc and as required. The Local Transport Plan (LTP) dealt with substantial and planned works.

In response to a member's question about the addition of A180 junction works (to improve congestion in Boulevard Avenue) to the LTP, it was noted that some 20 years ago a bypass was recommended to relieve Boulevard Avenue of congestion. However, the road remains always busy to the point of congestion. Mr Greaves advised that a bid had been submitted to the Department for Transport for 'pinch-point' funding in this location, to date this (and other bids for possible funding sources) had not been successful. The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport asked the member to raise this matter with him outside this meeting and committed to follow up his concerns. Mr Tritton advised that bids to the Government's Levelling Up Fund would invest in infrastructure that improved everyday life across the UK. The £4.8 billion fund would support town centre and high street regeneration, local transport projects, and cultural and heritage assets.

The Chair queried an item in the LTP capital programme which included reference to a ward member fund as part of a £35k project. Mr Snell advised that this was an additional small allocation of funding to respond to minor highways project identified by ward councillors in their wards. It was anticipated that this would cover things like small signage or reinstating white lines. Details would be released to members in June 2021 and there would be a short form for members to complete to apply for funds.

Regarding a £90k parking enforcement project, Mr Thorpe confirmed this entry referred to the introduction of rapid employment vehicles equipped with cameras utilising number plate recognition software. This would be targeted at tackling a number of hot spot areas where motorists were persistently flouting traffic regulation orders, for example, outside schools.

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

SPE.83 STRATEGIC HOUSING ACTION PLAN – FOCUS ON EMPTY PROPERTIES AND SOCIAL HOUSING

The panel received a requested report from the Assistant Director Housing, Highways and Transport on the above. Mr Nearney highlighted the multi-pronged approach supported by the council and other providers. He invited members questions.

Members raised the following issues:

Regarding the target figure of 40 empty units being brought back into use per year, a member queried if this allowed the authority to keep the number of empty homes down and abreast of the borough's empty homes. Mr Nearney welcomed the question but conceded it was not easy to answer. Regarding numbers, he believed the area was keeping pace and gaining traction. He committed to provide panel members with exact figures outside of the meeting. He stressed the issue was not solely about numbers but the type of dwelling was also important. For example, it could be more impactful to target a property or properties whose issues were founded in deep-rooted debt, rather than a number of 'quick wins'.

The Chair noted that the authority was on target to return 43 empty homes to use this year. Aside of compulsory purchase, he asked which other methods could be adopted by private owners and landlords who may not have funds to dispose of their property. Ms Wells advised that there were several solutions, each remedy would be tailored to the individual circumstances of the case. There were a number of landlords with negative equity in their properties. Where this was considerable, the authority had the option of undertaking an empty dwelling management order (compulsory purchase). This was to be avoided due to the cost and lengthy period involved. Hence, why the council worked with charities and other partners to encourage owners to improve the property. Options included various legal orders enforcing owners to improve property via notices served under the Town and Country Planning Act, or Environmental Protection Act.

In response to questions from the Chair, Ms Wells advised there were a few landlords with large portfolios of properties subject to mortgages well in excess of the current value.

Regarding the criteria or rationale for prioritising (clusters of) empty homes, Ms Wells advised that the empty property strategy was structured to ensure each property was risk assessed. The assessment did not look at the property in isolation, account was also taken of surrounding properties and the impact on the neighbourhood. This enabled partnership work with charities to focus on an area and support bringing homes back into use with better management and supported tenants. Mr Nearney added that clusters of empty properties had been identified and viable solutions were being sought. Owners, developers and charities were reluctant to invest in those properties now. It also had to be considered whether a 'pepper pot' or 'big bang' approach was the best solution for a neighbourhood.

Regarding the viability of creating an arm's length company to apply for available grants to support this function, Ms Wells drew members attention to the briefing paper and the council's developing work with Department for Communities and Local Government to purchase properties. A small number had already been secured. Homes England had clamped down on the creation of private companies (by public bodies) for this purpose, making grants available directly to councils for qualifying projects.

In response to a question about how social housing needs were being met by registered providers and a perceived gap in provision, Mr Nearney confirmed the areas reliance on registered housing providers for social housing. Dialogue with registered providers had been difficult over the past 12 months. Lincolnshire Housing Partnership (LHP) was the main provider and landowner and should be developing. Discussions prior to lockdown had focussed on Washdyke Lane and other developments. Homes England had also been brought into those conversations with a view to supporting developments. However, LHP's stance was that the £34k per property grant from Homes England was inadequate due to low land values. The council's influence and authority was limited to providing challenge, making requests and continuing to have a dialogue. The council was looking to step into the market to provide homes for the most vulnerable in communities. There were other providers in the area and the council was looking to introduce others into the borough. Development sites which included elements of social housing were encouraged to maximise the numbers of affordable homes. He acknowledged that registered providers could probably do more but in the context of the past year, the impact of COVID-19 and a 1% rent cut, registered housing providers were also experiencing difficult times. Mr Nearney conceded social housing developments were predominantly in south Lincolnshire rather than in northern Lincolnshire.

In response to a question on the known extent of empty homes in North East Lincolnshire and potential for fraudulent claims in respect of council tax and electoral registration, Ms Wells confirmed that wherever cases were reported to the service they would be passed on to our council tax team to investigate. All councils were very reliant on members of the public reporting their suspicions to the authorities. Ms Wells committed to confer with colleagues in council tax and respond to the panel outside of this meeting. Mr Nearney added that colleagues from the revenues and benefits team were present on the task group and information was shared to gain intelligence on this topic. He was confident that the authority had good and comprehensive data on empty homes, however, he acknowledged this was very reliant upon intelligence from others.

Regarding the council's housing strategy's ability to balance pressures between good and ample social housing and good private rented stock, Mr Nearney stressed that all matters were guided by the strategy and considered on a case-by-case basis; value for money being balanced against output.

In response to a question from the Chair regarding empty commercial properties and the council's ability to bring these back into use, Ms Wells advised that commercial property was included in the empty homes strategy when it had reached the end of its commercial life and there was potential to bring it back into residential use. Locally there may be problems with flood risk but where these could be mitigated it made good sense to change commercial use, through planning processes, to allow residential use.

Regarding the number of active applications on the Home Choice Lincs waiting list, Ms Chadwick advised that the number on the waiting was generally static around three thousand but that there had been a slight increase in the past quarter. Ms Chadwick considered these to be applications 'in advance', that is, made by people who were concerned about their current accommodation. Quarterly performance reports were produced by Home Choice Lincs which showed a broad spectrum of data useful for all partners in determining future strategy.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPE.84 COMMUNITY ASSET TRANSFER APPROACH - REFRESH

The panel received a briefing note from the Estates and Business Development Manager detailing the current approach, proposed refresh and next steps relating to this authority's approach to community asset transfer. Ms Fisher highlighted the key elements of the briefing note and invited questions from members.

The panel received assurances from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets on the proper process and policy being consistently applied. Members challenged on public perception, public notice, the role of SectorSupportNEL, good governance, lease arrangements, promoting transfer opportunities, key partner assets and parish councils.

Members welcomed a future opportunity to influence the portfolio holder's eventual recommendations to Cabinet via all-member workshops, dates to be arranged plus a report back to this panel in due course.

RESOLVED – That the briefing note be received.

SPE.85 UPDATE – GYPSY AND TRAVELLER DESIGNATED STOPOVER SITE

The panel received an update from Executive Director for Environment, Economy and Resources on the above via a briefing note. Ms Fisher advised that the permanent and transient needs assessment had been reviewed and found to be less than originally evaluated.

Members raised several issues regarding their frustration around the process and decision making relating to this crucial issue, delayed consultation with members of the travelling community, lack of access to the technical reviews of five identified sites, evidence of reducing need and access to the consultant's report. Members heard that the borough's need for a stopover site had changed since the 2014 report and this would impact on the impending review of the council's local plan. Such a change would not require the council to designate a stopover site for gypsies and travellers.

The panel was assured that future formal options appraisal and decision making on this matter by Cabinet would enable proper scrutiny and challenge as part of the usual process.

RESOLVED – That the briefing note be received.

SPE.86 HUMBER ESTUARY PLAN

The panel received a report from Assistant Director for Environment regarding the Humber Leadership Board's Humber Estuary Plan. Mr Tritton advised the Leader had requested this report be brought to the panel's attention. The plan drew on earlier work to develop a Humber Local Industrial Strategy, which had been informed by extensive local engagement, analysis and independent expert challenge. The plan would provide a 'green' focus to inform the council's review of its economic strategy and this panel's contribution. Ms Borgstrom made a short presentation highlighting the key elements of the plan.

Members raised the following issues:

Members found the report interesting and commented on the amount of collaboration between industries, partner organisations and authorities. Logistical ambitions were also supported.

Regarding how well the plan had been received, Mr Tritton reflected on the success of the freeport application but he was not aware of how central government had reacted to the plan. However, the plan was in direct alignment with the Government's ten-point plan for a green industrial revolution and the energy white paper, in that it sets out the opportunity for the Humber as a whole and North East Lincolnshire in particular. The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets advised that he and the Leader regularly met with local MPs. This report had been discussed and anecdotally he could advise that it was well received by government. This was a good indicator for any future bids, especially considering the Government's 'levelling up agenda'.

In response to questions from the Chair, Mr Tritton advised that the ambitions of the plan would be reflected in the emerging refresh of the council's economic strategy. The process for the refresh was back on track and he anticipated the panel would be a part of that early in the new municipal year.

Regarding a potential conflict between the Humber collaboration on the estuary plan and joint strategy work with Greater Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnership (GLLEP), Mr Tritton advised that funding would come from GLLEP but this did not stop collaboration with natural partners especially those pan-Humber.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPE.87 QUARTER 3 FINANCE MONITORING

The panel received a report from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets providing key information and analysis of the Council's position and performance at the end of quarter three of the 2020/21 financial year. Mr Lonsdale highlighted matters within the remit of the panel.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPE.88 REGENERATION PARTNERSHIP PERFORMANCE REPORT: OCTOBER – DECEMBER 2020

The panel received a report from the Strategic Regeneration Advisor containing a summary of performance against key performance indicators for the above period. Mr Tipple drew the panel's attention to key elements within the report.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPE.89 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 items referenced SPE.8 (Local Plan), SPE.32 (Energy Carbon Roadmap) and SPE.35 (Housing Strategy) be removed as completed.

SPE.90 ECONOMY SCRUTINY PANEL WORK PROGRAMME – REVIEW 2020/21 AND WORK PROGRAMME 2021/22

The panel received a report from the Statutory Scrutiny Officer (Assistant Chief Executive) summarising the panel's agreed 2020/21 work programme and the timetable of activities to undertake this work. The panel also considered any issues it wished to retain or add to its work programme for 2021/22. In introducing the report, the Chair commented on the panel's workload and, more importantly, on the members' enthusiasm, capacity and capability to challenge and influence the wide range of items brought before the panel. Members suggested a number of potential items for the panel's 2021/22 work programme:

- Aspects related to the COVID recovery plan, including effect on current regeneration programmes.
- Implementation of the freeport proposal, including impact on the South Humber Inward Investment Programme.
- Economic strategy review (gap analysis and monitoring delivery of strategy).

- Housing Strategy.
- Monitoring the delivery of the Town Centre Master Plan, including evaluating success.
- Car parking strategy in relation to other strategies (especially the Town Centre masterplan).

The following items had been marked as completed in tracking but retained the interest of the panel:

- Energy Carbon Roadmap – regular updates.
- Local Plan Review.

RESOLVED – That the panel’s comments be noted.

SPE.91 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

There were no members’ questions to the Portfolio Holder.

There being no further business, the Chair declared the meeting closed at 9.24 p.m.