

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
PROMOTING PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY 13 NOVEMBER, 2019 AT 4.00 P.M.
IN THE CIVIC CENTRE, BEECROFT ROAD, CANNOCK

PART 1

PRESENT: Davis, Mrs. M.A. (Chairman)
Councillors Sutherland, M. (Vice-Chairman)

Fisher, P.A.	Todd, Mrs. D.M.
Layton, Mrs. A.	Wilkinson, Ms C.L.
Newbury, J.A.A.	Witton, P.T.

8. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A.S. Boucker, Ms. A.A. Fitzgerald, P.M. Hewitt and P.D. Startin along with Councillor Mrs. P.Z. Stretton who was undertaking Civic duties in Datteln.

9. Declarations of Interests of Members in Contracts and Other Matters and Restrictions on Voting by Members and Party Whip Declarations

No declarations of interests or party whip declarations were received.

10. Minutes

The Chairman advised that Council on 4 September, 2019 had approved some changes to the Conservative Group's membership of the Scrutiny Committees. This meant that Councillor Ms. A.A. Fitzgerald had replaced Councillor Mrs. H. Sutton on this Scrutiny Committee.

With regard to Minute 7 the Committee noted that it had been necessary to change the review topic of one of the Working Groups that had been agreed at the meeting. The Working Group would now be reviewing the Rent Arrears Recovery Procedure instead of the Housing Allocations Process.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 July, 2019 be approved as a correct record.

11. End of Year Promoting Prosperity Priority Delivery Plan Performance Update

Consideration was given to the Quarter 2 performance information for the Promoting Prosperity Priority Delivery Plan (PDP) (Item 4.1 – 4.10 of the Official Minutes of the Council).

The Head of Economic Prosperity and the Head of Housing and Property Services led Members through the information explaining that overall progress had been good this Quarter.

Reference was made to the vacancy rates in Cannock town centre which had risen slightly above the national rate of 12%. The Head of Economic Prosperity confirmed that high streets across the country were having a difficult time and a number of businesses had closed in Cannock in recent months. The Working Group to review Cannock town centre occupancy rates, which had been set up by the Scrutiny Committee, would be considering the reasons for the higher vacancy rates and looking at ways to assist.

The Committee noted that there were a number of factors involved in the higher vacancy rates. Retailers were facing challenging times in town centres and this was not just confined to Cannock; it was a national trend. The increase in online shopping was having an effect on town centre businesses and town centres would need to function in a different way in the future. The importance of incorporating living accommodation in any town centre improvements was noted.

With regard to employment levels the Committee noted that the slight increase since last October was not due to job losses but the changes to the way claimants were measured following the introduction of Universal Credit.

The Head of Economic Prosperity explained that producing the business case for the Cannock railway station upgrade was behind schedule due to the length of time it had taken West Midlands Railways to successfully procure a suitable consultant to develop the outline business case. A consultant had now been appointed and the Council would be working with partners to develop the business case. He confirmed that the outline business case should be completed by the end of Quarter 4 and any major upgrade to the station would not be completed before the opening of the McArthurGlen Designer Outlet next September. However, there were a number of short term cosmetic improvements to the station that could be considered before next September (these would not form part of the business case). These included improving signage and involving Community Groups to clear litter.

The Head of Economic Prosperity confirmed that the consultants would be considering a number of options when developing the business case. This would include how to make the station more accessible, how to improve the platform and develop an attractive route from the station to the Designer Outlet. The business case would look at the detail and how to fund these improvements.

The Committee noted that work on the McArthurGlen Designer Outlet was progressing well and it was on track to be completed in August 2020 and open in the September. 40 to 45% of the units had already been let to high quality retailers and it was anticipated 75 to 80% of the units would be let by the time it was open.

Members were advised that the Duke of Kent had attended the Engineering Skills Academy launch event on 24 October and they noted that the take up of courses was promising.

The Committee noted that the Economic Prosperity Strategy had been drafted and would be submitted to Cabinet in December for formal adoption. Engagement with stakeholders and Members would then commence in order to deliver the priority actions.

Officers were working through the planning application with Lichfield District Council in relation to the Rugeley Power Station site. The demolition programme was on track to be completed by the end of 2020 with the start of a 10 year build programme commencing in 2021.

The Head of Housing and Partnerships confirmed that the Council had invested £12.9m to provide additional affordable homes across the district. Negotiations were ongoing to purchase a piece of land owned by Staffordshire County Council. The Hawks Green Depot site was progressing well, 51% of the site was being released for housing and 44 new homes would be provided.

The Chairman raised concern regarding traffic in that area and sought confirmation about where the exit would be located once the new homes had been built. Officers advised that discussions with the highway authority would take place through the planning process and the County Council would be seeking to mitigate the impact of the development on the highway.

12. Cannock Town Centre Regeneration and Occupancy Rates Working Group and Rent Arrears Recovery Procedure Working Group – update from Chairs

Cannock Town Centre Regeneration and Occupancy Rates Working Group - update

In the absence of Councillor P. Hewitt, Chairman of the Working Group, the Head of Economic Prosperity provided the Committee with a verbal update on the work undertaken so far by the Cannock Town Centre Regeneration and Occupancy Rates Working Group.

He explained that the Working Group had met on 15 October and had received a presentation from Debbie Harris, the Economic Development Manager. The Working Group had indicated support for 4 areas; these included:-

- Car Parking – to consider improving the ways to pay for parking to encourage people to stay longer (i.e. pay by card, contactless and pay-by-phone), to consider whether the car parks were situated in the right place and whether the plans within the Town Centre prospectus would affect the number of

parking spaces available, and also to consider the fee structure.

- ASB/Drug Activity – the Group discussed whether this fell under their remit or that of the Community Scrutiny Committee – the Group could note the current position and issues but not explore this in detail.
- High Rents – to invite estate agents and landlords to the Working Group to understand the high rents and compare rents in other towns
- Town Centre Partnership – to invite representatives to the Working Group to understand the role of the partnership and their plans to increase footfall

The Head of Economic Prosperity confirmed that the Working Group would therefore concentrate on 3 of the issues given that the ASB/Drug Activity issue fell under the remit of the Community Scrutiny Committee. The next meeting would be held in either December or January when car parking would be discussed. Mike Edmonds, Head of Environment and Healthy Lifestyles and Joss Presland, Waste and Engineering Services Manager would be invited to attend.

A Member made reference to a question he had asked at a previous meeting regarding the number of Council houses being built in the District in comparison to the number of registered housing providers building in the District. The Head of Economic Prosperity commented that this was not discussed at the Working Group meeting but confirmed that no new dwellings had been developed in the town centre.

The Head of Housing and Partnerships referred the Councillor to the information contained in the PDP on page 4.3. This indicated that 19 new dwellings had been provided by the Council and 32 new dwellings had been provided by registered housing providers. The Head of Economic Prosperity added that there were aspirations in the Cannock Town Centre Prospectus to ensure living accommodation was provided in the town centre.

A Member sought confirmation about the plans for the shops (whose leases were up next year) and the garages at St Michaels Drive in Rugeley. The Head of Economic Prosperity confirmed that the shop leases fell under the remit of the Property Services team. He would provide information to the Member concerned outside of the meeting. With regard to the garages the Head of Housing and Partnerships advised that this site had been considered for houses 2 years ago but the proposed scheme was not cost effective. The site remains on the list of site for future potential development; however the larger sites would be considered first.

Rent Arrears Recovery Procedure Working Group - update

Councillor Mrs. M. Davis, Chair of the Working Group then referred to the Rent Arrears Recovery Procedure Review. The Group had met on one occasion and it had proved to be a positive meeting. The Head of Housing and Partnerships explained that Members had considered the information provided to them by officers that outlined the lengthy process involved in recovering rent arrears.

The Group supported the following actions:-

- Amending and streamlining the letters currently sent out, keeping them simple and referencing any help available to tenants
- Communicating with tenants via email/text messages and increasing home visits
- Consider the introduction of an In-house Debt Advisor along with the resources involved
- Investigate alternatives to the Home Contents Insurance Scheme
- Supporting the work done to promote the Discretionary Housing Payment – ensuring the allocation is spent each year

Members noted that the Working Group was due to meet again next Thursday 21 November, 2019.

RESOLVED:

That the Head of Economic Prosperity liaise with Property Services and provide further information to Councillor P.A. Fisher regarding the shops at St Michaels Drive, Rugeley.

The meeting closed at 5.00 pm.

CHAIRMAN