

MINUTES of a meeting of the CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Coalville on WEDNESDAY, 5 JANUARY 2022

Present: Councillor R Boam (Chairman)

Councillors D Bigby, A J Bridgen, G Hault, V Richichi (Substitute for Councillor B Harrison-Rushton), S Sheahan and N Smith

In Attendance: Councillors T Eynon, R L Morris and R Johnson

Portfolio Holders: Councillors R Ashman

Officers: Mr J Arnold, Mr A Barton, Mr D Bates, Mrs C Hammond, Mrs R Wallace, Miss E Warhurst, Mr P Wheatley and Miss A Wright

37. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E Allman, B Harrison-Rushton, A C Saffell and M B Wyatt.

38. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor G Hault declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 6 – North West Leicestershire Visitor Economy Plan, as a member of Ashby Town Council's Events and Tourism Committee, where at she voted in favour of the following motion: 'The Town Council therefore urges the District Council to work with the Town Council to explore all of the options for the most effective delivery of these services post-covid to protect and promote the town's tourist offer and to ensure that local partnerships are maintained.' Councillor Hault confirmed that she would approach the item with an open mind under her District Council scrutiny role.

Councillor D Bigby declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 6 – North West Leicestershire Visitor Economy Plan, as a member of Ashby Town Council and the Ashby Civic Society. He also declared that he had asked a question in relation to the closure of Ashby Tourist Information Centre at the Council meeting on 7 September 2021, as well as expressed his opinion on the matter at several meetings and in the press. Councillor Bigby confirmed that he would approach the item with an open mind.

Councillor N Smith sought advice from the Monitoring Officer in relation to item 6 – North West Leicestershire Visitor Economy Plan, as an owner of a business in Ashby de la Zouch. Following a discussion, it was decided not necessary to make a declaration.

Councillor T Eynon declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 6 – North West Leicestershire Visitor Economy Plan, as the Chair of the Snibston Heritage Trust who were a consultee as part of the engagement process.

39. PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

The following question was submitted by Mr K Ward, a resident of Ashby de la Zouch and response was given:

'I am involved in tourism and visitor attraction to NW Leics with both my Ashby Civic Society and Venture Theatre roles. I am keen to continue to make our area one which attracts visitors and locals alike.

Chairman's initials

The report bases all its assumptions on the views of some stakeholders who appear to exclude a large number of interested parties. Apart from historical attractions you refer to arts and artistic events being an attraction. However, the only Stakeholders in the arts field are Mantle Lane Arts who produce hardly any art! Why weren't any drama/music or visual arts representatives included?

Ashby has an annual arts festival - perhaps the organisers would have liked to have been asked for their views? The Century Theatre and the Venture Theatre both attract audiences from outside the area - why weren't they asked?

To say that NWLDC staff were not working to attract tourists outside NW Leics is nonsense.

It is well known that staff working at Ashby Tourist office were working for the whole district. They only worked half the week at Ashby and the other half at Coalville working on Tourism for the whole district. Didn't the Officers know that?

The report states that most tourists come to one attraction and then leave. Could this be because there is so little hotel and B&B accommodation in the district? Why haven't the Council done something to encourage more accommodation? The new report does not have an answer for this - why not?

The answer to increase future tourism to the District is not spelled out in the recommendations. They merely dwell on such statements as 'use of digital marketing channels' and 'providing leadership to local partners and stakeholders'. Also 'support the creation of networks between partners and stakeholders'.

Who is going to provide such leadership and support networks and why isn't it already being done?

For the council to have wasted so much money on a such a vague consultant's report and to come to such feeble conclusions is appalling.

Why have you produced such a poor report regarding the Tourism/Visitor assessment for North West Leicestershire? Why has this been allowed to happen?

Response from the Head of Property and Regeneration:

A review of our cultural services activities is required in order to ensure we are aligned with the Leicester and Leicestershire Tourism Growth Plan and that targets in that document (which have subsequently been absorbed into our Council Delivery Plan) are delivered.

Between November 2019 and late 2020 we have sought to engage with a wide-ranging set of stakeholders from across the district, in order to validate (or otherwise) the priority activities which were first proposed to members in 2019.

Stakeholder engagement undertaken in April 2020 was complicated by Covid Pandemic restrictions (lockdown). Significant effort was made by Fathom Consultants to contact as many stakeholders as possible at the time, but it was recognised that not all those who might have wanted to make a contribution were in a position to do so. For that reason, a period of time was allowed between the preparation of the first draft of the Fathom Report (May 2020) and the final version (Dec 2020) during which any additional comments were collected and fed into the study. This was an opportunity that Mr Ward availed himself of between June and August last year.

The weaknesses of our district tourism offer (lack of accommodation and need for Leadership) as referred to by Mr Ward in his question, are the very same concerns as were raised by many other stakeholders. Tackling these two issues (plus others) are at the heart of the North West Leicestershire Visitor Economy Plan being put before Scrutiny Committee this evening.

Mr Ward makes reference in his question to whether the work of the Ashby TIC staff is purely about supporting visitors to Ashby or whether it has a wider district function. It is not appropriate to delve in detail into the job function of individual or small groups of staff in a meeting such as this, however it is worth noting that the Covid pandemic has demonstrated very well that you don't need to be physically in a location to deliver a service to that location.

Finally, it is noted that questions have been raised about the quality of the Fathom Report. That report is a background paper which has been used by officers along with a significant library of other materials to develop today's Scrutiny Report. The key strength of the Fathom Report is that it enabled officers to validate the proposed priority activities with a range of local Stakeholders. Moving forward, (subject to receiving Cabinet support) we will be able to further engage with stakeholders to determine the specific interventions needed to deliver each of the four priorities.

The Chairman invited Mr Ward to ask a supplementary question. Mr Ward reiterated several points previously made in his original question and referred to a recent petition against the closure of the Ashby Tourist Information Centre which had achieved approximately 500 signatures. He also referred to the proposed notice boards in the town which in his opinion, was a poor replacement for the information centre. As a supplementary question, he asked why the council was proposing to remove such a vital service as the Ashby Tourist Information Centre?

The Head of Property and Regeneration responded that there was no intention to diminish the tourist potential in Ashby, and information received indicated that people did not use the service as it currently operated as only one percent of visitors used the centre to influence their visit. He added that times were moving on and as a district it was important to move on with it and aspire to achieve more via alternative approaches.

40. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2021.

Councillor D Bigby requested the following amendments to minute number 35:

'Reference was made to the proposal to stop offering free parking in Coalville and Ashby Town Centres over the Christmas period, Members felt this would not be welcomed in the community.'

and

'A concern was raised on the maximum increase in ~~rates~~ rents at a time when people were already struggling.'

It was moved by Councillor D Bigby, seconded by Councillor S Sheahan and

RESOLVED THAT:

Subject to the amendments above, the minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2021 be approved as a correct record.

Chairman's initials

41. ITEMS FOR INCLUSION IN THE FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to the inclusion of any items on the work programme. The plan of forthcoming Cabinet decisions and the current work programme were set out in the agenda for information. No comments were made.

By affirmation of the meeting the work plan was noted.

42. NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE VISITOR ECONOMY PLAN

The Head of Property and Regeneration presented the report to Members.

The reporting timeline for the item was questioned as it was noted that the Visitor Economy Plan had initially been considered by Cabinet in November 2019 but had been taken no further until now. The Head of Property and Regeneration explained that Covid-19 concerns were starting to rise at the end of 2019 and then lockdown measures introduced early 2020 meant that emergency plans were put into place, and reports such as this therefore had to be paused.

In response to a question, the Head of Property and Regeneration explained that the consultants had suggested the closure of the Ashby Tourist Information Centre as a result of responses received from the stakeholder engagement process.

A statement was made by a Member on the diminishing tourist interest in Ashby over the last 20 years and it was felt that this was down to the lack of investment in the town by the District Council. Comments were made that little marketing was done to publicise the town and there was not enough on offer for the public if they did visit. Reference was made to the thriving market town it used to be and the fact that there would be a stronger need for a tourist information centre if more was done to attract tourists. The Head of Property and Regeneration acknowledged that visitor numbers were currently low and agreed there was more to be done to improve that, which was the aim of the plan before Members. However, it was noted that there were other ways for people to get information now, such as on their mobile phones, and this had to be considered moving forward.

Members were reminded that the report set out four priorities which would inform the plan and the recommendation was to make comment on these prior to consideration at Cabinet.

In relation to the Fathom Consultation report, a comment was made on the very little data available as although the report referred to significant engagement, this was in fact only 10 people. It was felt there was a lack of partnership working with organisations such as Leicestershire County Council, the museum service, and libraries. It was pointed out that the tourist information service was more than just a site at the library, staff were very active on social media and had attended Hermitage FM on a weekly basis to publicise events. The suggestion within the report of cross district working to promote the district was supported but it was felt that it had lost sight of what was needed and community venues such as libraries to work from should be considered. There was also some concern that the resource required to achieve the proposals may not be available.

Members felt that the staff at the Ashby Tourist Information Centre did much more than sit and wait for people to come in asking for information. It seemed that there was an intention to redeploy the staff within the same service area and savings being made were minimal in relation to the cost of running the premises. Therefore, it was felt that the staff should stay based at the Ashby premises as it was a useful and central location.

The questions asked as part of the engagement process were queried and it was pointed out there was little engagement with the Ashby business community or the Heritage Society. The Head of Property and Regeneration referred Members to paragraph 4 of the Fathom consultation report where the consultation questions were detailed.

In response to a query from a Member, the Head of Property and Regeneration assured the Committee that Ashby Town Council had and would be consulted on any further options going forward and that meetings had already been arranged for the near future.

In relation to the four priorities set out in the report, a comment was made that although good priorities, credibility was lost by the proposal to close the Ashby Tourist Information Centre which was the main way that the service was delivered.

Following further discussion about the Ashby Tourist Information Centre, clear opinions were shared, and it was agreed that the committee were unanimously opposed to the proposals to close the centre. Therefore, it was moved by Councillor S Sheahan that Cabinet be asked to request officers to look at alternative options that did not include the closure of Ashby Tourist Information Centre. It was seconded by Councillor D Bigby and was put to the vote. The motion was AGREED.

The Chair thanked Members for their contributions and confirmed that the motion as approved during discussion, and comments made would be presented to cabinet when it considered the report.

43. PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS AND TREASURY STRATEGIES 2022-23

The Head of Finance presented the report to Members.

Several technical questions were asked in relation to the borrowing on the general fund, the high rise in borrowing over the last two years and the affordability of it. The Head of Finance confirmed that the majority of borrowing was in relation to the new leisure centre project and explained the calculations involved in assessing the viability of capital projects. He assured Members that in comparison to other local authorities, levels of borrowing were not significant and as the Section 151 Officer, he was satisfied that it was prudent, sustainable, and affordable when taking everything into account.

In response to a question about the inflation forecast, the Head of Finance explained that any further increases would not affect current borrowing as the majority had been secured at a fixed rate, however it could affect any future borrowing required. A Member made the point that concerns were not only in relation to the council's borrowing but how an increase in rates could affect the people in the district too.

In response to a question about properties held for investment purposes, it was confirmed that Ashby Town Hall was indeed owned by the District Council as an investment property and the Finance Team Manager believed it fell under the industrial unit category but would confirm outside of the meeting.

The Chair thanked Members for their contributions and confirmed that comments made would be presented to cabinet when it considered the report.

44. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SCRUTINY CROSS PARTY WORKING GROUP - SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMMING

The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services presented the report to Members.

Members felt that the proposals were a good step forward for the scrutiny function and would assist in producing a thorough work programme.

Following a question on the differences between the proposed work programming group and scrutiny commission, the Monitoring Officer confirmed that any Scrutiny Commission would be a fully constituted group appointed to by council if the scrutiny work programming group was successful over the forthcoming year.

It was moved by Councillor S Sheahan, seconded by Councillor D Bigby and

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) The proposal of the Scrutiny Cross Party working Group, as set out in paragraph 2 of the report, be endorsed.
- 2) The authority be delegated to the Director of Housing and Customer Services, and the Director of Place, to establish the Scrutiny Work Programming Group, to include contact with the whips to agree its membership in accordance with paragraph 3.1 of the report.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 8.10 pm