

CABINET

11 NOVEMBER 2013

Present: Mayor (Chair)
Councillors D Scudder, K Crout, I Sharpe and M Watkin

Also present: Councillors Bell, Meerabux and Mills

Officers: Managing Director
Shared Director of Finance
Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services
Section Head - Parks and Open Spaces
Programme Manager
Economic Development and Infrastructure Planner
Corporate and External Communications Section Head
Legal and Democratic Section Head
Democratic Services Manager

28 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies for absence

29 **DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST (IF ANY)**

Councillors Watkin and Crout declared a personal interests in minute number 33.

30 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 7th October 2013 were submitted and signed.

31 **CONDUCT OF MEETING**

Councillor Bell spoke on behalf of the Labour Group at this meeting.

32 **ADOPTION OF THE WATFORD GREEN SPACES STRATEGY**

The previous 2007-2013 Green Space Strategy was now out of date and required considerable revising and updating taking into account national and local policy changes such as the Localism Act and National Planning Policy Framework as well as revised Corporate Priorities and Core Strategy. The previous strategy had therefore been reviewed and Action Plans assessed and revised. It also recognised the significant current reductions in core funding the Council was facing and the recent outsourcing to Veolia of the parks and open spaces service.

A report had been presented to Cabinet in April 2013 with a Draft 10 year Strategy which was approved for wider consultation. Consultation had been carried out internally and externally and the feedback fed into the new final strategy with a new 10 year Action Plan to be adopted by November 2013. Wider public consultation had now been carried out on the draft Green Spaces Strategy, Cabinet was being asked to approve and formally adopt the new 10 year strategy.

The Mayor commented that this was an excellent piece of work; very thorough and recognising the Council's changing financial situation.

Councillor Scudder added that the success of previous years had been built on, including the retention of three green flags and a major programme of improvement works. He advised that a short summary was to be produced for the public. The Mayor stressed that the summary needed to be outcome focussed.

In response to a question from the Mayor about the breadth of the responses received and level of engagement, the Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks & Streets) said that the level had been good. The general message indicated that quality was high and the provision in the right place, although some improvements could be made to accessibility.

Councillor Bell referred to 50 sites currently classed as low quality or low value. He asked which sites were being referred to and when they were likely to be reviewed.

The Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks & Streets) responded that there were a whole range of mainly small sites which were untidy and not meeting any real need. They would be reviewed over time. It was important to understand why they were not doing well.

A list of the sites was included in the report.

The Mayor suggested that ward councillors be approached to see if they could obtain some informed feedback from residents about the sites in question.

In response to a further point from Councillor Bell about priorities, the Mayor said that they had planned improvements for the next two years. It was important to have key milestones and deliverables

Councillor Bell asked what criteria had been used in respect of the allotments. The Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks & Streets) advised that this had been carried out by an independent consultant as it was difficult to evaluate quality objectively.

Councillor Sharpe said that he welcomed the move to achieve more Green Flags and the fact that the awards were not just based on usage – for example Oxhey Park and St Mary's Churchyard. He added that it was important not to confuse quantity with quality and to look at the potential for improving value. He

concluded by congratulating officers on the work done to produce the strategy and the proactive level of involvement demonstrated by councillors.

RESOLVED:

that Cabinet

1. approves the final Green Spaces Strategy
2. delegates to the Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services in consultation with the Portfolio holder any minor changes required to the documentation prior to publication, along with the content of the summarised version of the Strategy to be made available for local residents.

ACTION: Environmental Services Manager (Parks & Streets)

33

AGREED AMENDMENTS TO THE ALLOTMENT FAQs

Cabinet received a report presenting the revised and proposed updated FAQs for allotment tenants in Watford. For several years, along with the legal tenancy agreement signed by all allotment tenants, the FAQs had been the rules and regulations

As part of the development of the new 2013-2018 Allotments Strategy, one of the issues that arose was the dissatisfaction with the current FAQ's which were updated regularly by the Allotments Management Team without consultation or involvement of tenants or site supervisors. These had therefore been re-written in consultation with Site Supervisors and the Allotments Stakeholder Panel and were being presented to Cabinet for approval and adoption.

As a result of updating the Terms and Conditions (T&C), it was also apparent that the existing tenancy agreement needed updating to ensure it aligned with the revised T&Cs.

Councillor Scudder introduced the report. He welcomed the fact that the new T&Cs were now very readable and easy to understand. He also referred to the extensive level of consultation which had been undertaken with the Allotments Stakeholder Panel.

The Mayor commented that the level of "buy in" from allotment holders was important and many issues of common concern had needed to be addressed. She referred to the increase in rents last year to bring them into line with average costs nationally. Whilst the amount had been relatively small the percentage increase was high because the rents had not been increased for such a long time. A gradual increase over the years would have had less impact.

RESOLVED:

that Cabinet

1. approves the adoption of the final and revised FAQs now to be known as Terms and Conditions and that future revision approvals are delegated to the Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services in consultation with the Portfolio holder.
2. approves the recommendation to update the existing Allotment Tenancy Agreement in line with the updated Terms and Conditions and delegates its final approval to the Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services and the Head of Democracy and Governance.
3. approves the recommendation to increase allotment rents annually by the RPI (September value) and inform tenants annually based on the proposed revisions to the tenancy agreement after Cabinet approval of fees and charges each February.

ACTION: Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks and Streets)

34

NEW WATFORD MARKET UPDATE

Cabinet received a report on the progress of the delivery of the new Watford market and its future operation.

The design entailed a new, vibrant WBC-led covered market located in the current car park at the side of the TJ Hughes building (23-33 The Parade) and also included expansion into the Parade with some temporary stalls. It was designed to be complementary to the smaller market that Intu was proposing to build as part of the Charter Place redevelopment.

The estimated cost for the project was £2.65m which reflected substantial design changes including full roof coverage throughout the market and a first floor storey to accommodate more units. A planning application for the new market had been submitted and a decision was expected before Christmas 2013. The scheme included 45 units.

Following an open tender exercise, Town & Country Markets had been selected to provide advice prior to the opening of the market in relation to design, business support and operational matters. They had also been selected to operate the new Watford Market once completed and were expected to enter into a lease and a management agreement.

Councillor Sharpe introduced the report. He said that there had been extensive engagement with traders and the scheme was moving forward positively. The increased costs being incurred were as a result of discussions with traders and meeting their needs. The new market would be a market the town could be proud of and would not make losses in the way the old market had.

The Managing Director advised that the planning application had now been received and a decision was expected by the end of the calendar year. In January 2014 a contractor would be appointed to build and fit out the market. He said that the difference in costs had been driven by the traders and the market operator who specified the need for a roof and two storeys. It was anticipated that savings and income would result in costs being recouped within 10 years.

An open day had been held with traders on 29 October: There had been a near 100% turn-out and excellent feedback. Members were asked to note that trading was now proposed for five days a week and not six as detailed in the report.

In response to a question from Councillor Bell about future rent increases, the Managing Director advised that Town & Country Markets needed freedom to develop a successful market. The terms of the leases would be either one or three years and rents and service charges would be up-rated annually by RPI. They were, however, proposing a 50% reduction in rent for the first year spring 2015 to help traders establish themselves at the new location over the winter period.

Councillor Bell asked for confirmation that INTU would ensure that the smaller market proposed for Charter Place would compliment this new market. The Managing Director responded that this was certainly the intention although it was not clear at this stage what type of market the Charter Place market would be. He added that INTU were considering appointing an operator to run the Charter Place market and it would obviously be beneficial if Town & Country Markets were selected.

The Mayor commented that the two markets would be very different and the intention was for them to be complementary. She added that this was the best opportunity there had been for the market in 20 years. She had recently been carrying out visits to sheltered schemes and had learnt what was important for users of the market including a place to sit down and have refreshments and accessibility to roads and bus services.

The Portfolio Holder said that, whilst there had never been any opposition to the idea of a covered market, officers had been financially cautious. Town & Country Markets was a professional company who knew what they were doing and what was important for success.

The Managing Director confirmed that there would be no gap in trading. Councillor Watkin concluded the discussion by speaking of the positive cash flow potential and the benefits to the future of the town.

RESOLVED:

that Cabinet

1. notes that the Watford Health Campus Partnership LLP has been instructed to design the new Watford Market and to prepare Employer's requirements for the building contract
2. notes that a planning application has been submitted.
3. notes that Town & Country Markets have been appointed as the operator to manage the new Watford Market following completion and also been appointed to provide design advice, business support, secure pre-lets and develop appropriate management policies.
4. notes the Terms and Conditions for traders in the new Watford Market
5. approves a revised capital budget estimate of £2.65m and recommends the change to the Capital Programme to Council.

ACTION: Property Development Project Manager

APPROVAL TO APPOINT GREENHILL'S ASSET MANAGER (GAM) BY EXCEPTION TO LEAD IN THE PREPARATION OF A STRATEGIC REPORT ON WATFORD BUSINESS PARK ITS AIM WILL BE TO FACILITATE THE REGENERATION AND IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES TO REALISE GREATER FINANCIAL RETURNS

Watford Business Park (WPB) was a large industrial estate located in the Holywell ward. The freehold was owned by the Council who had granted long leases to various parties. Much of the estate was constructed in 1960 and whilst some areas had been modernised there remained significant areas that were in need of investment and updating.

Historic attempts by Watford Borough Council (WBC) to obtain Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) funding to develop a strategy and to provide funding to initiate early phases of work to WBP had proved unsuccessful. WBC recently approached the LEP again jointly with Greenhill Asset Management (GAM) who managed the adjacent Croxley Business Park, as there were a number of potential synergies for both parties in improving each others' assets as well as the area. This application was successful and the LEP agreed to provide £1.5m of loan funding for the project.

The LEP funding consisted of £300k to develop a regeneration strategy by March 2014 and a further £1.2m contribution for the implementation of identified projects from that strategy. Completion of the strategy did not commit WBC to draw down further funds or commit to projects. A further report would be brought to Cabinet for consideration when the strategy was completed so next steps could be discussed.

It had been provisionally agreed that £150k of the strategy development costs would be a fee for GAM and their sub consultants. The fee would be paid against agreed milestones whilst the remaining £150k was anticipated to be incurred on general due diligence work and technical studies

LEP funding conditions required the funds drawn to be paid back by 2019 with interest. The property department had identified a number of existing opportunities on the estate that could generate revenue and repay the £300k strategy work in that timescale in the event of no additional projects being identified. It was thought greater returns could be generated in the context of an overall strategy and consequently these short term opportunities would not be pursued individually at this stage until the strategy review was complete.

An exemption to the Contract Procedure Rules could apply in exceptional circumstances or where prior approval for that exemption has been granted at a Cabinet meeting. An exemption was proposed in this case to allow a single tender action with GAM for them to lead on the strategic review. This was based on the synergies and potential opportunities that could be realised from their association with the adjacent estate and on the success of the joint approach with them to the LEP.

The Managing Director introduced the report. He said that WBP had been seen as an underperforming estate in terms of employment opportunities and financial returns. This proposal could increase jobs and returns significantly and forming a partnership with GAM made sound business sense. LEP had been very supportive; the loan would be paid in a reasonable amount of time and would not impact on the revenue budget.

The Mayor welcomed Martin Jones, the recently appointed Programme Manager - Regeneration Projects, to the meeting. He commented that the back part of the area was quite modern whilst the front part could be developed more efficiently resulting in the whole site being enhanced.

Councillor Bell said that he was pleased that the site was being looked at but asked whether Cabinet was confident that the loan could be paid back by 2019. He also commented that parking could be an issue and that he would not support parking controls on the site.

The Mayor re-assured Councillor Bell that legal advice had been obtained regarding the proposals. With regard to parking, she responded that fees would be very low and that most people now expected to pay for parking at work. It was not intended to be a money maker but costs of enforcement, clearing up etc had to be met. She also stressed the encouragement shown by the LEP who recognised the extra value that could be gained through the involvement with Greenhill.

The Managing Director added that the LEP had recognised that Watford had got its act together. Local authorities had to look at different ways to raise income and the business rates to be collected from attracting more businesses to this site would help to underpin the Council's financial future.

The Economic Development Manager advised that he had carried out an initial approach to the LEP and that the proposal was not about duplicating the Croxley site but about looking holistically across the whole area. There were many activities and benefits which could be tapped into and the proposal would result in long term benefits over the next 10-15 years.

RESOLVED:

that Cabinet

1. agrees the appointment of Greenhill Asset Management to undertake a review of the Watford Business Park as described against agreed milestones without going through a formal competitive procurement.
2. agrees to enter an agreement with the LEP to draw down up to £300,000 of funding to develop a strategy for Watford Business Park. This draw down amount is within the currently agreed £10 million borrowing limit.
3. notes a further report will be submitted to Cabinet regarding any further drawdown of funds for project implementation on completion of the strategy

APPOINTMENT OF A TOWN CENTRE MANAGER, WITH ASSOCIATED BUDGET IMPLICATIONS, AND THE POSTS CO-LOCATION WITHIN THE COUNCILS JOINT INITIATIVE WITH WATFORD & WEST HERTS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE - THE CREATION OF A ONE STOP BUSINESS ADVICE AND SIGNPOSTING

Over the past months, consideration had been given to the best way of managing the Town Centre and how best to evolve business advice services. A new Town Centre Partnership had been formed comprising a wide range of stakeholders, including local business leaders and the Mayor and Managing Director.

At its inaugural meeting on the 3rd September, the Shadow Partnership Board discussed the need for a dedicated post to support the partnership's activities and the proposed use of the £100k allocated by government to WBC through the High Street Innovation Fund.

It had been agreed that a town of Watford's size and ambition should have a dedicated Town Centre Manager with an associated budget to implement and deliver the priorities of the Town Centre Partnership. It was agreed that WBC would employ the Town Centre Manager by re-allocating budget from an existing vacant post (originally the Town Centre Programme Manager) and that the £100k High Street Innovation Fund would be allocated to the partnership over 2 years.

The economic downturn and resulting cuts had had a significant impact on the public sector landscape of business support. With the demise of Regional Development Agencies and major cuts to national programmes such as Business Link, businesses were finding it difficult to navigate or find suitable sources of support, financial or otherwise, which would help them sustain or grow their business.

Watford was in a somewhat unique position in that it had a range of local stakeholders each with a role to play in helping to create, support and ultimately grow local businesses. While existing initiatives were proving successful, there was a growing understanding that even greater impact could be achieved by adopting a truly multi-disciplinary approach to business support by creating a single point of contact/signposting facility to help direct the business to the most applicable source of advice or information.

An opportunity had arisen for the co-location of a number of these key stakeholders with the Watford & West Herts Chamber of Commerce in one building in a central accessible location. This presented the best opportunity, to date, to create a single point of contact for advice and signposting to the range of business support still available. Advantages of a multi-disciplinary approach

included: creating a focal point for business issues, reducing duplication and providing an all round better service for business.

Premises had been identified in Clarendon Road which could accommodate the proposed Business Advice Service, a new permanent location for the Chamber and its staff and the Town Centre Manager. This would create flexible space from which to operate the proposed Town Centre Management office and a business advice and signposting facility.

The Mayor Commented that this work was a key priority and thanked the officers involved.

The Economic Development Manager introduced the report and commented on the current pressures on retail and the challenges facing them. Officers had researched how other town centres were managed and how to establish trust between the public and the retail sector.

He spoke about the number of key players within the town including WENTA, the college and Chamber of Commerce, all of whom had an interest in seeing business in the town succeed. The business landscape could, however, be difficult to navigate and a single dedicated point of contact would be a great advantage.

The Mayor agreed that this was absolutely the right time to introduce such proposals and was another area in which the Council was leading. It was about putting people in the best place to do the job and attracting new businesses to the town. It was noted that Kodak was moving into the town with the creation of 150 jobs: Employment in Watford was on the increase and unemployment rates lower than the national average.

In response to a point made by Councillor Bell about the previous post of Town Centre Manager which had been deleted, the Mayor advised that there had been no buy-in for the post at the time and partners had questioned value for money. This was a very different role requiring a different skills set.

In response to another point by Councillor Bell about the success of WENTA in Stevenage, Councillor Watkin responded that whilst the WENTA building in Stevenage was very impressive, especially compared to the rather unattractive premises in Watford, the Watford WENTA was very pro-active and did a brilliant job in the town.

The Managing Director added that WENTA were very excited about the opportunity to develop a new enterprise centre in the town. Councillor Sharpe commented that it was necessary to ensure that the town continued to stay alive and thrive.

RESOLVED:

that Cabinet

1. agrees the appointment of a Town Centre Manager responsible for implementing the priorities of the Town Centre Partnership.
2. agrees the allocation of £100k High Street Innovation Fund to the Town Centre Partnership over two years.
3. agrees the establishment of the One Stop Business Advice centre, co-located within Watford & West Herts Chamber of Commerce on Clarendon Road, and the subsequent capital and rental contributions.

ACTION: Economic Development Manager

37

PERIOD 6 FINANCE DIGEST

Cabinet received a report on the reported budgetary variances at the end of September 2013 (period 6).

Councillor Watkin introduced the report. He highlighted two key points: The increase to the original budgeted expenditure of £15m by £12k and the details in the report regarding collection rates, which were just about on target.

He commented that officers were doing a very good job and added that the Digest had also been presented to the Budget Panel where it had been accepted as a fair reflection of the budget.

The Shared Director of Finance advised that some money was being transferred to reserves and that small changes mainly reflected savings in salaries, supplies and services and business rates budgets. NNDR and Council Tax collections were on target and it was generally a good report for the six month point of the year.

Councillor Bell confirmed that the Digest had been considered at by the Budget Panel and that questions put at that meeting had been answered by the Director of Finance.

RESOLVED:

that the report be noted

38

WRITE OFFS

Cabinet received a report proposing that debts owed to the Council in respect of a Sundry Debt were written off as irrecoverable. The debt related to one organisation. A separate Part B memo had been circulated to Cabinet members and Group Leaders containing specific details. This information was confidential in accordance with paragraph 7, Part 1, Schedule 12a, Local Government Act 1972.

The Director of Finance confirmed that, for accountancy purposes, it was necessary to only show debts that were considered to be collectable but if further information came to light at a later date for any debt that had been written off then these debts would be pursued.

RESOLVED:

that Cabinet approves the writing off of irrecoverable monies owed to the council in accordance with the Financial Procedure Rules of the council.

ACTION: Director of Finance

Mayor

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 8.05 pm