

SPECIAL ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 March 2019 at 6.00pm at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members

Present:

Councillor I. Shires (Chair)
Councillor A. Hicken (Vice – Chair)
Councillor B. Allen
Councillor B. Chattha
Councillor S. Craddock
Councillor C. Jones
Councillor G. Singh Sohal
Councillor M. Ward

Portfolio Holders

Councillor M. Bird	Leader of the Council
Councillor G. Perry	Community, Leisure and Culture
Councillor C. Towe	Education and Skills

Officers Present:

Simon Neilson	Executive Director – Economy and Environment
Barbara Watt	Director of Public Health
Simon Tranter	Head of Regeneration and Development
Paul Gordon	Head of Business Change
Irena Hergottova	Corporate Consultation & Equalities Lead
Javed Iqbal	Head of Law - Contentious
Lorraine Boothman	Regulatory Services Manager
Lee Harley	Public Health Intelligence – Technical Officer
Nigel Rowe	Community Cohesion and Engagement Lead Officer
Matthew Powis	Democratic Services Officer

67/18 Apologies.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C. Creaney and L. Jeavons.

68/18 Substitution.

Councillor M. Ward substituted on behalf of Councillor L. Jeavons.

69/18 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip.

There were no declarations of interest or party whips.

70/18 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended).

In accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended) the following items were considered in private session:

Agenda Item 5: Approach to Unauthorised Encampments and the equality duty with regard to people following a travelling lifestyle (Except information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority for holding that information)).

Agenda Item 6: Strategic Acquisition – Walsall Third Sector Hub and Operational Accommodation. (Except information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority for holding that information)).

Resolved:

- 1. That item 71/18 ‘Approach to Unauthorised Encampment and the equality duty with regard to people following a travelling lifestyle’ be considered in private session as the report contains exempt information as defined (information relating to the financial or business affairs or any particular person (including the authority holding that information), of the Local Government Act, 1985 (as amended).**
- 2. That item 72/18 ‘Strategic Acquisition – Walsall Third Sector Hub and Operational Accommodation’ be considered in private session as the report contains exempt information as defined (information relating to the financial or business affairs or any particular person (including the authority holding that information), of the Local Government Act, 1985 (as amended).**

71/18 Approach to Unauthorised Encampment and the equality duty with regard to people following a travelling lifestyle.

All members of the public and press left the room in accordance with minute number 70/18 for duration of the meeting. Whilst discussions were held in private session the below minutes are a full account of the discussion that took place.

The Committee considered a presentation on the Council’s approach to Unauthorised Encampments (UE) and the equality duty with regard to people following a travelling lifestyle.

The Portfolio Holder for Community, Leisure and Culture highlighted that the Council was working on a balanced approach towards UEs which considers community needs, resident issues and concerns as well as the legal tools available to the Council. The Portfolio Holder, with support from officers, took the Committee through the Council’s approach and highlighted the following:

- Numbers of reported UEs had varied between 2013 and 2018 with the highest number in 2016 with 100 reported cases;
- A study conducted on behalf of the National Inclusion Health Board found that 66% of travellers were in general poor, bad or very bad health;
- 39% of travellers reported anxiety or depression;
- NHS data on Travellers was found to be limiting and largely reliant upon surveys and small studies;
- The Council actively carries out regular welfare needs assessments to establish advice and health issues;
- Travellers were statistically more likely to not have any immunisation compared to non-travellers;
- Travellers were consistently bottom of all ethnicities with regard to educational attainment;
- Traveller and Gypsy/Roma were more likely to be absent or excluded from school compared to other ethnicities;
- The Council had consulted with Gypsy/Roma and Traveller communities on future engagement and cooperative working. Results showed that over 70% of those interviewed were willing to move to a transit site if one existed. However, a third of respondents desired a permanent site;
- The Council had legal powers available to manage unauthorised encampments.
- Council costs associated with managing UEs were calculated at £3500 on average per UE;
- The response from the Government's consultation on powers for dealing with UEs and encampments had identified the following:
 - Existing powers for Local Authorities to deal with UEs was deemed sufficient but would be kept under review;
 - The Government's good practice guidance on UEs would be issued to all Local Authorities;
 - Further funding would be issued to assist planning enforcement to deal with UEs;
 - Place a duty on Councils to carry out accommodation needs assessments including permanent and transit pitches;
 - Amendment of relevant legislation to support policing potential UEs.

It was noted that the development of transit sites along with increases in permanent pitches was a key method in reducing the numbers of UEs. In addition, the use of negotiated stopping to support transit sites and the development of protocols between the Council, partners and the Police was under review.

Members were informed of a range of potential transit site which were under consideration by the Council.

The Portfolio Holder for Community, Leisure and Culture highlighted the importance of community engagement with any potential transit site. The Chair sought clarification on the timescales for the development of a site. In response, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that the timescales were subject to planning process and consultation.

Following the report a question and answer session took place. The session is summarised as follows:

- The Chair highlighted that the Council recognised that a transit site was needed to alleviate potential unauthorised encampments. However, he stressed the need for a Black Country wide approach to deal with current and future UEs;
- The Portfolio Holder for Community, Leisure and Culture responded that discussions were ongoing with Black Country Authorities and West Midlands Combined Authorities (WMCA) on future transit site proposals;
- A Member sought clarification on whether the Council had a plan for engaging with local communities and addressing local concerns about transit site proposals. The Portfolio Holder for Community, Leisure and Culture confirmed that planning stages would allow the Council to fully engage with communities and address local concerns;
- Ward Councillors would be consulted before any planning proposals;
- The Chair requested that a future cross party working group be established to investigate UEs;
- A Member expressed concerns about the negative impact of UEs in Brownhills and the delays in relocating them.

The Committee thanked officers and the Portfolio Holder for Community, Leisure and Culture for their attendance.

Resolved:

- 1. That, the presentation be noted;**
- 2. That, a future cross party working group be established to investigate Unauthorised Encampments.**

72/18 Strategic Acquisition – Walsall Third Sector Hub and Operational Accommodation.

The Committee took an adjournment at 7.13p.m.

The Committee reconvened at 7.18p.m in private session.

All members of the public and press left the room in accordance with minute number 70/18 for duration of the meeting. Whilst discussions were held in private session the below minutes are a full account of the discussion that took place.

The Committee considered a report on the acquisition of a third sector hub and operational accommodation in Walsall. It was noted that the Council had a longstanding aspiration to relocate customer facing services and incorporate partner organisations into one building. The proposals presented an opportunity for the Council to co-locate operations which interface with similar customers that could achieve economies of scale.

The Committee noted the advantages of locating Council and third sector services into one building in a central location.

Resolved:

That, the report be noted.

73/18 Date of next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 4 April 2019.

Termination of Meeting

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.26p.m.

Signed:

Date: