

Minutes

Meeting name	Scrutiny Committee
Date	Monday, 14 June 2021
Start time	6.30 pm
Venue	Parkside, Station Approach, Burton Street, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, LE13 1GH

Present:

Chair Councillor P. Cumbers (Chair)

Councillors

R. Bindloss (Vice-Chair)	P. Chandler
R. Child	J. Douglas
C. Evans	C. Fisher
J. Illingworth	E. Holmes
M. Steadman	

In Attendance Councillor J. Orson

Officers

- Chief Executive
- Director for Growth and Regeneration (via remote link)
- Democratic Services Manager
- Senior Democratic Services & Scrutiny Officer

Minute No.	Minute
1	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE Apologies for lateness were submitted on behalf of Councillor Child.</p>
2	<p>MINUTES The Minutes of the meeting held on 20 April 2021 were approved and authorised to be signed by the Chair.</p>
3	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST No declarations of interest were received at this meeting.</p> <p>A personal interest in respect of Councillor Orson was noted as being on record for any matters which related to the Leicestershire County Council.</p>
4	<p>REVIEW OF DRAFT SCRUTINY WORKPLAN 2021/22 AND THE ANNUAL FORWARD PLAN The Chair introduced the draft Scrutiny Workplan 2021/22 and the Cabinet Forward Plan and invited Members to comment on either document. It was announced to the Committee that the Scrutiny Workplan would be renamed as the Scrutiny Work Programme.</p> <p>Members were reminded that the Scrutiny Workshop, which was a session for Members of the Scrutiny Committee to suggest ideas for the Work Programme, took place on 10 June. Once the Chair and Vice-Chair have considered the ideas emanating from the Workshop and have established that Scrutiny can add value in those areas, then the ideas would be added to the Work Programme. It was clarified that, in line with the agreed protocol, the criteria for adding items to the Work Programme would be prioritised according to outcomes and objectives.</p> <p>Members discussed other topics which they would like considering when formulating the Work Programme including: the accessibility and user friendliness of public conveniences in Melton, car parking charges and the supporting arrangement for the Mayor including the creation of a guide or protocol. The Chair requested members of the committee feed any further thoughts through to her.</p> <p>The Committee then received a verbal report from the Chair on the allegations made by Leicestershire County Council (LCC) regarding the sale of Melton Borough Council (MBC) land at Lake Terrace, Melton Mowbray. The Chair stated the following:</p> <p><i>On 11 February 2021, at the Scrutiny Committee meeting, Councillor Chris Evans requested that an item be added to Scrutiny's Workplan – to review serious allegations made recently by Leicestershire County Council who had publicly criticised the conduct and competence of MBC Senior Officers and Members in relation to a housing scheme and land disposal off Lake Terrace, Melton Mowbray.</i></p>

Although Councillor Evans was correct in bringing these allegations to Committee, he produced no evidence to indicate that the allegations might be true.

I had complete confidence in the integrity and competence of MBC's Chief Executive, Senior Officers and the Cabinet and did not believe the allegations.

I could not understand why LCC should make such allegations but if they contained any truth, then clearly it could indicate significant problem for MBC. The Committee therefore agreed that an investigation was necessary in order to understand how this housing scheme had been dealt with and whether there was any truth in the LCC allegations.

I decided that, with the assistance of Vice-Chair, Cllr Rob Bindloss, we would review the whole process, gathering information regarding land registry, land searches, planning, land ownership and any other matter related to this windfall site.

Our review began with the outline planning permission in 2018 and our requests for information were dealt with promptly and efficiently by MBC officers who also provided additional material which we might find useful.

Our detailed investigation confirmed that throughout the process, MBC had acted professionally, in accordance with the law, and with extreme care. It transpired that the allegations reported to Scrutiny Committee on 11 February were completely untrue.

It was very disappointing that some elected members had been so ready to believe the LCC allegations despite the lack of evidence and despite LCC's track record; something that is all the more apparent after today's news regarding the Melton Mowbray Distributor Road (MMDR).

During our investigation it became clear that some of the information provided by LCC, to LCC's Cabinet and the public and considered at their meeting on 5 February 2021 was inaccurate and untrue. Including the following:

- That the County Council learned through the media the price the Borough Council had agreed for the land. This was not true as no such figure was reported in the media and we know that the County Council was confidentially advised by our officers of both the value and professional methodology the Borough Council had used to establish the valuation agreed.*
- That contrary to the ill-informed judgements and inappropriate comments expressed by LCC Cabinet members, Melton Borough Council could clearly demonstrate it had secured best value and based on the comprehensive and independent valuation subsequently obtained, has secured a good financial deal for the Council and one that will unlock substantial affordable housing to support our residents. In addition, LCC will benefit from more than*

£1,075,000 of S106 funding to help LCC with their financial responsibilities.

- That in a subsequent article in the Melton Times, a County Council 'spokesperson' suggested they believed Melton Borough Council was trying to sell LCC land. This always sounded far-fetched, especially as this was not mentioned at the LCC Cabinet meeting on 5 February. The review has found no evidence whatsoever that the Borough Council was trying to do this. Again there was no basis for this allegation.*
- I am also concerned that as part of my review I established that the County Council released information provided to them confidentially as part of an FOI. I am continuing to follow up on this and other matters related to their release of information in line with statutory regulations.*

Given the lack of any evidence to support the County Council's allegations, and their desire to publicly criticise the Council before raising any issues informally, it is clear this was a malicious attack on the borough council at a time when negotiations on the MMDR were at a critical stage. Given the news we have received today regarding the housing infrastructure fund, it is no surprise that once again the County Council is trying to pass the blame on to us.

What my review has shown is that our officers have served us professionally, diligently and with the best interests of Melton and our Council at heart. They have my complete confidence and there was no justification for the attack on the decision taken by our Cabinet which has been fully vindicated by this review.

MBC considers itself a reliable and honest partner to many organisations including LCC. It is extremely disappointing that LCC chose to make public unfounded allegations and we should certainly expect far better from one of our key partners in the future.

LCC should remember that effective partnership working is essential to achieve positive outcomes for our community that we are all here to serve and support.

The Chair confirmed that these remarks would be presented to the Cabinet so they could be formally received for their comments. In addition, the Chair thanked Officers for their assistance with the report.

5

THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S ANNUAL PRESENTATION

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Orson, provided an annual presentation to the Committee. In his presentation, the Leader reviewed the previous Municipal Year using the themes within the Corporate Strategy: Helping People, Shaping Places and Great Council. He also provided Members with a brief update on his priorities for the upcoming year.

In addition to the presentation, the Leader stated that he was disappointed to receive the news that it is proposed the County Council should return the Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) grant it had received from Homes England in respect of the southern section of the Melton Mowbray Distributor Road (MMDR).

He added that a petition had been launched in order to persuade the County Council to not return the grant. In addition, the Leader informed the Committee that the Member of Parliament for Rutland and Melton, Alicia Kearns, had released a statement urging the County Council not to reject the grant to which the Leader placed on record his thanks to her for her input into the matter.

In his presentation, the Leader mentioned the work that had been undertaken at the Country Park and the Chair asked whether the south of the town would still have a similar facility as was envisaged as part of the southern neighbourhood developments and Green Space Strategy? The Committee was informed that LCC's decision on the MMDR has put a number of projects in jeopardy. It was explained that the MMDR was the catalyst for growth and that if it no longer proceeds then the projects emanating from it would have to be reassessed.

The Chair asked whether the Council could do something to ensure that LCC receives its funding back from developers and that issues relating to infrastructure funding don't reoccur. It was explained to Members that every application has a number of infrastructure requirements related to it with some related to the County Council, Health and the Police. The Council are drafting a Developer Contributions Supplementary Planning Document and that would set the policy for the Council going forward in this area. This document is currently in draft but may need to be revisited following the County Council's announcement earlier today.

In addressing the Corporate Plan prioritisation session with Members, which was mentioned at the beginning of the presentation, the Leader was asked a question in relation to the assistance for the Mayorality. It was explained to the Committee, that the Council had already increased funding for Officer support for the Mayor by a further one day per week. Given Covid the ability to assess whether this was sufficient had not been fully tested. Despite the response, the Committee agreed that this required further discussion.

(At 7.32pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor Child entered the meeting.)

6

RESPONSE AND RECOVERY TASK AND FINISH GROUP (PLACE) - FINAL REPORT

The Vice-Chair of the Committee, Councillor Bindloss, introduced the report. In doing so he outlined to Members the following: the methodology used, the evidence received, the conclusions made and the recommendations proposed. He thanked the Members of the Task and Finish Group who assisted with the study and the Officers for their involvement.

A question was asked in relation to electric car charging points and e-scooter projects, however it was explained that the Climate Change Emergency Working Group are reviewing those issues and will produce their own recommendations at the appropriate time.

Following a comment regarding communicating the results of the survey, it was

confirmed that the results of the survey would be published.

The comment was made that it would be a challenge for Melton to recover from the economic effects of the pandemic due to the rise of out-of-town retail parks and a change in shopping habits in favour of online shopping. In response, the Committee was informed that the Task and Finish Group and Officers were aware of the challenge, but it is key for Melton to make the most of its unique selling point as the rural capital of food and then create a quality offer of retail and leisure premises to increase footfall.

In response to a comment on the need to have a vision for recovery, the Director for Growth and Regeneration stated that the Council would soon be submitting a bid for levelling up funds, which will be used towards three projects within Melton. In preparation for the bid a vision was created which outlined objectives and stated what it is that the Council are attempting to achieve.

RESOLVED

The Committee approved the Final Report of the Response and Recovery Task and Finish Group (Place) and recommended that it is presented to Cabinet.

(At 8.44pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor Child left the meeting and did not return.)

7	URGENT BUSINESS There was no urgent business discussed at this meeting.
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The meeting closed at: 8.58 pm

Chair