

# **STRATEGIC OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

## **MINUTES**

**THURSDAY 3 OCTOBER 2019  
GIPPING ROOM, GRAFTON HOUSE  
6.00 PM**

**Present:** Councillors C Allen, S Gage, T Grant, D Heaps, C Shaw, C Smart, J Smith, E Harsant, R Pope, T Lockington and H Armitage (Substitute)

**9. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gibbs, Handley and Maguire. Councillor Armitage attended as a substitute for Councillor Gibbs.

**10. Minutes of Previous Meeting**

**It was RESOLVED:**

**that the Minutes of the meeting held on 4 July 2019 be signed as a true record.**

**11. Declarations of Interest**

**OS/19/03 Annual Portfolio Holder Update - Leader of the Council - Property and Development**

Councillor Harsant declared a non-pecuniary interest as she was well acquainted with the founder of the Creative Computing Club.

**12. To Confirm or Vary the Order of Business**

**It was RESOLVED:**

**that the Order of Business be as printed on the agenda.**

**13. OS/19/03 Annual Portfolio Holder Update - Leader of the Council - Property and Development**

- 13.1 Councillor David Ellesmere introduced Annual Update on the Property and Development portfolio.
- 13.2 Councillor Ellesmere highlighted that since the preparation of the papers the Council had been told that Ipswich had, after a thorough assessment, retained its Purple Flag rating. Councillor Ellesmere also explained that the figures on the number of people claiming out of work benefits were not a true reflection of the picture as the traditional measure of using the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance had been rendered inaccurate by the introduction of Universal Credit.
- 13.3 Councillor Ellesmere reported that the Council had, working with Job Centre Plus, arranged a Jobs Fair on Thursday 10 October at the Town Hall where more than 50 organisations would be present with a large number of jobs available. This was the second such fair and feedback from the first one had been very positive.
- 13.4 Councillor Ellesmere explained that Suffolk County Council had devolved £100,000 to Ipswich Borough Council to spend on measures to tackle youth unemployment. Ipswich Borough Council had decided to fund projects in three areas, these being mentoring, work experience and pre-employment training. In addition to these schemes the Economic Development Team had awarded the Creative Computing Club £10,000 to deliver courses at additional schools.
- 13.5 Councillor Ellesmere spoke about the Council's efforts to encourage people to use Ipswich's Town Centre and reported that new footfall sensors, based on mobile technology, had been installed and would provide much better data about the success of these measures than the previous laser beam sensors.
- 13.6 Councillor Ellesmere explained that retail grants of up to £1,000 were available to businesses to make small improvements to their premises and that 5 had been awarded since the launch of the scheme in July 2019. Councillor Ellesmere commented that offers in Crown Car Park had probably significantly contributed to NCPs decision to reduce the prices in their Tower Ramparts Car Park, which he felt was important as those prices had led to visitors regarding Ipswich as an expensive place to park, which was not the reality. Councillor Ellesmere also reported that the market was trading well in its new location and that the stall holders had adapted to the change.
- 13.7 Councillor Ellesmere noted that there had been a number of significant events in Ipswich over the summer, most notably the Elmer's Big Parade sculpture trail and the Ed Sheeran Concerts, but that there was a wide range of other events such as Windrush Day and the Last Night of the Proms screening on the Cornhill. Councillor Ellesmere explained that the Economic Development Team also considered proposals for subsidised use of the Town Hall / Corn Exchange where these would bring significant numbers of people to the town centre; the SoundCity Ipswich music festival was an example of such an event.

- 13.8 Councillor Ellesmere explained that the Waterfront continued to be an area of focus for the Council and that all of the dilapidated properties at the western end of the quayside were now owned by the Council and that various proposals for the future use of these buildings were now being worked on.
- 13.9 Councillor Ellesmere explained that the redevelopment of the former sugar beet processing plant at Sroughton continued, with the Council being in advanced stages of negotiation with a business which would potentially occupy a large proportion of the remaining available site.
- 13.10 The Princes Street Enterprise Zone had been successful with the new Birketts office having been built and the former Fissons office now fully occupied. The part of the Enterprise Zone on the Portman Road side of Princes Street would be the focus for future development. Councillor Ellesmere also noted that the Maltings building had been completely refurbished by the current owner and that the first tenants had now moved in which showed the benefit of the Council's earlier intervention to prevent the building from becoming dilapidated.
- 13.11 Councillor Ellesmere reported that the Council was in advanced negotiations with a potential occupier of the Wharf area of 1 Cornhill and that works to the building were planned for 2020. The Council had also purchased Walnut Tree Farm, adjacent to Whitton Sports Centre which would allow additional housing to be built.
- 13.12 Councillor Ellesmere noted that the Council was still awaiting details of the Towns Fund announced by the Government, including what it could be spent on and how to apply.
- 13.13 Councillor Pope asked whether the Council advertised the availability of market stalls. Councillor Ellesmere confirmed that the market was promoted and that a florist had recently taken up a pitch which had been considered by regular traders to be unattractive and so he felt that progress was being made.
- 13.14 Councillor Pope asked why there had been a reduction in the number of businesses which the Economic Development Team had contacted. Councillor Ellesmere explained that there had been a degree of churn in the team which had reduced capacity, whilst significant extra demands such as the Elmer Trail and the consultation on Public Realm works had been placed on staff. Making calls to businesses had not been considered to be a priority and so the number of contacts had dropped.
- 13.15 Councillor Pope asked whether a breakdown of businesses using the Ipswich Waterfront Innovation Centre was available. Councillor Ellesmere noted that the centre was run by the University of Suffolk and so this information would be held by them, but commented that the centre didn't have as many technology firms as the funders would like and that steps were being taken to try to improve this and remove some of the barriers to firms using it.

- 13.16 Councillor Gage noted that the number of shops left vacant was increasing across the country and asked what support the Government was providing.
- 13.17 Councillor Ellesmere explained that nationally there were changes to town centres with retail facing significant structural challenges such as an increase in internet shopping, unbalanced business rates which favoured out of town shopping centres, and in the short-term, uncertainty caused by Brexit. Councillor Ellesmere commented that town centres would have to diversify with flexible planning policies which allowed alternative uses for former shops being important. Councillor Ellesmere noted that a new school would be opening in the former Coop department store and that some residential conversions had also taken place.
- 13.18 Councillor Ellesmere commented that the Government could assist Councils by allowing the Towns Fund to be used to purchase challenging vacant properties and improve them so that they were marketable or used for an alternative purpose.
- 13.19 Councillor Gage noted that the refurbishment of the Cornhill had allowed a varied series of events to be run and asked if a timescale could be provided for the refurbishment of Arras Square. Russell Williams explained that he hoped that the tender for architects could be issued before Christmas, with public engagement taking place this financial year and works in the next financial year, however, there were still some issues which needed to be resolved to enable this to take place. Councillor Ellesmere noted that the events on the Cornhill were financially supported by Ipswich Central and the Local Enterprise Partnership, as well as the Council, but that the Local Enterprise Partnership funding was unlikely to continue and so alternative funding would need to be found or the programme reduced. Councillor Ellesmere noted that there were no plans for significant events at Arras Square.
- 13.20 Councillor C Smart asked whether any progress had been made on the building of the two smaller bridges originally included in the Upper Orwell Crossings Project. Councillor Ellesmere explained that when the Upper Orwell Crossings Project had been cancelled, he and Sandy Martin MP had pressed Suffolk County Council to use the remaining budget of £11 million to build the smaller bridges. Councillor Ellesmere noted that progress on these bridges was dependant on the development of the island site by Associated British Ports and that he was hopeful that they would soon start to make progress on this.
- 13.21 Councillor Pope queried whether the target of new shops opened had been met as at least two of those which had opened had actually relocated within the town and so weren't new. Councillor Ellesmere commented that whether shops which had relocated ought to be included in the figures was an interesting point, noting that when a business moved it would invest significantly in the new premises and sign a new lease which would mean that it was unlikely to leave for a longer period of time, and so there was a benefit to the town. Councillor Ellesmere agreed however that if only those shops which were opening with a new brand were counted the target would narrowly have been missed.

- 13.22 Councillor Pope asked that the Council consider using the former British Home Stores building as an indoor market or an enterprise centre for small businesses. Councillor Ellesmere explained that a range of options were being considered, including those mentioned by Councillor Pope, however, he noted that the building was not owned by the Council and that a business case to purchase the property and then convert it would not be viable, although, depending on the restrictions placed on the Towns Fund, a Council intervention might be possible.
- 13.23 Councillor T Lockington asked whether figures were available for the level of churn in shops. The Chief Executive replied that the data needed to create these statistics was recorded but that it would be difficult to produce any useful information.
- 13.24 Councillor T Lockington asked whether the Council had concerns about over-dependence on the restaurant sector to revitalise the town centre and the sustainability of the sector. Councillor Ellesmere agreed that there was no one solution to the problems affecting town centres, however, restaurants would be part of the solution as they would attract people into the Ipswich and complemented the cultural events in the town. Councillor Ellesmere commented that an increase in residential accommodation in the town centre would help to support restaurants.
- 13.25 Councillor T Lockington asked whether the Council was confident that there would be an increase in the average weekly workplace wage. Councillor Ellesmere noted that the Council had little control over this issue but that it was an important indicator of Ipswich's economic prosperity. Councillor Ellesmere explained that the Council had become a living wage employer and commented that whilst the average workplace wage in neighbouring districts was higher, there was greater inequality between the very rich and lower paid people.
- 13.26 Councillor T Lockington asked whether it was planned to include green features on the island site, as had previously been suggested. Councillor Ellesmere explained that he wasn't aware of what Associated British Ports' current ideas were for the island site but commented that it was a difficult site to develop and that it was likely that a relatively high density would be required.
- 13.27 Councillor Armitage asked whether there were any schemes for short term lets and pop up restaurants in Ipswich. Councillor Ellesmere explained that the Council owned relatively little property in the Town Centre and so could not easily run such a scheme itself, however, there was nothing preventing landlords from offering such terms on their properties.
- 13.28 Councillor Heaps asked for further information on the enterprise zones and asked what incentives there were for businesses to locate within these zones. Councillor Ellesmere explained that the Council's main focus had been on the Princes Street Enterprise Zone, as the zone covering Futura Park was well established and the island site was owned by Associated British Ports. The Council also owned the former sugar beet processing site at Sproughton which

was in an enterprise zone in Babergh. Councillor Ellesmere explained that there were two principal advantages for potential occupiers, the first being that there was supposed to be a degree of certainty about obtaining planning permission and the second being the substantial business rate discount.

13.29 The Chair thanked Councillor Ellesmere and Mr Williams for their answers and contribution to the session.

**14. OS/19/04 Strategic Overview & Scrutiny Annual Report 2018-2019 and Future Work Programme**

14.1 Councillor Harsant introduced the report, explaining that it set out the work of the committee over the past municipal year. There were no comments on the report.

14.2 Councillor Harsant asked that Suffolk County Council Councillors West and Evans, and relevant County Council Officers, be invited to the meeting on 24 October to contribute the discussion on the Park and Ride Update.

14.3 With regard to the item entitled 'Highways England – Survey Results' Councillor Gage commented that the committee was likely to wish to discuss closures of the Orwell Bridge more broadly, for example further advanced signage, and asked that Highways England be made aware that this item would not be restricted to the survey results, although they would be the focus.

14.4 Councillor Gage asked that the format of the Annual Report on Police Matters be considered to allow more opportunity for questions.

**It was RESOLVED:**

- a) that the Strategic Overview & Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2018-2019, attached at Appendix 1 to report OS/19/04 be approved for submission to Full Council.
- b) that the Work Programme for 2019/20, attached at Appendix 2 to report OS/19/04, be approved.

The meeting closed at 7.18 pm

**Chair**