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OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

19 DECEMBER 2023

PRESENT:

Councillors Norman (Chair), Leung (Vice-Chair), Ball, Booker, Ho, Ray, Robertson and Woodward

45 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Holland, Trent, Whitehouse and Yeates.

46 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were received.

47 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The public minutes of the previous meeting, held on 30 November 2023, were taken as read and approved as a correct record.

48 HEALTH MATTERS

The Vice-Chair updated the committee on the discussions of Staffordshire County Council Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee. She confirmed that the check marks on the side of the work programme relate to when actions have been completed. The Vice-Chair confirmed she would share the SCC Winter Surge Plan with committee members. The Vice-Chair confirmed she would get an update to committee regarding Items 13 and 16 on the SCC work programme. She was asked about the Falls Response programme being operated by the Fire and Rescue Service and agreed to give feedback on this although the minutes were on the County Council's website.

The Vice-Chair updated the committee on the Samuel Johnson birth centre. She confirmed the temporary closure was ongoing due to a shortage of midwives and a lack of demand for the centre pre-Covid that increased the risk of staff becoming de-skilled.

Members asked the Vice-Chair to raise where social prescribers may refer patients to, public health prevention and issues with travel between Lichfield and Burton Hospital on the A38, at the next opportunity.

49 TASK GROUP NOTES

The Chair of the Lichfield City Masterplan Task Group updated the committee on the discussions of the last meeting on October 24th, 2023. He stated that members were certainly not unanimous in their views of the Georgian design focus. He confirmed that disabled parking and communication about the project were discussed by members at the Task Group, whilst marketing would be discussed at an upcoming meeting.

50 PLANNING COMMITTEE PROTOCOL

Lizzie Barton (Assistant Director Resident and Business Services) presented the report, alongside Artemis Christophi (Planning Management & Transformation Consultant) and Councillor Tom Marshall (Chair of Planning Committee).

It was confirmed that there are protocols for committee members and non-committee members. Three central issues were highlighted for feedback from O&S:

1. How to process member call-ins following a member departure, either as a result of an election seat change, bi-election seat change, standing down or death.
2. How to provide member support for both views (objectors and applicants) in single member wards/ward where only one member is not a member of the planning committee.
3. Speaking times at committee.

Point 1:

Artemis Christophi clarified that Parish Councils can call in applications if they meet the necessary criteria. Some other authorities require a minimum of 2 members to request a call-in. The fundamental rule is that all call-ins must be done on valid material grounds and all authorities report those grounds at some stage during the process.

Members expressed unease at asking substitute councillors to speak at planning committee based on their political party and believed the process should remain apolitical and instead focus on adding detailed local context to the issue through members knowledge of the ward and residents.

Members noted that residents also have the opportunity to submit objections prior to the application appearing at planning committee.

Members believed that whilst councillors have a responsibility to represent residents, necessitating a member to represent a particular view on a planning issue would not be appropriate.

Members expressed support for continuing to allow call-ins and the opportunity for ward members to have their views read out at committee if they are unable to attend.

Point 2:

Officers sought the committee's views on whether residents living in a single member ward could seek representation from an alternative member if their councillor did not share their view.

Members noted this could potentially provide an unfair advantage to residents living in single member wards, who would be able to seek representation from all 47 councillors, whilst those living in multi-member wards may find that all of their councillors still disagree with their view. It also risks involving members who do not understand the local issues as intricately as the ward member.

It was suggested that defining the role of councillors speaking at planning committee as a voice of the ward may be beneficial. The committee supported this suggestion.

Point 3:

Artemis Christophi confirmed the authority does not ask the applicant or agent for permission to impose conditions, but that they are imposed outright if members feel that is fit.

Lizzie Barton highlighted that a number of recent planning committees have had standing orders suspended and public applications deferred to the following meetings. There is a

concern officers may need to organise meetings based on how contentious they feel an item may be. Based on an analysis of recent meetings, she noted that:

- Moving forwards, officers are working towards 5 minutes maximum, unless on complex cases.
- Ward members often don't speak and when they do, they do not use the ten minutes allotted.
- Applicants/agents often use the full five minutes.

It was confirmed that with permission of the Chair, an extension to speaking times can be allowed in complex cases. Members noted that councillors should be encouraged to write to officers in advance of the meeting with their concerns about any application.

Members expressed support for reducing the speaking time at planning committee meetings to 3 minutes for objectors, 3 minutes for applicants/their agents and 3 minutes for ward members.

Members also suggested looking at the length of debates during planning committee meetings and how to ensure that can best follow the structured format.

- Members asked if the committee size could be changed.

It was confirmed that the size of planning committees can vary between authorities.

- Members asked whether site visits should again be considered.

It was confirmed that site visits are under discussion and it was hoped committee members would undertake an escorted site visit to all items on a planning committee agenda in the company of planning officers. The technicalities of this are currently being ironed out.

Members supported exploring the idea of pre-briefing meetings before planning committees to run members through the presentations in advance.

RESOLVED: The committee provided views and feedback to officers on changes to the Planning Committee Protocol, as well as suggesting potential further reforms to be explored.

51 WORK PROGRAMME

Members confirmed that they would like a briefing note on Youth Council Performance in January 2024, with the possibility of a wider agenda item in April 2024.

It was confirmed that the aim is to have a Civic Review Task & Finish group, constituted and running in early 2024. Members suggested this Task Group could then report its findings to the April 2024 O&S committee meeting.

Members raised the request for a Public Transport Task Group and debated whether the aims of this group may be better achieved through an item to be discussed at committee. O&S could invite bus operators and highways officers as part of this discussion.

Members highlighted that inviting officers and members from Staffordshire County Council to the committee, could also be an effective way to address the aims of the proposed Local Health Matters Task Group. The Vice-Chair confirmed a request had been made to SCC to attend LDC for discussions regarding health matters.

It was suggested these issues may be better raised at the Staffordshire Leaders Board, or a similar forum instead.

52 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED: “That as publicity would be prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business, which would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972”

IN PRIVATE

53 CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The confidential minutes of the previous meeting, held on 30 November 2023, were taken as read and approved as a correct record.

(The Meeting closed at 8.23 pm)

CHAIRMAN