

**REGENERATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT POLICY
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

MINUTES of a meeting of the Regeneration and Economic Development Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in the Darent Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 24 March 2010.

PRESENT: Mr M C Dance (Chairman), Mr I S Chittenden (Vice-Chairman), Mr J R Bullock, MBE, Mr K A Ferrin, MBE, Mr P J Homewood, Mr J A Kite, Mrs J Law, Mr K Smith, Mr M V Snelling and Mrs E M Tweed

ALSO PRESENT: Mr K G Lynes, Mrs J A Rook, Mr A Wickham and Mr C Hibberd

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr D Cockburn (Executive Director, Strategy, Economic Development & ICT), Ms B Cooper (Director of Economic Development) and Miss T Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

15. Minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2010

(Item A3)

RESOLVED that, subject to a change to paragraph 3) a) of Minute 4 to read 'cruise' rather than 'cruising' industry, the minutes of the meeting held on 19 January are correctly recorded and that they be signed by the Chairman.

Matters Arising

Minute 10 – Update on Major Projects

Mr Lynes reported that the Kent Credit Union had been launched on 4 March 2010.

16. Designing out Risk - Building in Safety. Presentation by Kent and Medway Fire and Rescue Authority on its links to the Regeneration Framework

(Item B1)

Mr C Hendry, Chief Executive and Chief Fire Officer of the Kent Fire and Rescue Service, was in attendance for this item, with Mr J Pereira.

1) Mr Hendry presented a series of slides which set out the contribution that KFRS could make, and wished to make, to the regeneration agenda in Kent. He set out his key concerns as follows:-

- a) a clear link had been identified nationally between economic deprivation and increased fire risk;
- b) developers were now employing cheaper and faster construction methods which could compromise the safety of buildings, and the Fire Service's ability to tackle fires effectively;

- c) 80 – 85% of Kent's economy was made up of small and medium sized businesses, which operated on very narrow margins and could easily be wiped out by a fire. Flood risk was also a big issue for such businesses, and KFRS was particularly concerned about being able to support and protect these businesses; and
- d) the Fire Service wished to establish better links with other agencies, particularly health and social care services, in addressing the needs of vulnerable people.

2) In discussion and in Mr Hendry's responses to questions raised by Members, the following points were highlighted:-

- a) KFRS was known as a beacon authority for its well-developed joint agency working;
- b) there was no provision in the building regulations to require the use of dual treatments (i.e., to guard against rot and make a building fire retardant) for timber-framed buildings, and some 'timber' used in timber framed construction today was not solid wood but woodchip and other composite material. Timber framed buildings could be perfectly safe and last for centuries, as shown by Kent's many surviving medieval timber-framed buildings;
- c) there was a large disparity in the application of building standards and regulations, and no accreditation scheme for inspectors;
- d) new developments were most vulnerable during construction. Once completed and signed off as safe, their integrity could start to reduce as soon as modifications were made, creating holes and voids which could help fire spread;
- e) insurance companies were experiencing more fire-related loss , and the cost per fire was increasing. Insurers specialising in covering public buildings would often insure schools (a particular high risk group in terms of arson) with reduced excess payments;
- f) building control was a big issue for district councils, and it was recognised that retro-fitting systems was more expensive than designing them in at the outset;
- g) controlling the flow of air around a building was an important factor in limiting the spread of fire, but sophisticated air control mechanisms aimed to preserve life rather than property;
- h) agencies working in different area of public life needed to have a mutual appreciation of each other's varying agendas;
- i) fire retardant interior furnishings were covered by European legislation, and the KFRS had played a major part in raising awareness of the risk and establishing a requirement for all furnishings to be fire retardant;

- j) sockets and wiring tended to be overloaded, particularly in multi-occupancy buildings such as student accommodation, but extensive wiring systems were perfectly safe if installed properly;
- k) fires now caused much less loss of life but the ongoing effects and costs of a fire were in the health and social care and economic inactivity of people injured in a fire;
- l) a 'fire mark', denoting that a building was constructed to minimise fire risk, could be developed to help sell new housing developments, in the same way in which buildings were sold on the basis of their green credentials, and safety features are used to sell cars;
- m) KFRS was a statutory consultee in the planning process but not in the early stages, and informal earlier consultation would be helpful. KFRS are consulted when building regulations are reviewed. However, the building industry was powerful and skilled at lobbying, and KFRS would have more clout as a consultee/lobbyist by joining forces with other agencies; and
- n) KFRS had done much work with Eurotunnel and Eurostar to address issues of safety in the channel tunnel, but Mr Hendry emphasised that the tunnel did have a relatively good safety record compared to other major civil engineering projects. The safety of the tunnel was constantly being scrutinised.

3) Asked to summarise what he wished to see put in place to address the issue, Mr Hendry listed the need for new legislation to address the current failing legislation; a mechanism for consistency; recognition of the capacity for fire (and flood) to damage the economic health of the county; the need for KFRS to be engaged and consulted earlier in the planning process; the need to address issues of density and access to the built environment, and the need to encourage innovative design while acknowledging the need for KFRS to be able to access and tackle fires effectively.

4) Mr Hendry thanked Members for the opportunity to address the POSC. He said he would take away the points raised in Members' discussion and would welcome the opportunity to update Members in six months' time on developments in addressing them.

5) Mr Lynes referred to the shared agendas of various public sector agencies which had brought this issue forward, and emphasised the democratic mandate of elected Members to raise the profile of the issue. He supported the suggestion of a 'fire mark' to sell new homes, and suggested that the current dip in construction activity offered an opportunity to address the construction issues which had arisen in discussion.

6) RESOLVED that the information given in the report and presentation, and in response to Members' questions, be noted, with thanks, and that Mr Hendry's offer to update the POSC at a future meeting on the issues raised be welcomed.

17. Regeneration and Economy - A District Perspective. Oral report back from visits to Canterbury on 26 February and Dartford and Gravesham on 12 March (Item B2)

Canterbury – 26 February 2010

- 1) Members expressed their thanks to Canterbury City Council for the organisation of an excellent, full visit and the welcome the KCC party was given.
- 2) In discussion, Members made the following comments on what they had seen and heard in Canterbury and Herne Bay:-
 - a) Canterbury has obviously had much money spent on it, while Herne Bay has not, although Members were reassured that projects in Canterbury had received good cross-party support, and that investors were expressing confidence in Herne Bay;
 - b) Canterbury is a vibrant city, and its 30 – 40,000 student population brought life and economic benefits to the city, plus inevitably a few social problems;
 - c) the elements of education, skills, employment and regeneration came together well in Canterbury, but there was always scope to strengthen the links between these elements in Canterbury and in other towns;
 - d) local passion was evident, and character and tradition are everything in making a place successful;
 - e) one negative in Canterbury was in relation to the new Innovation Centre at the University of Canterbury, as the number of jobs generated were low when set to the financial investment;
 - f) another Member said the Innovation Centre seemed to be covering its costs, and had been selective about the businesses it had included. It is a fertile place for growth, is well placed and a worthwhile enterprise;
 - g) this was an excellent visit, but it is important to remember that regeneration is a long term task, and there is a long way to go;
 - h) Canterbury has much for other towns to envy – its Cathedral, Universities and private schools which attract money and cultural tourism. With all those advantages, it should be impressive;
 - i) Herne Bay will come good, like Whitstable, if it is marketed properly;
 - j) it had taken years to gain agreement to the development of Herne Bay, but the confidence was now there, and it was attracting investment; and
 - k) the Canterbury bypass had not been built with a view to the future, and new housing being built needs infrastructure to support it.

3) Mr Lynes referred to the East Kent Spatial Development Company which existed to administrate Government funding, and which he used to chair. It had had some involvement in the Innovation Centre, and he agreed that it was important to get the right balance between having enough tenants and the right tenants. Occupancy had exceeded expectations and offered a good support network for growing businesses, although he would not wish to see it drain business and energy from other places.

Dartford – 12 March 2010, am

4) Members expressed their thanks to Mr Kite and his team at Dartford Borough Council for their organisation of an excellent pre-briefing pack and full tour.

5) In discussion, Members made the following comments on what they had seen and heard around Dartford:-

- a) it was important to continue with and finish Kent Thameside as an exemplar project, as 70% of the funding was in place;
- b) The Bridge project was a good example of a Total Place project, and Members supported having more of this sort of initiative;
- c) Leigh College of Technology was very impressive and a great success, having 10 times more applicants than it had places, excellent technology teaching, a good, disciplined work ethic and good teacher-pupil relationships; and
- d) Members were keen to see how projects at Eastern Quarry would be moved on, and how Dartford Central would develop in the future.

Gravesham – 12 March 2010, pm

6) Members expressed their thanks to Mr Snelling and his team at Gravesham Borough Council for their welcome and a very useful afternoon.

7) In discussion, Members made the following comments on what they had seen and heard around Gravesham:-

- a) the Riverside project was ambitious in aiming to attract cruise liners, but concern was expressed that success in this field might be a threat to Dover;
- b) Gravesend town centre worked well in terms of layout and pedestrian links, and this and its history gave it great potential to attract business and cultural tourism. Gravesend's Sikh Temple was very impressive and was the biggest in Europe;
- c) one Member expressed the view that the programme of visits would not give Members a balanced view of the reality of each area and would

show them just the good parts without the challenges and problem areas; and

- d) other Members disagreed and said it was important to give praise where it was due. Pre-visit briefing information provided by each host council set out negatives as well as positives, so Members were aware of the negatives and were prepared in advance to ask questions about them during the tour.

Collating Conclusions

8) Members' attention was drawn to the potential outcomes of the year-long programme of visits and how the information gathered at visits, as well as given in pre-visit briefings, could be collated, compared and used. It was suggested that a special meeting of REDPOSC could be set reserved at the end of the programme of visits to examine where and how far KCC and DC priorities were aligned.

Future Visits

9) Miss Grayell announced that the next two visits were as follows:-

Friday 30 April 2010, afternoon – visit to Ashford, and

Tuesday 25 May 2010, afternoon – visit to Sevenoaks,

and that, as dates for summer visits had been very hard to find, it was likely that some dates would have to be used at the start of the school holidays, and several visits fitted into the autumn to complete the programme.

18. Kent and Medway Housing Strategy - update

(Item B3)

Mr B Horton, Strategic Housing Advisor, was in attendance for this item.

1) Mr Horton presented a series of slides setting out the content and aim of the Strategy and pointed out how closely it related to Mr Hendry's item at the start of the meeting. He said he would contact Mr Hendry to discuss how they could work together.

2) In discussion, Members expressed a number of concerns about the Strategy and its content, as follows:-

- a) Members expressed doubts that the Strategy would receive much public support, as it fails to address key issues in housing provision;
- b) key elements of previous housing strategies, such as 75% of development needing to be placed on brown field sites, and the need for social housing, seem to be no longer included, and the Strategy does not address the quality of development;

- c) housing was not a responsibility of the KCC but of partnership working between KCC and District Councils, so gaining Districts' willing support for it would be vital. Some Districts were known not to accept the Kent Design Guide;
- d) the Strategy was not yet published, yet it seemed to have decided already where priority should be placed;
- e) housing for offenders was mentioned, but not housing for other groups such as young people or the elderly;
- f) Members were not convinced that home ownership had peaked, as the pattern tended to be cyclical;
- g) the quoted demand for housing had been based on previous patterns of young people seeking to set up their own homes, but the current economic climate mean that this was not necessarily possible any longer;
- h) access to property was an important issue, as some historic areas had narrow streets which tended to be blocked with parked cars;
- i) Kent should build life-time homes, planning ahead for the needs of the elderly and disabled; and
- k) infrastructure was needed to support housing development, and if this was not funded sufficiently, then it would not allow development growth.

3) RESOLVED that the information in the report be noted, and that Members' comments, set out in paragraph 2) above, be reflected in the development of the Strategy.

19. Kent Environment Strategy

(Item B4)

Ms C McKenzie, Greener Kent Manager, was in attendance for this item.

1) Ms McKenzie introduced the report and summarised the key priorities and actions of the Kent Environment Strategy. She explained that the Strategy had gone through a consultation process in 2009 and the final version of it would be available to all Members in May.

2) Members commented that it was possible to enjoy prosperity within environmental limits, as shown by a recent visit of the Renewable Energy Select Committee to a site in Hertfordshire, which was performing very well and attracting much business. It was possible to save money and energy and as well as having a healthier lifestyle.

3) RESOLVED that the information set out in the report be noted, with thanks, and the approach and next steps, set out in section 3 of the report, be agreed.

20. 21st Century Kent - Launch Feedback

(Item B5)

Mr E Dreyer, Urban Design Director, Farrells, and Mr D Godfrey, Strategy, Economic Development and ICT, were in attendance for this item.

1) Mr Dreyer presented a series of slides showing the key points of 21st Century Kent and circulated a booklet which had been used at the launch on 28 January. He reminded Members that launch events had taken place at three venues along the route of high speed rail link, with each having an element tailored to the venue. He summed up the three main themes of 21st Century Kent; Kent has a varied and thriving coast, is a 21st Century Garden of England and is a well connected county.

2) In discussion, the following points were highlighted:-

- a) some Members expressed disappointment that the major part of the 21st Century Kent document was concerned with one corridor across Kent, from which large areas of the county would not benefit. Other areas of the county were not mentioned at all;
- b) other Members disagreed and said the document was excellent, impressive and visionary, although a similar document was needed which would concentrate on looking after the green and rural areas of the county;
- c) some Members were sceptical of the references to the five Medway towns joining to make one city by 2030, and to the growth of a new town at Ebbsfleet; and
- d) reference to businesses being attracted to rural areas of the county by the availability of broadband was challenged as being incorrect;

3) Ms Cooper pointed out that an important part of the roll-out of the strategy was the testing of the vision it contained. She added that all strategies for the regeneration and economic health of the county would be brought together by the end of 2010 and reported to REDPOSC.

4) RESOLVED that the information in the report be noted, with thanks.

21. Financial Monitoring Report: Regeneration 2009/10

(Item B6)

The Chairman secured the Committee's agreement to consider this item as urgent business as the papers had not been placed in the public arena with the required notice.

Mr D Shipton, Finance Strategy Manager, was in attendance for this item.

1) Mr Shipton introduced the report and explained that it had not been possible to release it to POSCs until it had been cleared for the Cabinet meeting on 29 March. He added that the holding of several vacant posts in Regeneration had resulted in an underspend on staffing.

- 2) RESOLVED that the information set out in the report be noted, with thanks.

22. Update on Major Projects
(Item B7)

RESOLVED that the information set out in the report be noted, with thanks.

23. Update on Select Committee Work
(Item C1)

- 1) To complete the information reported about the current Select Committees, Miss Grayell reported that, at its first meeting on 19 March 2010, the Extended Services Select Committee had elected Mr R B Burgess as its Chairman.
- 2) RESOLVED that the information set out in the report be noted, and that Members pass to Miss Grayell any suggestions they wish to put forward for consideration for the 2010/11 Select Committee Topic Review Programme.