
INFRASTRUCTURE, HOUSING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

MINUTES

of a meeting held in the Penn Chamber, Three Rivers House, Rickmansworth on Tuesday 22 March 2022 from 7.30pm to 9pm.

Councillors present:

Stephen Giles-Medhurst (Lead Member for Transport and Economic Development)
Andrew Scarth (Lead Member for Housing)
Alex Hayward
Tony Humphreys
Joan King
Ciarán Reed
Reena Ranger

Paul Rainbow
Stephanie Singer
Phil Williams (for Cllr M Bedford)

Also present: Councillor Margaret Hofman
Councillor Andrea Fraser, Batchworth Community Council

Officers Present: Sally Riley, Finance Manager
Kimberley Grout, Head of Housing Services
Peter Simons, Senior Transport Planner
Sarah Haythorpe, Principal Committee Manager

Councillor Stephen Giles-Medhurst in the Chair

IHED 21/21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Matthew Bedford with Councillor Phil Williams the substitute member.

IHED 22/21 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Infrastructure, Housing and Economic Development Committee held on 16 November 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair.

IHED 23/21 NOTICE OF OTHER BUSINESS

The Chair ruled that the following item of business had not been available 5 clear working days before the meeting but was of sufficient urgency to take at the meeting:

Item 8 – Proposals for the Future Closure of Rickmansworth High Street.

The item was of sufficient urgency to be considered as the current road closure expired at the end of the month and a decision needed to be made on the continuation of the road closure.

IHED 24/21 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Cllr Alex Hayward declared an interest in reference to the Local Plan. The Chair noted the offer, but did not believe it necessary due to the Local Plan part of the service plan not falling within the remit of this Committee.

Councillor Stephen Giles-Medhurst and Councillor Reena Ranger declared an interest in item 8 (Proposals for the Future of the Closure of Rickmansworth High Street) as County Councillors and as Members on the Project Board but came to the meeting open minded, not bound by the views of the County or the Board and would deal with the report fairly on its merits.

IHED 25/21 TO RECEIVE A PETITION ON CPZ PARKING IN CROXLEY GREEN

Councillor Margaret Hofman, had been requested on behalf of the Lead Petitioner, to present the e-petition signed by 57 residents which stated:

'Businesses depend on customers being able to visit and park their cars without hassle. We would like Three Rivers District Council (TRDC) to make changes to the Controlled Parking Zone (CPZ) to better support local businesses.

The short stay parking bays on Watford Road and Frankland Road only allow customers to park for free for one hour, with no return within two hours. This is not long enough for customers who visit cafés, dentists, hairdressers, nail salons and others.

A solution to this is for additional dual-purpose bays to be added, with the first hour free followed by £1 for the second hour. This would make life easier for customers and local business.

Therefore we, the undersigned, request that TRDC undertake the following:

For TRDC to find sites for additional dual purpose short stay parking bays near to the parade of shops on Watford Road near Frankland Road and Hazelwood Road;

TRDC to undertake a study into the feasibility of the short stay parking bays near to the parade of shops allowing drivers to park for two hours, with the first hour free followed by £1 for the second hour, or something similar."

The Chair and Lead Member for Transport and Economic Development advised that the due process in receiving petitions was to just receive them and there would be no debate.

The Chair wished to thank the petitioners for bringing forward the e-petition and bringing it to our attention. It was always proactive to receive suggested changes to parking schemes. The Chair had discussed the e-petition with officers and it would form part of the wider Croxley Green Controlled Parking Zone review to be undertaken after the elections from May onwards (currently we are in the pre-election period). Undoubtedly officers will consult with Ward Councillors appropriately once more detail was available on the review.

RESOLVED:

That the e-petition be received and a letter of thanks be sent to the Lead Petitioner from the Chair.

IHED 26/21 BUDGET MONITORING (PERIOD 10)

The Finance Manager introduced the report which covered this Committee's financial position over the medium term (2021 – 2025) as at Period 10 (end of January).

The Period 10 Comprehensive Budget Management report had previously been presented to the Policy & Resources Committee on 14 March 2022, which had recommended changes in the Council's 2021 - 2025 medium-term financial plan.

A Member asked what happened to the report that there was an error with the Council Tax bills, and also whether TRDC had committed any funds to the Croxley Rail Link project.

The Chair replied that Watford Borough Council had committed funds out of their CIL money, and officers are discussing whether any money can be forthcoming from TRDC but at present no monies had been requested from Three Rivers towards the project at this stage.

The Chair said there was no error in the Council Tax bills which are correct and legal. The way the bills are presented now clearly shows the element of Council Tax charged to all residents by TRDC separate to the variable amount which is dependent on the Parish Council arrangements in each Parish or Unparished area.

The Finance Manager said the Council Tax bills were correct, but had been presented in a different format this year. A message had been published to advise residents of the changes and a link would be provided in the minutes to the message.

<https://www.threerivers.gov.uk/eqcl-page/how-your-council-tax-is-spent>

A Member referred to Appendix 1 (Point 2.2) and requested some information about the £89,000 surplus for Housing.

The Finance Manager said the figure represented a saving on expected outgoings now that the Council had its own Temporary Accommodation (TA), and the figure also included the Government grant money.

The Member asked if the underspend could have been utilised for something else in housing including buying back properties from Housing Associations, as it was known that a Housing Association been selling off perfectly good housing stock.

The Head of Housing Services said they had spoken to Thrive on this and had been advised that if it was not economically viable for them to refurbish a property to re-let the Housing Association was within its rights to sell it. This had been checked with the Legal Team and it was within their rights to do this. Properties that had gone through stock transfer there was nothing the Council could do about them. Any properties that had been built since then the Council had a separate nominations agreement for those properties and that nominations agreement would not allow that to happen to convert them from either social/affordable rent to shared ownership. It was the stock transfer properties was the ones the Council were not able to challenge.

A Member said Thrive had renovated some of its bungalows for first-time buyers to gain a step on the property ladder via shared ownership on a selective number of units.

A Member understood that properties were not able to be refurbished but they were good enough to be sold as the person who buys the property would take on the burden of doing the refurbishment.

The Head of Housing Services replied that if they do refurbish them to get them to the standard they should be the rents that they would collect would not be sufficient to repay on the refurbishment and that was why they sell them for shared ownership.

The Member asked how many properties had been sold in this way so far.

The Head of Housing Services would find out.

The Chair suggested checking all the details before referring to it as an omission and check it was a legal requirement across the whole of the country for stock transfers.

A Member asked who assesses houses for suitability for living.

The Head of Housing Services said Thrive owns the stock, and it was up to them how they managed their stock. The Council is not able to make assessments as we have no grounds to do so.

The Lead Member said properties had been renovated very well and were in a good condition for offering for shared ownership, and reiterated that a tenancy would not recoup the sums spent on refurbishment.

The Member asked if Thrive Homes could be approached with a view to in the first instance offering the purchase of the stock to another Housing Association. They took them from the Council initially to be Social Housing and they are not. The Head of Housing Services would ask the question.

The Chair asked that a briefing note be prepared and circulated amongst Members of the Committee to address the points raised.

RESOLVED:

That the Budget Monitoring (Period 10) report be noted.

IHED 27/21 TO RECEIVE THE FOLLOWING SERVICE PLANS 2022-2025 FOR RECOMMENDATION TO COUNCIL

HOUSING SERVICES

REGULATORY SERVICES

ECONOMIC AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (EXCLUDING LOCAL PLAN)

The Chair took the three item service plans *en bloc* as all three of the plans had previously been discussed at Committee.

ECONOMIC AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (EXCLUDING LOCAL PLAN)

A Member noted that Performance Indicator (PI) ESD07 did not include a target date and thought there should be one. With regard to PI ESD05 the figure relating to Conservation Areas was very low and was not going to get higher.

The Chair said an explanation was provided as to how the targets were calculated.

A Member said that the Council used to have a Conservation Officer working on such matters but resources no longer allowed.

On PI EHC01 it stated that 28.6% of all new food businesses were being inspected within three months of opening but that did not instil confidence.

It was agreed that the matter would be referred to the Head of Regulatory Services for comment but it was believed that the number was low due to opportunities for inspections being limited during the pandemic, and this was the case with all Local Authorities.

On being put to the vote, the Chair declared that the recommendation to submit the Service Plans to Council was CARRIED, the voting being 6 For, 0 Against and 4 Abstentions

RECOMMEND:

That the Housing Services, Regulatory Services and Economic and Sustainable Development Service Plans be recommended to Council.

Post meeting note

With regard to Environmental Health Performance Indicators the Head of Regulatory Services submitted the following:

EHC01 – All new food businesses to be inspected within 3 months of opening.

With the resumption of inspections following the pandemic, there is no expectation from the Foods Standards Agency that new businesses will be inspected within 28 days of opening; instead they should be worked through on a risk basis which is being carried out.

EHC02 – Food businesses inspected within 28 days either side of target date (except Category E Premises)

There is no expectation from the Foods Standards Agency that businesses will be inspected within 28 days of the target date, as above.

It is expected the Food Standards Agency will review its inspection programme and criteria following the pandemic which has affected food business inspections over the last 2 years. Officers will monitor the situation.

IHED 28/21 PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE CLOSURE OF RICKMANSWORTH HIGH STREET

The Chair said this item was part of the Covid 19 response in which the Rickmansworth High Street Recovery Board was set up.

This was a County Council project but it was necessary for the District Council to put forward their recommendation.

The Chair felt that the current trial road closure should be continued from April to September 2022 with a review at the end of that period, and an opportunity to trial an alternative regime if appropriate at that time. During the trial period feedback would be obtained on whether it should be continued in its current form or modifications made to it to provide a different regime. With regards to the physical infrastructure required for the closure it would be similar to what was currently in place now. There would be a review of the planters, signage, parking provision and loading as part of the detailed design process. The responsibility of Three Rivers DC will be the gates, enforcement of the parking, waiting restrictions, monitoring the evaluation process, engagement and communication and street cleaning.

The Chair moved, duly seconded, the following amended recommendation: "To agree the recommendation of the HCC/TRDC Project Board that the High Street Road closure project should move forward to a formal trial phase initially for six months with a review at the end of that period or during it with the opportunity to trial alternative regimes if it was felt appropriate."

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 35 Batchworth Community Councillor Andrea Fraser spoke on information provided to the Community Council from the High Street retailers. The majority of the retailers consulted wanted the High Street to be opened. While there was some support for a pedestrianised area, the removal of a 20 minute parking facility was majorly detrimental, and the Committee was asked to consider a different trial of opening up the High Street. They also advised that occupancy levels had reduced in the High Street.

The Chair counted against the assertion that High Street occupancy levels had taken a big hit, and said in Rickmansworth High Street the occupancy levels were the highest in the District and above the national average.

The Senior Transport Planner said the temporary traffic order expired shortly so a decision needed to be made. Surveys undertaken in other towns in the county, namely Hertford and Hitchin, returned very similar figures, and it was proposed that Three Rivers support an extended six month trial.

A Member said the survey results all featured percentages, which can be open to interpretation and could be misleading. They would like to see a better trial in place after six months. They suggested the survey be broken down by shopkeepers, shoppers etc.

The Senior Transport Planner said a more detailed breakdown was on the Herts County Council website.

The Chair said the timing of the proposal considered the relaxing of Covid restrictions, the warmer weather and upcoming Bank Holidays. They added that not one local business took advantage of the free licences offered by the Council to trade outside.

A Member found the surveys and social media feedback confusing and conflicting, and said people needed to write into the Project Board. They also wondered how the public should best engage with shopkeepers.

The Senior Transport Planner said a survey of shoppers and business owners in the High Street was conducted by the County Council which revealed a reluctance by shopkeepers to engage in the survey, although the results of the survey by Batchworth Community Council were different.

The Chair said the response to the survey by County was vague and it was difficult to find the business owner.

A Member said shopping trends continued to move more towards online. The Member's own experience of trying to meet with business owners made clear the difficulty of engaging with them. It was, however, important that the High Street survived, and solutions did exist.

A Member asked how many more trials and surveys would there be.

The Chair said the current Traffic Regulation Order was for an 18 month period, during which time it could be reviewed, revoked or made permanent. It was necessary that there was consistency in the times that the road was open and closed, and although the 20 minute drop off facility no longer existed, additional parking for blue badge holders was provided.

A Member referred to street markets and the consequent requirement for road closures, and asked whether any are due to take place. The Chair replied that they were under consideration.

A Member referred to the types of shops in the High Street and that some may not be able to succeed, and asked if the Council could have more influence in the types of businesses that open. It was added that the nature of the shops probably determined the responses to the survey.

The Senior Transport Planner said the Council cannot decide what type of shop opens in the High Street, but it supported retailers through both the Rickmansworth and Watford Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber of Commerce would like to see a better mix of shops. The Chamber were also behind the Welcome Back campaign, but it was found that retailers were not fully engaging with them.

A Member said that, as a shopkeeper, it was necessary to evolve, and was fully in support of extending the trial for a further six months. It was time that the Rickmansworth shopkeepers responded as one and made their representations.

The Chair said it was worth revisiting the offer of free licences to enable outside trading. Better weather and the installation of planters etc. would have a beneficial effect, and some streets in Watford were buzzing having embraced the opportunity, and others should do so too.

A Member asked what the Council could do to help the local shopkeepers and how we can encourage more people to shop in the High Street. There had been some objections raised on facebook about the closure but they wondered how we could engage with the residents and shopkeepers better. They suggested setting up a Retail Forum, similar to a Local Area Forum.

A Member said one the best ways was to encourage the retailers and businesses to engage with the Chamber of Commerce. They supported the continued trial for a further 6 months.

The Chair continuing the closure would meet with the Council's Sustainability and Climate Change objective to discourage motorised vehicles in the High Street.

The Senior Transport Officer advised that the Chamber of Commerce had organised networking events, and Waitrose were hosting one soon.

The Chair moved, duly seconded, the recommendation that the current road closure trial be continued from April to September 2022 continue to review at the end of that period and opportunity to trial an alternative closure regime if appropriate.

On being put to the vote, the Chair declared that the amended recommendation CARRIED, the voting being unanimous.

RESOLVED:

To agree the recommendation of the HCC/TRDC Project Board that the High Street Road closure project should move forward to a formal trial phase initially for six months with a review at the end of that period or during it with the opportunity to trial alternative regimes if it was felt appropriate.

IHED 29/21 MOTION UNDER PROCEDURE RULE 11

Under Rule 11(5) of the Council Constitution it had been agreed by the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Chair of Council that the Motion be referred to the Infrastructure, Housing and Economic Development Committee.

The Proposer and seconder wished to remove the following words from the end of the 4th Paragraph – “and grant permits to District Council's for suitable on-road charging points as covered by the recent budget announcement.”

Councillor Stephen Giles-Medhurst duly moved, seconded by Councillor Phil Williams an amended motion as follows:

Council welcomes the UK Government announcement of £620 million in grants to support more electric vehicles on the UK's roads. The grants will be targeted towards infrastructure, particularly local on-street residential charge points. Notes that a further £350m is promised to help vehicle manufacturers make the move to build electric vehicles.

Council welcomes the work of the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) to support the transition to zero emission vehicles (ZEVs) and the grants already awarded to support on-road charging points but notes that according to their estimates the country will need 1.5m charging points if we are to meet zero emissions target by 2030 and that currently there are only 24,000 charge points available.

Council notes that Herts County Council, as the Highways Authority, is consulting District Council's on its Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure Strategy but in this consultation its position is to refuse on road charging points and only allow them in exceptional circumstances.

Council believes this is unduly restrictive especially in dense urban areas with no off-road facilities and no available car parks and thus Council endorses a mixed economy approach, as promoted by OZEV, to allow for both on and off road and asks the County Council to adopt such a policy allowing the maximum facilities in local areas.

The Chief Executive to so write to the County Council accordingly.

On being put to the Committee the Chair declared the amended motion CARRIED the voting being 6 For, 4 Against and 0 Abstentions.

RESOLVED:

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The Chief Executive to so write to the County Council accordingly.

IHED 30/21 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee's work programme was discussed.

Members noted that it may not be possible to bring all the reports identified in the work programme to the 21 June 2022 meeting.

RESOLVED:

Noted the work programme

Noted that the motion on the Self Build Register had been withdrawn.

CHAIR