Strategy and Resources Meeting
Wednesday 18th September 2024
The Trinity Centre
7:00pm

Present:

Cllrs S Ward (Chairman), Cooper, Parkin, Pears and Raut.

In Attendance:

Olive O'Sullivan – Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Mary Watkins – Head of Finance.

There were two members of the public and no press present.

The Chairman opened public question time and invited members of the public present to ask their questions.

A member of Friends of Libraries in our Sutton Coldfield (FOLIO) shared her dismay at Birmingham City Council's (BCC) proposal that only the Mere Green library would be retained as a BCC funded library. She asked what the Town Council's vision is for the libraries moving forward and if they would be interested in a dialogue with FOLIO.

Cllr Ward responded to confirm that the Council is interested in having that dialogue and working with FOLIO. He stated that the Town Council had been financially supporting the town centre library since 2016 and had already contributed more than £1million to the local library service.
The Town Council's vision for the future of libraries is still taking shape, the consultation on the Town Council's Strategic Plan is running until 27th September and contains a specific question about the library service. The Town Council wants to get the right solution for libraries but also needs to be financially responsible and the full information from BCC on the running costs of the service has not yet been made available. In response to a supplementary question asking if the Town Council is the partner negotiating with BCC on the Walmley, Boldmere and the town centre library, the CEO responded that Town Council officers have had discussions with BCC Officers and that there are also other local organisations that are interested and have been in discussions with BCC.

A resident asked if the Town Council's resources would be better used by enhancing and improving parks and open spaces rather than undertaking the huge, and possibly unnecessary, task of full ownership from Birmingham City Council (BCC).

Cllr Ward responded that he was happy to report that recent recruitment had filled gaps in the Town Council senior resource and there was a new Head of Open Spaces and Environment. He stated that many of the assets contained in the Devo-Deal ask had not been maintained and been allowed to deteriorate for some time and needed investment. Parks with Friends Of (FO) groups had been maintained by these volunteer groups, discussions had taken place with some FO groups, and they were delighted that the Town Council were looking to take over these assets.
Cllr Parkin added that the BCC work schedule contained items that were no longer delivered, the service was reduced, diminished and it was likely that there would be further cuts.

Cllr Ward said that the allotment sites that transferred over to the Town Council were receiving substantial capital works and were a model of what could be achieved.

The CEO read out questions and comments about libraries from five residents who were not in attendance, that had been submitted in advance of the meeting.

These included:

- Five comments strongly urging the Town Council to do all that it can to ensure the retention of all four libraries in Sutton Coldfield
- A question asking the Town Council to consider exploring the idea that the constituency community library hub be shifted from Mere Green to Sutton Coldfield town centre but that the library hub be provided from a different building in the town centre, (i.e. not in the Red Rose Centre).
- Clarification on BCC proposals around withdrawing BCC staff from partner-led libraries. The CEO advised were BCC appeared open to discussing all potential solutions and had indicated that if a partner solution could be found, if the partner could provide the necessary funding, BCC could provide the staff to run the library.
- A question asking if the Town Council had submitted an Expression of Interest (EOI) for Mere Green and Walmley Community Centres. The CEO confirmed that an EOI in libraries and community centres had been submitted for both sites, to enable dialogue to commence and an expression of interest did not commit the Town Council.

The CEO read out a question from a resident regarding the Town Centre Regeneration Partnership Minutes, asking when the business case would be published on the BCC website. The CEO responded that once the Strategic Outline Case (SOC) had been approved by the Combined Authority, BCC would publish details of the submission on their website which was likely to be the end of October.

17 Apologies for Absence

The CEO reported apologies from Cllrs Cairns, Puri and Mackey.

Resolved to accept the apologies received.

18 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Pears declared a non-pecuniary interest in the public questions session, as a member of Friends of Rectory Park.

19 Exclusion of the Press and Public

Resolved that due to the confidential nature of the business of item 34 under the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 s3, members of the public and press would be excluded during

20 Minutes of the Previous Meetings

Resolved to confirm and sign the minutes of the meeting of the Strategy and Resources Committee held on 9th July 2024.

21 Matters Arising

No matters arising reported.

22 Questions from Members

No questions had been received.

Cllr Ward varied the order of the agenda items to facilitate members of the public to be present during discussions.

25 Libraries and Community Centres in Sutton Coldfield

The CEO presented the report that contained the outcome of the first phase of consultation carried out by Birmingham City Council (BCC) and summarised the proposed changes to library services that were now undergoing the final stage of consultation by BCC.

Cllr Pears encouraged everyone to complete the BCC consultation and the Town Council consultation on the Draft Strategic Plan. He stated that resources from Precept are finite and that if residents wanted the Town Council to support libraries this may need to be supported by an increase in Precept. Cllr Pears said the town centre library had been allowed to deteriorate and would most likely be too expensive to repair and retain and if there was town centre library provision this would need to be from a different location.

Cllr Cooper asked what the Town Council contribution over the last eight years had on the town centre library service. Cllr Pears responded that the funding had ensured that library had stayed open as it would have been closed by BCC.

Cllr Parkin spoke about a Motion brought to Town Council by Cllr Raut in May 2024. He spoke about the importance of libraries and his frustration that three of the seven proposed libraries that would close if a partner was not found, are located in Sutton Coldfield.

Cllr Ward suggested that an additional recommendation be considered by Committee that the Town Council explore options including relocating Sutton Coldfield Library from the Red Rose Centre to a more prominent town centre location.

Resolved to:

a) Note the outcome of the first stage of the BCC consultation and the proposals for the future provision of the library service in Sutton Coldfield set out in the final BCC Consultation on the library service, which runs to 27 September 2024.
b) Explore a partnership approach to help secure the future of the four libraries in Sutton Coldfield and the Community Centres in Mere Green and Walmley.
c) Note that the Town Council 's consultation on the Strategic Plan 2024 -2027 seeks residents' views on the Town Council taking on more responsibilities for library Services and buildings and community services and buildings.
d) Explore options including relocating Sutton Coldfield Library from the Red Rose Centre to a more prominent town centre location.

26 Devolution Deal with Birmingham City Council

Cllr Ward presented the report to consider the next steps with Birmingham City Council on the Devo-Deal Proposal approved by Committee in July 2023.

The CEO confirmed that the recommendation to commission external support would be for professional and technical expertise not available within the Town Council Officer team.

Cllr Parkin asked about the status of the transfer of Vesey Garden from Birmingham City Council (BCC) to the Town Council. The CEO confirmed that the transfer had been agreed by BCC and the legal transfer was progressing and was currently with the Lord Bishop of Birmingham's solicitors.

Resolved to:

a) note the report;

b) approve the preferred option of the Devo-deal Working Group set out in section five of the report as the starting point for further discussion with Birmingham City Council.

c) approve that the CEO is delegated to commission appropriate external support to provide the necessary capacity and expertise to support progressing this work.

23 Update from the Human Resources Sub-Committee

Cllr Ward provided a verbal update that recruitment to the Head of Open Spaces & Environment and Head of Regeneration & Sustainability had been successful and both would be in post over the coming months. Interviews for the vacant post of Allotments & Green Spaces Officer had been carried out this week and a preferred candidate identified.

Sub-Committee had recommended establishment of an additional Project Manager Events and Communications post, this recommendation would be considered by Committee under agenda item 34.

24 Minutes from the Town Centre Regeneration Partnership

Resolved to note the minutes from the Town Centre Regeneration Partnership meeting held on 6th Sept 2024.

27 Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

The CEO confirmed that CIL funds need to be allocated and spent within five years of receipt from Birmingham City Council.
Resolved to note the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds held by the Town Council.

28 External Audit Report 2023/24

Members thanked the CEO and Finance Manager for their support in maintaining a clear audit report for the year.

Resolved to note that external audit report for 2023/24 financial year.

29 Policy Documents

The CEO informed Committee that the proposed changes were to the level of delegation. These changes would give better agility in decision making, enabling some decisions to be made more quickly by Committees in the meeting cycle.

Cllr Pears suggested a wording change in Financial Regulations 1.7 to make clear the grants referred to did not include Community Grants. The wording now reads:

1.7. In addition, the council shall:

- determine and regularly review the bank mandate for all council bank accounts;

• authorise any non-community grant or single commitment in excess of £50,000.

Resolved to recommend the amended Financial Regulations and Scheme of Delegation to Full Council for approval.

30 Risk Register

Resolved to note the Risk Register.

31 Internal Audit Appointment for 2024/25

Resolved to approve appointing Auditing Solutions Ltd as the Internal Auditor for Financial year 2024/25.

32 Bank Reconciliations

Resolved to note the bank reconciliations.

33 Date of the Next Meeting

Resolved to approve rescheduling the next scheduled meeting from Tuesday 15th October 2024 to 19th November 2024.

8:00pm a short comfort break was taken.

8:04pm the meeting resumed.

34 Exclusion of the Press and Public

a) Review of Consultants
Resolved to approve that Andrew Tucker, PJA, Clarity NS, Trevor Askew, ASkills and Changepoint Solutions continue to provide consultancy services to the Town Council, as needed, for the next 12 months.

b) Staff Structure
Resolved to approve the creation of an additional full-time permanent post of Project Manager – Events & Communications.

c) Potential Opportunities for the Acquisition of Assets
Committee discussed the potential approach to Sutton Coldfield assets that may be listed as surplus by Birmingham City Council and listed for disposal. Each asset will be considered on a case by case basis as they are declared surplus.

The meeting ended at 8:12pm.

Signed as a true record