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Working Plymouth

Wednesday 6 November 2013

PRESENT:

Councillor Murphy, in the Chair.

Councillor Darcy, Vice Chair

Councillors Bowie (substitute for Councillor Haydon), Michael Leaves, Mrs Nelder, Nicholson, Dr. Salter, Singh, John Smith and Wheeler.

Apologies for absence: Councillors Haydon and Morris.

Also in attendance: David Draffan (Assistant Director for Economic Development), The Leader (Councillor Tudor Evans), Chris Grace (Head of Economy, Enterprise and Employment), Phil Heseltine (Head of Integrated Transport), Patrick Knight (Economy and Employment Manager), Paul Palmer (Principal Surveyor), Stuart Palmer (Assistant Director for Homes and Communities), Gill Peele (Lead Officer), Amanda Ratsey (Enterprise and Inward Investment Manager), Helen Rickman (Democratic Support Officer), Clive Turner (Chief Executive of Plymouth Community Homes) and James Watt (Head of Land and Property).

The meeting started at 3.00 pm and finished at 5.30 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the committee will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

38. **APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR**

The Chair informed the panel that a new Vice Chair was to be appointed due to Councillor Ball's resignation from the Working Plymouth panel.

Agreed that Councillor Darcy is Vice Chair for the Working Plymouth panel.

39. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest in accordance with the code of conduct.

40. **MINUTES**

Agreed that the minutes of 25 September 2013 were approved as an accurate record.

Agreed that the Lead Officer would provide members with clarification regarding the contradiction in information provided to the panel between the fact that 'the 18-24 age-group was the only age-group increasing' yet 'Plymouth's population was increasing due to an ageing population'.

41. **CHAIR'S URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of Chair's Urgent Business.

42. **PLYMOUTH COMMUNITY HOMES**

Clive Turner, the Chief Executive of Plymouth Community Homes (PCH) and Stuart Palmer, Assistant Director for Homes and Communities, provided the committee with an update on current progress.

Members were informed that –

- (a) PCH was four years old this year; in 2009 PCH took on 14,000 homes as a result of the housing stock transfer from Plymouth City Council;
- (b) PCH was focused on improving service delivery and had delivered 117 of the 125 promises made to residents;
- (c) new homes were being built in North Prospect however existing homes had replacement kitchens, bathrooms, windows, doors and central heating installed;
- (d) PCH had received a significant amount of gap funding amounting to £130million; there was a promise that every home would be decent by March 2015;
- (e) the first phase of the North Prospect housing transformation had been completed as 128 homes had been demolished and 170 homes had been rebuilt;
- (f) PCH head office was relocating to Crownhill; refurbishments were currently taking place;
- (g) staff members had increased in number from 500 to 650 since the stock transfer;
- (h) customer satisfaction had increased from 78% to 88% based on a recent survey; PCH was very pleased with the improvements made to homes in Plymouth;
- (i) as part of the Decent Homes Programme 300 jobs were made available; PCH had also signed a deal with British Gas to help reduce fuel bills;
- (j) 50% of 2012/2013 expenditure was spent on local businesses to try and ensure that a lot of what PCH procured went into the Plymouth economy;
- (k) 57% of PCH residents were in receipt of some sort of benefit;
- (l) PCH had an ambitious agenda for the next five years in order to continue to be a leading housing provider;

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (m) the development at North Prospect was part of an accelerated housing delivery programme; there was an aim for several of the 730 planned new homes to have been built within five years;
- (n) PCH rent was the third lowest in the country and was cheaper than any other housing association in Plymouth; rents had been increased by slightly more than inflation however were still considered low as it was significantly below market rent figures;
- (o) the Chief Executive of PCH would provide Members with information relating to refurbishment being undertaken at ward level as well as building plans;
- (p) the increase in rent had not resulted in an increase in rent arrears; this was currently set at 2.9% however was improving;
- (q) the Chief Executive of PCH would provide Members with the specific number of newbuild properties available at North Prospect to buy and those to rent; once complete the housing stock in this area would be 1100 properties;
- (r) all properties available were currently rented; Barratt Homes had sold every property built; it was considered there was a change in the perception of the area due to the significant levels of regeneration;
- (s) PCH was supporting tenants who wanted to downsize their property however there were currently not enough smaller properties to accommodate everyone; this was doubly difficult if residents wished to remain in a specific area;
- (t) PCH paid the living wage to staff members from 1 April 2013;
- (u) PCH was in the top 50% of rent arrears with regards to comparable figures throughout the country of housing providers; this was considered positive;
- (v) Members would be provided with information regarding the cost of maintaining communal gardens and if it was possible for tenants to opt out of this service;
- (w) there was anecdotal evidence, since the implementation of the spare bedroom subsidy, that tenants with spare rooms were sub-letting however this was not considered to be a big problem as the majority of tenants had tried to downsize their property; PCH was providing support to tenants to help them find alternative accommodation if required and discussing finance issues.

Members praised Clive Turner and his team for their hard work and improvements made to Plymouth's housing stock.

The Chair thanked Clive Turner, the Chief Executive of Plymouth Community Homes, and Stuart Palmer, Assistant Director for Homes and Communities, for their attendance at the meeting.

Agreed that –

- (1) Members would be provided with information relating to refurbishment work being undertaken by Plymouth Community Homes at ward level as well as building plans;
- (2) Members would be provided with the specific number of newbuild properties available at North Prospect to buy and those to rent;
- (3) Members would be provided with information regarding the cost of maintaining communal gardens and if it was possible for tenants to opt out of this service;

43. **STRATEGIC PROPERTY REVIEW**

James Watt, Head of Land and Property, and Paul Palmer, Principal Surveyor, provided the Committee with an update on the Strategic Property Review.

Members were informed that –

- (a) in May 2012 a strategic property review was undertaken in order to ascertain how efficiently the Council was using its land and buildings;
- (b) an external review was undertaken by Jones Lang LaSalle; this was funded by the Council's successful bid to join the Local Government Association Capital & Assets Pathfinder Programme 2012/13;
- (c) the review confirmed the Council's current management of its property demonstrated a significant number of strengths;
- (d) the Langage Business Park in Plympton was due to commence in 2014; this would result in the construction of 30,000sq.ft. of industrial space supporting approximately 82 jobs;
- (e) the lease arrangements for the Theatre Royal had been restructured enabling a £7million regeneration scheme;
- (f) terms had been agreed on 10 former schools sites and community centre site disposals in order to provide housing; approximately 544 new homes would be created with 49% specified as affordable;
- (g) the Council provided many of its services through the corporate estate generating a valuable income stream of over £6million per year; the commercial estate occupancy level was at 97% supporting over 300 businesses and approximately 2,670 jobs;

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (h) as one of Plymouth's objectives was to become a low carbon area there were several sites identified for further investigation for renewable energy generation; these sites were 'challenged' sites from a redevelopment perspective however there was potential for interim development use for ground-mounted solar energy installations. Towards the south of the Langage site there was nine acres of buffer zone with visibility of the A38. Officers were in the process of establishing the viability of solar array sites at all three sites in Langage, St Budeaux and Ernesettle;
- (i) the Plymouth Dome had an agreement to the lease amended in 2013 to permit the opening of the upper floor as Gary Rhodes restaurant; the lease covered the entire building and would be developed in several stages;
- (j) land needed to be safeguarded for commercial development as well as for providing more homes;
- (k) building work had not yet commenced on the former school sites and community centre site disposals however it was expected that this would start within 6 – 18 months;
- (l) the Council had adopted the Corporate Landlord Model to ensure that corporate parameters were adopted to control operational asset decisions; rents were now going through the Corporate Centre to maintain more control;
- (m) officers had to maintain a balance between driving capital receipts and maintaining rental income;
- (n) officers agreed that Colin Campbell Court and Bretonside Bus Station were in need of redevelopment and regeneration however they were in active discussions with the private sector to enable the viability of this;
- (o) there were expected to be 544 new homes built across the nine former school and community centre sites;
- (p) the proposed housing developments for the former school and community centre sites were subject to planning approval;
- (q) officers would add their names to future reports to enable Members to contact them direct with any queries;

The Chair thanked James Watt and Paul Palmer for their attendance at the meeting.

Agreed that –

- (l) officers would include their name to future reports to enable Members to contact them direct with any queries;

- (2) the Working Plymouth Scrutiny panel recommend to the Cooperative Scrutiny Board that the Strategic Property Review is included on the panel's work programme for 2014/15.

44. **CONNECTIVITY/ SW PENINSULAR PLAN**

Phil Heseltine, Head of Integrated Transport, and Amanda Ratsey, Enterprise and Inward Investment Manager, provided the Committee with an update on Connectivity/ SW Peninsular Plan.

The panel was informed that –

- (a) the report was produced jointly by Transport and Economic Development officers in order to explain the current situation both in terms of physical and digital connectivity;
- (b) flooding had a major impact on connectivity in the last six weeks of 2012; Great Western announced that 2000 train journeys had been delayed or cancelled and the M5 was also affected by flooding therefore the South West was cut off;
- (c) Plymouth relied on the M5, A38 and a single rail connection; the lack of resilience to the transport network hit business confidence during the flooding in 2012;
- (d) it was projected that incidents of flooding would happen more frequently in the period up to 2050 and beyond;
- (e) for every 10 minutes of travel time from London it was estimated that productivity dropped by 6%;
- (f) in the South West there was far less spent per population on transport than in comparison to other parts of the country;
- (g) Plymouth was not connected to a motorway within 10 miles or airport within 25 miles and was perceived as peripheral to the rest of the UK;
- (h) two years ago the previous Cabinet Member for Transport set up the Plymouth Rail Franchising Task Force to campaign for improvements to the rail network, this was now a Peninsular Rail Task Force representing the aims and aspirations of the five South West Peninsular Local Transport Authorities;
- (i) Plymouth had great existing digital connectivity enabling significant strategic opportunities for the city; Plymouth was among the ten best locations in the UK for superfast broadband as 95% of the city had access;

- (j) it was important that those without a digital connection or the skills to access the internet were not neglected; officers were trying to encourage people to be more digitally engaged;
- (k) each contact and transaction with government switched online could generate savings between £3.30 and £12;
- (l) the Council was developing a three year £330,000 project, the largest of its kind in the UK, to encourage citizens to access the internet and create positive impacts in skills and employability;

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (l) the infrastructure for digital connectivity was put in place by Virgin Media; BT had the current contract and were required to meet superfast broadband requirements;
- (m) there was a risk that a section of the community would be neglected as they were unable to connect to the internet however officers were working to reach out and provide advice and support;
- (n) cost was an issue with digital connectivity and the exclusion of some residents however it was highlighted that the internet could be accessed free of charge at local libraries;
- (o) the outreach project would engage with voluntary community organisations as well as Citizens Advice, libraries, Age Concern and the Home and Communities Agency to encourage people to access the internet;
- (p) the Plymouth Rail Franchising Task Force had met on two occasions; Network Rail and the Environment Agency attended the meetings to discuss changes needed;
- (q) officers were undertaking work to establish the best solution to connect Plymouth with the air network;
- (r) Government supported routes were used for connecting the highlands and the islands in Scotland;
- (s) the business community had already adapted their business needs before the closure of the airport therefore the closure did not affect Plymouth in economic terms.

The Chair thanked Phil Heseltine and Amanda Ratsey for their attendance at the meeting.

Agreed that –

- (l) the Working Plymouth panel recommend to the Cooperative Scrutiny Board that the Transformation Change Programme suitably recognises the difficulties

that hard to reach groups have with digital connectivity in Plymouth;

- (2) an invitation would be extended to a representative of BT Group PLC to attend a future meeting to discuss digital connectivity in Plymouth.

(Councillor Dr Salter left the meeting at end of this item.)

45. **PLAN FOR JOBS**

David Draffan, Assistant Director for Economic Development, Patrick Knight, Economy and Employment Manager, Chris Grace, Head of Economy, Enterprise and Employment and The Leader, Councillor Tudor Evans, provided the panel with an update on the Plan for Jobs.

Members were informed that –

- (a) the Plan for Jobs was a great example of working in partnership in a co-operative manner as it aimed to bring together 19 different projects led by a variety of partners and the Council;
- (b) due to a recommendation at a previous scrutiny meeting the monitoring process had been further improved resulting in more meetings and compilation of update reports;
- (c) the diagrams contained within the report highlighted the projected trend for jobs created; it was confirmed that the projects were always expected to achieve results at a different pace however the plan was on target and in some areas had exceeding expectations;
- (d) Plymouth was doing favourably in terms of job creation compared to other local authorities; unemployment was at its lowest level for five years with 2.9% unemployed;
- (e) 14 of the 19 projects had created jobs; it was expected that the other projects would deliver jobs shortly;
- (f) significant investment was happening in the city by businesses such as the Money Group and God TV locating to Plymouth;
- (g) Princess Yachts had increased numbers of staff from 1800 to 2200 enabling productivity;
- (h) local artists were already showing an interest in working in Plymouth's Ocean Studios;
- (i) Plymouth had won Social Enterprise City Status; one of only two cities to have achieved this status;

- (j) five planning applications encouraging accelerated housing developments had been granted in Plymouth;
- (k) officers were still awaiting the result for the City Deal bid however a decision was expected as part of the autumn statement. A team of representatives from the Council, Plymouth University, Princess Yachts and other organisations submitted Plymouth's case and received complimentary feedback;

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (l) nationally 26% of 18-24 year olds were long-term unemployed; the figure for Plymouth was 31%;
- (m) at the celebration event for the first anniversary for the 1000 club several young people were in attendance; by the end of the event three of the four young people had been offered employment;
- (n) the City Deal would have contained within its work programme an element to encourage people to get into work and look after them once they achieved a job;
- (o) the City Deal pitch contained three strands including 'ambition' and coaching to help individuals get a good job, 'progression' to match skills with opportunity and 'meeting employers' to help individuals with employment;
- (p) officers from the Enterprise and Inward Investment Team were maintaining regular dialogue with local businesses to ensure they were engaged with the overall plan for jobs in Plymouth; business engagement was vital to the success of this project;
- (q) aspirations for the next 12 months included a greater emphasis on encouraging day visitors to Plymouth to become overnight visitors to help the local economy, and to continue reaching out to businesses to help them and Plymouth grow;
- (r) the Economic Development Strategy set out a clear joined-up framework for the transformation of Plymouth's economy;
- (s) Plymouth was considered to be a top performer at delivering job outcomes for apprentices with 97% receiving a permanent job outcome;
- (t) if Plymouth achieved the City Deal it would enable Plymouth to secure the future for local businesses and encourage them to expand.

The Chair thanked officers and the Leader for their attendance at the meeting and congratulated them on their achievements.

46. **TRACKING RESOLUTIONS AND UPDATE FROM THE COOPERATIVE SCRUTINY BOARD**

Members noted the tracking resolutions document however requested more information regarding the delay in being provided with the Housing Market Needs Assessment as requested at the 25 September 2013 Working Plymouth meeting.

The Chair also provided Members with an update from the Cooperative Scrutiny Board regarding the request, from 25 September 2013 Working Plymouth meeting, to add the North Plymouth Area Action Plan Inspector's Report to the work programme. Members were advised that the Board refused to grant their recommendation due to the complexities involved with the report however the Assistant Director for Planning Services offered to meet the panel in a different forum; this invite was not accepted.

Agreed that –

- (1) the Lead Officer would confirm why the Strategic Housing Market Needs Assessment would not be available until January/ February 2014.

47. **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee noted the work programme for 2013/14 and were advised that the next meeting was scheduled for Wednesday 5 March 2014.

The Leader Officer informed Members that two reviews were currently taking place, namely the Park and Ride Bus Service Review and the Controlled Parking Zones: On Street Parking Review. It was confirmed that the Cooperative Scrutiny Board would have an overarching lead on the Plymouth Plan Review however other scrutiny panels would scrutinise specific areas of the plan between now and next July 2014.

48. **EXEMPT BUSINESS**

There were no items of exempt business.