

Report to Council

Date of meeting: 29 July 2021

Chairman: Councillor M Sartin

Democratic Services Officer: V Messenger (01992 564243)



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the Overview and Scrutiny progress report for June to July 2021 be noted.**

Report:

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 3 June 2021

1. The Leader presented an overview of the Council's corporate priorities for 2021/22 at the Committee's first meeting in the new municipal year and said that it was appropriate to physically be in the refurbished Civic Offices. A 'new era' with improved technology was rolled out last year to enable virtual meetings via Zoom to transact Council business. Renewal was the theme of the Leader's presentation. The way we work would change and lead to other things changing. Businesses would not be seeking to return to the City but would move local, leading to partnership arrangements. Renewal for the environment, the expanding Council housebuilding programme and positivity on its income / assets and town centre regeneration projects were also outlined.
2. The Council's new draft policy on its approach to trees causing structural damage to assets was pre-scrutinised in detail by members and their suggestions were included in the final draft which went before Cabinet for a decision on 21 June 2021.
3. The Committee ratified the memberships for 2021/22 of the three select committees, which each comprise 11 members, and appointed the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of Stronger Council, Stronger Communities and Stronger Place.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 8 June

4. This extra meeting was organised to pre-scrutinise the sale of the Pyrles Lane site to Qualis, Qualis' second quarter monitoring report and four town centre regeneration reports.
5. The redevelopment proposal for the Pyrles Lane site in Loughton was outlined by S Rutter, Qualis Commercial Development Director. This is a Local Plan site and is at the pre-application stage with the Local Planning Authority. Regarding Qualis' timescales, the evaluation stage will be ready by the beginning of July 2021 followed by a formal offer, and a consultation will be organised for mid to the end of September 2021. Members raised many comments and observations, as the access and site conditions made this development more challenging to progress. Qualis had yet to put forward a detailed acquisition proposal, but it was hoped the Cabinet considered the Committee's pre-scrutiny comments at the meeting on 21 June.
6. Although progress on the Qualis quarterly monitoring reports is usually under the remit of Stronger Council Select Committee. As its next meeting was in July, it came before the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to scrutinise ahead of Cabinet on 21 June. This second quarter monitoring report for the Qualis trading year 2020/21, covered the period from 1 February to 31 March 2021 and reflected a shortened quarter due to the change in the Qualis year end. Andrew Small, Strategic Director and 151 Officer, had advised that generally the promise was good as there were few ambers highlighted in the appendix accompanying the report.

7. Portfolio Holder Councillor J Philip introduced the Town Centre Regeneration reports for Loughton Broadway, Loughton High Road, Buckhurst Hill and Epping high streets. The District has more than one key town centre and they are all very different. The consultant, Mr P Messenger, who is now the Council's Town Centre Project Manager, had looked at these as retail centres throughout the lockdowns. The Council is at the beginning of the process on how to tackle long term strategy and is one stakeholder in the partnerships. The high streets have their own characters and attractions. The reports provided a starting point of a localist approach. The Committee's pre-scrutiny highlighted many issues and concerns. Councillor J Philip encouraged councillors to make their comments known to himself or J Houston, Partnerships and Economic Development Specialist, before Cabinet considered these on 21 June 2021.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 1 July

8. The Committee pre-scrutinised the Qualis Four-Year Business Plan 2021/22 to 2024/25, which was introduced by Strategic Director A Small, prior to Cabinet's decision on 12 July. It is a requirement of the Shareholder agreement that each year Qualis produces and presents to the Council a one year and a four-year Business Plan for the Council to consider and sign-off. Since the newly appointed Board of Qualis had needed time to consider the medium, and longer term, strategy only a single year business plan had been presented to Cabinet in December 2020. Details of future service transfers and a template for such business case transfers features in the business plan. Councillor J Philip, Portfolio Holder (Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development), outlined that Qualis has been set-up by the Council to be successful and to do the business it wants Qualis to do, although it is a separate development and property management company. He encouraged members to be positive about Qualis and look at what Qualis was expecting to undertake. He fully expects the one year and four-year business plan to be updated, as there may be changes along the way.

9. A member of the public submitted two questions in relation to Qualis finance to the Chairman in advance of the meeting but as Qualis needed more time to answer the second question, this will be recorded as a post-meeting update in the minutes.

10. The Committee agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny 2020/21 Annual Report of the work undertaken during the past municipal year be submitted to Council for approval on 29 July 2021.

11. Other business considered by the Committee included the Executive's current programme of Key Decisions of 1 July 2021. Under the Leader's Portfolio, Councillor C Whitbread will soon be organising visits of the refurbished Civic Offices for members, which will be followed by the official opening. A report on commercial uptake of the Civic Offices will also be forthcoming.

12. The work programmes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were reviewed by the Democratic and Electoral Services Team Manager, G Woodhall, including the select committees' work programmes.