

Report to Council

Date of meeting: 17 December 2020

Chairman: Councillor M Sartin

Democratic Services Officer: V Messenger (01992 564265)



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1) That the Overview and Scrutiny progress report for November 2020 be noted.

Report:

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 19 November 2020

1. At the meeting on 19 November 2020, the Committee undertook external scrutiny of UK Innovation Corridor. Dr John McGill, the Director, and Dr Ann Limb, the Independent Business Chairman, outlined the Innovation Corridor's geographical area, which extended from north east London to Cambridge and Peterborough, and from Stevenage eastwards to beyond Stansted Airport. The local authorities that formed the Innovation Core included Epping Forest (a founder member), Broxbourne, East Hertfordshire, Harlow and Uttlesford district councils. The Corridor was essentially funded by annual contributions from local authorities.

2. While its former name the London – Stansted – Cambridge Consortium had identified its geographical location, the UK Innovation Corridor evidenced the importance of 'innovation' to match the scale of its ambitions, and no one else had claimed the name. The Committee heard the Innovation Corridor had become the UK's most productive region and was home to 2.1 million jobs. A fifth of those people were employed in the 'knowledge economy' – ICT, life sciences, advanced manufacturing and engineering, transport and logistics. The main sectors for Epping Forest were construction, business services, public admin and health, but lower employment in the information, financial services, communications and R&D sectors.

3. How did the Innovation Corridor support the Council? It was a voice to Advocate, Broker and Co-ordinate – an ABC. It was a non-statutory, like-minded group and coalition of the willing that gave it a bigger voice to lobby national and London government and private investors for districts' ambitions, such as Harlow and Gilston and the Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ). It helped to promote investment opportunities, such as those for the North Weald Airfield Masterplan.

4. Colleges within the Innovation Corridor were now collaborating more effectively as they had signed the Regional Skills Concordat to get investments into colleges and therefore, would have the skills going forward to retrain older workforce and provide the younger workforce with the skills it needed. The Innovation Corridor had recognised that economic growth could widen social inequality and was trying to address this sizeable issue.

5. The Innovation Corridor organised an annual conference and visited trade shows, and Manchester Airports Group was one of its sponsors. In relation to putting carbon neutrality and environmental sustainability on its agenda, quite a few of its local authority members had declared climate emergencies, so it was active in promoting journeys by rail, especially West Anglia mainline. How much impact Covid-19 would have on changing working practices and on homeworking, only time would tell, but its agenda was shaped by its members.

6. The call-in by Councillors CC Pond, H Kauffman, S Murray, C Roberts and D Roberts over the release of restrictive covenants to Epping Forest College (now New City College) was ultimately referred back to Cabinet on 3 December 2020 for further discussion, to safeguard the land and the proposed new wellness centre for the community; and to resolve the future of the remaining open space and its protection for the community in perpetuity.

7. The Committee noted the report that detailed the new internal governance to manage and deliver the programme of works aligned to the Stronger council ambitions. It noted the delays on the three exceptions on the telecare offering project, ICT restructure and Local Plan. The Committee agreed that it would only receive summaries and exceptions in future, with more detailed reports going to Stronger Council. It also reviewed the performance of KPIs for quarters 1 and 2.

8. The Committee received a short progress report on the Accommodation programme to October 2020 and a Member workshop on 'New Ways of Working' had recently taken place.

9. The Committee learnt about the launch of a new Employee Assistance programme called Perkbox, which enabled employees to access online counselling, financial and legal support, and discounts from major retailers. The People Strategy report detailed a wellbeing platform that gave employees online access to mental and physical wellness programmes and Perkbox Medical that provided 24/7 online access to GPs. Extra platforms were being added and the Committee asked to see a further report on the uptake of Perkbox by the staff. Four new apprentices had been appointed to Housing and the Council had proposed an additional apprenticeship in its Fleet Operations Team.

10. The Committee noted the quarter 2 Budget Monitoring Report 2020/21 that was normally reviewed by Stronger Council, as its next meeting was not until January 2021. The report set out the 2020/21 General Fund revenue and capital positions, as at 30 September 2020, and provided updates on the capital position for the Housing Revenue Account. Although Covid-19 had made a large impact on the Council, on a positive note, overall funding from the Government was approaching £4 million.

11. The Committee discussed the report on Local High Streets and agreed to revisit the reconvening of the Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel at the Committee's next meeting in February 2021, provided the Covid-19 recovery phase had progressed sufficiently. The Task and Finish Panel had only held one meeting in February 2020 before the first Covid-19 lockdown.

12. As a result of the Chairman of the Stronger Place Select Committee, Councillor R Bassett, being appointed to the Qualis Board, the Committee selected Councillor S Heather, the current Vice-Chairman as the new Chairman, with Councillor R Morgan as the Vice-Chairman.

13. Other business considered by the Committee included the Executive's current programme of Key Decisions, as well as the work programmes of the Overview and Scrutiny and select committees.