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ECONOMY REGENERATION & HOUSING COMMITTEE

Monday, 17 July 2023

Present: Councillor T Jones (Chair)

Councillors	GJ Davies	J Bird
	R Pitt	E Lamb
	M Skillicorn	E Tomeny
	G Wood	Raymond
	I Lewis (for A Hodson)	L Rennie (For A Gardner)

13 **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

The Chair opened the meeting and reminded everyone that the meeting was being webcast and a copy would be retained on the Council's website for two years.

14 **APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillor Andrew Hodson who was substituted by Councillor Ian Lewis. Apologies were also received from Councillor Andrew Gardner who was substituted by Councillor Lesley Rennie.

15 **MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any item on the agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Councillor Helen Raymond declared a personal, non prejudicial, interest regarding item 6: Proposal to Consult on Selective Licensing Scheme, as the landlord to three properties in the borough. She noted that none of her properties fell within the areas listed in the report and she would remain in the chamber during the debate and voting on this item.

16 **MINUTES**

Members noted that a request was made at the previous meeting for a project delivery plan to be included in the Work Programme. While the request was reflected in the minutes, it had not been added to the work programme, nor had a report come to committee.

The Chair noted that this would be dealt with during Item 11: Work Programme.

Resolved – that the minutes of the meeting held on 20 June 2023 be approved as a correct record.

17 PUBLIC AND MEMBER QUESTIONS

17.1 Public Questions

The Chair indicated that 3 public questions had been received from 2 members of the public.

Catherine Evans asked a question about the risk of flooding to residents of the Wirral and the assurances the Council could offer regarding their protections.

In response the Chair noted that a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment was published as part of the evidence base for the new Local Plan. Level 2 Flood Risk assessments were produced for areas identified as more at risk. These documents were produced in consultation with the Environment Agency and Lead Local Flood Authority. He noted the Environment Agency was the statutory consultee regarding flood risk from rivers and the sea.

Mr Alan Featherstone asked two questions on behalf of the Birkenhead Market Tenants Association (BMTA). The first question noted that market representatives had met with the Market Manager and they now wished to know if Members would agree to meet with the BMTA to discuss their proposals for a Dutch auction rental proposal.

The Chair noted that the Market Manager met with the BMTA on 12th July 2023 when the proposals were put forward and a number of actions were discussed. He stated that the council must first consider the demand/viability of any proposal of this nature before considering it as a potential policy alongside the future market strategy. He confirmed that officers would review the risks associated with this proposal against the benefits including the financial implications.

Mr Featherstone asked a supplemental question regarding whether councillors would be interested in meeting to discuss their proposals as he felt the Council were losing money by not implementing them.

The Chair responded that the proposals should be discussed with officers first and that Members would consider meeting with the BMTA after this.

Mr Featherstone's second question related to a stated 40% increase in vacant market rents in November 2021 and the effect this has had on the number of

occupied stalls. He asked if this vacant rent increase could be cancelled immediately.

The Chair responded that the Council had benchmarked the rental values against similar markets in the North West and Birkenhead remained one of the most affordable when comparing rents per square foot. In addition, the Council had taken the difficult decision to maintain its current rental values over recent years with significant increases in inflation therefore giving a real value decrease in traders rents when compared to the increasing costs. The market industry has faced significant and wide-ranging pressures in the last decade which was a factor in its decision in acquiring Birkenhead Market and securing its long-term future. He noted that the Council would continue to support Birkenhead Market wherever practically possible.

Mr Featherstone asked a supplemental question seeking clarification on the answer received to his 2nd submitted question. He stated he had submitted evidence that there had been a 40% increase in vacant rents in 2021 and requested an enquiry into why this was being denied.

The Chair responded that he could not give a verbal answer and that a written response would be provided within 10 working days.

17.2 Statements and Petitions

The Chair informed the committee that no statements or petitions had been received.

17.3 Questions by Members

The Chair informed the committee that no questions had been received from Members.

18 PROPOSAL TO CONSULT ON SELECTIVE LICENSING SCHEME

The Strategic Housing Services Senior Manager introduced the report of the Director of Regeneration and Place which set out a proposal to consult on a Selective Licensing Scheme in Wirral through re-designating two Selective Licensing areas that have been in place since 2019 and are due to end on 31st March 2024 and extending the scheme to include two further new areas, both in East Wirral based on a robust evidence base for selection.

Councillors requested further information on the conditions found in rental properties that would not meet the Selective Licensing conditions, what the scope might be for inclusion of further areas in the scheme, how close Wirral was to requiring a borough wide approach to Selective Licensing and whether a banning order applied borough-wide to a landlord that had significantly breached licensing conditions in one of the Selective Licensing areas.

Members also raised concerns over an increase in older tenants and the risks to them regarding being able to afford rent. Officers noted that some very poor conditions in tenanted properties had been discovered and that support was available to those that needed it. Further areas for inclusion could be looked at in future but currently resources dictated how many areas could be managed at one time. It was noted that finances and credibility over the case presented to central government were factors in how areas were chosen for the Selective Licensing Scheme.

It was confirmed that a banning order was enforceable borough wide and that information on banned landlords was publicly available. Officers noted that there was currently no published data on older tenants but that they received feedback from the Healthy Homes team and referrals were made to any tenants that needed support to remain homed.

Resolved - That

- 1. The draft proposal for Selective Licensing be approved in the following four areas from 1st April 2024 until 31st March 2029:**
 - **Birkenhead West;**
 - **Seacombe St Paul's;**
 - **Bidston and St James West; and**
 - **Egremont North;**
- 2. The Business Case set out in Appendix One to the report be approved as the basis for the rationale for wider consultation on Selective Licensing;**
- 3. The consultation plan as set out in Appendix Three of the Business Case be approved; and**
- 4. The Director of Regeneration and Place be authorised to undertake any minor amendments to the Business Case should further evidence be made available which should be included in the consultation.**

19 HIND STREET REGENERATION - DELIVERY

The Head of Regeneration Delivery introduced the report of the Director of Regeneration and Place which sought approval for a capital request for up to £2.255 million for Hind Street Urban Village. The report noted that these costs were crucial for the Council to reach a point by which it could enter a grant funding agreement with Homes England and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. No further capital funding was anticipated to be required for the delivery of Phases A and B of the development of the Hind Street Urban Village. A further capital request would be made to support land assembly

costs and a two form primary school in 2025. £1.439 million of capital funding was expected to be recovered in the current financial year.

Resolved – That the Policy and Resources Committee be recommended to allocate capital funding of £2.255 million to be utilised for the Hind Street Urban Village scheme.

20 **2023/24 BUDGET MONITORING FOR QUARTER ONE (THE PERIOD TO 30 JUNE 2023)**

The Director of Regeneration and Place introduced his report which set out the financial monitoring information for the Economy Regeneration & Housing Committee as at Quarter One (30 June) of 2023/24. The report provided Members with an overview of budget performance, including progress on the delivery of the 2023/24 saving programme and a summary of reserves and balances, to enable the Committee to take ownership of the budgets and provide robust challenge and scrutiny to Officers on the performance of those budgets.

Members asked for further information on the Office Quarter Building Fit costs of an additional £4 million, the likely start of demolition works at the House of Fraser site in Birkenhead and information on a previous request for information regarding the RIBA Stage 3 draft report for Birkenhead Market. The Director of Regeneration and Place noted that the building fit costs were not an unknown additional cost but had not previously been reported to the committee, the building had been received by the Council and now needed to be refurbished to its requirements. He noted that while he could not give a specific date, the demolition of the House of Fraser building was due to start imminently. He offered to return to Members with the information requested on the RIBA Stage 3 report on Birkenhead Market.

Resolved – That

- 1. The adverse revenue forecast of £0.5m as at Quarter 1 be noted;**
- 2. The progress on delivery of the 2023-24 savings programme at Quarter 1 be noted;**
- 3. The level of reserves at Quarter 1 be noted; and**
- 4. The revised capital programme of £39.462m for 2023-24 be noted.**

21 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Lead Principal Lawyer introduced the report of the Director for Law and Governance which reminded members that that the Economy Regeneration and Housing Committee was responsible for proposing and delivering an

annual committee work programme. This work programme was to align with the corporate priorities of the Council, in particular the delivery of the key decisions which were the remit of the Committee.

The Lead Principal Lawyer noted that due to the short period of less than a calendar month since the previous Economy, Regeneration and Housing Committee, there had not been enough time to produce a Regeneration Delivery Work Plan and the intention was that this would be brought to the Committee in September.

The Chair noted that some items were not listed on the Work Programme that Members had requested at the March 2023 meeting of the committee. Councillor Ian Lewis noted that these items included a report on The Future of Liscard, a report on Homelessness as a standing item, information on the value for money received from the Councils payments to the Wirral Chamber of Commerce and finally a report on the consultation methods used by the Council following items discussed at the March meeting of the Committee.

Resolved – That the work programme be noted.

22 **ADDENDUM TO MINUTES**

Supplementary Question and Response

Mr Alan Featherstone

Question: The vacant rents were still increased in November of 2021 and you have referred to occupied rents instead. We have supplied evidence that this rise took place. I'm asking for an official inquiry into the key decision that was made in 2021 when the rents for the vacant stalls increased by 40% as the asking price for new traders.

Answer: The matter that you have outlined in your question would not constitute a key decision. It appears that the question is perhaps conflating a particular type of market system with a potential Council decision.

The council continues to be committed in delivering the current market as effectively and successfully as practicably possible alongside the future market strategy. The Council will not discuss commercial arrangements which are by their nature confidential.