

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, 28 FEBRUARY 2024

Present: Councillor S Dannheimer, Chair

Councillors: E Williamson
K Harlow
R D MacRae
J M Owen
C M Tideswell
S Webb
E Winfield
S P Jeremiah
D D Pringle

55 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors H Crosby, W Mee, A G W A Stockwell and K Woodhead.

56 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

57 CONSIDERATION OF CALL - IN

Discussion took place on roles of Members who had called-in the item. Councillor H Land and would speak as a Member who had called-in the item rather than as a Member of the Committee.

Further discussion ensued regarding the need for the meeting to include information that could only be discussed with the exemption of public and press. It was agreed by Members that the meeting would continue in public session unless specific information had to be considered which would necessitate the exclusion of public and press.

Councillors D K Watts, S J Carr, B C Carr, H Land and A Kingdon spoke as Members who had requested the call-in.

Statements included concerns around the lack of consultation with residents, breaches of openness and transparency and that Cabinet did not have the information contained in the survey report until 30 minutes before the meeting. It was further stated that the costs had raised since the initial consideration of the item. Further concerns were raised over traffic congestion and the increasing risk of flooding in the area.

Councillors G Marshall and V Smith spoke as the relevant Portfolio Holders.

It was stated that one of the Council's main priorities was housebuilding. The application had been passed through Planning Committee and this represented good value for money. There had always been transparency and a significant number of submissions had been received through consultation for the Planning Committee application. Local residents were being supported through the provision of homes.

Mr Mohammed Habib, the Council's Head of Asset Management and Development, spoke as the relevant Officer responsible for the service area.

It was stated that the contractors had held their costs in relation to inflation which represented good value for money. It was further stated that the Cottage was not in use due to disrepair and although Homes England had been approached for financial assistance, the scheme was not reliant on the potential grant.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the statements and asked questions of the relevant Members. On hearing the evidence and opinions presented, the Committee concluded that when the report was considered by Cabinet, the late submission of the Surveyor's report did not allow for Members to be fully informed when reaching a decision on the item. It was stated that the potential cost of repair of Fishpond Cottage may not be viable when considering the details of the Surveyor's report. Furthermore, the uncertainty regarding the potential grant from Homes England did not allow for Cabinet to be fully apprised of the financial outlay for the proposals leading to a lack of clarity in the report.

Further suggestions from the Committee included that there was extensive consultation during the original planning process, the scheme represented value for money as the payback period was 33-years rather than the industry standard of 40-years, flooding concerns were not based on local evidence and that the Cottage would fall into further disrepair should no action be taken.

Councillors G Marshall and V Smith, as the relevant Portfolio Holders, were invited to sum up.

The Committee considered the options following the conclusion of the debate. It was proposed by Councillor R D MacRae and seconded by Councillor E Williamson that the matter be referred to full Council for its views. On being put to the meeting, the proposal was defeated.

Following the vote, it was proposed by Councillor S Dannheimer and seconded by Councillor R D MacRae that the Committee refer the decision back to the Cabinet for reconsideration

On being put to the meeting, the proposal was carried.

RESOLVED that the Committee refer the decision back to the decision-maker for reconsideration, setting out the nature of the Committee's concerns; the decision-maker must then re-consider the matter within a further 10 working days, taking into account the concerns of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, before making a final decision.