

Finance and Administration Committee – 8 June 2017

Agenda Item FA1266/17 – Strategic Business Plan

First Interim Report to Finance and Administration Committee

Introduction

The working group has held a further meeting (25 May) since its terms of reference were agreed at the Full Council Meeting on 30 March, CC1721/17. As part of the ToR it was agreed that the Working Party reports progress and issues to the Finance and Administration Committee from time to time. Councillor Gallagher agreed to present the report for the group (Cllrs Linhart and Cole are attending basic councillor training sessions).

Participants

The active members of the working group are:

- Cllr Nigel Cole (working group leader/chair)
- Cllr Andrew Gallagher
- Cllr Sarah Linhart
- Cllr Cliff Vassiliou
- Barry Grant (chair CCGRA)

Additionally both the Parish Clerk and the Administrative Assistant are invited to be in attendance and were present at the first meeting and copies of papers etc are sent to Cllr Mitchell (also at first meeting), Cllr Kaur and Wendy Jordan. Cllr Saxon, as new chair of Council, was recently asked if he wished to attend meetings but declined at this stage, until the working group is closer to a conclusion.

Work to date

A draft plan has been written that deliberately excludes any detailed discussion of elements of new objectives.

A number of topics were discussed at the latest meeting:

- a) Draft plan structure (tabled) – is it about right now?
- b) Whether speed of preparation has advantages over completeness of final report
- c) Proposed monitoring process (tabled) – go back frequently to “stakeholders” = residents, businesses and local organisations – proposed annual frequency – to check we are still on the right tracks.
- d) How do we best get engagement from all sectors of stakeholders and how best to generate ideas for Parish Council action to improve services provided to the community
- e) How to ensure that the finished plan is a meaningful addition to Council thinking
- f) How to ensure Parish Council and Councillors are kept informed and can contribute ideas.

After discussion the following are the broad conclusions reached, presented in the same order:

- a) A structure outline was presented to the group (attached to this report) and was agreed to be fit for purpose, subject to any comments, corrections and improvements offered by F&A/FCM.
- b) We concluded that the most appropriate process is get a draft plan out as quickly as possible and then refine it, rather than spending a long time trying to write a perfect plan.
 - a. Some improvements that may be made a later date could include considering parish services longitudinally such as
 - i. such as age group (babies/pre-school, children, youths, adults, senior citizens)
 - ii. by education groups (nursery, infant, primary, GCSE, 16-19, university, school age children, mature, U3A)
 - iii. pre work, in work, retired
 - b. Concern that it does not provide a method for analysis / identifying gaps or opportunities
 - c. Agreed that such an analysis could be used as a framework to challenge the current business as usual and stimulate thinking on gaps and opportunities (remembering that other levels of local and national government have the main responsibilities)
- c) Agree, beyond the diagrammatic representation, how to get regular confirmation from stakeholders that the plan remains fit for purpose.
 - a. Concern that consultation can be a lengthy process
 - b. How do we involve Byewaters (semi-detached from main body of CG, vehicular access from business park; pedestrian access via canal and Moor Lane) in parish activities?
 - c. Concern that consultation can be an excess use of scarce parish resources
- d) At what stage are we going to be generating ideas to improve the area?
 - a. Once we have described / summarised the council's current 'business as usual' activities.
 - b. Use the draft plan as a 'stalking horse' to attract informed criticism
 - c. Logically part of generating the future five year plan
 - d. Need to cost activities, both continuing activities and proposed new activities, so that the proposals can be realistic and achievable
 - e. Need to involve a wider audience in generating ideas for improvement / change
 - f. Possibly gather opinions at Revels and at Croxfest?
 - g. Possibly extend the next CGRA meeting to discuss issues and generate ideas (Barry Grant to gain agreement from CGRA and report back. Choice between early July or mid September.
 - h. At the first meeting of the group we discussed a number of options for reaching residents and other stakeholders, including Facebook and other social media including the Council website; surveys both paper and online; leaflet drops; articles in local paper (eg MyCroxley and Watford Observer). There is a sense (see above) that face to face contact is a better method.

- i. There is an implication that if the CGRA meeting is in September, the working party will be unlikely to meet the deadline of 6 months to complete its work (CC1721/17) and the report to F&A should highlight this consequence.
- e) Concern that Council initiatives generate documents that are used as shelf decoration – how do we ensure that planning becomes embedded in the Council's processes?
 - a. Many initiatives seem to take forever – for example Neighbourhood Plan has been a very long time in development
 - b. Proposals to take land ownership from TRDC – for example of the Green – have been moving very slowly for years
 - c. Need to identify priorities and then pursue them forcefully and diligently to a positive conclusion
- f) How should we ensure Parish Council and other councillors are kept informed of progress and contribute their ideas?
 - a. Suggest draft documents should go through F&A and then to full Council
 - b. Cllrs often attend meetings without having fully informed themselves (by reading and re-reading documents) so discussion often focusses on trivia, things people spot in the meeting and feel confident to raise
 - c. Suggest regular verbal/ written reports to F&A to keep chairmen and vice chairmen fully informed
 - d. Encourage Councillors to contribute ideas and initiatives.

We also had an off topic but probably relevant debate concerning communication and parish councils, generally.

How do we, the Councillors, communicate with residents – is it the most effective manner?

- a. Main route is through the office – staffed most working days / hours
 - b. Issues are communicated through officers / employees and dealt with by them
 - c. Therefore issues are filtered before being brought to Council attention
 - d. Only significant issues are brought to councillors' attention
 - e. Should we initiate councillor surgeries
- A. What makes successful Parish Councils?
 - a. Discussion of the relative contributions of councillors and officers
 - b. Need for good strategic leadership to generate esprit de corps
 - c. Some other local parishes raise significantly more through the precept (e.g. Chorleywood, approximately £72 per band D. What does this imply?
 - i. Does this reflect greater aspiration from the PC to deliver services to community?
 - ii. Or does this reflect perceived value of PC to residents?
 - iii. Or is this a reflection of comparative affordability of the precept to residents
 - iv. Or something else?

We wondered whether these last two topics are worth a more considered discussion by F&A or the full council.