

**NOTES** of the **STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT KEY AREA GROUP MEETING** held in the Council Chamber on **Wednesday 19 February 2020 at 19.00 hours.**

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**Present:** Roger Cartwright Chairman  
Andrew Barrett-Miles Vice Chairman  
Graham Allen\*  
Joseph Foster\*  
Kathleen Willis  
Robert Duggan

**Also Present:** Robert Eggleston  
Janice Henwood  
Ann Eves  
Peter Chapman  
Matthew Cornish  
Sylvia Neumann

*\*denotes non attendance*

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(19:00 hours)

#### 40. **OPEN FORUM**

There were three members of the public present.

Concern was expressed that no visible progress had been made with the Bridge the Gap project and that a further 3 businesses were closing.

It had been promised that the public would not be asked again to fund the Beehive but it appears that this was not the case and that a loan of £5million is now on the cards. It appeared that the cost to service the loan would be £180k pa and to subsidise the Beehive would be £120kpa which would not leave funding for anything else.

A second member commented that not much was changing in the town centre. Shops continued to close and very little was going on in town. Family businesses as well as large corporates are closing. The member was also concerned about what measures had been taken to ensure flooding did not occur in the new estates.

Cllr Eggleston responded. Shoezone had made a commercial decision to downsize. The retail market is undoubtedly in difficulty due to the changing nature of the High Street to include leisure and residences as well as retail.

He cited the example of INTU which is one of the largest shopping mall investors and which is seeking support from the market to shore up its balance sheet. 1 in 12 retailers are closing. It is a tough environment for all. The Town Council is not the Planning Authority. We have not given permission for flats above Iceland or the new flat block. These decisions will be taken in accordance with planning law.

The Town Council is focussing on immediate priorities not just the Beehive. £30k has been budgeted to generate footfall. We are currently engaged in scoping exercises to see whether an indoor and an outdoor market are viable. No decision has been taken in this regard. Nothing happens overnight and it is good that we have a programme.

Cllr Eves said she was saddened to hear about the closure of LJs. She felt they had not been treated well and were a legacy of the previous administration. The Repair Café had opened and was a success. The possibility of a street market was being looked at.

Cllr Barrett-Miles said that the New River initiative was the best deal at the time. He felt there would not be a rush for an indoor market and that it is not true that this is what the people want. It would not be a good investment. He felt that an outdoor market was worth pursuing.

He felt that there is enough funding in the budget to cover the Beehive and that it was wrong to use funding earmarked for the Beehive for other purposes. He was of the opinion that there is no need to ask the public for an increase to their precept. It was not true that the previous Council did not have a proper budget and regarded this as an unsubstantiated claim.

41. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Joseph Foster, Graham Allen

42. **SUBSTITUTES**

Robert Eggleston for Joseph Foster

43. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Nil

44. **NOTES OF THE STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT KAG MEETING**

The Notes of the meeting of the Strategic Development Key Area Group held on 14 January 2020, having been previously circulated, were **AGREED** and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

45. **CULTURAL QUARTER UPDATE**

Cllr Eggleston provided a summary of the project to date and where we were heading for. Planning permission had been granted and the application to register a CIO is with the Charity Commission. This will enable us to seek grants. The current cost of the project is around £6million.

We currently have a PWLB loan of £3million. The balance would come from

grants and section 106 funding. In addition there was an amount of £125k which had been provided by NRR to assist with the relocation of users of the Martlets. There was still an outstanding balance of £2,25million required.

He addressed the suggestion that the £3million could be used to build a facility by saying that after all the design fees had been stripped out, the demolition had taken place as well as other costs there would only be about half that amount left to build a facility. This would provide the equivalent of a village hall and fell far short of the aspirations of the project. He felt that this option should be discounted and that the Council should concentrate on the original concept of providing a community arts centre. He mentioned that the current capacity of 237 seats was arrived at by suggesting that every show would require a stage. This was not so and the architect had informed him that if a stage was not used between 283 and 321 people could be accommodated. 300 seemed to be the requirement for many performers to perform so this was good news.

When do we want this facility delivered? The fundraiser originally felt that it would take 3 years to raise the 2.5 million. Inflation is pushing the cost up. How quickly can we do it? Ideally it would be in place by 2023 giving a 2 year build project if we started in May 21. Delays will cause additional expense.

The Council faces a dilemma. The £3million loan can be financed from our current budget but it would be imprudent to draw down this amount and end up paying capital and interest with no delivery of the project. We could draw the £3million down and approach the PWLB for a further loan if the fundraiser was unsuccessful but this would raise some eyebrows about our planning and would need public support.

The third option is to recognise that we have a problem with our fundraising capability. We could let the current loan lapse and then apply for a larger loan. This would need public support. He suggested that a consultation period of 60 days be embarked upon to explain to the town what the project is about and that we are the only town in Mid Sussex without an arts facility. We should suggest to the town that this was unacceptable. What sort of legacy are we going to leave behind? The town deserved a state of the art facility to support the arts community. But it is not up to Council. The public needs to be approached in an open and honest way and only if we can sell this vision will we go ahead. The challenge is to convince the town that we would have the best arts facility in the district.

Cllr Barrett-Miles fully supported this approach and shares the feeling that we need a facility of this nature. He welcomed what had been done to date and supported the idea of selling the vision to the town. This was why the RBL had been identified though at the time of purchase it was not known that the Martlets was to be demolished. He hoped the Council would go ahead with this idea and would like to see the facility delivered.

Cllr Chapman felt that while it was not originally the idea to replace the Martlets this is the current reality.

Cllr Eggleston felt that a critical point had been reached. We have no mandate from the public to apply for a larger loan which people would have to pay for. The town's residents will need to be asked what they want and whether they would be happy to pay for it. He suggested a 10 week consultation period during which the town could be informed about what the vision is. A proper conversation is needed and a range of views should be gathered. We should accept that there will be differences in opinion. After this period and after the fundraiser has done his work we will have a proper proposal to take back to residents.

Cllr Neumann wondered whether a different fundraiser could be used to which Cllr Eggleston responded that he felt that future fundraising could be done in-house.

Cllr Eves admired the vision. The town needs a cultural centre but the figures are scary. She felt there are three options. The first would be to refurbish the current building, the second would be to downsize the project and the third would be to do away with it altogether. She also queried why people would have changed their mind.

In response Cllr Eggleston said that the RBL building has been condemned and is too small in its current configuration. He reiterated his point about set up costs and that we would end up with just another village hall and meeting rooms. This was not what the petition trying to save the Martlets was about.

The risk that we take is that the town says no. However people are angry that we are the only town without a facility of this nature.

Cllr Henwood asked what it would cost the average resident on his precept not just to build but to subsidise. The response was that it would cost 37p per month on a £4.8million loan. She was concerned about how the vote would be conducted. It needed to be a proper referendum and this could possibly be incorporated with the election next May.

Cllr Cornish felt that now that planning was in place the fundraiser has a different scope. There is also a vast difference between raising funds for a charity and a town. Maybe a more appropriate fundraiser should be used.

Cllr Eggleston was of the opinion that the subsidy would be decreased by increasing audiences. Housing stock is increasing and the Northern Arc houses should be incorporated into Burgess Hill in 2023. He estimated that by 2031 given the increase in the housing base the precept could be decreased. It is because of the increase in the tax base that we can afford this and other activities.

While we do not necessarily need a referendum, we do need a proper consultation to establish a true view of the town's feelings. Addressed letter should be addressed to residents to avoid confusion with junk mail. There must be robust security including a proper ballot box and a way to prevent

people from voting twice. He proposed the following:

- 10 weeks of open, honest, transparent consultation.
- This would assist in the drawing up of a proposal
- 4 weeks for residents to give their opinion.

Cllr Chapman asked about a worst scenario where the building would need a £100k subsidy per year. How much extra would this cost? Cllr Eggleston responded by saying that this had been built into the budgeting. The aim of the precept would be to limit any increase to the cost of living after year three. We would not need to go back to the town with an increase in this regard. The tax base increase should be sufficient to mitigate this. The larger audience would also bring down the subsidy.

2 aspects affect the income of the town; an increase in the tax base and an increase in the precept. Our revenue will increase because there are more homes. 60% of our expenses are staff costs. Cost of living increases will come about as a result but we can keep any increase to the cost of Living.

Cllr Eves said that assuming the Northern Arc is incorporated into the town the increase in the tax base would be slower as this project goes through to 2031.

The RFO could not support the scenario where we draw down the current loan and rely on fundraising in the future and feels that the loan should not be drawn down at present. We have until September by which time we will have a better understanding of the success or not of our fundraising efforts. We would need public approval for another loan. We previously enquired about the possibility of raising a £5million loan and this was not rejected. Given that we have planning permission, will have a charity registered and have a viable business plan it should be possible to raise a loan of this sum.

Answering a question about how this approach differed from the past, Cllr Eggleston said that this plan is deliverable. The previous consultation and vote was not particularly well organised with only 8% of residents responding. People were not well informed. 10 weeks of hard work will deliver the information needed for people to make a decision. Neither will we make the mistake of assuming that people will support the project as was the previous approach. With enthusiasm we will try and get people to support it. It is a key project and the Council while seeking support should not try to impose it.

A member of the public asked what a £6million loan would cost. She felt it was difficult not to relate the project to NRR. What would they put into it? If it was seen that they were supportive it would provide motivation for the public to support.

Cllr Eggleston replied saying that a £6million loan would cost each household 70p per month. He said there was £125k of NRR money which could be available and a possible further £80k from section 106 resulting from their development. He emphasised that MSDC had used some of the pot of £250k NRR had given to install new windows in Claire hall supposedly to assist

Burgess Hill groups. Some has gone to Wivelsfield supposedly to support a group there. We would want these groups to return to a purpose built building. A member of the public felt that MSDC should justify their position on the way these funds had been used. The facility would not only be for Burgess Hill but for the surrounding villages as well. We will need to show the public that we have tried to get the support of MSDC.

When sending out a voting form it would be necessary to address each voter and not rely on a flyer through the post box which ends up in the bin. There should be a proper locked box in which to place returned votes. A minimum number of responses should be obtained to legitimise the vote. Security was paramount.

Cllr Henwood felt that there should not be an assumption that people would support the concept. Do not start with that premise.

Consultation must be transparent and voting must be robust.

Cllr Duggan identified certain risks:

1. Would the application for a new loan be successful?
2. There is no guarantee of any section 106 funding.
3. There is no guarantee the Northern Arc boundary will be changed for it to fall into Burgess Hill.
4. Since MSDC has control of the Northern Arc what would stop them building a similar facility there?
5. The business plan needs independent scrutiny from a third party.

Cllr Eggleston responded saying that the Northern Arc was under the control of Homes England and there was no provision for a facility of this sort in their outline planning, only the Centre for Community Sport. The risk is negligible and the history of the project is that the boundary will be moved. Tom Clark has given a strong steer that the boundary will move to include it in Burgess Hill. Our model assumes a 1,75% increase in the annual tax base whereas last year this had been 2%.

Cllr Hussain felt that the town needed a facility like this. We need to do something for the next generation.

Cllr Chapman said that a referendum would cost £20k but if it was combined with the election next year it would cost £10k.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their contribution.

**Recommended:**

1. That a 10 week open and transparent consultation take place to inform the public of the vision and need for a community arts centre;
2. That a policy proposal be formed from the consultation to put to the town;
3. That a 4 week period to consider the proposal be given ensuring that the vote is robust and secure.

#### 46. **Bridge the Gap**

The chairman set out the background of this project. A meeting had been attended by a number of traders at which various ideas were exchanged and suggestions made. The feeling of the Council was that we should support our traders. However the traders feel that we should take the lead. The Council has moved it forward because we organise a lot of activities anyway. The forces of the market mitigate against small traders. The project would try to run in parallel with the development of the town.

A programme of identified projects was considered. Some are being scoped eg the indoor and outdoor markets. Nothing has been committed and it is not a precise science. Some things such as VE day will come about. Councillors asked that projects be discussed by all before decisions are taken.

Cllr Henwood liked the idea of a climbing wall and similar activities to bring people into town. While she supported an outdoor market she was not in support of an indoor market as there are already 3. There was a risk involved in hiring premises. Fiesta days are better

Cllr Eggleston said that Bridge the Gap could not be micromanaged. There was a £30k budget for activities over 2 years. Not everything can be taken to a meeting as this would slow down the delivery of projects. There was a need to identify activities and Councillors should generate ideas leaving officers to implement.

We have not committed to spend £40k on an indoor market and we are currently scoping the project. It would be a place for independent traders who cannot support the cost of a full unit or even a full week. This would provide something smaller. Landlords will not invest in an incubatory market. Some other councils are trying this. The idea is that the hirers will ensure the project is sustainable.

Cllr Chapman warned that the public would think it a sick joke if the Council rented premises from NRR. There are other options.

Cllr Eggleston said that demand would need to be gauged before we invest any money. He pointed out that the town did not have basic traders such as a greengrocer or a baker. There is growth in the vegan market. Who owns the building is immaterial. It could work and needs investigating. It would not be for profit.

Cllr Chapman felt that a limit should be set as to what projects officers can do without referring it to a KAG. He felt that Councillors should be approached by email on projects to get an opinion.

There is a small committee which meets to discuss projects. This could be increased. A bulletin setting out what was happening could be shared with Councillors. Another possibility is theme days and he is looking at this with two others. It is essential that people are kept updated.

Cllr Henwood asked what has been decided especially with regard to the food and drink guide. Is this a good way to spend money? It has not been agreed and Councillors were not consulted and should be in the future.

Very few food traders have responded.

Cllr Eggleston was concerned that if everything had to go to a meeting this would slow down the initiative and hinder it. The food guide shows that most food traders are independents and displays what is on offer in the town.

Cllr Henwood felt that it had been assumed that the food guide would go ahead and perhaps there was a better way of spending the money.

**Recommended:**

1. That a small committee of the leader, deputy leader, representative from the Green Party and one other Councillor along with the CEO and Operations Section Head be set up to consider projects going forward.
2. That a bulletin board be put together to inform Councillors of what is going on.

Cllr Eggleston said that the art exhibition is not going ahead as the Art Society has an alternative initiative which it prefers. This would take place in May.

**47. TRANSPORT WORKING GROUP**

The Chairman agreed to chair this. Cllrs Henwood, Eves and Willis agreed to sit on the committee with members of the public being co-opted. The Terms of Reference previously set up would guide the group.

**48. ASSETS OF COMMUNITY VALUE- NOMINATION OF AN ASSET**

The CEO explained that this was an urgent item as comments were needed within two weeks and there was insufficient time to put it before Council. An unincorporated group had nominated The Weald Inn as an asset of community value. MSDC had approached the Town Council to establish whether there were any objections to this. There were none.

**Recommended:**

That MSDC be informed that there are no objections to the nomination of THE WEALD INN as an asset of community value.

**49. CONFIDENTIAL SECTION**

Members of the public were excluded from the discussion of the following item.

**50. STORAGE OF CHAIRS**

The meeting ended at 21.15