

S42. Monitoring and Reporting on the Corporate Plan – One Council – Place

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided performance information on the Place priority of the Corporate Plan.

The Head of Planning and Economic Development provided an update on the following workstreams:-

Growing our economy

- Tax Incremental Financing (TIF)
- Falkirk Gateway
- Falkirk-Grangemouth Investment Zone
- Fair Start
- Business Gateway
- Tourism

Improving the neighbourhoods we live in

- Grangemouth Flood Protection Scheme
- Road Infrastructure
- Active Travel and Electric Vehicle (EV) Infrastructure Investment
- Housing Provision
- Open Spaces
- Climate Change

Promoting vibrant town centres

- Town Centres
- Strategic Property Review (SPR)

The Head of Planning and Economic Development provided an update on the following workstreams:- Housing Audits; the Leader Programme Audit; and the Engineering Design and Roads Audit.

Following a question the Head of Planning and Economic Development gave an update on the current position on the Tax Incremental Financing programme in respect to the Avonbridge Gorge. Mr Duff explained that officers had held discussions with Transport Scotland and Ministers. The project was in the programme but there was an acceptance that it needed to be accelerated. This required funding from parties including West Lothian Council. In regard to the likely timescale, Mr Duff estimated it could begin within 2 years.

Mr Duff also gave an update on the upgrading works at Icehouse Brae (North). The timescale for this, he estimated was 2025/26. It was currently programmed at the end of the series of projects but officers were looking at ways to bring this forward tying in with works at Westfield.

The committee sought an indication of when Council would receive confirmation of the outcome of bids for the Investment Zone. Mr Duff confirmed that the Council had received feedback from the Scottish Government and was waiting to hear from the UK Government. Mr Duff anticipated a summer announcement on the outcome of the bids.

Following a question on the likely impact of Brexit on external funding, Mr Duff anticipated that it was likely to impact in a number of ways such as on investment and the performance of business (such as transport). The Council could monitor impacts and look at ways to counteract these for example through TIF or the Investment Zone.

The committee then discussed the public consultation on TIF projects, highlighting a 'relatively positive response' and sought clarification from Mr Duff on this assessment. Mr Duff explained that there had been extensive consultation from the early stages of the initiative in 2013. The consultation to which he had referred was in regard to the Westfield roundabout. Of the 1000 consultees 70% of responses had been positive. Mr Duff explained that as the green network was developed there would be further engagement, for example through the planning process. Mr Duff then explained the complex funding structure for the TIF. He stated that the funding did not include monies raised through Council Tax.

Members returned to Brexit and asked for detail on the likely impact of this on the tourism industry. Mr Duff stated that the Council was alert to the potential impacts. Risk assessments had been developed. The Council had responded to the financial crash in 2008 by developing an action plan. Existing actions would be scaled up and additional support may be required. In regard to tourism, Brexit could result in economic pressure on everyone and therefore on spending power. There could be benefits however. There may be an increase in domestic holidays for example and Falkirk was well placed with a number significant tourist attractions.

The committee discussed the Falkirk Gateway and asked if the planned retail activity would impact on the High Street, noting that the regeneration of the Town Centre was a priority. Mr Duff responded that the proposed retail outlets would be 'big box' retailers which would not be suited for the High Street. It was important that the retail mix was balanced and that there was a 'route' to the High Street from the Gateway.

The committee turned to the Fair Start service and sought detail on the 'measures' in place to reach the most isolated and distant from the labour market. Mr Duff explained that the Council was working with the Job Centre who referred the long term unemployed to the project. Referrals could also be made by partners such as the Health Service, Social Work and Advice Hubs. The project could change people's lives and the initiative had begun to show benefits.

The committee noted that tourism had contributed £110m to the economy and asked whether this represented a peak. Mr Duff stated that it was not a peak. The Council's central location and attractions made it an attractive area for tourism. The Council need to continue to 'talk itself up' and be

ambitious. The business case was an example of the ambition. The gateway would retain visitors. The aim was to attract visitors from the Gateway to the town centre. At the moment this did not happen. Projects such as the proposed Arts Centre would be a draw in the town centre.

The committee asked for a timescale for the commencement of the Flood Protection Scheme. Mr Duff stated that this was given in the report as 2024. There was a significant stream of work currently underway in preparation for the sign off – approvals and design schemes were underway. There would be sign off when all the various work streams were in place. The works could be phased but funding from the Scottish Government was both critical and key. There was constant dialogue between the Council and the Scottish Government to ensure its ongoing support.

Following a question on the road infrastructure programmes Mr Duff was advised of concerns in regard to the programme for line painting and undertook to investigate.

The committee turned to the Electric Vehicle (EV) Infrastructure Investment Programme and asked if Brexit would have an impact on the scheme. Mr Duff explained that Brexit would have an impact on the UK car industry. There was also a lack of investment generally as a consequence of Brexit.

Turning to climate change the committee asked if initiatives such as ‘wind powered trees’ (which could be seen in Paris) had been explored. Mr Duff stated that there was a local heat and energy efficiency strategy (LHEFS) pilot underway which looked at initiatives and could explore these.

The committee discussed the INTEREG project. As part of this the Council and 21 European Partners were looking to establish a living lab in Grangemouth to deliver energy efficiency and technological innovation and this was a key strand of the Investment Zone. The committee asked if Brexit would impact on the work. Mr Duff said this was the kind of project which was at risk due to Brexit. There was work ongoing to try and maintain such projects. Carbon emissions was a global concern and funding was required to develop projects in Scotland. Work needed to be completed to complement that going on in Europe to ensure that Scotland was competitive in the global market. The committee returned to the Council’s Road Safety Programme. It was suggested that the Council’s approach unduly focussed on ‘the cosmetic’ and there would be a financial impact in the future.

The committee considered the Strategic Housing Investment Plan, (SHIP). The housing which would be building would predominately, it was stated, be private and members of the committee cited issues in Denny arising from investment by the private sector. The service was, Mr Duff stated, working closely with Housing Services to identify appropriate sites. Often the Council did not own the sites and these complicated matters.

Following a question the Director of Corporate and Housing Services undertook to look into resources in place to support digitisation in particular to support those without access to, or understanding of, technology.

The committee returned to the Investment Zone and asked whether work had begun in Grangemouth. Mr Duff stated that a community action plan was being developed for the area. A masterplan would be developed for the area – the Council was looking to secure funding from the Scottish Government to assist with this. Following a statement that the community was frustrated by the apparent lack of progress following the consultations. Mr Duff stated that the situation in town was complex – for example in the town centre there were 3 different owners. However, it was important to scope out the exercise and this took time. Mr Duff conceded there were resourcing issues. The team was small. Support from the Scottish Government was vital. It was suggested by the committee that the Strategic Property Review was at odds with the Council's Placemaking Priority. There was a need, members suggested, to retain historic areas such as the Charing Cross area in Grangemouth.

The committee then turned to the performance statement which was appended to the report.

Members asked why, given the reported slippage of £3.1m compared to the planned expenditure of £47.7m, was the action 'improve and improve our housing estates' regarded as 'in progress'. The director Corporate and Housing Services stated that this was due to the investment in the Capital Programme. The SHIP had been agreed by Council in January and the work would begin.

The committee highlighted the 3 year on year increase on the % of rent lost through properties being empty (from 0.91% to 1.23% in 2019/20). The target was 0.9%. The Director of Corporate and Housing explained that there was a number of reasons why properties were 'void'. For example, the Council had brought a number of long term voids back into the pool of properties. There had also been significant investment (for example in Charlotte Dundas Square in Grangemouth) which has added to the indicator. Mr Ritchie also cited the impact of the Homeless Strategy. The increase was a sign of positive activity.

The indicators for time taken to undertake emergency and non-emergency repairs had both increased. Mr Ritchie stated that these were lower than in the private sector. There were a number of factors which had contributed to the increase - such as the often specialist nature of the work. There was a work stream to develop a higher performance framework for external contractors. The committee noted that there was an indicator '% of tenants who have had repairs or maintenance carried out in the last 12 months satisfied with the repairs and maintenance service'.

It was put to the Director that a more valuable measure would be 'number of tenants who are given a timescale for repairs to be carried out when they move to the property when the repairs are not carried out in the timeframe'.

Decision

The Scrutiny Committee noted the performance of the Council against the priority of Place within the Corporate Plan.