

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Management Board

At 7.00 pm on Thursday 18th January, 2024 in the
Council Chamber, Corby Cube, George Street, Corby, Northants, NN17 1QG

Present:-

Members

Councillor Gill Mercer (Chair)
Councillor Lyn Buckingham
Councillor Lora Lawman

Councillor Graham Lawman
Councillor Kevin Watt

Also in attendance

Cllr Jim Hakewill
Cllr David Howes
Cllr Joseph Smyth

Officers

Adele Wylie – Executive Director for Customer and Governance/Monitoring Officer
Ben Smith – Head of Democratic Services/Statutory Scrutiny Officer

Graeme Kane – Executive Director of Place and Economy (Interim)
Simon Richardson - Head of Policy & Placemaking, Growth and Regeneration
Ian Smith - Assistant Director - Regulatory Services

Claire Edwards - Assistant Director of Finance & Accounting

13 Apologies for absence

It was noted that there were no apologies for absence.

14 Notification of requests to attend the meeting.

The Chair noted there were a number of speakers to be heard at this meeting, who would be invited to speak at the commencement of the call-in item.

15 Declarations of Interest

The Chair invited those who wished to do so to declare any interests in respect of items on the agenda.

No declarations were made.

16 Call-In of Key Decision Relating to Travellers Temporary Stopping Site - Land at Junction 3 of the A14 Rothwell

The Scrutiny Management Board considered a report setting out the reasons for call-in by eight councillors of an Executive key decision of 21 December 2023 in respect of 'Travellers Temporary Stopping Site - Land at Junction 3 of the A14 Rothwell', and

which requested the Board to consider the next steps that it may wish to take in accordance with the Constitution's Scrutiny Procedure Rules relating to call-in. A copy of the report, marked 'item 4' on the agenda, is filed with the agenda for the meeting.

The Chair stated to all those present that the purpose of a call in of an Executive key decision was to scrutinise whether the decision making process had operated effectively and not the merits of the decision taken.

It was noted that there were five speakers who wished to address the Scrutiny Management Board in accordance with Public Participation procedure rules. Each speaker was invited to address the Board in turn.

- i) Councillor Joseph Smyth, ward member for Rothwell, spoke against the siting of the temporary stopping site at Rothwell, stating it was the wrong location in a green belt location, that there had not been sufficient consultation before the decision had been made, and that this was not best use of money to site the temporary stopping site in Rothwell in this way.
- ii) Katherine Cadbury, Chairman of Harrington Parish Council, opposed the establishment of the site stating the location was a greenfield site between Harrington and Rothwell and that the village felt very strongly, evidenced by the number of residents in person at this meeting. She stated the village supported the call-in by led by Cllr Jim Hakewill and that in practice very little consultation had taken place and that other sites had not properly considered.
- iii) Michael Blissett, a resident, felt that the decision was ill thought out and the cost of establishing the site would be detrimental to taxpayers, that the site should instead form part of the wider traveller consultation that was due to start later in the year and not be built until the wider options had been looked into. He also stated that as a wildlife area it should be protected from development.
- iv) Jonny Easter, a resident, felt there had been a lack of engagement with stakeholders particularly with regard to the wildlife value of the site, stating that species of interest including birds of conservation had been recorded, so the site was clearly of value to local wildlife and should be investigated further with the prospect of becoming a pocket park. This would be supported by residents and stakeholders, and so should be included in the North Northamptonshire local nature recovery strategy.
- v) Carl Simper, a Rothwell Town Councillor, spoke against the proposal stating the Town Council's wished for the site to be retained as an area of natural beauty. He stated the site was the main entrance into Rothwell from the motorways from the west and that Rothwell had objected for many years to the site being used in this manner. He felt there had been a lack of scrutiny prior to the Executive decision and that proper scrutiny of other sites should be considered as part of the developing Council's Gypsy and Traveller local plan which he understood was near completion. Mr Simper also considered that the Council had failed to work collaboratively with local residents noting the requirements of the Government's planning policy for traveller sites.

The Chair thanked all of the contributors for speaking on this subject.

The Chair then called Councillor Jim Hakewill to speak, as the lead signatory for the call-in.

Councillor Hakewill spoke in support of the speakers statements, thanking the other local residents for being there. Cllr Hakewill reiterated that he considered the process had not being undertaken properly, that in 2022 there not been a consultation, but an engagement taking place and he believed the reasons for call-in being accepted were strong and firm.

Cllr Hakewill believed that best value should have been considered as part of Gypsy and Traveller local plan, that the site was sensitive and attractive. He considered it would be ill-advised to commence a planning application with significant opposition to the project and that the costings had not been stated properly.

The Board then asked some clarifying questions to Cllr Hakewill before moving on to ask Cllr David Howes, Executive Member for Rural Communities and Localism to speak.

Cllr Howes stated that the site had been identified as it was one that was in council ownership and that the full borrowing costs were set out in the report. He also stated that funding was proposed to be taken from the Development Pool as part of the 2024/25 budgetary process. He considered sufficient consultation and engagement had taken place.

In respect of the Local Plan currently being considered, he stated that this was looking at permanent gypsy and traveller encampments whereas in this case a separate audience was being catered for - not for permanent siteholders, but for transitory travellers. He believed the site was suitable and that there was no merit in delaying the process underway.

Following clarifying questions, Cllr Howes also stated that he believed the land's original purpose was for one of commercial development. It had ended up in public ownership as an asset for public development. He believed best value was being followed in these circumstances.

The Scrutiny Management Board then debated the call-in request, with the following principal points noted:-

- i) It was clarified that of the options available to the Board, officers advised that they did not consider that the Executive decision had been contrary to either the Council's Budget and Policy Framework and so of the three options available to the Board in making a decision, option b) should be ruled out;
- ii) That a central site was needed for transitory travellers and that the issue of best value was not just financial but of social value too;
- iii) That only 50% of the site would be used and that biodiversity could continue to be catered for;
- iv) That there had not been sufficient evidence presented to the Board that the decision making process had not operated effectively in this case and whilst having sympathy with some of the concerns raised, the decision to be made by

the Board was not in respect of the merits of the decision but only of potential failures of process;

- v) The Board concluded that there had not been any failures of process in the decision making made in this case and that it had been made effectively.

The Board therefore voted unanimously that no further action should be taken in respect of the call-in.

Approved:-

That following consideration of the call-in in respect of Travellers Temporary Stopping Site - Land at Junction 3 of the A14 Rothwell and the reasons given that have been deemed as valid, the Scrutiny Management Board has:-

- a) Decided to take no further action, and notes accordingly the original Executive decision will be effective immediately.

(Reason for Decision – Consideration of the call-in was carried out to comply with good governance and the call-in procedure set out in paragraphs 15-18 of Part 7.1 of the Constitution’s Scrutiny Procedure Rules.)

(Alternative Options Considered – In responding to the call-in, the Scrutiny Management Board had three options to consider, to either refer back to the Executive, refer (in specific circumstances) to full Council, or to take no further action and allow the Executive decision to take effect.)

17 Close of Meeting

There being no further business, the Chair thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and closed the meeting.

Chair

Date

The meeting closed at 8.19 pm