



**REPORT of
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
COUNCIL
3 APRIL 2025**

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – MEMBER SCRUTINY REQUEST OUTCOME
– CORPORATE PROJECT – LAND AT HEYBRIDGE**

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform the Council of the outcome of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's (the Committee) work on this matter.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- (i) That the report on the outcome of the Committee's work on this Member Scrutiny Request item is received and noted;
- (ii) That the Council identifies any actions arising from the Committee's conclusions to inform practice and process in relation to future similar corporate projects.

3. SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 The Committee on 25 April 2024 first considered a report from its Working Group on this scrutiny item request submitted by Councillor A S Fluker. The request sought a review of various issues arising from the extensive history of this corporate project which was effectively closed by the Council by decision at its meeting in November 2023.
- 3.2 This project involved the potential acquisition of land by the Council with a view to providing affordable housing and generating a commercial return. The Overview and Scrutiny Working Group (the Working Group) continued to request and consider further information to understand the various issues raised by and as a consequence of the scrutiny request, so that it could reach an informed conclusion for report back to the Committee.
- 3.3 During that process it was noted that the project team had undertaken a 'lessons learned' workshop and the resulting report prepared was awaiting sign-off by the Corporate Leadership Team following which it could be shared with Members. The scrutiny request having been added to the Committee's workplan, the Working Group was subsequently tasked with reviewing the 'lessons learned' report and recommending further to the Committee.
- 3.4 The 'lessons learned' report having been noted and already shared with Members, the Committee would be invited to note that it would inform practice and process for similar projects in the future. Whilst the report recorded the things the Council did well, it set out some areas for learning as follows:

3.4.1 Areas for learning on future projects:

3.4.1.1 Although the project did proceed initially on the basis of internal planning advice, it is felt that Maldon District Council (MDC) must ensure that any future development opportunities start with a robust and clearly documented assessment of site viability, taken forward via a series of 'approval gateways' overseen / agreed by both Officers and Members at each stage. The below process is recommended to ensure early identification of site viability / risks and engagement of Members:

- 1) Carry out an initial planning appraisal as to whether the Council is in a position to take forward / explore a proposal(s) for housing development in light of the Maldon Local Development Plan, the Spatial Strategy and where that development may be situated relative the settlement boundary.
- 2) Conduct a Planning Sustainability Assessment of identified site (including multiple site options (where these are available)
- 3) Develop a high-level Concept Design (in order to commence early-stage planning appraisal, land valuation and pre-app)
- 4) Land Valuation (Red Book)
- 5) Planning appraisal with key statutory consultees e.g., Essex County Council Highways and Education, Environment Agency etc.
- 6) Hold an early Pre-App with Members with a draft scheme to identify potential issues and secure a more collaborative culture between Members and Officers.

3.5 A report was brought back to the Committee at its meeting on 24 September 2024. This outlined the further discussion undertaken by the Working Group, focusing on how the project was instigated and perpetuated only to be found not to be commercially viable. Officers maintained that they had engaged with Members throughout and in the interests of good governance had obtained approval to necessary important steps.

3.6 The Committee at its September 2024 meeting debated this in detail, some Members being of the view that a deeper investigation was required to clarify the processes that were followed and to ensure that greater project governance needed to be in place in the future. It was decided however, in the light of the discussions, that the item should be referred back to the Working Group for further investigation / clarification as to the initial engagement with local landowners, and to provide a report back to the Committee which also included a range of financial milestones associated with the project.

3.7 The Working Group made strenuous efforts to understand and establish clarity on the origin of this project and how it was initiated. As a result, the Working Group was able to conclude its work and report back to the Committee at its meeting on 6 February 2025. The Working Group established clarity on a number of issues and in updating the Committee on this drew attention to the lessons learned, including those identified in the review report undertaken by the Project Team. Emphasis was placed on the need to be clear as to the objectives of future corporate projects at their outset – this being an obligation on both Members and Officers. It was considered that together with the benefits of the Project Management Office processes now in place awareness of the lessons learned will assist practice and process in relation to future similar projects.

- 3.8 The Committee at its February 2025 meeting resolved as follows:
- (i) That the work undertaken by the Working Group to understand and clarify the various issues and points of concern raised is noted;
 - (ii) That the Working Group's conclusions together with the findings contained in the 'lessons learned' report produced by the Project Team with a view to them influencing practice and process in relation to future corporate projects be endorsed;
 - (iii) That a report on the Member Scrutiny Item Request – Corporate Project – Land at Heybridge be presented to a meeting of the Council.
- 3.9 Full details and copies of the reports which informed this matter can be accessed within Mod.Gov under the Overview and Scrutiny Working Group and Committee.

4. IMPACT ON PRIORITIES AS SET OUT IN THE CORPORATE PLAN 2025 - 2028

4.1 Delivering good quality services.

- 4.1.1 Thorough scrutiny processes support improved performance and efficiency which in turn will contribute to the quality of services provided, and functions undertaken by the Council.

5. IMPLICATIONS

- (i) **Impact on Customers** – None directly, but individual scrutiny reviews will enable the impact on customers to be assessed.
- (ii) **Impact on Equalities** – Equalities are considered as part of the reporting on review work undertaken by Officers.
- (iii) **Impact on Risk (including Fraud implications)** – Scrutiny reviews enable potential Corporate Risks to the organisation and their mitigation to be identified.
- (iv) **Impact on Resources (financial)** – Scrutiny reviews offer the potential for an assessment of financial impact to the organisation.
- (v) **Impact on Resources (human)** – Scrutiny reviews offer the potential for an assessment of any resource impact to the organisation.
- (vi) **Impact on Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation** – None.

Background Papers: None other than the Committee reports referred to in para. 3.9 above.

Enquiries to: Stuart Jennings, Corporate Governance Project Officer.