

LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES – 8 JANUARY 2019

Cllr Anna Firth, Cabinet member for Legal & Democratic Services

The focus during the last quarter has been on execution and delivery rather than innovation but good progress has been made.

Quercus 7

Quercus 7 is in the advanced stages of negotiation on several properties which achieve the Q7 investment return criteria. It is hoped that contracts will be exchanged shortly and in accordance with the current financial plan, Q7 will start making a cumulative profit from 2020/21. Conditional offers have also been made on two other developments within the District that meet the investment criteria and due diligence is on-going. However, the residential property market is going through uncertain times due to the current political and economic uncertainty and Q7 must be wary of the risks this causes when analysing opportunities.

Quercus Housing

£6 million from our section 106 contributions have been earmarked for Quercus Housing to be transferred on a scheme by scheme basis as and when each scheme is agreed. The second Board meeting for QH took place on the 6th December 2018 and work is progressing on two potential schemes within the District.

Legal team

The legal team continue to be extremely busy. A further successful environmental health court hearing took place in December resulting in a court order being granted and an unsafe business practice being changed. See the attached table of recent legal successes for more details.

Finding a permanent replacement for Kate Jardine, Principal Planning solicitor, is proving difficult and costly. Two days locum help from a junior planning Barrister costs the same as a full-time Principal Planning Solicitor and filling the remaining 3 days places a considerable additional strain on the rest of the team. This is an on-going challenge although SDC are not alone in having difficulties recruiting to this and similar roles.

Elections

The annual canvass is now complete with the new register was published on the 1 December 2018. As of the 1 December 2018 there are 89,319 people on the Register compared to 89,766 for December 2017. The figures relating to responses from the annual canvass are as follows:

24,840 online across all stages – 55.7% cf 42% last year
19,377 paper across all stages – 43.5% cf 57% last year

The represents a very good outcome and shows that the extra effort and focus on letters, messaging, social media and canvassing has resulted in a more efficient, more resilient service which represents better value for money.

On Friday, 14 December the Council helped celebrate the centenary of the 1918 general election in which some women voted for the first time and 17 women stood for Parliament. In conjunction with the Chairman and the Communications team we produced and released a short Twitter video followed by a succession of 30 second vox pops throughout the day during which female councillors explained the significance of women's suffrage to them. As has been said before, women's suffrage has been identified by the World Health Organisation as one of the 6 P's to health and wellbeing along with People, Place, Peace, Prosperity and Planet.

Licensing

Bromley joining licensing partnership – on 9 November we sent the Bromley Head of Service a revised quote based on the Licensing Partnership taking on the whole of the Bromley licensing function including enforcement. However, despite very favourable indications, nothing definitive has yet been received

Performance – the Sevenoaks licensing performance was 100% KPI achievement across all targets.

Gambling Policy – the new gambling policy, agreed at Full Council on 20 November, will come into effect on the 31 January.

Brexit

Hopefully by the time the committee meets the broad direction of travel in terms of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union will be clearer.

On the 18 December 2018 I attended the LGA South East Brexit roadshow at which concern was expressed about the ability of Kent roads to cope with Operation Brock, the replacement to Operation Stack, and the possible effect on the Kent economy if the M20 is closed in part or in both directions. Other concerns included skills shortages, the direct costs of new burdens and demand pressures because of Kent's exceptional position and uncertainty around how the UK Shared Prosperity Fund will be allocated. On a positive note, the Kent Resilience Forum has done a great deal of work on scenario and contingency planning.

Democratic services / Chairman

The democratic services team continue to support the many Council committees as well as the Chairman's extremely busy diary.

Equalities

Recognising equality-related achievement in our District as per action four of the 2018/19 Equalities Action plan, two additional categories will be awarded at the February "Making It Happen" Awards: Equalities Champion of the Year and Carer of the Year.