
Extraordinary Economy and Property Committee

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Wednesday, 4 March 2026 from 7.00 pm - 9.54 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Monique Bonney (Chair), Hayden Brawn, Shelley Cheesman, Simon Clark, Charles Gibson (Substitute for Councillor Alex Eyre), Angela Harrison (Substitute for Councillor Ann Cavanagh), Terry Thompson and Ashley Wise (Vice-Chair).

PRESENT (VIRTUALLY): Councillors Lee-Anne Moore and Sarah Stephen.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Joanne Johnson, Kieren Mansfield and Philippa Richardson.

Neil Miller, Homes England.

OFFICERS PRESENT (VIRTUALLY): Emma Wiggins.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor Mike Whiting.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE (VIRTUALLY): Councillors Ashley Shiel and Dolley Wooster.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Ann Cavanagh, Alex Eyre, Lee-Anne Moore, Richard Palmer, Carrie Pollard, Sarah Stephen and Mark Tucker.

782 **Emergency Evacuation Procedure**

The Chair outlined the emergency evacuation procedure.

783 **Declarations of Interest**

During consideration of the item, the Chair declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest as she was a Director of Swale Rainbow Homes.

784 **Queenborough and Rushenden (Housing Infrastructure Fund) - update**

At this point, the Chair suggested that Section 106 agreements be added to the Forward Decisions Plan, particularly in terms of them delivering services and infrastructure in a timely fashion; and to also include projects that needed to be completed and how matters could be moved forward.

The Strategic Programmes and Assets Manager introduced the report which provided an update in relation to proposed development at the Queenborough and Rushenden Regeneration area. He highlighted Appendix I to the report which set out a summary timeline for the development. There had been numerous 'shifts' along the way, including the reduction in delivery of housing from 2,000 to 1,180. He referred to the Grant Determination Agreement (GDA) and the preference that the agreement be brought to an end, for the reasons set out in the report.

The Chair welcomed Neil Miller, Head of Development, Homes England to the meeting. The Head of Development highlighted the following points:

- Acknowledged the length of time the development was taking;

- Homes England was now focusing on delivery;
- a library of historic information on the site was being collated for interested parties;
- Homes England was working on engaging with a potential developer partner;
- it was hoped that by the Summer of 2026, there would be clear strategy, with a partner secured to work-up detailed planning applications; and
- the main focus was finding the quickest route for delivery.

The Chair invited Members to make comments and ask questions and these included:

- Considered this site was 'levelling-up' before levelling-up was 'invented';
- a crucial aspect of the site had been the affordable housing which was key in a deprived area;
- welcomed the work that Homes England had done in involving the community and feared this could be lost, once a developer had been found; and
- clarification sought on how involved Homes England would be going forward.

The Head of Development responded:

- He had been involved with the scheme for many years through changing governments and priorities;
- he had tried to steer a course and achieve the original objectives and keep the goodwill;
- the strategy for delivery was similar to other sites;
- typically, Homes England worked on sites with between 750 – 2000 dwellings, alongside developer partners;
- 'placemaking' was more likely to be incorporated within larger sites;
- it was hoped that developer partners would be engaged long term, typically on a building lease agreement with a series of obligations to ensure they put in place what Homes England had requested they do;
- there would also be a public consultation process; and
- it was in Homes England's interest to stay involved with the development and have control of the scheme going forward and he assured Members that Homes England's involvement would continue and they would not step away.

In response to a question, the Head of Development confirmed that the current housing numbers for the site were anticipated to be 500 – 600 houses.

A visiting Member made the following comments:

- Would like to be encouraged by what we were hearing, but concerned about being focussed on delivery, but at what cost?;
- welcomed that Homes England were looking for potential developer partners;
- concerned with the 'one size fits all' approach as considered this was a bespoke site;
- the smaller amount of units would mean less money to fund community benefits;
- clarification sought on what Homes England's priorities were in terms of schools/GP surgeries; and
- what was Homes England's position on the suggested termination of the GDA?

The Head of Development responded:

- Disagreed that it was deliverable 'at any cost';
- it was not for Homes England to set priorities, that would be done via consultation, and the results would then feed into the planning application and decision;
- the Masterplan was the starting point;
- the density of housing on the development had changed to what it had originally been forecast, due to market demand;
- the driver was delivery, but Homes England tried to also meet the aspirations of the Masterplan;
- agreed that this was a bespoke site;
- there had been various challenges over the years, including land raising, building the link road first, Neats Court employment opportunities before housing, the Covid-19 pandemic, inflation costs, requirements of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), either on site (less space to build) or off site (at considerable cost);
- Homes England were now ready to engage with a partner, as they now knew the unknowns and were ready for meaningful discussions; and
- the opinion of Homes England on the termination of the GDA could not be discussed as that responsibility laid with a different team within Homes England.

A Member referred to paragraph 2.17 in the report where it suggested that the market for flats in this location was limited, and the Member considered this was not the case and residents should be consulted on this. The Member also asked for the timescale for getting 'spades in the ground'. In response, the Head of Development said there would be a mix of housing type, it was just that the proportion was likely to change and he said the developer partners were experienced in what the market was interested in, and as the scheme developed it would go through a consultation process for feedback and evidence of the need for different types of housing. There was no scheme drawn up at the moment, but he hoped that by the Summer of 2026, Homes England would engage with a developer partner and then with other processes in between it was hoped there would be 'spades in the ground' within 18 months from working with a developer partner.

Further comments included:

- Welcomed the infrastructure and employment aspects of this site;
- it was important that the site reached its maximum potential;
- trust was important, i.e. what residents were promised, they should get;
- clarification sought on how Homes England could guarantee a placemaking scheme;
- there was a real need for smaller homes on the Isle of Sheppey;
- this development not delivering on housing had impacted the Council's five-year housing supply;
- more funding was needed to sort the issue out; and
- there was a sense of infrastructure deficit and concerns that lower housing numbers would mean less infrastructure.

The Head of Development responded to the points made:

- The main objectives of the Masterplan still existed and were still relevant;
- Homes England had their own design and quality standards, which were over and

above what Swale Borough Council (SBC) could deliver as the Local Planning Authority;

- in conjunction with consultation, Homes England had the ability to use their unique position to structure agreements to get best outcomes;
- additional funding would not necessarily mean more density of housing;
- developer partners were aware of 'building for healthy life' as standard and Homes England were able to use their unique position, with no need for additional funding, by dealing with everything through their agreement with the developer partner;
- facilities such as a school were also achievable through their scheme, and if it did not work, then a viability assessment conversation could take place, and this was achievable even on delivery of 550 homes; and
- in terms of feedback from consultation, a lot could be resolved at the outline planning application stage, and pre-application discussions helped to 'tick-off' the unknowns.

A visiting Member made the following comments:

- Considered the reasons why the development had not been completed had also impacted other developers, but had not hindered them with their developments;
- was aware of other areas in Kent where flats had been successful;
- this development had been de-prioritised;
- surprised that there did not appear to be any access from the development to the waterfront;
- suggested Homes England provided regular updates on the development; and
- a Section 106 agreement was crucial to this scheme and it was important money from this was retained within the neighbouring community.

The Head of Development responded:

- Acknowledged that other developers had faced the same issues, but Homes England were not in a position to secure a developer partner until the land raising had been completed and the land was not physically ready for development until 2019/20;
- flats could be part of the housing mix, it was an unknown at the moment, and subject to consultation responses; and
- within the Masterplan, there was an intention to get waterfront access with public open space to the foreshore and there was a clear requirement in the Masterplan for commercial leisure activities.

Further comments included:

- It was important that the development was master-planned and came forward as a whole;
- Section 106 delays caused huge educational issues; and
- Homes England needed to be having discussions with Kent County Council in terms of sequencing educational facilities.

A visiting Member made the following comments:

- It was important to separate what had already been achieved at the site, and

- what still needed to be done;
- the site was presently a 'mess';
- the Masterplan needed to be re-written as the plans within it did not match what was happening in reality, especially with the reduction of proposed housing units and trying to achieve the building of a school;
- clarification sought on what was going to happen to the rest of the site;
- 500 houses was not good value for money, and not what the public was promised;
- seemed there was no end in sight, and could not continue this 'never-ending' story;
- Neats Court was a massive achievement;
- the amount of money spent on land-raising did not match the delivery of only 500 homes;
- real progress was needed and more updates; and
- suggested writing to the Secretary of State.

The Head of Development responded:

- Acknowledged that some elements of the Masterplan had changed, but the fundamentals were still there which Homes England wanted to take forward; and
- in terms of value for money, the total investment in the project, paying for the land, the infrastructure, the link road, employment space, utility upgrades, a lot had already been delivered.

Further comments included:

- Work needed to be done to address the overall appearance of the site, such as landscaping and trees;
- the current state of the site was 'dragging' the area down, and was potentially putting off future investors to the area;
- the whole process just seemed to have taken too long;
- residents wanted spades in the ground;
- the situation was very frustrating;
- Homes England needed to start delivering;
- needed to consider children's health and wellbeing as some children on the Isle of Sheppey had still not got school places, this was not just a problem in the future, it was a problem now;
- there was not enough infrastructure;
- the timing and delivery of the school was critical, it caused delivery issues elsewhere when a school was not delivered;
- adding additional houses next to schools puts more pressure on those schools; and
- if there was no critical mass of residents, GPs often did not come forward, and reducing the housing numbers undermined the delivery of health and education if taken out of the Local Plan.

A visiting Member made the following comments:

- Clarification sought on the density of housing on the development;
- suggested the position regarding the development agreement be formalised; and

- a meeting should be held with the local MP and the Chief Executive of Homes England to move things forward.

The Head of Development said he would need to update the Committee on the density of the housing and he also informed Members that there had been a small regional re-structure within Homes England and as such they could consider the level of engagement they wanted from Homes England.

Further comments included:

- Aware of the challenges of this development, but the Masterplan was the blueprint;
- acknowledged the high value work that had been done so far, such as the Rushenden Relief Road, and training opportunities;
- considered a housing needs survey gave a better understanding of what was needed, rather than feedback from developers;
- a programme of updates would be good going forward at appropriate milestones;
- thank you to the Head of Development for his work on the project over the years;
- there was more demand for one/two bedroomed properties, rather than larger family homes; and
- bungalows were needed as well and should be added to the mix of housing types.

The Head of Development acknowledged the suggestion of a Housing Needs Survey, and was happy to look into providing updates to Members.

The Head of Place suggested an item be added to the Forward Decisions Plan on the lines of the matter being added to the agenda of a meeting 'at an appropriate trigger point'.

The Chair summarised and thanked the Head of Development for attending the meeting. She said there was a lot of frustration because of the position the Council found itself in. There was a lot of accountability from Homes England to deliver on their promises. There were at least two versions of the Masterplan which had not been delivered. The Chair said there was little trust now between the Council, the community and Homes England to carry this forward in a timely fashion. She hoped that Homes England would take away the points made at this meeting and action some of them, particularly with regard to the condition of the site, and resolve what would be delivered on the site, and not necessarily go with what the developer stated they could deliver.

The Chair asked the Head of Place how quickly the agreement could be terminated. The Head of Place explained that officers had been working to extricate the Council from the agreement because of all the idiosyncrasies around it which led officers to believe that it was unenforceable and therefore not the right position for the Council to be in.

The Chair moved the following motion: That Homes England clarify the density of development they were expecting on the site; that Homes England commit to a proposal and action plan be put in place for the immediate future in terms of tidying up the appearance of the site; and a discussion be held with the Chief Executive of Homes England, the Treasury Minister and the Housing Minister about investment on the site. This was seconded by Councillor Terry Thompson.

Members spoke on the bizarre situation the Council was in and a Member considered the work included in the motion should be focussed upon, rather than terminating the agreement. The Chair reminded Members that her proposal had not included terminating the agreement, and from Members' feedback, she did not add it to the motion.

On being put to the vote, the motion was agreed.

Resolved:

(1) That the content of the report as background to understanding the position in respect of development at Queenborough and Rushenden and the associated Housing Infrastructure Grant, managed by Swale Borough Council be noted.

(2) That Homes England clarify the density of development they were expecting on the site; that Homes England commit to a proposal and action plan be put in place for the immediate future in terms of tidying up the appearance of the site; and a discussion be held with the Chief Executive of Homes England, the Treasury Minister and the Housing Minister about investment on the site.

785 Adjournment of Meeting

The meeting was adjourned from 8.59 pm until 9.08 pm.

Chair

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All minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel