

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Tuesday, 20 August 2019 at 5.20 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillor Grenville Chamberlain – Chairman

Councillors:	Anna Bradnam	Dr. Martin Cahn
	Sarah Cheung Johnson	Dr. Claire Daunton
	Geoff Harvey	Steve Hunt
	Peter McDonald	Judith Rippeth
	Deborah Roberts (substitute)	Peter Topping (substitute)
	Bunty Waters (substitute)	

Councillors Bill Handley, Dr. Tumi Hawkins, Heather Williams and John Williams were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers:	Kirstin Donaldson	Programme Manager
	Susan Gardner Craig	Interim Director of Corporate Services
	Kathrin John	Democratic Services Team Leader
	Stephen Kelly	Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development
	Trevor Roff	Interim Director of Finance
	Ian Senior	Democratic Services Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Councillors Ruth Betson, Gavin Clayton, Graham Cone, Dr. Douglas de Lacey and Brian Milnes sent Apologies for Absence.

Councillors Peter Topping, Bunty Waters and Deborah Roberts substituted for Councillors Betson, de Lacey and Cone respectively.

In Councillor Milnes' absence, the Chairman sought and received the Committee's agreement to Councillor Judith Rippeth being appointed Vice-Chairman for the meeting.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee authorised the Chairman to sign, as a correct record, the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2019, subject to the following:

Minute 5 – Update on 3C ICT

In connection with the eighth and ninth bullet point (starting "in relation to the recent failure..." and "the newly consolidated server...", Councillor Anna Bradnam reiterated that 3C ICT should assume responsibility from Facilities Management for the server room at South Cambridgeshire Hall, and that both

the server room itself and the equipment within it should send telemetry that would prevent future failures in the chiller system.

In the eighth bullet point, the word "...currently..." should be added between the words "...for which 3C ICT was..." and "...responsible as...". The words "The server room at South Cambridgeshire Hall, and the equipment within it, ought to be similarly monitored." should be added to the ninth bullet point,

By affirmation, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee agreed that the eighth and ninth bullet point should be amended to state as follows:

"In relation to the recent failure of the chiller system in the South Cambridgeshire Hall server room, which had led to an outage of ICT systems across the council, the committee was informed that this was not something for which 3C ICT was currently responsible as the server room was managed by South Cambridgeshire Facilities Management. The Head of 3C ICT explained that this failure had occurred during a weekend."

"The newly consolidated server room environments, such as the server room at Pathfinder House which 3C ICT managed, had monitoring equipment in place. The server room at South Cambridgeshire Hall, and the equipment within it, ought to be similarly monitored."

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were no public questions.

5. 2019-20 PERFORMANCE REPORTING ARRANGEMENTS AND QUARTER 1 OPERATIONAL KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR RESULTS

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee received and noted a report providing it with details of proposed performance reporting arrangements for the 2019-20 financial year. The report also contained the South Cambridgeshire District Council's Quarter 1 position regarding its operational key performance indicators (KPI).

Householder planning applications

The Chairman exercised his discretion so that Councillor Peter Topping could establish the basis upon which, as summarised in a recent e-mail to Members, a process was being developed that would allow some planning applications to be validated and progressed by an outside company.

Councillor Dr. Tumi Hawkins, the Lead Cabinet Member for Planning, emphasised that the measure offered an opportunity to bring in additional resources to support the processing of minor household planning applications. The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development highlighted the fact that the lack of resources within the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service (GCSPS) had been identified as a risk within South Cambridgeshire District Council's Strategic Risk Register. He referred to the challenges faced in recruiting appropriately qualified planning officers, drawing attention to the high level of vacancies in the service and the difficulty in engaging agency staff which, in any event, was costly to the Council. For those reasons, the alternative option had been pursued of entering into a contract to provide additional capacity to assist in the validation stage for household applications, for subsequent review by case officers

employed by the Council. The Joint Director commented that a similar option had been pursued in 2014 when external resources had been used to support a range of functions within South Cambridgeshire District Council's planning section. The Committee noted the following:

- A national campaign was underway to recruit new staff
- Current planning officers would shortly transfer to new roles with revised job descriptions
- Investment in new ICT would promote efficiency
- Some planning officers were currently processing applications up to 50% above the national average and, with many of these requiring difficult and complex decisions, there were implications for staff well-being

Although the GCSPS had been meeting its targets for determining applications (as indicated in the Quarter 1 performance report before the Committee), it had also been receiving complaints about elements of that performance and the communication with customers and residents.

The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development confirmed that the Council had undertaken a formal tendering process and that a contract with the successful service provider could be managed within existing budgets. The cost was competitive and cheaper than using agency staff. The contract would provide capacity for validation and assessment of simple applications. The Committee was assured that decision-making would remain in-house. The contract was for four months and the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development outlined the type of monitoring that would take place. The decision to secure additional validation and application assessment capacity from a service provider fell within the remit of operational management under the Council's officer scheme of delegation.

While recognising that GCSPS had severe capacity issues, and that the arrangement was short-term only, some Members were concerned that such a measure did little in the way of addressing the underlying challenge. They were also concerned that the service would be delivered by an external provider which did not have knowledge and understanding of the local area and might not be available to respond to customers' enquiries. They expressed concern that the decision to place the work externally had been taken by the Joint Director without prior consultation or discussion with Members, most notably members of the Planning Committee, and that it was unsatisfactory to be notified about the decision by email after the decision had been taken. Other Members acknowledged that it was important to act to address the challenges currently being faced by the GCSPS to improve service delivery and seek to try to achieve reasonable individual officer caseloads. The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development responded to a number of questions raised by Members, and assured the Committee that:-

- Liaison would take place with the external service provider regarding the opportunity for engagement with customers in relation to their applications
- The external provider would be appropriately briefed on relevant South Cambridgeshire and local issues, background and context
- Consultation would take place with the Lead Cabinet Member and, if appropriate, Cabinet, before any decision was taken to extend the four month contract
- There was capacity and capability within the GCSPS to deliver an effective and efficient client monitoring function in respect of the contract

While recognising the factors behind the Joint Director's decision, and having noted the assurances given to Members, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee nonetheless emphasised the importance of proper monitoring and management of the contract to make sure that service of an appropriate standard was delivered to the Council's customers. The Joint Director indicated that it was likely that the Council would be dealing with named individuals at the external provider, who would quickly appreciate the culture of South Cambridgeshire. The Committee should receive a report on the Planning Service in November 2019 and this would give Members the opportunity to assess how the externalised service was functioning. The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development concluded by emphasising that the external provider would supplement rather than replace the Council's own capability.

Housing Advice

In respect of Performance Indicator AH215 (percentage of successful homeless preventions as a proportion of all homeless prevention / relief cases closed), the Scrutiny and Overview Committee noted that the data contained in the report was inaccurate. That data had been reviewed and an updated document, explaining the methodology for obtaining the data, had been tabled at the meeting. The Committee noted that, based on the revised data, the performance against the indicator was now rated as "green" meaning that the risk was being managed successfully.

With reference to Performance Indicator AH212, the Committee Chairman questioned why the spending on bed and breakfast accommodation appeared to have risen so sharply in June. However, no response was available at the meeting and he suggested that Cabinet might wish to consider further the reason for this apparent marked increase. Corporate Services / Shared Waste Service, The Committee sought to establish further information on the data behind Performance Indicator FS125 (Staff sickness days per Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff member excluding Shared Waste Services Staff) and Performance Indicator SF786a (Staff sickness days per FTE (Shared Waste Service) noting, in particular, that in the latter case, the majority of the sickness figures were attributed to musculo skeletal causes. The Interim Corporate Services Director provided further details to the Committee on the actions being taken to support managers at the depot to manage sickness absence and referrals to occupational health. Scrutiny and Overview Committee members again asked for variance data to be provided as part of the performance monitoring results reporting, noting, for example, that results on sickness absence could be skewed significantly by instances of long term sickness.

6. STRATEGIC RISK REGISTER

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee received and noted the draft Strategic Risk Register for Quarter 1.

Given the Committee's recent focus on ICT resilience and governance, Members were particularly keen to review the risk control measures relating to Risk Reference G (Infrastructure Failure). They received an update from the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance. The Chairman noted that, at its previous meeting, the Committee had learned from the Head of 3C ICT that many of the recent ICT problems experienced at the Council had related to the telephone system that needed replacing. The Committee noted that officers were working with 3C ICT to commission a project to progress the replacement of the Council's telephone system. Members were updated on progress with the roll out of the Council Anywhere project. They noted that a wi-fi audit had been undertaken recently and would be acted upon. In terms of governance of shared services (Risk Reference H), the Committee welcomed the proposal to consider

establishing a shared Scrutiny Committee for shared services.

With reference to the risk relating to Housing delivery and maintaining a 5 year housing supply (Risk Reference C1), following questioning on whether annual monitoring of delivery against the housing trajectory was sufficient, the Committee noted a proposal to move to quarterly monitoring once new ICT systems were in place.

7. VALUE FOR MONEY STRATEGY

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee received and noted a report that would be asking Cabinet, at its meeting on 4 September 2019, to consider the adoption of a Value for Money Strategy by the Council

The Interim Finance Director said that the report was now final, and that the word 'draft' should therefore be disregarded.

The Committee reviewed the draft Value for Money Strategy set out at Appendix A. Members acknowledged the value of the strategy in demonstrating how the Council would seek to make sure that the Council was achieving value for money. This would be particularly important in the context of the increasing emphasis on efficiency savings, invest-to-save initiatives and income generation opportunities, and in determining key investment priorities.

Noting the aim to reduce the cost of services without reducing the level of outcome or to increase the level of outcome for the same cost, as referred to in paragraph 4.6.1 of the strategy, Members felt it was important to be clear in advance about what monitoring mechanisms would be used to ensure that outcomes were not worse for customers and suggested that perhaps this should be clearer in the Strategy. There was also a concern that the Council should not assume that capacity was available in the community or voluntary sector to pick up services the Council was no longer able to deliver. With reference to paragraph 4.9.1 of the Strategy, Committee Members were mindful of the difficult judgments that would need to be made in balancing economic considerations with the need for environmental and social outcomes. The Interim Finance Director advised the Committee that in any process of service change, a full review and risk analysis would need to be completed so that decisions could be made informed by an awareness of all relevant considerations. Additionally, as indicated in paragraph 4.5.1 of the Strategy, monitoring mechanisms would need to be in place to ensure that desired outcomes were realised. The Chairman summarised that the aim should be to ensure that that reductions in the cost of services did not result in deterioration in the level of service received by customers and the Interim Finance Director confirmed that the Value for Money Strategy should enable the Council to achieve that goal.

Committee members asked that a more considered analysis of the environmental implications of proposals be included in the relevant section of each committee report, noting that at present, very standardised responses tended to be included in this section.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee received and noted its Work Programme for 2019-20 and a copy of the Notice of Key Decisions and Non-Key Decisions.

The Chairman indicated to Members that he would be discussing with the Democratic Services Team Leader the most effective way of dealing with the Scrutiny and Overview Committee workload for the meetings in September and October 2019.

9. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee noted that its next scheduled meeting would be on Tuesday 10 September 2019 starting at 5.20pm.

10. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee agreed by affirmation that the Press and Public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item (Housing Revenue Account – Purchase of Affordable Homes and Review of Executive Scheme of Delegation) in accordance with the provisions of Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) (exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)).

11. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT PURCHASE OF AFFORDABLE HOMES AND REVIEW OF EXECUTIVE SCHEME OF DELEGATION

In accordance with Section 100B (4) (b) of the Local Government Act 1972, the Chairman had agreed that this item should be considered at the meeting as a matter of urgency, because the Council needed to enter into a contract as soon as possible in order to mitigate against the serious risk of losing Right To Buy receipts back to H.M. Treasury in December 2019.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered the report that had been drafted for submission to Cabinet on 4 September 2019. The Committee needed to review the report at the current meeting so that its comments could be conveyed to Cabinet.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee sought further information and assurances at the meeting in relation to:

- The quality of construction materials
- The precise number of units involved
- Buildings performance
- Procurement
- Benchmarking
- Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990

Having considered all the information presented, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee agreed to support recommendations 4 (a) – (c) relating to the purchase of affordable homes as outlined in the restricted report of the Interim Chief Executive.

The Committee also supported the proposal to amend the limit for executive decisions by the Lead Cabinet Member, with decisions above that level being referred to Cabinet, as outlined in recommendation 4 (d) of the restricted report.

The Meeting ended at 7.25 p.m.
