

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 15 February 2024 at 5.30 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillor Graham Cone – Chair
Councillor Stephen Drew – Vice-Chair

Councillors: Paul Bearpark (substitute) Tom Bygott
Libby Earle James Hobro
Helene Leeming Dr Lisa Redrup (substitute)
Richard Stobart Dr. Aidan Van de Weyer
Heather Williams (substitute)

Officers in attendance for all or part of the meeting:

Peter Campbell (Head of Housing), Susan Carter (Service Manager - Housing Advice and Options), Aaron Clarke (Democratic Services Technical Officer), Bode Esan (Head of Climate, Environment & Waste), Andrew Francis (Elections and Democratic Services Manager), Heather Jones ([Deputy Director Planning and Building Quality](#)), Kevin Ledger (Senior Policy and Performance Officer), Peter Maddock (Head of Finance), Jeff Membery (Head of Transformation, HR and Corporate Services), John Murphy (Monitoring Officer), Ian Senior (Scrutiny and Governance Adviser), Duncan Vessey (Head of Ermine Street Housing) and Liz Watts (Chief Executive)

Councillor John Williams (Lead Cabinet Member for Resources) was in attendance, by invitation.

Councillors Peter Fane and Sally Ann Hart (both Scrutiny and Overview Committee members), Henry Batchelor (Lead Cabinet Member for Environment), John Batchelor (Lead Cabinet Member for Housing), Dr Tumi Hawkins (Lead Cabinet Member for Planning) and Peter McDonald (Lead Cabinet Member for Economic Development) were in attendance remotely.

1. Apologies for absence

Councillors Anna Bradnam, Martin Cahn, Sue Ellington and Judith Rippeth sent apologies. Councillors Lisa Redrup, Paul Bearpark and Heather Williams substituted respectively for Councillors Bradnam, Cahn and Ellington.

Councillors Bridget Smith (Leader of the Council), Brian Milnes (Deputy Leader) and Bill Handley (Lead Cabinet Member for Communities) also sent apologies.

2. Declarations of Interest

Councillor James Hobro declared an interest as a non-Executive Director of Ermine Street Housing and withdrew from the Chamber during consideration of Item 8 (Ermine Street Housing – Review of the Business Plan).

Councillor Richard Stobart declared an interest as a Director of the South Cambridgeshire

Investment Partnership LLP.

3. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee authorised the Chair to sign, as a correct record, the minutes of the meeting held on 18 January 2024.

4. **Public Questions**

There were no public questions.

5. **2023-24 Quarter Three Performance Report**

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee reviewed a report about the Council's Quarter Three (Q3) position regarding its operational Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and progress in relation to the 2020-25 Business Plan.

PN510 and PN511 (major and non-major planning applications determined within 13 and eight weeks respectively or agreed timescale)

The Committee welcomed the improvement in both KPIs and noted that the statistics suggested that the Four-Day-Week trial was having a beneficial impact in this instance.

PN512 (Percentage of appeals against major planning permission refusals allowed)

The Deputy Director (Planning and Building Quality) assured the Committee that, despite the two-year trend being upwards, the KPI nevertheless showed a positive result when compared with the Government's target.

FS117 (Staff turnover)

The Committee noted that this KPI reflected the quarterly situation rather than an annual one, and welcomed an assurance that this would be made clearer in future reports.

ES412 and ES414 (Kilograms of residual waste and total waste per household year to date)

The Committee noted that historical data was being used to develop this new KPI and noted also how that data would influence the setting of achievable targets in the future.

AH211 (Average days to relet all housing stock)

Amid continuing concern from the Committee about this challenging KPI, the Lead Cabinet Member for Housing said that, in the light of intense external scrutiny about the four-day-week, South Cambridgeshire District Council would be ill-advised to review the target at this stage. He summarised the various processes conducted as part of the KPI and explained that the Council was continuing to make progress after the difficulties of carrying out necessary repairs during the Covid-19 pandemic.

SH332 (Percentage of emergency repairs within 24 hours)

The Committee welcomed the consistently high performance under this KPI, due in part to the performance of the Council's contractor. The Head of Housing undertook to provide Committee members with a list of what constituted an emergency repair.

Business Plan Objective 2(a) (Address water scarcity)

The Deputy Director (Planning and Building Quality) assured the committee that officers from across the Council were collaborating with partner organisations to identify ways to encourage reduced water usage and mitigate waste.

Business Plan Objective 3(b) (Supporting local businesses – Shared Prosperity Fund Green Business Grant)

The Lead Cabinet Member for Economic Development explained the purpose of this fund, operated by the Cambridge & Peterborough Combined Authority across the County and available until 2025.

Business Plan Objective 4 (Skills development opportunities)

The Lead Cabinet Member for Economic Development explained how South Cambridgeshire District Council would help Small and Medium-sized businesses (SMEs) by directing them to appropriate sources of digital training.

Business Plan Objective 4(b) (Information on the Council's website)

The Head of Transformation, HR and Corporate Services outlined the process being followed in order to refresh the Council's website and make it more user-friendly. He confirmed that, before going live, ease of access to the new website would be assessed by reference to the experience of residents seeking information.

Business Plan Objective 5(b)(ii) (Statement of Community Involvement)

The Lead Cabinet Member for Planning outlined the steps taken by planning officers to engage with Parish and Town Councils, Agents, Developers and residents. These included the staging of regular Forums.

Business Plan Objective 5(c) (Cultural Strategy)

The Head of Transformation, HR and Corporate Services outlined the process being followed in order to deliver a Strategy that Members wanted within the resources currently available to the Council.

Having received responses to questions posed by Committee members, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee

1. affirmed the Key Performance Indicator results and comments at Appendix A to the report and progress against Business Plan actions at the draft Appendix B; and
2. recommended to Cabinet that the Business Plan should acknowledge the issue of water consumption and the importance of identifying and implementing appropriate mitigation measures (Appendix B (Action 2(a)(i) concerning water scarcity).

6. Homelessness Strategy

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee reviewed a report on the Council's five-yearly Strategy update intended to help prevent homelessness in South Cambridgeshire.

Councillor Peter Fane reminded the Committee about his non-remunerated role at Shire Homes but did consider it to be a declarable interest.

Committee members explored a range of issues arising from the report. In particular

- an already incisive strategy might benefit further from an examination of anecdotal evidence such as notable successes and lessons learned
- care should be taken to ensure that the strategy remains relevant as the demography of homelessness changes
- there could be value in housing and planning officers and Lead Cabinet Members investigating the feasibility, in terms of such factors as

management costs and the careful choice of tenants, of requiring the delivery of purpose-built HMOs (Houses in Multiple Occupation) in new developments.

In response to a question about data collection, the Chief Executive reminded Members about the data collection team to be considered by Full Council as part of the budget proposals for 2024-25. Advances in such technologies as Artificial Intelligence could identify risks from across the organisation and help prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place.

Having received responses to questions asked by Committee members, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee commends to Cabinet the new Homelessness Strategy 2023-2028.

7. Conservative Group budget proposals 2024/25

Councillor Heather Williams stepped down as a Committee member for this item in order to present the report and answer questions in her capacity as Leader of the Opposition Conservative Group.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee reviewed a report setting out the Opposition Conservative Group's budget proposals for 2024-25.

Following a short debate focussing on the proposal to freeze Council Tax and having reviewed the measures proposed by the Conservative Group, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee agreed by affirmation to submit them to the meeting of Full Council on 27 February 2024 for consideration alongside the detailed draft budget for 2024-25.

8. South Cambs. Limited trading as Ermine Street Housing: Review of the Business Plan 2023/2024 to 2032/2033

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee reviewed a report relating to the annually updated Ermine Street Housing Business Plan containing the latest portfolio details, the previous year's performance, and the amended financial assumptions.

Committee members explored the following issues:

- the nature and role of the travel-to-work area
- the degree of risk that Ermine Street Housing created for the Council
- the business relationship between Ermine Street Housing and South Cambridgeshire District Council

Having reviewed the report and received responses to questions asked by Committee members, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee commended to Cabinet the Ermine Street Business Plan for the period 2023-2024 to 2032-2033 together with the following recommendations:

- a. that the Ermine Street Housing Business Plan should use footnotes to explain complex accounting concepts, and clearly explain the meaning of unavoidable technical jargon.
- b. that in future the Cabinet report relating to the Ermine Street Housing Business Plan should set out in greater detail the risks to Council so that the Scrutiny and Overview Committee can help and support the Cabinet by proposing

mitigation measures where appropriate.

c. specifically, that the covering report for the Business Plan should address Strategic Risk SR25 (Ermine Street Housing (ESH) £100 million investment fails to deliver return) so that the Committee can consider the potential implications for the residents of South Cambridgeshire.

9. **Work Programme**

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee received and noted the work programme attached to the agenda.

The Meeting ended at 7.50 p.m.
