



Report to: Cabinet 6 December 2021

Lead Members: Councillor John Batchelor
Councillor Dr. Tumi Hawkins
Councillor John Williams

From: Councillor Grenville Chamberlain, Chair, Scrutiny and Overview Committee
Councillor Judith Rippeth, Vice-Chair, Scrutiny and Overview Committee

Update from Scrutiny and Overview Committee

Purpose

1. This report is to inform Cabinet about relevant discussion among members of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee at their meeting on 11 November 2021 and to make recommendations at paragraphs 2, 4, 6, 8, and 9.

Planning performance – Follow-up review (Internal Audit)

Recommendation

2. While this follow-up review is for information only (having been requested after the review of Planning Performance in April 2021) the Scrutiny and Overview Committee recognises the considerable effort made by the Head of Internal Audit in producing his report and appreciates the hard work of officers in the Greater Cambridge Planning Service. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee invites Cabinet to endorse these sentiments.

Comments

3. Committee members commented as follows:
 - The improvement recorded by Internal Audit and evidenced by the granting of reasonable assurance is to be welcomed.
 - It is recognised that the review was conducted against the challenging backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, staff shortages caused by

recruitment difficulties, and the transition to a new software package part-way through that review.

- Quality is just as important as process. While the Government's metric does not take user-experience into account, it is clear planning officers recognise the need to make the process as rewarding as possible for those customers engaging with it.

Planning performance – Overview for period from 1 September 2019 to 30 September 2021

Recommendation

4. This matter was referred to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee by Full Council at its meeting in September 2021. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee recommends that Cabinet notes the comments made by Committee members.

Comments

5. Committee members commented as follows:

- It is again recognised that the review was conducted against the challenging backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, staff shortages caused by recruitment difficulties, and the transition to a new software package part-way through that review.
- The recent introduction of a 'no amendments' approach to planning applications and the discharge of conditions creates a risk that applicants will withdraw applications and re-submit. However, Committee members accept that this approach is still a pilot scheme intended to encourage greater discipline by those submitting new applications. Nevertheless, the new approach should be monitored.
- It is recognised that the cost of living in the Greater Cambridge area is just one of the factors making it even more difficult to recruit in a sector suffering a skills shortage nationally. Furthermore, it is noted that staff turnover has increased as the country begins to emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic.
- It is noted that performance management information is being reviewed so that it can help managers and Members to understand the planning service's activities and be more effective (and not skewed by statistical extremes).

Investment Strategy

Recommendation – Climate Change

6. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee recommends that the Cabinet considers the adoption of 'principles of disclosure' to guide investment decisions where such investment might be affected in future by the impact of climate change, and that, if necessary, the Cabinet reconsiders the Investment Strategy at more frequent intervals than 12 months so that appropriate changes can be made as soon as possible.

Comments

7. Cabinet is asked to note that:
 - Scrutiny and Overview Committee members spent a considerable amount of time analysing the investment categories in the draft Strategy, and clarifying the new rules relating to borrowing from the Public Works Loans Board (PWLB). They note that there are risks for this Council but also opportunities – for example, in borrowing money to promote the 'Green to our core' objective of the Business Plan within South Cambridgeshire.
 - Committee members note that the new rules would not preclude the Council from borrowing money from the PWLB to maintain properties outside the District that had been bought, through Ermine Street Housing, prior to 26 November 2020.
 - Members note the new Investment Team structure within the Council and its working relationship with external advisers and consultants. They are satisfied with the flexibility this provides to deal with future changes in direction.
 - The Chair would like to highlight the idea of bringing back into use empty properties (including shared-ownership properties) by agreement with their owners (see paragraph 8 below).
 - Members have some reservations about the conversion of offices to residential.
 - Clarity is needed as to investment returns.

Empty Homes Strategy

Recommendation 1 - Options available to bring empty homes back into use (Section 6 of the draft Empty Homes Strategy)

8. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee recommends that Cabinet considers the further option of South Cambridgeshire District Council buying empty properties by agreement with their owners under the terms of the Council's Investment Strategy.

Recommendation 2 - Disincentives through Council Tax

9. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee supports in principle Section 7 of the draft Strategy but recommends that Cabinet monitor the effectiveness of the measures outlined in bringing empty homes back into use and considers the option of increasing the premium charges if it considers there to be a reasonable prospect of such a step reducing the overall number of empty properties throughout the District.

Comments

10. Scrutiny and Overview Committee members made the following additional comments:

- Purchase by South Cambridgeshire District Council of empty properties could provide the opportunity to install the latest energy-efficient features and let as investments subject to owner co-operation negating the need for lengthy and expensive legal measures.
- While noting that it currently receives only between five and ten complaints a year about empty properties, South Cambridgeshire District Council should be prepared, if necessary, to become more proactive in dealing with 'challenging buildings'.
- Inclusion in the Budget for 2022-23 of funding for a dedicated Empty Homes Officer is welcomed and supported.
- In considering how to deal with empty properties, it is important to consider both the nature of ownership (tenure) and the circumstances of each individual case.

Report Author:

Ian Senior – Scrutiny and Governance Adviser
Telephone – 01954 713028