

## South Cambridgeshire District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on  
Tuesday, 6 September 2022 at 5.20 p.m.

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

Councillors:	Anna Bradnam	Libby Earle
	Sue Ellington	Peter Fane
	Sally Ann Hart	James Hobro
	Helene Leeming	John Loveluck
	Richard Stobart	Dr. Aidan Van de Weyer

Officers in attendance for all or part of the meeting:

**In the Chamber:** Aaron Clarke (Democratic Services Technical Officer), Ian Senior (Scrutiny and Governance Adviser) and Liz Watts (Chief Executive)

**Virtually:** Anne Ainsworth (Chief Operating Officer), Peter Campbell (Head of Housing), Bode Esan (Head of Climate, Environment & Waste), Peter Maddock (Head of Finance), Rory McKenna (Monitoring Officer) and Jeff Membery (Head of Transformation, HR, and Corporate Services)

### 1. Chair's announcements

The Chair made several brief housekeeping announcements.

### 2. Apologies for absence

Councillor Dr. Martin Cahn sent apologies.

### 3. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

### 4. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Committee authorised the Chair to sign, as a correct record, the minutes of the meeting held on 26 July 2022.

### 5. Public Questions

Mr. Daniel Fulton (Fews Lane Consortium) asked the following question:

“Parliament has enacted a number of laws requiring that local authorities publish their accounts on an annual basis and that documents related to those accounts, including public procurement contracts, are made available for public inspection in accordance with the timeframes established by the Secretary of State.

For the last two financial years, this council has failed to meet those deadlines and has, in fact, failed to publish any accounts at all.

Residents of multiple villages in South Cambridgeshire have requested access to the contract documents for one expenditure from the council's 2020-21 accounts. This was a limited and focused request that could have been easily fulfilled by the council.

Instead, the council refused the requests.

This refusal to allow public access to public information is part of a disturbing trend at this council that has become increasingly pervasive over the past 4 years.

When potential wrongdoing becomes apparent, this council's response is all too often to hide the evidence at all costs and despite any legal obligations the council may be under to make the information available to councillors and members of the public.

The local members for Longstanton have declined to respond to residents' requests to view the contract documents in question. Members of the opposition political group have remained silent as well.

What good reason could this council's chief executive, monitoring officer, and section 151 officer possibly have for keeping details of a public procurement contract secret after the contract has been fulfilled, and why won't a single member of this council support the documents being available for inspection, as is required by law?

Do you all honestly believe that this council should not be accountable to the public for how it spends public funds?

I would like to ask each member of this committee to please contact the leader of the council and ask her why she won't support transparency and openness in regard to public spending by this council.

I will end on a positive note.

Change at this council is possible. Previously, I would not have been permitted to make these remarks at today's meeting. I am glad those days are over. Democracy cannot operate without freedom of political expression.

The majority group at this council has shown that it is capable of renewal and self-improvement, and I would like to thank this committee and its chair for allowing me to speak today."

The Chair replied as follows:

"Thank you for your statement Mr Fulton. Like all residents of South Cambridgeshire your participation in meetings of the council is welcome in supporting us to fulfil our responsibilities as councillors.

I have allowed your statement using the discretion given to me as chair of the committee under the public speaking scheme, even though you did not follow the correct procedure in submitting the statement in time. As you are no doubt fully aware, the rules of the council are in place in order to ensure the most effective and efficient management of our work. Statements, and questions, are required to be submitted three clear working days in advance of the meeting taking place so

that full and clear answers can be prepared to any pertinent points or questions that are raised. By not following the procedures that are in place you have made it more difficult for me as chair to fulfil what I am fully aware are my duties in this role. Therefore, whilst it would have been good to be able to provide a full response to the points you have raised, that is not possible on this occasion. This is disappointing for me as chair as I wish to be fastidious in the delivery of my role as chair of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee on behalf of all stakeholders in our district and beyond.

Your question arrived yesterday (Monday 5th September) just after midday. I was first able to talk to Democratic Services about it at around 4pm when I had finished my working day. In order to be fair and maximise my capacity to respond I spent time last night and today talking to colleagues and officers so as to ascertain what information I could provide you with in response. I apologise if my answer is necessarily limited due to the very short period of time you gave me to do this. However, I will do my best in the circumstance and ask you to remember the short window of time I have had to do this.

In relation to the delivery of the audits of 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, as well as the specific request to view parts of the “contract documents” to which you refer, I am informed by the Monitoring Officer that you and he exchanged emails about this in August, and that an explanation was provided to you on 23rd August in answer to your specific questions that you have raised again in your statement today. I do not have anything additional to add to the response you have been given by the Monitoring Officer which in my view responds clearly and in full to your questions.

I thank you for your kind words at the end of your statement and look forward to continuing to work constructively with you and all residents in South Cambridgeshire in my role as chair of his committee. I would like to remind you that in January 2022 the previous chair of this committee specifically reminded you via email of the requirement to submit statements or questions three clear working days ahead of the meeting as per the council’s public speaking scheme. Whilst I have used my discretion to allow your statement in order to be as open as transparent as possible, I would like to remind you once again that the rules are in place to help you as well as the council’s members and officers to best be able to discharge their duties.”

## **6. Work Programme**

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

Committee members also noted the following topics not on the Corporate Forward Plan, but which Councillor Stephen Drew considered as worthy of committee review.

- Relationships between the planning service and parish / town councils
- Plans for the efficient use of the space available at South Cambridgeshire District Council Hall up to 2026
- Engagement of the council with stakeholders across the district
- Young people in South Cambridgeshire

## **Relationships between the planning service and parish / town councils**

Members discussed several concerns contributing to some parish and town councils' perception they were not fully engaged in the planning process. While Members accepted that a scrutiny review of this topic should seek to build on the outcomes of work carried out last year by the Planning Committee Development Group, a crucial element would be to identify a mode of engagement that recognised the diversity of parish and town councils in terms of their size, composition, and skill sets.

A scrutiny review should also consider whether the internal structure at the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service could be made simpler for outsiders to follow and also whether the transition between case officers could be less disruptive. Clearer communication, including the use of Plain English, was an important factor.

The Chief Executive welcomed Members' suggestions that a survey of parish and town councils be carried out and that a series of case studies be compiled to help the Committee conduct its review.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **agreed** to allocate time within its work programme for an analysis of relationships between the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service and parish / town councils.

## **Plans for the efficient use of the space available at South Cambridgeshire District Council Hall up to 2026**

Building on the investment put into South Cambridgeshire Hall and noting the impact on working patterns brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, Members envisaged that this review would examine options for maximising the effective use of the Hall by providing a facility for businesses and private organisations. While security would be an important factor in agreeing tenancy arrangements, Members recognized the opportunity to promote the work of South Cambridgeshire District Council and enhance its profile within the community.

There was scope for sharing ideas with Cambridge City Council as that Council considered its own options for benefiting from using its assets differently.

The recent installation of green energy measures at South Cambridgeshire Hall set the building apart from many others and would be used to attract potential tenants such as social businesses.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **agreed** to allocate time within its work programme for considering a briefing note detailing progress in implementing plans for the efficient use of the space available at South Cambridgeshire District Council Hall up to 2026

## **Engagement of the Council with stakeholders across the district**

Members envisaged this review looking at ways to engage with all residents, including those for whom face-to-face meetings were favoured over video calls, and those represented for example by tenant participation groups.

It would consider how best to communicate with those living in small communities with parish meetings rather than parish councils. Part of this engagement would be to effectively communicate the full extent of the District Council's powers. It would look at options for improving engagement with hard-to-reach groups.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **agreed** to allocate time within its work programme for an analysis of South Cambridgeshire District Council's various methods of engagement with stakeholders across the district.

### **Young people in South Cambridgeshire**

Following Full Council's support in July 2022 for an investigation into how South Cambridgeshire District Council can improve democratic and service engagement with young people throughout the district, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee established a Task & Finish Group consisting of the following five Members:

- Councillor Graham Cone
- Councillor Stephen Drew
- Councillor Sue Ellington
- Councillor Helene Leeming
- Councillor Richard Stobart

The Chief Executive said that the Task & Finish Group would be able to co-opt others, such as a young person from within the district, should it wish to. The Chief Executive would identify a lead officer.

### **Future scrutiny**

Scrutiny and Overview Committee members suggested several organisations (including from the voluntary sector, transport providers and utilities) that might be invited to attend future meetings. Officers would consider options for taking this forward.

## **7. To Note the Date of the next meeting**

Members noted that the next Scrutiny and Overview Committee meeting would be on 20 October 2022 starting at 5.20pm.

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**The Meeting ended at 6.45 p.m.**

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