

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 15 December 2022 at 5.20 p.m.

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

Councillors: Anna Bradnam Tom Bygott
Libby Earle Peter Fane
James Hobro Dr John Loveluck
Richard Stobart Dr. Aidan Van de Weyer

Officers in attendance for all or part of the meeting:

In the Council: Anne Ainsworth (Chief Operating Officer), Peter Maddock (Head of Finance), Ian Senior (Scrutiny and Governance Adviser)

Virtually: Peter Campbell (Head of Housing), Bode Esan (Head of Climate, Environment & Waste), Stephen Kelly (Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development) and Rory McKenna (Monitoring Officer)

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

Councillors Helene Leeming (Committee member), Sunita Hansraj and Cllr Heather Williams (substitute) were in attendance remotely.

1. Chair's announcements

The Chair made several brief housekeeping announcements.

2. Apologies for absence

Councillors Sue Ellington, Sally Ann Hart, and Judith Rippeth sent apologies as Committee members. Councillor Heather Williams attended remotely as substitute for Councillor Ellington,

Apologies were also received from Councillors Bill Handley (Lead Cabinet Member for Communities) and Bridget Smith (Leader of the Council).

3. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Richard Stobart declared an interest as a Director of both the South Cambridgeshire Investment Partnership and South Cambridgeshire Project.

4. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Committee authorised the Chair to sign, as a correct record, the minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2022 subject as follows

1. To add Councillor John Williams (Lead Cabinet Member for Resources) as having been present in the Chamber.
2. Minute 6 (2022-23 Quarter Two Performance Report)

Replace the paragraph

“KPIs PN510 to PN512 related to Development Management. Councillor Peter Fane said that a differentiation should be made between those planning applications determined within the period set by statutory targets and those determined within a timescale set by an Extension of Time Agreement. Councillor Fane asked that the percentage of appeals against major planning permission refusals allowed should specify the proportion allowed in respect of appeals against non-determination. The Committee noted that the number of Extension of Time Agreements and refusals made in order to meet determination targets was unrelated to the time taken to validate applications.”

with the following expanded text

“KPIs PN510 to PN512 related to Development Management. Councillor Peter Fane said that a differentiation should be made between those planning applications determined within the period set by statutory targets and those determined within a timescale set by an Extension of Time Agreement. Councillor Fane asked that the percentage of appeals against major planning permission refusals allowed should specify the proportion allowed in respect of appeals against non-determination. The Committee noted that the number of Extension of Time Agreements and refusals made in order to meet determination targets was unrelated to the time taken to validate applications.

In response, the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development said that only a small number of appeals were against non-determination, and this would not affect the standards being measured. He offered to provide clarity in writing.

While he was unsure how many small applications had been determined within statutory timescale, he confirmed that average time was now recorded for applications. Members noted a chart showing the number of days taken to determine current applications compared with lower and upper quartile performance. A reduction in the backlog of applications had resulted in a progressive reduction in determination timescales for all applications. Further analysis would show those applications falling outside the timescale. The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development undertook to give further details at the next Scrutiny and Overview Committee meeting.

Councillor Heather Williams said that for some time now there had been concerns about the extent to which the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service relied on extensions of time agreements. to which the response had been that a system would be put in place. The Chair undertook to pursue this matter with the Lead Cabinet Member for Planning and the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development.

The Committee noted that the number of Extension of Time Agreements and refusals made in order to meet determination targets was unrelated to the time taken to validate applications.

The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development informed Members that KPI PN519 (Average time to determine validated householder planning applications) should be Amber not Green.”

The Chair invited the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development to make a short statement. That statement

- clarified the number of applications determined within an extended time limit agreed with applicants
- confirmed that the previously reported backlog in validating householder planning applications had been eliminated

The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development undertook to provide a full written statement of the above to all members of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee. This would also include an analysis of appeals against the non-determination of planning applications.

5. Public Questions

There were no public questions or statements.

6. General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a draft Cabinet report updating the Medium Term Financial Strategy to the financial year 2027-2028 and the medium term financial plan following the outcome of a mid-year review of financial forecasts. Members noted that some of the assumptions used in the report might need adjusting as the budget developed and further information became available, such as through the provisional 2023-2024 Local Government Finance Settlement. However, the Head of Finance assured Councillor Anna Bradnam that he was confident that the assumption that the Council would borrow at 5% was robust.

In response to Councillor Graham Cone, the Head of Finance confirmed that the Council had significant funds invested upon which it could draw at short notice.

Councillor James Hobro asked about the ability of the assumptions made to deal with the anticipated volatility in inflation and interest rates during the next two years. The Head of Finance acknowledged the degree of uncertainty involved in predicting future events but said that the scenarios set out in the report reflected the circumstances thought most likely by officers.

Councillor Richard Stobart asked how various risks faced by the Council related to the scenarios set out in the report, and at what stage those scenarios would be triggered. In reply, Councillor John Williams assured the Committee that the situation was under constant review and that he was notified straightaway about any issues causing concern. The Head of Finance added that the corporate Risk Register considered every six months by the Audit & Corporate Governance Committee included those risks referred to by Councillor Stobart. The Head of Finance explained that the making of savings was the best way to address the challenge posed by the Fair Funding Review, which represented the biggest risk to South Cambridgeshire District Council. When further savings could not realistically be made then the Council would need to focus on income generation instead.

For Councillor Tom Bygott, it was important to understand the implications for this Council of forthcoming changes to the allocation of retained Business Rates. Following an explanation of the possible outcome of these changes, Councillor John Williams concluded that upper-tier Authorities such as Cambridgeshire County Council would benefit at the expense of district councils. Councillor John Williams assured the Committee that the diversity of Council investments and the adoption of new working practices were helping to protect the Council against potential future uncertainty about funding, which included changes to the way in which the Public Works Loan Board operated. The Head of Finance said that South Cambridgeshire District Council was in a remarkably strong position financially.

Appreciating that the MTFS was subject to change prior to a final version being considered by Full Council in February 2023, Members discussed what role the Scrutiny and Overview Committee might play in managing any risk posed by financial volatility during the next two months. The Chair said it would be a matter of judgment as to whether circumstances should trigger a further review by the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.

Following further discussion, and subject to comments made during this meeting, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee **noted and endorsed** the draft recommendation that Cabinet

- (a) acknowledges the projected changes in service spending and the overall resources available to the Council over the medium term to 2027-2028; and
- (b) recommends to Full Council the updated Medium Term Financial Strategy once the 2023-2024 budget is complete and the settlement finalised.

7. **Work Programme**

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

As Chair of the Young People Task & Finish Group, Councillor Richard Stobart updated the Committee on the Group's work.

8. **To Note the Date of the next meeting**

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee noted that its next meeting had been moved from Tuesday 10 January 2023 to Thursday 12 January 2023 starting at 5.20pm.

The Meeting ended at 6.50 p.m.
