

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 14 February 2013 at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillor Ben Shelton – Chairman
Councillor David Whiteman-Downes – Vice-Chairman

Councillors: Alison Elcox
Roger Hall
Janet Lockwood
Bunty Waters
Hazel Smith

Jose Hales
Roger Hickford
Bridget Smith
David Bard

Councillors Dr David Bard and Hazel Smith were in attendance as substitutes for Ted Ridgway-Watt and Mark Hersom respectively.

Councillors Tom Bygott, Simon Edwards, James Hockney and Ray Manning were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers: Graham Aisthorpe-Watts
Alex Colyer
Maggie Jennings
Richard May

Democratic Services Team Leader
Executive Director, Corporate Services
Democratic Services Officer
Policy & Performance Manager

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Lynda Harford, Mark Hersom, Douglas de Lacey and Ted Ridgway-Watt.

39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

40. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 January 2012 were agreed and signed as a correct record.

41. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None received.

42. CORPORATE PLAN 2013-18

Councillor James Hockney, Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Customer Services presented the report on the Council's Corporate Plan 2013-18 and particularly emphasised its relationship with the Medium Term Financial Strategy that enabled delivery of the Council's priorities within allocated resources. He added that there had been a positive response to consultations undertaken on major issues including the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan, Broadband provision and the Youth Council.

Councillor Hockney referred to one of the recommendations that the Scrutiny & Overview Committee had made concerning Action 6 in the Plan which, on reflection, had been deemed to limit the scope of its intention and therefore had been removed.

Several members of the Committee expressed their disappointed that reference to 'council-owned' wording had been removed from Action 6, particularly as Cabinet had accepted the Committee's recommendation at its meeting on 8 November 2012. Members added that it was important to broaden the scope and look at all alternatives to ensure that all available council-owned property was used as a priority for temporary accommodation, particularly as it was more economical to use than privately rented property.

Following further debate and the acknowledgement that there was a shortage of smaller homes in the district, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee,

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that Action A6 in the Corporate Plan be amended to read:

'Increase the supply of council-owned temporary accommodation as a priority without restricting the Council's options'

43. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2013/14, INCLUDING COUNCIL TAX SETTING), HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT, (INCLUDING HOUSING RENTS), CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2013/14 - 2017/18 AND TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY: REVISED 2012/13 AND 2013/14

Councillor Simon Edwards, Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder, gave a brief overview of the report on the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) due to be considered by Cabinet and agreed by Council later in the month; he then invited the Committee to ask questions.

Estimates

The Portfolio Holder was asked to comment on the importance of the 5-year MTFS and its relationship to short-term planning. In response, Councillor Edwards agreed that concentration had been based on the first 2 years of the MTFS and highlighted an uncertain degree from that point onwards. He added, that it was to the officers' credit that the projected estimates would enable the Council to set an achievable budget.

Councillor Edwards confirmed that the New Homes Bonus would not be used to fund any future shortfall.

Investments

Responding to a question raised about the Council demonstrating best value, Councillor Edwards informed the Committee that this Council was in the upper quartile for returns and had been one of the top 5 Councils in most recent years. A risk-averse strategy was used whereby investments were made in British banks and building societies and unlike some councils, the work was undertaken in-house.

One Member felt that it was acceptable to initiate risky investments for higher returns in order to spread the risk. In response the Portfolio Holder stressed the need to balance risk versus reward, however, Council could consider earmarking money for investment in low-quality counter-parties.

General Fund/Capital Programme

It had been noted that the General Fund showed a balance of approximately £7m at March 2012 and by March 2018 showed a reduction to £2.5m. The question was raised as to whether the New Homes Bonus, together with the £2.5m in reserves could be used to balance the budget and/or freeze council tax? The Portfolio Holder stated that he felt there would be significant risks arising during the next 5 years, however, once the

General Election in 2015 had taken place, the outcome should become much clearer.

An explanation was requested concerning the relationship between the Capital Programme and the General Fund balance at 2015/16 which the Portfolio Holder provided.

South Cambs Housing Ltd

It was confirmed that there would be no financial risk to the Council following the formation of the company; no decisions could be taken without Member approval.

Council Tax

It was explained that the 3.5% increase in council tax would enable the Council to maintain its financial position during the Strategy period.

Planning Charges

Referring to the table of charges for new developments, a question was raised on whether this would result in additional revenue being raised from larger developments. In response it was noted that Government consultation was awaited on fee charging, however, a balance would be required to encourage developers to use this Council's services rather than other providers.

Building Regulation Charges

It was noted that the fees were set by Government and the requirement for the service to break-even.

In conclusion, both the Chairman and the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder expressed their thanks for the work carried out by officers in preparing the MTFS and in particular John Garnham, who had only recently been appointed as Head of Finance, Policy and Performance.

44. PERFORMANCE MONITORING 2012/13

Councillor James Hockney, Corporate and Customer Services Portfolio Holder presented the report highlighting the numerous successes to date. He then invited the Committee to raise questions.

Website

Several questions were raised concerning the Council's replacement website. In response it was noted that the original supplier had gone into liquidation and it was financially advantageous to move to a new one. The functionality of the original website had also been limited compared with the new one and since its launch there had been a significant increase in users via mobile phones. Members were assured that officers were responding to the feedback received via a SOCITM survey.

Action A12 – Development Plan

It was noted that feedback from members of the public had indicated that it had been difficult for them to navigate the on-line consultation document. The Portfolio Holder undertook to liaise with the Planning and Localism Portfolio Holder on ways in which links could be improved for future consultation purposes. The Portfolio Holder undertook to investigate concerns expressed that a number of the electronic forms had not been submitted correctly.

Action B03 – Strategy to reduce barriers to employment

It was explained that a strategy had been drafted with apprenticeships as a key strand,

together with initiatives to enable access to employment opportunities.

45. UPDATE ON THE MECHANICAL BIOLOGICAL TREATMENT PROCESSING PLANT

The Committee, having **NOTED** the contents of the briefing note provided by the Director of Health and Environmental Services, **REQUESTED** that the Environmental Services Portfolio Holder enquires into the possibility of Amey Cespa financing the cost of transporting waste to another processing plant until the MBT plant is fully functioning again.

46. COUNCIL FORWARD PLAN

The Committee having **NOTED** the contents of the Forward Plan and found it a useful tool to inform subjects for possible scrutiny, **AGREED** that a separate informal meeting of the Committee be arranged to agree topics for future scrutiny by Task and Finish Groups.

47. WORK PROGRAMME 2013

The Committee **AGREED** its work programme for 2012/13 and requested that fewer presentations be made in the future, suggesting written briefing notes as an alternative.

48. MONITORING THE EXECUTIVE

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided in the agenda.

49. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee **NOTED** the dates of the two remaining meetings for 2012/13, as follows:

21 March 2013 at 6pm
23 April 2013 at 6pm

and **AGREED** that the dates of meetings for 2013/14 be held on Thursdays, commencing at 6pm on the following dates:

04 July 2013
05 September 2013
07 November 2013
16 January 2014
11 February 2014
03 April 2014

The Meeting ended at 7.50 p.m.
