

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Tuesday, 21 January 2020 at 4.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillor Grenville Chamberlain – Chairman
Councillor Brian Milnes – Vice-Chairman

Councillors: Anna Bradnam
Graham Cone
Geoff Harvey
Judith Rippeth
Heather Williams
Dr. Martin Cahn
Dr. Claire Daunton
Steve Hunt
Deborah Roberts

Councillors Gavin Clayton, Neil Gough, John Williams, Ruth Betson and Dr. Tumi Hawkins were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers: Victoria Wallace
Peter Maddock
Gareth Bell
David Ousby
Scrutiny and Governance Adviser
Head of Finance
Communications Manager
Head of Commercial Development & Investment

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Shrobona Bhattacharya, Sarah Cheung Johnson, Douglas de Lacey and Peter McDonald. Councillor Heather Williams was present as a substitute for Councillor Bhattacharya and Councillor Deborah Roberts was present as a substitute for Councillor de Lacey.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 December 2019 were agreed as a correct record.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Mr Daniel Fulton was invited to ask his question, which had been submitted in advance of the meeting. Planning officers were unable to attend the meeting to provide a response however the following written response had been prepared, which the Chairman read out:

The Planning Service is currently carrying out a review of all of the planning conditions used across both South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge, with a view of having a standard list of conditions that will be used for relevant applications. This includes conditions related to sustainable design and construction and policies CC/3 and CC/4 of the Local Plan. This will help to ensure effective implementation of these policies.

5. 2020-25 BUSINESS PLAN

The Deputy Leader (non-statutory) presented the 2020-25 Business Plan. The committee considered and commented on the proposed Business Plan and action grid, which detailed the activities the Council would carry out under each of the four priority areas.

Councillor Roberts expressed concern about the priorities identified in the Business Plan and that core ambitions were identified rather than core functions. She expressed concern about the priority of growing local businesses and economies and was unsure what support the Council could provide for entrepreneurs that they needed. Councillor Roberts suggested that the Council looked at where the problems were in the organisation and suggested the Planning department should be a priority area for the Council. She suggested a complete review of the Planning process and Shared Planning Service should be a top priority under the 'A modern and caring Council' priority area. She informed members that the villages she represented were very angry and concerned about how Planning delegation was managed by the Council. In response to this, the Lead Cabinet Member for Planning informed the committee that the delegation process had been put in place by the previous administration in 2016 and had not changed. Councillor Hawkins explained that parish councils could request that a planning application be referred to the Planning Committee and that this request was reviewed by Planning officers in consultation with the Planning Committee Chairman. This process was being looked at as part of the review of the Council's Constitution. Counsel's advice had been sought on this matter and a report would be presented to the Planning Committee. Councillor Hawkins reminded the Scrutiny and Overview Committee that it had received a report on the performance of the Planning service at its December 2019 meeting, during which members had the opportunity to raise any concerns about the service.

In response to the concerns raised by Councillor Roberts, Councillor Gough informed the committee that:

- The Council would provide support sought by any existing South Cambridgeshire businesses and to those who sought support in setting up new businesses in the district.
- The priorities identified in the Business Plan were above and beyond business as usual. The importance of the efficiency of the Planning service was recognised and this, as well as the Council's other core services, were part of business as usual.

Other committee members expressed their support for the priority to support local businesses.

Support was expressed by committee members for the reference to paper free meetings. The resources needed for this were queried. The Lead Cabinet

Member informed the committee that this was about modernisation and that a lot of detail had to be worked through regarding equipment and software in order for meetings to become paper free. The committee was informed that the provision of equipment for members was under consideration and it was recognised that there would be a cost associated with this.

The following comments and suggestions regarding the Business Plan were made:

- Under action B1 of Priority B) Housing that is truly affordable for everyone to live in, it was requested that the wording 'where possible' was amended to provide more clarity.
- Under the list of actions completed from the 2019-20 Business Plan:
 - Regarding the action, 'Signed contracts to deliver 150 new Council houses in the next few years', members requested that the number of years be specified.
 - Regarding the anti fly-tipping campaign that had reached over 40,000 people, members queried whether this had led to a reduction in fly tipping.

In response to the points raised by committee members, the Deputy Leader informed the committee that:

- The Council would continue to monitor the number of fly tips and the number of fly tip prosecutions.
- The Council would continue to ensure the highest renewable energy and energy efficiency standards with all the Council homes it built.
- The Council was trying a number of things to deter fly tipping and was targeting the areas most vulnerable to this.
- There was an additional staffing element in the plan for more community forums.
- £200,000 had been assigned in the budget to create a new team to deliver a new Business Support service. It was difficult to say when the recruitment to this service would be completed.
- In response to concerns raised regarding the difficulty to attract and retain talent in Planning, the committee was informed that recruitment and retention was an issue across many service areas. The Council had seen success, such as in the waste service, through targeted campaigns and creative remuneration packages and training being offered.
- Several of the priority areas focussed on health and wellbeing. The extension of the mobile warden scheme was a very important area of service provision, particularly given the demographics of the district.

Subject to the incorporation of the suggested amendments, the Committee supported the Business Plan's onward submission to Cabinet for consideration and to Council for approval.

6. REVIEW OF RESERVES AND PROVISIONS

The Lead Cabinet Member for Finance and Head of Finance presented the review of the Council's Revenue Reserves and Provisions as part of the 2020/21

budget setting process.

The committee considered and commented on the report:

- Committee members thanked officers and the Lead Cabinet Member for the very clear reports, all of which were easy to understand.
- Members were pleased to see that money in the taxi licensing reserve was being used to employ a new member of staff.
- Councillor Heather Williams felt that this document and the other political documents being presented to the committee, were sound enough to be presented to Cabinet for review. She requested that it be recorded in the minutes that this did not however mean that she endorsed the contents of these reports.
- It would be useful to understand how the Bad Debt Provision compared to other councils.
- The Head of Finance informed the committee that ICT software was normally treated as capital expenditure, however as there were more cloud-based systems, this could not be treated as capital expenditure and more revenue expenditure would have to be found to fund this.
- The committee was informed that there was no intention to withdraw contributions to the Cambridge Sports Lake Trust.

The committee endorsed the recommendations to Cabinet.

7. CAPITAL STRATEGY

The Lead Cabinet Member for Finance and Head of Finance presented the refreshed version of the Capital Strategy.

Committee members considered the Strategy and made the following comments:

- Accessibility of the document for those with visual impairment was queried in relation to the design of the front cover and the use of text against colour.
- The inclusion of a glossary was suggested.
- At paragraph 9.2 of the Strategy, it was suggested that the words 'or mainly' be removed.
- It was suggested that the wording at paragraph 9.3 of the Strategy was changed from 'The Council accepts higher risk on commercial property investment', to 'The Council acknowledges/recognises the higher risk on commercial property investment'

The committee endorsed the recommendations to Cabinet.

8. CAPITAL INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

The committee considered the Capital Investment Programme for the financial years 2020/2021 to 2024/2025, which was presented by the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance and Head of Finance.

The committee had no specific comments to make on this and endorsed the recommendations to Cabinet.

9. TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The committee considered and commented on the Treasury Management Strategy which was presented by the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance and Head of Finance.

As with the Capital Strategy, the accessibility of the document for those with visual impairment was queried in relation to the design of the front cover.

Some concern was raised by committee members regarding the potential risk to the Council of future interest rate rises, however members were reassured that the Council was doing all it reasonably could to balance the risks.

The committee endorsed the recommendations to Cabinet.

10. SUMMARY GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2020/21

The committee considered and commented on the summary General Fund Revenue Budget for 2020/21, which was presented by the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance and the Head of Finance.

Concerns regarding the economic outlook were discussed, as was the economic resilience of the district. In response to concerns raised if build out rates at Waterbeach and Northstowe slowed due to the economic climate, the Lead Cabinet Member emphasised that the Council was keen to be proactive in bringing forward housing, particularly affordable housing. The Council was providing as much support as it could and would intervene where appropriate to ensure homes were delivered.

The anticipated impact of the fair funding review on the Council was also discussed. The Head of Finance had been working on this and set out what was expected, which were cuts to business rates and the New Homes Bonus.

The Deputy Leader (non-statutory) thanked the Head of Finance and other officers for their work on the business rates retention scheme, which would see the Council benefitting from additional income of £1.1 million.

The committee noted the report and endorsed the recommendations to Cabinet.

11. PROPERTY INVESTMENT DECISION

The committee considered this item in confidential session. The committee heard representations from the local members and Town Clerk. The committee had no specific recommendations. The committee supported the continuation of negotiations and for the final decision on this matter to be taken by full Council.

12. WORK PROGRAMME

The committee noted its work programme.

13. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting would take place on Thursday 13th February 2020 at 5.20pm. Members were reminded to attend the Investment Partnerships Members Agreements training that would take place from 1-5pm that afternoon.

The Meeting ended at 6.25 p.m.
