

## **SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on  
Thursday, 14 May 2020 at 5.20 p.m.

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

Councillors:	Anna Bradnam	Dr. Martin Cahn
	Nigel Cathcart	Graham Cone
	Dr. Claire Daunton	Dr. Douglas de Lacey
	Geoff Harvey	Steve Hunt
	Peter McDonald	Judith Rippeth

Councillors Heather Williams, Sue Ellington, Bridget Smith, Hazel Smith, Neil Gough and Bill Handley were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers:	Liz Watts	Chief Executive
	Victoria Wallace	Scrutiny and Governance Adviser
	Kirstin Donaldson	Head of New Build
	Lesley McFarlane	Development Officer - Health Specialist
	Clare Gibbons	Northstowe Healthy New Town Programme Lead
	Kathryn Hawkes	Programme Manager

### **1. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Sarah Cheung Johnson.

### **2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020 were agreed as a correct record of the meeting. Committee members agreed that noting apologies from non-committee members was unnecessary.

Matters arising were:

- Committee members queried whether the documents requested at the previous meeting from ICT, had been circulated. The Chief Executive apologised for the delay in these being shared with committee members and would follow this up with ICT.

### **4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

There were no public questions.

### **5. NEW BUILD COUNCIL HOUSING STRATEGY 2020-2025**

The Lead Cabinet Member for Housing presented the New Build Council

Housing Strategy 2020-2025. This set out the reasons for and context within which the Council would acquire or directly commission new build affordable housing, to be owned and managed directly by the Council. This was an update to the strategy agreed in June 2015 and took into account changes to policy and practice.

Committee members were pleased to see a commitment in the strategy to improving the energy efficiency of housing stock. The committee was informed by the Lead Cabinet Member that the increased payback period was due to the reduction in council housing rent, which had reduced since the strategy was first written. The Lead Cabinet Member clarified that there was a clause allowing the payback period to be increased to 35 years.

The committee was informed by the Head of Housing that the risk register would be brought to members at a future date, following the normal reporting protocol for this.

The committee was informed by the Lead Cabinet Member that:

- The Council had 43 sheltered housing schemes across the district. The 44<sup>th</sup> scheme would be at Northstowe. The schemes were well distributed across the district and tended to be in larger villages where they were most needed.
- The right to acquire for Housing Association properties had not come into law and there was no stipulation for the size of villages in relation to this. There were a number of pilot schemes in the Midlands that were subject to the right to acquire Housing Association properties and it was thought that this may be extended, however there had been no further information regarding this from the Government. Where councils built out to rural exception sites, the right to a buy would apply. South Cambridgeshire District Council was not seeking to take forward such sites, but Housing Associations were being encouraged to do so.
- There was a deficit in one and two-bedroom properties across South Cambridgeshire District Council and Housing Association properties. The Council was seeking to acquire and build more of these properties.
- The committee was informed by the Head of New Build that of 350 new build properties acquired under S106 agreements, 288 were contract pending S106 acquisitions. The balance of this was expected to change slightly as the Council's Investment Partnerships started. The Head of New Build explained that the Investment Partnerships would not affect the number of affordable properties that would be delivered.
- The County Council determined the level of need for wardens in sheltered accommodation, which committee members highlighted had been reduced significantly due to local government cuts. The committee was informed by the Head of New Build that South Cambridgeshire District Council would actively seek opportunities to deliver more specialist accommodation, including specialist accommodation for older people.
- Land would be allocated for co-housing in the Local Plan.

The Lead Cabinet Member explained the challenges regarding the economic feasibility of building energy efficient/zero carbon homes. The Council's ambition

was to lead the way in building energy efficient homes that would last.

The committee was informed by the Head of New Build that when bidding to acquire S106 properties, the Council could choose the properties it acquired based on a strict technical framework. This framework had been updated to align with the Council's Sustainable Design and Construction Supplementary Planning Document, and all potential S106 acquisitions would be measured against this before acquisition.

The committee noted the Government's pledge to phase out gas from 2025. The Head of New Build clarified that nothing had yet come of this from Government but would be kept in mind. The committee was informed that air source heat pumps were being installed where possible, however ruling out gas completely would prevent the Council from building houses due to the economic feasibility of this.

The committee drew attention to the urgent need for homes for those down-sizing and was pleased that this was recognised in the strategy. Committee members pointed out that these houses also needed to be attractive for those down-sizing. The Lead Cabinet Member informed the committee that the need for attractive homes for down-sizing within villages, came under the Council's Housing Strategy rather than the New Build Strategy. The Housing Strategy Team was working with Planning on this and the work of the New Build Team would be informed by this.

The Conservative Health and Wellbeing lead queried whether there were any plans to survey the housing needs in villages, including the smallest villages which she highlighted also needed development.

The affordability of rent levels was discussed by the committee, with concern raised by some committee members that the housing benefit element of Universal Credit payment would not cover the cost of housing in some areas of the district. The committee was informed by officers and the Lead Cabinet Member that the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) was set locally within the district and therefore accounted for variations in housing cost across the district.

Some committee members raised concern that the rent charged by the Council for new build affordable rented homes may skew the rental market. Committee members also queried whether these would be truly affordable homes. The Head of Housing informed the committee that the Council was confident that the cost of living in these properties would be affordable due to the rent charged and the high level of energy efficiency of these properties, which would lead to lower utility bills. The Lead Cabinet Member informed the committee that as rents were set at the Local Housing Allowance rate, she was confident that this would not impact the rental market.

The committee was informed by the Head of New Build that where the Council was building on its own land, procurement regulations allowed social value to be included in the procurement criteria. The provision of apprenticeships and contributing to the Council's ambition of being green to the core, would be

included in the social value scoring. Contracts were awarded predominantly on build quality rather than cost, and social value would form part of the quality calculation. This was not a factor in the payback period, and it had been found that more competitively priced firms were more likely to have apprenticeship schemes.

Committee members highlighted the importance of the quality of building design particularly in villages, and the opportunity for the council to demonstrate to other developers, quality of design in its new build affordable homes.

The committee was informed that it was expected that all homes in the Business Plan would be delivered by 2023.

The committee was informed by the Head of New Build that the Council was looking at several garage sites that were no longer in use, as potential development sites. The committee was assured that the Council would not look to develop any site where it was likely that development would cause a knock-on issue. The committee was informed that the storage of equipment in garages, was not classed as valid use.

The committee was informed by the Lead Cabinet Member that Ermine Street Housing was a vehicle to raise income for the Council through private rental income and that there may be some opportunities for Ermine Street Housing from the Investment Partnerships. The Chief Executive informed the committee that the Investment Partnerships would be considered at the full Council meeting in July 2020.

## **6. HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY**

The Lead Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the South Cambridgeshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy and informed the committee that this would be reviewed considering the Covid-19 pandemic and the Council's role in the recovery following this. It was anticipated that mental health and family stress would be more significant issues going forward.

The Leader of the Council thanked officers for their work on the strategy. She informed the committee that it was likely the strategy would need to be reviewed twice a year so that it could adapt to changing situations. The Leader emphasised that the Covid-19 pandemic had demonstrated the critical role of district councils in the delivery of health and wellbeing of communities, and that without these councils the challenges of Covid-19 would be far worse.

The Development Officer (Health Specialist) presented the Strategy to the committee and highlighted the following:

- The emphasis of the strategy was on prevention.
- Having a strategy for the district positioned health and wellbeing as a strategic priority in all the Council's plans. It was emphasised that mental and physical wellbeing was threaded through a lot of what the Council did.
- It was important to capitalise on the positive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as how communities had come together and the data

sharing that had taken place between organisations. As a result of the pandemic, the number of people exercising outdoors had increased and this should be capitalised on by increasing and improving walking and cycling infrastructure. Due to the pandemic however, it was anticipated that a rise in obesity, substance abuse, domestic violence and mental health issues would be seen. It was too early to determine what services would be needed, but this would start to emerge in the coming months.

The committee considered and commented on the strategy:

- Referring to the ambition outlined in the strategy of building communities close to where people worked, the importance of infrastructure and communications allowing people to live where they wanted to, was emphasised. It was queried whether consideration had been given to the potential for more people to be working from home in future. The Leader of the Council informed the committee that enabling people to live in high-quality housing close to where they worked, led to better productivity. It was recognised that employment and infrastructure needed to be delivered together, with housing following this.
- Committee members were pleased to see activities for children included in the strategy and that awareness of physical and mental health was embedded in this.
- Committee members highlighted the importance of avoiding duplication between organisations and was informed that officers were working closely with the County Council to avoid this. Officers from both organisations were working closely to look at schemes that would benefit young people across South Cambridgeshire, which included schemes for children who had been adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Committee members noted that safe cycling was not mentioned in future plans and suggested that the strategy should proactively engage with the County Council on transport.
- It was noted by committee members that S106 contributions could be used to set up sustainable clubs in new communities and it was queried whether part of the strategy should be to set these up in existing as well as new communities. Officers advised the committee that this was a challenge as existing communities were not eligible for S106 funding; they were aware that this could lead to inequality. Committee members suggested a priority be added to the strategy for the Council to proactively engage with other authorities to deliver schemes in existing communities.
- Committee members raised the importance of taking advantage of the small window of opportunity which had emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic, to improve infrastructure for cycling and footpaths. The committee was informed by the Development Officer that feedback was awaited from university-led discussions which had taken place regarding this. The Chief Executive informed the committee that the Government had announced funding for cycling infrastructure, which would be delivered through the Combined Authority.
- Members highlighted the importance of recognising the health and wellbeing needs of those with learning disabilities; it was suggested that more mention of this was needed in future versions of the strategy.

The Conservative Health and Wellbeing Lead suggested a section on self-help and support be included in the strategy. Councillor Ellington pointed out that while the strategy made no mention of deprived families, these were pepper potted across the district. She suggested that the strategy could do more to address the issues that were leading to young people self-harming.

The Development Officer informed the committee that:

- In relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Development Officer informed the committee that GPs had seen a rise in the occurrence of pressure ulcers amongst the over 70s who were self-isolating but who had previously been active. Through social prescribing there was an opportunity to improve the relationship between GP practices and local authorities. The Development Officer explained the potential role for the Council in linking up health services, such as for example providing patient transport to clinics.
- The Council's role was to ensure there were opportunities for people to seek help and encourage them to do so by participating in local clubs or groups.
- She explained how Primary Care Networks were formed and that these did not necessarily make geographical sense. GP practices determined how PCNs were formed with the remit that each PCN should serve a population of 30,000-50,000 people.
- The development of children living in poverty was a challenge and was largely dealt with by the County Council. South Cambridgeshire District Council provided some funding to Homestart which worked with families who were struggling across Cambridgeshire and assisted them with parenting skills.
- Committee members highlighted that warden provision had been reduced significantly due to local government cuts and were informed that the Council was investing significantly in mobile warden schemes. Histon and Impington had an existing scheme which could be accessed by sheltered housing residents for a small fee.
- The Development Officer explained the ways in which the Council could enable access to healthy food, such as by enabling opportunities for residents to grow their own through access to allotments. Provision of this in existing villages and not just new communities, needed to be considered. There were opportunities to influence healthy eating through the Council's licensing policy, such as for example by not licensing fast food outlets within a certain radius of schools. The Development Officer suggested this may need to be a consideration in relation to Cambourne, Northstowe and Waterbeach.

In response to queries regarding contact tracing, the Chief Executive informed the committee that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government recognised that contact tracing needed to be done locally for it to be successful.

Committee members thanked officers for their work on the strategy which the committee noted.

**7. WORK PROGRAMME**

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee noted its work programme.

**8. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

The next meeting would take place on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> June at 5.20pm. It was agreed that the committee's pre-meeting would start at 4.25pm.

**9. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

The committee agreed that the press and public should be excluded from the meeting for the consideration of the confidential minutes of the previous meeting.

**10. CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The confidential minutes of the meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020, were agreed as a correct record of the meeting.

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**The Meeting ended at 7.55 p.m.**

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