

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Tuesday, 19 January 2021 at 5.20 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillor Grenville Chamberlain – Chair
Councillor Judith Rippeth – Vice-Chair

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| Councillors: | Anna Bradnam | Dr. Martin Cahn |
| | Nigel Cathcart | Sarah Cheung Johnson |
| | Graham Cone | Dr. Claire Daunton |
| | Dr. Douglas de Lacey | Peter Fane |
| | Jose Hales | Geoff Harvey |
| | Steve Hunt | Dr. Richard Williams |

Councillors Heather Williams, Bunty Waters, Gavin Clayton, Bill Handley, Dr. Tumi Hawkins, Peter McDonald, Brian Milnes, Hazel Smith, Dr. Aidan Van de Weyer and John Williams were in attendance, by invitation.

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| Officers: | Victoria Wallace | Scrutiny and Governance Adviser |
| | Peter Maddock | Head of Finance |
| | Anne Ainsworth | Chief Operating Officer |
| | Peter Campbell | Head of Housing |
| | Jeff Membery | Head of Transformation |
| | Dawn Graham | Benefits Manager |
| | Martin Lee | Housing Accountant |

1. Apologies

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting

Councillor Richard Williams' doctorate would be added to his title in the minutes.

The Chair informed committee members of further amendments to the Shared Planning Service Update, which had received from officers. Subject to the inclusion of these amendments, the committee agreed the minutes of the previous meeting.

4. Public Questions

There were no public questions.

5. Summary General Fund Revenue Budget 2021/2022

The Lead Cabinet Member for Finance presented the General Fund Revenue Budget for 2021/2022. He highlighted and explained the proposed modest increase to Council Tax which would help cover the shortfall in other funding sources and emphasised that South Cambridgeshire District Council's Council Tax would continue to be in the lowest 25% of all local authorities in the country. He expressed pride at the Revenue and Benefits Team for keeping payment defaults lower than had been expected and thanked council taxpayers for maintaining their payments despite the uncertain economic situation. He informed the committee that the Covid-19 pandemic may have a longer term impact on business rate growth and that it was anticipated that councils would be able to retain fewer business rates and other grants such as New Homes Bonus and Rural Services grants were expected to be phased out. He explained the required savings over the next four years and the implications of the changes to Public Works Loan Board lending terms. Despite this, he informed the committee that the Council was in a sound financial position.

The committee was informed by the Head of Finance and Lead Cabinet Member for Finance that:

- The operation of the Council's new electric bin lorry was cost neutral and purchase of this showed in the capital programme.
- The cost of the investment team was spread across the cost of the investments and it was not anticipated that this would impact on yield from the investments.
- The loss of investment income to the Council was explained. The investment programme had been affected by the Covid and consequently the Council had not invested as much as had been anticipated.
- Before any investment was taken forward, due diligence was carried out. There were costs associated with this regardless of whether the investment opportunity was taken forward.
- The Zero Carbon Fund was funded from the Renewables Fund to which money was being moved. It was up to the Climate and Environment Advisory Committee to consider and recommend to the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance how much should be spent on this going forward. The assumption was that the same amount of funding would be made available for the next financial year as had been made available for the last financial year
- The Lead Cabinet Member suggested that the Climate and Environment Advisory Committee could look at conservation grants for the 2022/2023 Budget.

The committee discussed a proposed amendment to the Budget from the Labour Group, which was presented by Councillor Gavin Clayton. This proposed a new Welfare-Visiting officer role to support residents to access financial support from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), as well as ensuring available support from the council was accessed. This would enable the Council to support the most vulnerable residents in the community who struggled to access financial support. Committee members indicated their support for this proposal which was accepted by the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance.

The committee also discussed a proposed amendment to the Budget from the Conservative Group, which was presented by Councillor Heather Williams. This proposed the establishment of an extra Planning Enforcement Officer on a permanent contract. This would be funded by reducing the South Cambridgeshire magazine to two issues per year and where more than one Special Responsibility Allowance was paid to a member, in future they received one allowance. Whilst some committee members were concerned about the pressure on the Planning Enforcement team and supported the principle of the proposal for additional Planning Enforcement support, members were reassured that the council had just gone out to recruitment for two Planning Enforcement Officers. Committee members suggested the council should see how the recruitment and subsequent additional resource provided by these posts went before any further positions were created.

6. Housing Revenue Account Budget 2021/2022

The committee considered and commented on the Housing Revenue Account Budget for 2021/2022 which the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance presented.

There were some queries and comments from committee members in relation to:

- Funding for major repairs which the Head of Finance clarified was funded from the major repairs reserve.
- The length of voids, for which the Lead Cabinet Member for Housing informed the committee there was a Key Performance Indicator (KPI). She informed the committee that this KPI was in the red as there were several properties in the process of having works undertaken. She informed the committee that an additional contractor would be used to help catch up on this work.
- The redevelopment of Council owned garage sites and whether these could be reserved for social housing. The Lead Cabinet Member for Housing informed the committee that these sites were difficult to redevelop which meant they could not be reserved solely for social housing.

7. Treasury Management Strategy

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

The Lead Cabinet Member for Finance highlighted the changes to the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) lending terms and the potential impact of this on the Council. He informed the committee that the new rules were not retrospective and did not affect existing loans. The Head of Finance would be seek further clarity from the PWLB on their lending requirements. The committee was informed by the Head of Finance that if the Council did not want to borrow from the PWLB, it would have to borrow from commercial markets. He explained that the new rules prevented the Council from using its own reserves to invest in property for commercial yield. He clarified that the Council would want to retain the option of being able to borrow money from the commercial market.

The Lead Cabinet Member for Finance informed the committee that the Council had no direct investments with fossil fuel companies or any companies directly involved with fossil fuels. He informed the committee that the Council would not directly invest in anything that went against its aim of achieving zero carbon by 2050 and this policy was carried through everything the Council did, including its investments.

The Head of Finance explained Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) and informed the committee that advice from treasury advisors would be sought if officers considered provision of MRP was not appropriate.

8. Capital Strategy

The committee considered and commented on the Capital Strategy, which was presented by the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance.

The Lead Cabinet Member for Finance clarified that the efficiency through technology project was being led by South Cambridgeshire District Council.

Some comments were made by committee members regarding the phrasing of some paragraphs and the relevance of some graphics in the strategy; these would be reviewed by officers.

Committee members thanked officers for producing very clear reports, particularly given the challenging circumstances.

9. Work Programme

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee noted its work programme.

10. To Note the Dates of Future Meetings

The next meeting would take place on Thursday 25th February 2021 at 5.20pm.

The Meeting ended at 7.25 p.m.
