

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the Council held on
Monday, 20 November 2023 at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillor Peter Fane – Chair
Councillor Peter Sandford – Vice-Chair

Councillors: Henry Batchelor, John Batchelor, Paul Bearpark,
Dr. Shrobona Bhattacharya, Anna Bradnam, Tom Bygott, Ariel Cahn,
Dr. Martin Cahn, Graham Cone, Stephen Drew, Sue Ellington,
Corinne Garvie, Bill Handley, Sunita Hansraj, Sally Ann Hart,
Geoff Harvey, William Jackson-Wood, Helene Leeming, Daniel Lentell,
Peter McDonald, Brian Milnes, Annika Osborne, Dr Lisa Redrup,
Bridget Smith, Richard Stobart, Bunty Waters, Heather Williams,
John Williams, Dr. Richard Williams and Eileen Wilson

Councillors Cllr Michael Atkins, Cllr Carla Hofman and Cllr Natalie Warren-Green were in attendance remotely.

Officers:	Anne Ainsworth	Chief Operating Officer
	Andrew Francis	Elections and Democratic Services Manager
	Jeff Membery	Head of Transformation, HR and Corporate Services
	John Murphy	Monitoring Officer
	Pippa Turvey	Democratic Services Team Leader

1. Apologies

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Michael Atkins, Jose Hales, Dr Tumi Hawkins, Pippa Heylings, Dr James Hobro, Mark Howell, Lina Nieto, Judith Rippeth, Dr Susan van de Ven, Dr Aidan Van de Weyer and Natalie Warren-Green.

2. Declaration of Interest

No declarations of interest were declared.

3. Register of Interests

The Chair reminded Members that Democratic Services should be informed of any changes to their Register of Members' Financial and Other Interests form.

4. Best Value Notice

The Chair stated that he had called the meeting, at the request of opposition councillors, to discuss the Best Value Notice received from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, on 3 November 2023 and the proposed response by the Council. It was noted that councillors had received a letter from the Government regarding their liability for the Council's decisions. This letter had been addressed by the Monitoring Officer. This guidance was included in the agenda. It was understood that the letter from

the Government to all members had not been received by all councillors. The Leader dismissed the letter as a scare tactic and directed members to the legal advice received from officers.

The Leader explained that the Council was debating a request from the Government to respond to 80 questions regarding the four-day week trial. This had resulted in 186 responses, which was costly to compile and put an additional burden on the authority. She stated that the purpose of the Government's Best Value notice was to end the four-day week trial prematurely and she expressed her disappointment in the fact that the Government were opposing the initiative on ideological grounds. Nevertheless, she hoped to meet with the new minister to discuss this matter face-to-face. She concluded that that Government had asked local authorities to be innovative and the Council had responded by introducing a four-day week trial. This had saved hundreds of thousands of pounds in reduced agency fees and allowed the Council to appoint new employees to half of the difficult to recruit to posts. She recommended that the Council continue with the four-day week trial, where the benefits of the initiatives could be fully assessed.

Councillor Paul Bearpark asked if the Council could ignore the Government's Best Value notice. The Leader replied that as it was non-statutory guidance the Council could have taken this action but on reflection it had been decided that the authority should share its evidence with the Government by complying with its request.

Councillor Heather Williams asked if the Leader had instructed the Chief Executive to intervene in response to the letter shown on page 21 of the agenda. The Leader replied that she was aware that the Chief Executive had been liaising with civil servants about the four-day week and so it was appropriate for her to respond to a letter written by civil servants to the Council.

Councillor Heather Williams asked why the Leader had refused to allow all councillors to have a vote on the four-day week trial. The Leader explained that Council would vote on this matter at the end of the trial.

Councillor Heather Williams asked if the Leader was prepared to accept the consequences of not fully agreeing the four-day week before going ahead with the initiative. The Leader supported the decision taken to initiate a four-day week trial in response to challenges the Council was having in recruitment.

Councillor Annika Osbourne asked what the Best Value notice did and why it had been issued. The Leader replied that a Best Value notice was usually issued by the Government to authorities that had serious financial, performance or governance issues. The recent peer review had shown that this Council was performing well with an enviable financial position and so the Government had taken an unusual decision in issuing a Best Value notice. She suggested that the Government were simply fundamentally opposed to a four-day week, without considering the reasons why the Council had initiated the trial.

The Leader explained that the Council was waiting for a response from the Minister Lee Rowley to the authority's invitation for a meeting. A similar invitation had been extended a week ago to Simon Hoare, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

The Leader explained that the Council had decided to respond in a professional and positive manner to the Government's request for data on the Council's performance. Obviously, there was a cost in time and resources to this. Councillor Brian Milnes added that providing weekly data on matters that were not currently recorded was onerous. He

concluded that the Council was responding in a sensible way to an arduous demand. Councillor Sunita Hansraj suggested that the Government was deliberately giving the Council a near impossible task and so setting it up to fail. Councillor Brian Milnes responded he would not speculate on the Government's motives, but it was annoying to be given such a large volume of unnecessary work. The Leader explained that the Government had only asked for the data and had not asked the Council to analyse it. The Council was waiting for the Government to appoint an independent organisation to assess the data.

Councillor Dr Richard Williams queried whether the success in recruiting to hard to fill posts had been due to the four-day week trial, as positions had been filled before the trial had started. The Head of Transformation reported that the figures on recruitment dated from after the Cabinet had announced that it was trialling a four-day week. One post had been filled before the four-day week trial had started. Other posts had been recruited to after the trial had been in operation for two days.

Councillor John Batchelor asked how data relating to shared services was being collected in response to the Government's Best Value notice. The Leader replied that the Council's partner authorities had been supportive on this issue. A letter signed by 15 other Leaders had expressed their concern about the Government's actions.

Councillor Daniel Lentell expressed his support for four-day weeks but asked why the Council had adopted one of the more radical models. He alleged that the data assessing the four-day week trial had been manipulated by the Council. The Leader stated that as the question did not relate to the recommendation, which was about the Government's Best Value Notice, she would not be responding to it.

Councillor Heather Williams proposed and Councillor Graham Cone seconded the following amendment to the recommendation:

"To note the report and agree that the Council should request that the Best Value notice be withdrawn on the proviso that the four-day week trial is stopped before March 2024."

Councillor Heather Williams stated that the cost to the Council in terms of resources and detriment to both staff and residents had not been determined. She requested that all legal advice provided on this issue be shared with all councillors and the cost of this advice be declared. It was wrong to deny all councillors a vote on this matter and not to consult with residents before the trial had been implemented. A consultation by the MP for South Cambridgeshire had indicated that 76% of residents were opposed to the four-day week. She lamented that viewpoints that differed to the administration were ridiculed and disrespected. She urged councillors to stop ignoring the evidence and stop the four-day week trial.

Councillor John Williams stated that the four-day week trial was not compulsory for staff, who could continue working five days a week if they wished. Since the four-day week had been announced, staff turnover and staff sickness had decreased, whilst recruitment and performance figures had improved. He concluded that it made little sense to stop the trial now, as March 2024 was only four months away.

The Leader stated that the proposed amendment asked the Council to ignore the Best Value notice and demand the Government withdraws it. This was not what the Government had requested. She disagreed with this approach and preferred to comply with the Government's demand and send them the data, which indicated the success of the four-day week.

Councillor Daniel Lentell expressed his support for the amendment, which would end the

trial and save money. He asserted that the administration should have worked with all councillors to introduce a different four-day model, than the one that had been chosen and all councillors should have been able to vote on the four-day week.

Councillor Dr Richard Williams expressed his support for the motion as he wanted to see the four-day week trial ended. He stated that the administration had no mandate for the introduction of a four-day week as it was not included in their manifesto for the 2022 election and all councillors had not been given an opportunity to vote on it.

Councillor Sue Ellington stated that planning officers had been unable to arrange a meeting with Swavesey Parish Council, which indicated that the service had declined due to the four-day week trial. She concluded that residents cared more about the actual service they were receiving than the performance data produced by the Council.

Councillor Tom Bygott stated the Government had reserved the right to take further action against the Council over the introduction of the four-day week and he suggested that it was reckless of the administration to seek a confrontation with the Government on this matter. He asked why Councillor Brian Milnes had complained that the data requested by the Government was impossible to collect. He concluded that the four-day week trial should be ended and this would remove the need to provide data for the Government. Councillor Brian Milnes clarified that it was impossible to provide weekly figures on monthly wages.

Councillor Graham Cone reported that residents had not been consulted on the four-day week and he believed that they would support the proposed amendment. Residents had reported to him that the financial burden of Council Tax was second only to rent and expressed concern about the resources that had been spent on the four-day week trial.

Councillor Brian Milnes stated that the consultation on the four-day week by the MP for South Cambridgeshire was biased and should be disregarded. He concluded that the administration would continue to gather its own evidence on the four-day week trial and also comply with the Government's request for data, as the administration supported evidence-based decision making.

A vote was taken and were cast as follows:

In favour (8):

Councillors Dr Shrobona Bhattacharya, Tom Bygott, Graham Cone, Sue Ellington, Daniel Lentell, Buntly Waters, Dr Richard Williams and Heather Williams.

Against (24):

Councillors Henry Batchelor, John Batchelor, Paul Bearpark, Anna Bradnam, Ariel Cahn, Dr Martin Cahn, Stephen Drew, Peter Fane, Corinne Garvie, Bill Handley, Sunita Hansraj, Sally Ann Hart, Geoff Harvey, William Jackson-Wood, Helene Leeming, Peter McDonald, Brian Milnes, Annika Osborne, Dr Lisa Redrup, Peter Sandford, Bridget Smith, Richard Stobart, John Williams and Eileen Wilson.

Abstain (0)

Council **rejected** the amendment.

Councillor Daniel Lentell suggested that the Government could take action to prevent the Council from continuing with the four-day week trial and if so, all the resources spent on the project would have been wasted.

Councillor Heather Williams explained that she opposed the recommendation in the report as she opposed the four-day week trial, which exposed the Council to more risks and costs that had not been adequately calculated.

The Leader stated that the Government's intervention had imposed an unnecessary burden on the Council. It was unclear what any future actions by the Government would be, but she expressed the hope that the current Government would be replaced by one that supported innovative initiatives like the four-day week. In the meantime, the administration was prepared to provide the Government with the data it had requested and hope that the new minister would agree to a meeting shortly.

Councillor Brian Milnes proposed and the Leader seconded the recommendation in the report. A vote was taken and were cast as follows:

In favour (24):

Councillors Henry Batchelor, John Batchelor, Paul Bearpark, Anna Bradnam, Ariel Cahn, Dr Martin Cahn, Stephen Drew, Peter Fane, Corinne Garvie, Bill Handley, Sunita Hansraj, Sally Ann Hart, Geoff Harvey, William Jackson-Wood, Helene Leeming, Peter McDonald, Brian Milnes, Annika Osborne, Dr Lisa Redrup, Peter Sandford, Bridget Smith, Richard Stobart, John Williams and Eileen Wilson.

Against (8):

Councillors Dr Shrobona Bhattacharya, Tom Bygott, Graham Cone, Sue Ellington, Daniel Lentell, Bunty Waters, Dr Richard Williams and Heather Williams.

Abstain (0)

Council

Agreed to note the report and engage with DLUHC to provide the data requested.

The Meeting ended at 7.45 p.m.
