

## **SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on  
Tuesday, 17 December 2019 at 5.20 p.m.

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

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

Councillors Dr. Tumi Hawkins, Hazel Smith and John Williams were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers: Liz Watts Chief Executive  
Victoria Wallace Scrutiny and Governance Adviser  
Stephen Kelly Joint Director of Planning and Economic  
Development  
Peter Maddock Head of Finance  
Sharon Brown Assistant Director (Delivery)  
Paul Frainer Assistant Director (Strategy & Economy)  
Mike Hill Director of Housing and Environmental Services

### **1. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Shrobona Bhattacharya, Douglas de Lacey, Nigel Cathcart, Sarah Cheung Johnson and Peter McDonald.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

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

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 November 2019 were agreed as a correct record, subject to the following amendment (amendment shown in italics):

Item 6: 2019-20 Quarter Two Performance Report:

- ‘This was important so that staff did *not* provide the wrong advice when they were unsure of the answer’.

### **4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

There were no public questions.

### **5. UPDATE ON PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

The committee considered an update, which it had requested at its November committee meeting, on the impact of Universal Credit (UC) on rent collection and

the steps being taken to mitigate this. This was presented by the Director of Housing, Health and Environmental Services, who informed the committee of the following:

- Universal Credit was paid in arrears and required active management by recipients.
- Landlords were not entitled to know if a tenant was a recipient of Universal Credit.
- Of the Council's 2000 tenants, only 370 received Universal Credit. Despite this, an impact of Universal Credit on rent arrears had been seen.
- Tenants having difficulty managing their Universal Credit, could have their rent paid directly to their landlord to prevent them from falling into further rent arrears.
- Four new members of staff were in post to help with the impact of Universal Credit. These posts were funded by South Cambridgeshire District Council. A Vulnerable Work Coach was also in post, which was jointly funded by the Department for Work and Pensions and South Cambridgeshire District Council. This role was to help support vulnerable tenants.
- The Council was handling the challenge of Universal Credit as best as it could.
- Officers recognised that by giving more early help to tenants on Universal Credit, less support would be required later.
- Extra work was being done by the Council to monitor Universal Credit claimants and identify any having difficulty with managing their money.
- Although the number of rent arrears had not increased significantly, this was a significant percentage increase of 7.5% which needed to be monitored.

Members of the committee asked several questions, which the Director of Housing, Health and Environmental Services was unable to answer at the meeting. He would update the committee with the answers following the meeting. Questions were:

- How many tenants on UC had the council subsequently evicted for arrears / non-payment of rents?
- For how many residents did the Council receive direct rent payments?
- Once a resident on direct rent payments recovered their rent arrears, did they stay on direct payments or did they go back on self-managing their Universal Credit payments?
- When would the remaining Council tenants transfer to Universal Credit?
- How did the Council's collection performance compare to other Councils?
- How many non-HRA tenants did the Council support with Universal Credit?

Scrutiny and Overview Committee members noted the challenges posed by Universal Credit, highlighting that Disability Cambridgeshire was seeing problems caused by UC for people with disabilities. Members asked whether the Council could do anything further to help support these people.

Committee members expressed concern regarding the five week delay in

claimants receiving their Universal Credit payments, as claimants were likely to have limited or no cash reserves. Committee members queried whether the Council could lobby Central Government to not roll Universal Credit further. The Chief Executive pointed out that Universal Credit was a Government policy and they were aware of the problems being caused by it.

Committee members noted the update and thanked officers for their thorough approach to mitigating the risks of Universal Credit.

## **6. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT CAPITAL PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The committee considered an update on the HRA Capital programme, which was presented by the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance and Head of Finance. The committee noted that this had been re-profiled in line with the expected timing and levels of spend.

The Head of Finance informed the committee that there had been some delays to the Council's new build programme, however this was being pressed ahead with. The Head of Finance informed the committee of the contractor issues that were referred to in the report and informed the committee that some of these had been resolved.

The Head of Housing, Health and Environmental Services informed the committee that the shortage of construction skills and supply of materials, remained a risk to the Council's delivery of housing. The Lead Cabinet Member for Finance informed the committee that modern methods of construction were being looked at, in order to mitigate against this. The Council was working on this with developers and landowners.

Regarding the completed capital projects listed at appendix A of the report, it was pointed out that Pembroke Way in Teversham had not yet been started. The Head of Finance would check the accuracy of this and review the information provided in the appendix accordingly.

In response to a query regarding the budget for window replacement increasing from 2021, the committee was informed by the Lead Cabinet Member that these figures had been included in the budget as it was likely there would be a need to replace windows in order to bring the Council's housing stock up to the required environmental standards.

The committee:

- a. Noted the outturn position of a £2.742 million underspend for the HRA Capital Programme and that of this, £1.124 million was proposed for reprofiling into future years.
- b. Noted that borrowing of around £10 million was likely to be required during 2021/22 in order to finance the updated Capital Programme.
- c. Noted that following the abolition of the HRA debt cap, a local debt cap of £250 million rising to £300 million, has been calculated.
- d. Recommended to Full Council the revised HRA capital programme for

the period 2019/2020 to 2024/2025, to reflect amendments to and the reprofiling of expenditure.

## **7. UPDATE ON SHARED PLANNING SERVICE**

The committee considered an update on the progress of the shared planning service project. This was presented by the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development, Assistant Directors and Lead Cabinet Member for Planning.

The committee was informed that an ICT project for a new planning software system was ongoing. This was on track for implementation in February 2020. The new software was one of the most used systems in the country and would enable more efficient working. The Assistant Director explained some of the functions of the new software in relation to the information it provided to applicants. Applicants would be able to subscribe for updates so the software would provide them with updates on their planning application, thereby keeping them informed of the progress of their application. Customer Contact Centre staff would also have access to the new ICT system and would receive training on the use of this, so that they could also support applicants when they contacted the Council.

Committee members pointed out the delays around recruitment in the conservation team. The Director informed the committee that specialists in this area were hard to recruit, however there was now capacity in the Council's conservation team. The Assistant Director was looking at how to more effectively use the skills of the team.

Committee members highlighted the importance of officers answering customers' emails and telephone calls and noted that procedures were being put in place to ensure this. The committee was informed by the Joint Director that mobile telephones were being rolled out to mobile planning officers, so that they were contactable by telephone. The committee was also informed that customer service champions were being introduced in the shared planning service.

The Assistant Director informed the committee that Terraquest would be commencing its contract on 9 January 2020 and would also help to clear the backlog of planning applications. The committee was also informed that a project was ongoing to improve the pre-application service, making this more streamlined and tailored to customers' needs. Much work had been done to ensure the Council was better at pricing, charging and invoicing.

The Assistant Director overseeing the Local Plan process informed the committee that utilities were critical to build out rates and delivery of both the current and emerging plans. While these would continue to be complex issues going forward, he informed the committee that utilities would be unlikely to affect the build out rates for the early part of the current Local Plan. Detailed evidence would however need to be part of the emerging plan in order to ensure the

issues were considered and mitigated fully in the medium and longer term.

Regarding performance in relation to householder applications, the Joint Director explained that positive progress had been made in this area and performance had been steady and above the Government's performance target between 2016-19. Performance in relation to appeals had also been steady and the reporting of appeals to the Planning Committee would be increased.

The committee requested standard deviations be provided with future performance data.

Regarding Member and staff development, the committee was informed by the Assistant Director that:

- An officer had been tasked with Member development, which included development in relation to more strategic issues relevant to the Local Plan.
- A workforce development officer whose focus was staff development, had been appointed.
- A management development programme was in place and would be rolled out in January 2020. A wider management programme was being worked on with HR.
- The service was supporting several staff with post graduate qualifications.
- Some of the service's underspend was being invested in much higher quality training and development.

The committee was informed that a reduction in the number applications for major developments had been seen. The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development informed the committee that a positive environment for development needed to be created. He informed the committee that consumer demand changed faster than the planning process. There was a need for flexibility in order to respond to market and demand. The Planning service was considering how it could be more responsive.

The committee thanked officers for the comprehensive report, which it felt indicated significant progress in the restructuring of the planning team and likely improvement of the service.

## **8. AN ECONOMIC ACTION PLAN AND NEW BUSINESS SUPPORT SERVICE FOR SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE**

The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development and Assistant Director (Strategy & Economy) presented the draft Greater Cambridge Economic Action Plan, which had been drafted by Cambridge City Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council and the Greater Cambridge Partnership. It reflected the local priorities for Greater Cambridge.

The Assistant Director informed the committee that:

- The draft Action Plan focussed on the role of the public sector in delivery.
- The author of precise studies looking into the constraints to development,

was on the working group that was developing the evidence base for the development of infrastructure and low carbon. He informed the committee that there was a critical problem with energy infrastructure in the Greater Cambridge area. A shared picture across the region was being developed in partnership with other organisations. Data was being collated in a readable format so it could be used by other organisations.

- The universities were represented on the Greater Cambridge Partnership's Joint Assembly and Executive Board; their role was at a more strategic level. The GCP had a workstream around the economy in which the university was also involved.

The Joint Director informed the committee that Cambridge City Council was less focussed on economic development than South Cambridgeshire District Council, and this was not one of their corporate priorities. South Cambridgeshire District Council was very clear on its aspirations to support local business and the new Business Support Service would be retained by this Council.

The following comments on the draft Action Plan were made by the committee and Lead Cabinet Member for Housing:

- Some of the data needed to be updated before consultation; reference to South Cambridgeshire District Council's declaration of a climate emergency in November 2019 needed to be included
- Council housing numbers needed to be updated.
- It was suggested that a glossary be included to help the general public and businesses understand the action plan.
- It was suggested that the wording should be more neutral regarding the level of self-employment in South Cambridgeshire.
- Lower case lettering should be used for the word 'Agri-Tech'.

The committee agreed that, subject to the incorporation of the suggested amendments, the draft Action Plan be submitted to Cabinet for approval.

The committee considered and commented on the proposal to create a new Business Support Team to deliver business support and engagement. The main query from the committee regarding this was how success would be measured. The Joint Director explained that key performance indicators would be developed for the service.

## **9. PROPOSED SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The committee considered and endorsed the proposal to invite the Centre for Public Scrutiny to undertake a review of the effectiveness of the Council's scrutiny function.

## **10. WORK PROGRAMME**

The committee noted its work programme.

## **11. APPOINTMENT OF FINANCE SCRUTINY MONITOR**

Councillor Grenville Chamberlain was appointed as the Finance Scrutiny Monitor.

**12. CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING: AGENDA ITEM 9  
PROPERTY ACQUISITION**

The confidential minutes of the meeting held on 14 November 2019, were agreed as a correct record.

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

The next meeting would take place on Tuesday 21 January 2020 at 5.20pm.

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**The Meeting ended at 7.40 p.m.**

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