

## **South Cambridgeshire District Council**

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on  
Thursday, 17 December 2020 at 5.20 p.m.

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

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

Councillors Bill Handley, Tumi Hawkins, Brian Milnes, Peter McDonald and Hazel Smith 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
	Sharon Brown	Deputy Director Delivery
	Jeff Membery	Head of Transformation

### **1. Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Geoff Harvey and Judith Rippeth. Councillor Ian Sollom was a substitute for Councillor Harvey.

In Councillor Rippeth's absence, Councillor Jose Hales was appointed as Vice Chair for the meeting.

### **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> November 2020 were agreed as a correct record of the meeting, subject to the following amendments:

- Councillor Richard Williams to be added to the list of attendees.
- Regarding the task and finish group looking at equality and diversity issues, this would be changed to 'looking at anti-racism'.

### **4. Public Questions**

There were no public questions.

## 5. Update on Policing matters from Cambridgeshire Constabulary

The Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire Constabulary, Nick Dean, attended the meeting to update the Scrutiny and Overview Committee on policing matters in South Cambridgeshire and to answer questions from committee members. These questions and answers are included as an appendix to the minutes of the meeting.

The Chair of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and committee members thanked the Chief Constable for his attendance at the meeting.

## 6. Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service Delivery Update

The Lead Cabinet Member for Planning presented the report which provided the Scrutiny and Overview Committee with an update on the delivery of the Shared Planning Service. She highlighted the following to the committee:

- Weekly planning reports were provided to parishes and members.
- A new online customer feedback questionnaire had been created.
- A new onboarding process for new staff had been introduced
- A new single customer complaints process had been developed for Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire.
- A new and improved pre-application service had been launched. It was hoped that more applicants would use this service, and that applications would subsequently move through the system more easily.
- A 24 hour call back service had been introduced for officers to respond to those who had requested updates.
- A standard planning performance agreement had been introduced.
- More member development had been introduced, with bitesize training sessions taking place before Planning Committee meetings started.
- Work was ongoing on a suite of planning conditions.
- The Planning Advisory Service review had taken place. This had reviewed the Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire Planning Committees. The report would be published in early 2021.

The Assistant Director (Delivery) informed the committee of the following:

- The major work in merging the two planning services was complete. Work was ongoing on aligning the processes of the services.
- The ICT upgrade had taken place with the migration to a new system and new server, creating a more robust system. This had taken significant officer time and high volumes of testing work had been carried out
- The reduction in the number of complaints regarding the service compared to the previous year was highlighted.
- S106 agreements had been completed for the Wellcome Trust and Land North of Cherry Hinton planning applications.
- The work of team leaders to improve relationships with parishes was highlighted. There would be a programme of quarterly parish meetings.
- Work would be carried out in relation to the reliance on extensions of time. The committee was informed that these were used extensively across the country and South Cambridgeshire District Council was consistent with

many other local authorities in this regard.

- The committee was informed that it would be difficult to provide data regarding who had requested extensions of time. The committee was informed that in most cases, the applicant sought an extension of time to amend their application.
- A single tree application process would be developed.
- There was further work to be done on making the application processes as efficient as possible.
- The way in which appeals were processed would be looked at.
- The number of Terraquest staff had been reduced from three part time to one full time member of staff working on the validation of applications.
- The committee was informed that many requests from parish councils to refer applications to the Planning Committee were declined. 22% of applications were being referred to the committee and this matter was being kept under review. This would need to be looked at through the implementation of the recommendations from the Planning Advisory Service.
- In recent months, 100% of business applications had been approved and 80% of household applications. These approvals would often not be possible without the amendment of applications.

Committee members informed the Lead Cabinet Member and officers that they had received complaints from parish councils which had been unable to access documents on the online planning portal when they had needed to. It was queried whether the availability of the website was being tracked. Members were informed by officers that when the site was undergoing maintenance, notification was put on the Council's website. Members requested that advance notice of scheduled website maintenance be provided to parish councils.

Committee members acknowledged the work of the Planning team on Northstowe, however were concerned at losing another member of staff from this team and the lack of continuity this would result in. Members queried whether major strategic sites could be a priority for permanent staffing. In response to this, the Lead Cabinet Member for Planning informed the committee that staffing was an issue across the country. The service used contract staff rather than leaving posts vacant and would continue to look for permanent staff. The committee was informed that there were several vacancies on the Strategic Sites Team.

Vacancies in the Technical Support Team were queried. The Deputy Director (Delivery) informed the committee that the vacant posts were fixed term posts which expired in March 2021 and had been filled by agency staff. All permanent posts in the team were filled.

Some committee members informed officers and the Lead Cabinet Member that parish councils were grateful for the weekly planning updates.

The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development informed the committee that the council's use of extensions of time was not unusual compared to other local planning authorities and this data could be found online. He

informed the committee that there was a difference between major and minor applications in this regard. For major applications there was a large use of extensions of time whereas with minors, the use of extensions of time was more variable. The service had made efforts with local agents to try and reduce the use of extensions of time, however the service had seen an increase in their use over the last 12 months. The service did not currently have detailed data to show when extensions of time were sought. The Joint Director suggested bringing a report regarding this, to a future Scrutiny and Overview Committee meeting.

The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development informed the committee that a new process for exit interviews had been put in place with a designated officer within the service carrying out all exit interviews for all permanent and agency staff. This provided consistency in the way these interviews were carried out.

The Joint Director informed the committee that there had been a reduction in the number of major planning applications during the Covid-19 pandemic, however numbers had since increased for household applications. In general, application numbers had gone back to pre-Covid levels and officer workload remained high.

Committee members noted the improvement in the service's performance. The Lead Cabinet Member for Planning informed the committee that the service was being measured against national targets and would continue to do so.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee:

- a) Noted the report.
- b) Supported the establishment of a joint member/officer Planning Improvement Group.

Councillors Richard Williams, Anna Bradnam and Grenville Chamberlain were nominated as members of the Planning Improvement Group which would be chaired by the Head of Transformation.

## **7. Work Programme**

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee noted its work programme.

## **8. Scrutiny Covid-19 Response Task and Finish Group Terms of Reference**

The Chair of the Covid-19 Scrutiny Task and Finish Group updated the Scrutiny and Overview committee on the work of the group to date and presented the group's draft terms of reference.

It was agreed that point 3 of the scope of the group in the terms of reference, be amended to investigate how residents in South Cambridgeshire could be supported during the Covid-19 pandemic until June 2021, rather than just through the winter months. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee supported the task and finish group's terms of reference.

It was suggested that another task and finish group could be set up in future to look at longer term support for vulnerable and lonely people in communities.

The task and finish group members thanked officers in the Sustainable Communities team for the support they had provided to them.

**9. To Note the Dates of Future Meetings**

The next meeting would take place on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> January 2021 at 5.20pm.

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**The Meeting ended at 7.30 p.m.**

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