

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Tuesday, 22 June 2021 at 5.20 p.m.

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

Councillors: Anna Bradnam
Nigel Cathcart
Dr. Claire Daunton
Sally Ann Hart
Dr. Aidan Van de Weyer
Dr. Martin Cahn
Graham Cone
Peter Fane
Geoff Harvey
Dr. Richard Williams

Officers in attendance for all or part of the meeting:

Lesley Beevers (Service Manager (People Protection and Planning)), Peter Campbell (Head of Housing), Jeff Membery (Head of Transformation), Ian Senior (Scrutiny and Governance Adviser) and Liz Watts (Chief Executive)

Cllr Steve Hunt, Cllr John Batchelor, Cllr Neil Gough, Cllr Tumi Hawkins and Cllr Brian Milnes were in attendance remotely, by invitation.

1. Chair's Announcements

The Chair made a number of brief housekeeping announcements.

2. Apologies

Councillor Sarah Cheung Johnson (a Scrutiny and Overview Committee member) and Councillor Bridget Smith (Leader of the Council) sent apologies.

3. Declarations of Interest

Councillors Dr. Martin Cahn, Nigel Cathcart, Peter Fane and Dr. Tumi Hawkins declared non-pecuniary interests in Minute 6 (Private Sector Housing Policy), as owners of rented properties or directors of small businesses involved in letting properties.

4. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee authorised the Chair to sign, as a correct record, the minutes of the meeting held on 20 April 2021.

5. Public Questions

There were no public questions.

6. Private Sector Housing Policy

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee received drafts of the Private Sector Housing Policy and Civil Penalties Procedure and Guidance, together with a draft Cabinet report from the Head of Waste and Environment. Councillor Brian Milnes (Lead Cabinet Member

for Environment and Licensing) was in attendance to give evidence to the Committee.

Councillor Dr. Claire Daunton asked why this matter was the responsibility of Environmental Health rather than Housing. In reply, the Lead Cabinet Member explained that the proposed Policy amounted to an enforcement and licensing function that fell within his remit as Lead Cabinet Member.

Councillor Nigel Cathcart commented that properties were sometimes in poor repair because tenants had failed in their responsibilities to look after them. He urged caution and said that, while he welcomed a Policy that offered protection for tenants, reasonable balance was needed to ensure appropriate support for landlords. Councillor Cathcart emphasised the need to make sure that appropriate resources were committed to this Policy, and the Service Manager (People, Protection and Planning) assured him that the Environmental Health & Licencing team had been restructured recently and that staff members were in place. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee noted that money received as a result of fines levied under the Policy would remain with South Cambridgeshire District Council.

Picking up on a comment from Councillor Cathcart, Councillor Anna Bradnam reiterated the need for some degree of protection for landlords. The Lead Cabinet Member said that the aim of the Policy was to protect tenants. Other measures, such as the Tenants' Deposit Scheme, existed for the benefit of landlords. The Service Manager (People, Protection and Planning) informed Members that the Policy would not apply in the case of sub-letting.

Councillor Steve Hunt (a Scrutiny and Overview Committee member joining the meeting by video conference) sought to compare and contrast the proposed Private Sector Housing Policy and the Council's Empty Homes Strategy in order to establish what protection existed for neighbours. The Chair invited Councillor Hunt and the Service Manager (People, Protection and Planning) to discuss this aspect outside the current meeting.

Councillor Graham Cone agreed that the Policy must strike a balance between landlords and tenants (notwithstanding the legal remedies available to landlords) and that the availability of resources was of prime importance. Councillor Cone wondered what potential there was for the Council to work more closely with bigger landlords to minimise those instances where the Policy might otherwise be applied. The Lead Cabinet Member said that the Policy would apply to all landlords, regardless of size. Dialogue was important, but so was the scheme of escalation designed to deal with different landlords and with persistent offenders.

Highlighting the need for the Policy to use consistent and precise language throughout, Councillor Dr. Richard Williams said that the doctrine of reasonableness was a key issue. South Cambridgeshire District Council must apply the Policy in connection with those properties managed by its own arms-length company Ermine Street Housing. The Chair invited Councillor Richard Williams, the Service Manager (People, Protection and Planning) and the Lead Cabinet Member to discuss further details outside the current meeting.

Noting that the problems sometimes caused by properties not being occupied was a matter for the Council's Housing Service, Councillor Dr. Martin Cahn suggested that there might be scope for joint working across the Authority. And in an effort to encourage good property management, Councillor Cahn suggested that consideration be given to a 'Landlord Awards Scheme'.

Councillor Peter Fane focussed on the benefits of having a meaningful dialogue with landlords and, to this end, regretted any reference to 'rogue landlords'. He also highlighted Houses in Multiple Occupation where unruly tenants might cause more of a nuisance for other tenants rather than anyone else. It was also important keep landlord contact information up to date.

Councillor Geoff Harvey wondered how penalties were related to income. The Service Manager (People, Protection and Planning) said she would clarify this in the final document. Fairness was also an issue.

Councillor Dr. Tumi Hawkins gave evidence to the Committee in her capacity as a landlord having dealings with five local authorities. She observed that it was unusual to see housing matters dealt with by an Environmental Health Service. Councillor Hawkins extolled the virtue of good communication as one way of forging a positive relationship between landlords and their tenants. The Council needed to be conscious of the possibility of tenants lodging malicious complaints. It also needed officers with the expertise to conduct effective and fair assessments to prevent landlords being branded unfairly as bad landlords.

By affirmation, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee **commended** the Private Sector Housing Policy to Cabinet, subject to the comments referred to above and further work being carried out as noted.

(Councillor Anna Bradnam missed the first part of this item, did not vote, and did not form part of the affirmation.)

7. Quarter 4 Performance Report

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee received the Key Performance Indicators and Business Plan Update, together with a draft Cabinet report from the Head of Transformation.

Councillor Neil Gough, Deputy Leader, made some introductory comments.

Councillor Aidan Van de Weyer expressed concern about the Contact Centre. In response, the Deputy Leader acknowledged that the statistics were disappointing. He had commissioned some work that plotted the number of calls per day against call waiting times. This had revealed that the Contact Centre coped well if the number of calls received was 600 or fewer, but that performance fell significantly if that number was 800 or more. While it was important to resource the facility properly, staffing levels were not the only answer. The Deputy Leader reminded Members that, unlike some other organisations, South Cambridgeshire District Council could not simply close its Contact Centre for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead, the Council was taking a holistic approach, encouraging those who could to use online alternatives while attempting to reduce waiting time for those who had no choice but to phone.

The Head of Transformation highlighted the increased number and different nature of calls received during the past 15 months when compared with previous years. He announced that the Contact Centre was now fully staffed and that the project to modernise telephony equipment was well-advanced. This equipment would enable the Council to offer residents a call-back option and officers were actively identifying resources. Another option being looked at was that of the webchat: it had been estimated that customer services staff could deal with three webchats in the time it took to deal with one telephone call. The Council was also exploring the deployment of Artificial Intelligence in order to allow

residents to contact the Council when they wanted, including outside normal working hours.

Councillor Judith Rippeth welcomed the concept of seeking tenants' feedback about response repairs by text message. The Lead Cabinet Member for Housing agreed with her view that this was less intimidating than a face-to-face survey,

Councillor Graham Cone was concerned about complaints seemingly not being resolved promptly. In reply, the Head of Transformation stated that good progress was being made in tackling the backlog of complaints made against the Greater Cambridge Planning Service.

The Deputy Leader undertook to investigate Councillor Dr; Richard Williams' question about how many planning applications apparently determined within the 8- week or 13-week deadline had in fact been the subject of Extension of Time Agreements.

Councillor Dr. Martin Cahn was pleased to note that the Council was again offering a pension verification service and that efforts were being made to reduce the backlog of those with overseas pensions who had been on a waiting list as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In response to Councillor Dr. Claire Daunton's question about the cost to South Cambridgeshire District Council of providing bed-and-breakfast accommodation during the pandemic, the Lead Cabinet Member for Housing said that, after taking into account grants received from Central Government, the net cost to the Council was £27,821 – a figure well within budget.

8. Work Programme

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee received and noted its updated work programme for 2021-2022.

9. To Note the Dates of Future Meetings

Members noted that the next two scheduled Scrutiny and Overview Committee meetings would be at 5.20pm on

- Tuesday 20 July 2021(not 27 July as published in the agenda)
- Tuesday 14 September 2021

There would be an Extraordinary meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee on Tuesday 21 September 2021 to consider the next stage in the preparation of the Greater Cambridge Joint Local Plan.

The Meeting ended at 7.05 p.m.
