

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 11 November 2021 at 4.30 p.m.

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

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

Officers in attendance for all or part of the meeting:

Anne Ainsworth (Chief Operating Officer), Peter Campbell (Head of Housing), Julie Fletcher (Head of Housing Strategy), Stephen Kelly (Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development), Peter Maddock (Head of Finance), Ian Senior (Scrutiny and Governance Adviser), Jonathan Tully (Internal Audit) and Liz Watts (Chief Executive)

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

Councillor Graham Cone was in attendance remotely.

1. Chair's announcements

The Chair made several brief housekeeping announcements.

2. Apologies

Councillor Sarah Cheung Johnson sent apologies for absence.

3. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Anna Bradnam declared a non-pecuniary interest in minutes 6 and 7 (Planning Performance) as a member of the Planning Committee Development Group.

Councillor Peter Fane declared a non-pecuniary interest in minute 8 (Investment Strategy) as a Director of Ermine Street Housing.

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 14 October 2021.

5. Public Questions

There were no public questions.

6. Planning Performance - Follow-up review (Internal Audit)

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a report on the Internal Audit review of Planning – Performance Management and welcomed the fact that, because of the efforts made by the Greater Cambridge Planning Service since April 2021, Internal Audit was now able to give Reasonable Assurance.

The Chair recognised that the review had been conducted against the challenging backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, staff shortages caused by recruitment difficulties, and the transition to a new software package part-way through that review. Councillor Peter Fane agreed but wondered whether the data covered in the report should be looked at again once the Covid-19 pandemic was over and the planning regime moved back into a more typical environment.

Councillor Dr. Aidan Van de Weyer commended the findings to the Committee but said it was now time to move on.

In response to a question from Councillor Dr. Claire Daunton, the Head of Internal Audit said that such planning performance audits were not common and should be carried out on a risk-based assessment.

Referring to the Internal Audit report's analysis of data quality and supporting information, Councillor Steve Hunt asked why the fields in Uniform could not be configured to be mandatory. The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development explained that some applications would not contain data to add to the fields.

Councillor Dr. Tumi Hawkins, the Lead Cabinet Member for Planning Development and Policy, applauded the efforts of planning staff working within a shared service that was going through a period of transformation.

Councillor Nigel Cathcart said that quality was just as important as process. In reply, the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development said that, while the Government's metric did not take user-experience into account, the planning service was aware of, and focused upon improving, the user experience of the service alongside the quality of the outcome and meeting national performance measures.

In conclusion, the Chair said that, although this follow-up review was for information only (having been requested after the review of Extensions of Time six months ago), the Scrutiny and Overview Committee recognised the considerable effort made by the Head of Internal Audit in producing his report and appreciated the hard work of officers in the Greater Cambridge Planning Service.

7. Planning Performance - Overview for period from 1 September 2019 to 30 September 2021

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a report on South Cambridgeshire District Council planning performance in relation to decisions made on planning applications during the period from 1 September 2019 to 30 September 2021. The report included information and analysis relating to the numbers of decisions that met the Government's statutory targets, the numbers of decisions made with and without extensions of time (EOTs) and the numbers of applications in hand or outstanding at the end of each month within the assessment period.

The report had been prepared in response to a motion from Councillor Heather Williams at Full Council on 23 September 2021, which had been referred to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.

Members recognised that the review period included the challenging backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, staff shortages caused by recruitment difficulties, and the transition to a new software package.

Councillor Peter Fane suggested that the recent introduction of a 'no amendments' approach to planning applications and the discharge of conditions had created a risk that applicants would withdraw applications and re-submit them. In reply, the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development acknowledged that risk but said that the number of applications 'on hold' pending amendment could also have a significant impact on officers' caseloads. Committee members accepted that the 'no amendments' approach was still a pilot scheme intended above all to clear the backlog of planning applications and encourage greater discipline by those submitting new applications. Nevertheless, the new approach should be monitored. Councillor Anna Bradnam said that clear communication was key given the potential financial implications for individuals of both the backlog and the 'no amendments' approach'. Councillor Dr. Tumi Hawkins, Lead Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and Delivery agreed that customer service was key and added that she recognised that the cost of living in the Greater Cambridge area amongst other factors made it difficult to recruit in an area nationally facing skill shortages. The Committee noted that staff turnover had increased as the country began to emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Councillor Nigel Cathcart pointed out that in many cases amendments were only needed because the applicant or applicant's agent had failed to provide all the information needed to process the application quickly.

Councillor Dr Tumi Hawkins (Lead Cabinet Member for Planning Delivery and Policy) informed the Committee verbally about data published by the Government covering the 24-month period ending in June 2021. This data related to the use of Planning Performance Agreements / Extensions of time as a percentage of all decisions made by neighbouring councils and was as follows:

Major applications

South Cambridgeshire District Council – 77%

East Cambridgeshire District Council - 93%

Fenland District Council – 68%

West Suffolk District Council – 79%

Huntingdonshire District Council - 87%

Peterborough City Council - 80%

Non-Major applications

South Cambridgeshire District Council - 50%

East Cambridgeshire District Council - 46%

Fenland District Council - 29%

Peterborough City Council – 46%

Huntingdonshire District Council - 58%

West Suffolk District Council - 42%

Councillor Dr. Richard Williams asked for written confirmation of the figures provided,

which related only to application types included in the Government's submission requirements. South Cambridgeshire District Council's published position was included in the above lists for comparison purposes.

In response to a question from Councillor Dr. Martin Cahn, the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development said that the service had no empirical evidence to indicate whether, compared with Cambridge City Council, the planning process at South Cambridgeshire District Council was extended because of the need to involve parish councils. Cambridge City Council had residents associations and the service sought to engage with them on planning matters – although they were not statutory consultees on applications.

Performance management information was being reviewed so that it could assist managers and members to understand the services activities and be more effective (and not skewed by statistical extremes).

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **recommended** that Cabinet notes the comments made by Committee members.

8. Investment Strategy

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a report on a review of South Cambridgeshire District Council's Investment Strategy in response to new borrowing rules for commercial investments introduced from 26 November 2020.

Following a brief introduction by the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance, the Head of Finance gave a short PowerPoint presentation to highlight the nature and importance of South Cambridgeshire District Council's investments.

Committee members spent a considerable amount of time analysing the investment categories in the draft Strategy, and clarifying the new rules published by the Public Works Loans Board (PWLB). They noted that there were risks for this Council but also opportunities – for example, in borrowing money to promote the 'Green to our core' objective of the Business Plan within South Cambridgeshire.

Committee members noted that the new rules would not preclude the Council from borrowing money from the PWLB to maintain properties outside the District that had been bought, through Ermine Street Housing, prior to 26 November 2020.

Members noted the new Investment Team structure within the Council and its working relationship with external advisers and consultants. They were satisfied with the flexibility this provided to deal with future changes in direction.

Members had some reservations about the conversion of offices to residential.

Councillor Dr. Aidan Van de Weyer sought clarity as to investment returns under the revised Strategy. The Head of Finance undertook to provide him with this.

In conclusion, the Chair suggested that it might be possible to bring empty properties (including shared-ownership properties) back into use by agreement with their owners.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **recommended** that the Cabinet

1. considers the adoption of 'principles of disclosure' to guide investment

decisions where such investment might be affected in future by the impact of climate change;

2. reviews the Investment Strategy, when necessary, at more frequent intervals than 12 months so that appropriate changes can be made as soon as possible.

9. Empty Homes Strategy 2021 - 2025

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a report on the draft Empty Homes Strategy. This Strategy related to the issue of empty homes in South Cambridgeshire and the tools available to the District Council to help bring empty homes back into use. A survey of owners of empty properties had been undertaken in July 2021, the results of which were attached as an appendix to the report.

Several committee members wondered whether South Cambridgeshire District Council could purchase empty properties with the co-operation of the owners of those properties. It was suggested that this might provide the opportunity for the Council to install the latest energy-efficient features and then treat those homes as Council investments. The element of agreement would negate the need for a lengthy and expensive legal process. The Head of Housing Strategy drew Members' attention to the roles that Ermine Street Housing and Shire Homes could play in this context.

While noting the Lead Cabinet Member for Housing's assertion that South Cambridgeshire District Council only received between five and ten complaints a year about empty properties, Councillor Dr. Claire Daunton urged the Council to be more proactive in dealing with 'challenging buildings'.

The Chair welcomed provision in the Budget for 2022-23 of funding for a dedicated Empty Homes Officer.

Councillor Peter Fane said that, in considering how to deal with empty properties, it was important to take account of both the nature of ownership (tenure) and the circumstances of each individual case.

The Head of Housing urged caution in viewing empty properties as an investment opportunity. He cited affordability, viability, and limitations on the use of Right to Buy proceeds.

Councillor Dr. Martin Cahn asked that officers investigate the opportunities provided by Empty Dwellings Management Orders.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee

1. **recommended** that Cabinet considers the further option of South Cambridgeshire District Council buying empty properties by agreement with their owners under the terms of the Council's Investment Strategy.
2. **supported** in principle Section 7 of the draft Strategy but recommended that Cabinet monitor the effectiveness of the measures outlined in bringing empty homes back into use and considered the option of increasing the premium charges if should there be a reasonable prospect of such a step reducing the overall number of empty properties throughout the District.

10. Work Programme

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee received and noted its work programme for 2021-2022. This indicated that the meeting on 16 December 2021 would consider reports on

- North East Cambridge Area Action Plan (Proposed Submission)
- Housing Revenue Account Asset Management Strategy

11. To Note the Date of the next Meeting

Members noted that the next scheduled meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee would be on Thursday 16 December 2021 starting at 5.20pm.

The Meeting ended at 7.15 p.m.
