

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 3 March 2022 at 5.20 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillor Judith Rippeth – Vice-Chair in the Chair
Councillor Sarah Cheung Johnson – Vice-Chair of the meeting

Councillors: Anna Bradnam Graham Cone
Dr. Claire Daunton Sally Ann Hart
Geoff Harvey Steve Hunt
Heather Williams (substitute) Dr. Richard Williams

Officers in attendance for all or part of the meeting:

Anne Ainsworth (Chief Operating Officer), Peter Campbell (Head of Housing), Aaron Clarke (Democratic Services Officer), Julie Fletcher (Service Manager – Housing Strategy), Adele Gritten (Head of Economic Development and Commercial Investments), Kevin Ledger (Senior Policy and Performance Officer), Peter Maddock (Head of Finance), Rory McKenna (Monitoring Officer), Jeff Membery (Head of Transformation), Ian Senior (Scrutiny and Governance Adviser), Duncan Vessey (Interim Project Manager) and Liz Watts (Chief Executive)

Councillors John Batchelor, Neil Gough, Bridget Smith, and John Williams were in attendance as Cabinet members.

Committee members Councillor Martin Cahn, Councillor Nigel Cathcart, and Councillor Peter Fane were in attendance remotely.

1. Chair's announcements

The Chair made several brief housekeeping announcements.

Upon a proposal from Councillor Judith Rippeth, seconded by Councillor Steve Hunt, and by affirmation, the cttee agreed to consider the public elements of agenda item 13 (Ermine Street Housing – Review of the Business Plan) as the first substantive item (minute 6).

2. Apologies for absence

Councillors Dr. Martin Cahn, Grenville Chamberlain and Dr. Aidan Van de Weyer sent apologies.

Councillor Heather Williams substituted for Councillor Chamberlain.

In the absence of Councillor Chamberlain, Councillor Judith Rippeth (Committee Vice-Chair) took the Chair, and the Committee affirmed the appointment of Councillor Sarah Cheung Johnson as Vice-Chair of the meeting.

3. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Peter Fane declared a non-pecuniary interest in minutes 6 and 14 (Ermine

Street Housing – Review of the Business Plan) by virtue of being a Director of both Ermine Street Housing and Shire Homes.

Councillor Heather Williams informed the Committee that minute 7 (Review of hybrid technology and risk mitigation) had been added to the agenda by Councillor Grenville Chamberlain (Committee Chair) at her request.

4. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

By affirmation, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee authorised the Chair to sign, as a correct record, the minutes of the meeting held on 18 January 2022.

Councillors Judith Rippeth and Heather Williams exempted themselves from the affirmation because they had not been present at the meeting in January.

5. **Public Questions**

There were no public questions.

6. **Ermine Street Housing - Review of the Business Plan**

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered the draft report to Cabinet.

While recognising that the Business Plan had been prepared prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Councillor Cone asked that the Cabinet be conscious of any adverse impact that invasion, and ongoing war, might have on Ermine Street Housing. Councillor John Batchelor (Lead Cabinet Member for Housing) said that Ermine Street Housing was a strong business but that it remained to be seen what central Government support would be made available, if any.

The Head of Ermine Street Housing confirmed that the company was not registered for VAT and that it would consider

- the impact of the crisis in the Ukraine
- the impending changes in VAT
- Minimum Revenue Provision and future ownership of the portfolio
- climate change initiatives
- the Increase in energy costs and other costs of living increases

Following further discussion, primarily around Ermine Street Housing's approach to minimising the impact of climate change, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee **supported** the recommendations contained in the report to the Cabinet meeting on 22 March 2022.

7. **Review of Hybrid Technology and Risk Mitigation**

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee examined the procedures and backups in place for the delivery of hybrid meetings, should the technology fail. The Committee considered what further measures could be put in place to assist Members and explain to the public as to what should happen in these situations

Committee members heard Councillor Neil Gough (Deputy Leader) commend the hybrid technology in the Council Chamber as a huge benefit in increasing public participation in

the democratic process. The Head of Transformation, HR and Corporate Services said that the system had raised public expectation of being able to view the major public meetings at South Cambridgeshire District Council, and that there was in excess of a 90% success rate. Any problems had been identified and fixed quickly.

Councillor Heather Williams, at whose request this item had been added to the agenda by Councillor Grenville Chamberlain, was concerned about decision making. She sought clarity about where authority lay to adjourn a meeting in the event of technology failure. In the interests of consistency, she suggested an amendment to the Council's Standing Orders.

In response, the Monitoring Officer said that such a constitutional change would require referral to the Civic Affairs Committee. He added a cautionary note pointing out that no single measure would cover every potential scenario.

Councillor Heather Williams and Councillor Dr. Richard Williams both supported referral to the Civic Affairs Committee. The Deputy Leader accepted this idea. Councillor Anna Bradnam, who was Chair of the Civic Affairs Committee, observed that the technology was still relatively new for South Cambridgeshire District Council. Problems had been much reduced, and she was minded to vest the decision whether to adjourn in the relevant Committee Chair. Councillor Bridget Smith noted the ongoing improvement in the system's reliability and questioned whether referral to the Civic Affairs Committee at this stage would be the best use of that Committee's time. Councillor Heather Williams said that the effect would be to give Committee Chairs official authority to adjourn meetings in the event of technological failure.

Following further discussion, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee concluded its Review and, by affirmation

Recommended that the Cabinet

- (a) **Refers** to the Civic Affairs Committee the question of governance in the event of technology failure during a meeting or other event being webcast to the general public; and
- (b) **Requests** officers to investigate options for making reliability of the hybrid technology a Key Performance Indicator.

Councillor Anna Bradnam was not part of the affirmation, noting her role as Chair of Civic Affairs Committee.

8. **Greater Cambridge First Homes Interim Position Statement**

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a report on the Greater Cambridge First Homes Interim Position Statement.

Councillor Peter Fane drew comfort from the officer report and emphasised his view that First Homes should not be allowed to have an adverse impact on the Council's affordable housing policy. He urged the Authority to concentrate on rural exception sites rather than First Homes exception sites. Councillor John Batchelor (Lead Cabinet Member for Housing) said that the crucial point about First Homes was that any discount was dependent on developers themselves coming up with funding. The Housing officer assured Councillor Fane that she shared his concern about developer-led First Homes exception sites and reiterated her focus on rural exception sites.

Councillor Dr. Richard Williams called for a more objective approach given that there was insufficient detail yet from central Government as to how First Homes would work in practice. Councillor Heather Williams agreed that the Authority must do whatever was in the best interests of residents.

Councillor Graham Cone said that it was important to consider key workers as a whole rather than to distinguish between different categories.

Officers and the Lead Cabinet Member for Housing acknowledged comments from the Scrutiny and Overview Committee which otherwise **supported** the recommendations contained in the report to the Cabinet meeting on 22 March 2022.

9. Quarter 3 Performance Report

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a report on the Council's Quarter 3 (Q3) position regarding operational Key Performance Indicators and 2020-25 Business Plan actions, noting in particular the reduction in target in relation to Land Charges Search Response Days, as part of a phased return to pre-Covid target level by the new financial year.

Referring to Key Performance Indicator (KPI) H211 (Average days to re-let all housing stock), Councillor Dr. Claire Daunton ascertained that the reason for the higher refusal rates compared with those pre-Covid was due in part to publicity material giving insufficient information about the location of properties in terms of factors such as access to local facilities. Councillor Daunton was pleased to learn that the Authority was striving to improve the effectiveness of such material.

Councillor Sarah Cheung Johnson referred to the Business Plan Progress Report and received clarification that Measure B5ii) (Complete local engagement to understand what the community wants in the new community centre (Quarter 2)) referred to the community centre in Northstowe Phase 1. Councillor Cheung Johnson maintained that there had been minimal community engagement and urged the Authority to carry out more.

Councillor Cheung Johnson asked about Measure B5(iii) (Submit planning permission for new Civic Hub in Northstowe (Quarter 4)). Upon receiving clarification that consultation had been focussed on stakeholders, she asked that descriptive text be amended to reflect that fact and requested further community engagement.

Councillor Dr. Richard Williams expressed concern about the levels of staff turnover and formal complaints. He also urged the Authority to avoid the use of quantitative measures where qualitative data was being considered (in the Business Plan).

Councillor Heather Williams requested that bar and pie charts contain clear definition of categories other than by colour alone. Councillor Anna Bradnam commented that such graphs should contain clearly defined axes and make allowances for standard deviation.

Referring to KPI AH204 (Percentage of tenants satisfied with responsive repairs), Councillor Heather Williams noted the use of text messaging to obtain data but urged the Authority to offer an alternative option for those tenants not confident with mobile technology.

Councillor Heather Williams suggested that an indication of the number outstanding would help to identify the scale of the challenge faced in dealing with complaints.

Regarding Action D5 (Council and committee meetings will be run paper-free wherever possible), Councillor Anna Bradnam said that, in the interests of accessibility for all, paper agendas should remain an option for those Councillors who were unable to use, or uneasy with, information technology for whatever reason.

Subject to Officers consideration of comments made at this meeting, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee **supported** the presentation of the report to the Cabinet meeting on 22 March 2022.

10. Annual Equality Scheme Update and Progress Report

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a draft version of the Council's revised Equality Scheme for the 2022-23 financial year.

By virtue of the Public Sector Equality Duty, Councils were obliged to publish at least one equality objective every four years. South Cambridgeshire District Council met this requirement through its Equality Scheme and action plan for the delivery of such objectives.

Councillor Judith Rippeth observed that the issues addressed in the report potentially affected every resident of South Cambridgeshire.

Having reviewed the draft Equality Scheme at Appendix A to the report and the Equality Scheme action plan progress report at Appendix B, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee **supported** the onward submission of both documents to the Cabinet for approval.

11. Work Programme

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

12. To Note the Date of the next meeting

Upon the proposal of Councillor Judith Rippeth, seconded by Councillor Dr. Claire Daunton and by affirmation, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee moved the date of its next meeting from 12 April 2022 to 5 April 2022 at 5.20pm.

13. Exclusion of Press and Public

Upon the proposal of Councillor Judith Rippeth, seconded by Councillor Anna Bradnam and by affirmation, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee resolved that the Press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of minute items 14 and 15 in accordance with the provisions of Section 100(a)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A (as amended) of the Act). Paragraph 3 relates to information about the financial or business affairs of any person, including the Authority holding that information.

14. Ermine Street Housing - Review of the Business Plan

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered the confidential appendix attached to the report considered at Minute 6.

15. Potential Disposal of Commercial Asset

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a confidential report and conveyed its comments to the Cabinet.

The Meeting ended at 8.15pm
