

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held in the Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 24 July 2019

PRESENT: Councillor R J West – Chairman.

Councillors J D Ablewhite, R E Bellamy, Mrs M L Beuttell, G J Bull, E R Butler, S Bywater, J R Clarke, Mrs S Conboy, J C Cooper-Marsh, S J Corney, S J Criswell, J W Davies, D B Dew, Ms A Diaz, Mrs A Dickinson, R Fuller, Dr P L R Gaskin, D A Giles, Mrs S A Giles, J A Gray, M S Grice, K P Gulson, M J Humphrey, Dr N Johnson, Mrs P A Jordan, P Kadewere, D N Keane, C J Maslen, H V Masson, L W McGuire, D J Mead, J P Morris, J M Palmer, K I Prentice, T D Sanderson, Mrs P E Shrapnel, Mrs S Smith, D Terry, R G Tuplin, D M Tysoe, S Wakeford, D J Wells and J E White.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors T D Alban, B S Banks, S M Burton, B S Chapman, J Neish and Mrs J Tavener.

12 PRAYER

The Pastors Simeon and Joyce of the International Prayer Church opened the meeting with a prayer.

13 MINUTES

Subject to the inclusion of Councillor J E White in the list of attendees at the Annual Meeting of the Council held on 15th May 2019, the Minutes of the meeting of the Council and Extraordinary Meeting of the Council held on the 15th May 2019 were approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

14 MEMBERS INTERESTS'

No declarations were received.

15 CHAIRMAN'S ENGAGEMENTS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Council noted those engagements attended by the Chairman and Vice-Chairman since the last meeting (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). In particular, the Chairman expressed his appreciation to the Vice-Chairman for his support of the events that they had attended together and drew Members attention to the Unity in the Community Event held on 13th July 2019 that involved attendance from the Zimbabwean Environment and Tourist Minister designed to be a meeting of friendship.

16 PETITION

The Chairman invited Ms M Edwards to present a petition submitted on behalf of 836 signatories regarding the closure of St Neots Customer Service Centre. In so doing Ms Edwards thanked the Council for allowing her the opportunity to present and drew Members attention to the concerns raised by residents of St Neots on announcement of closure of the Customer Service Centre in St Neots. In particular concern was expressed for the most vulnerable residents with limited transport facilities, affordability for public transport or access to the Internet and it was suggested that the service was deliberately run down to provide an excuse for closure.

Reference was made to various cases of vulnerable individuals that would not benefit from a home visit and urged the District Council to re-consider the decision to close the Customer Service Centre in an attempt to continue to assist the poor, aged and disabled individuals in Huntingdonshire.

In responding to the petitioner, Councillor P L R Gaskin referred to his attendance as a Member of the Digital Advisory Group that had been apprised of the development of the Council's Digital Strategy through the online Customer Portal and opportunities that this had allowed for improved accessibility for Huntingdonshire's residents outside of normal office hours and the development of partnership working with a health centre in St Neots to offer extended services to its residents. Whilst sharing concern for the vulnerable in the District, Councillor Gaskin outlined his reassurance that the Council would continue to support the needs of the residents and would be further highlighted by the Executive Councillor for Digital and Customers, Councillor D M Tysoe.

Councillor Dr N Johnson commended the presentation of the petition and outlined his concern that residents had a preference for face to face contact and suggested that it was necessary for a District Council presence in St Neots through further consultation to establish the need.

In referring to the closure of the Customer Service Centre, Councillor Ms M Beuttell acquainted Members with the comments of Councillor T D Alban, in his absence, by referring to his concern for the proposal and as a result had visited the Centre but his experience had demonstrated the lack of customers and had accepted the decision in light of the suggested scope for development of other options to support the needs of the residents.

Councillor Mrs A Diaz outlined her primary concern that not all residents had access to the Internet and although appreciated that the decision to close had been for financial reasons and shared the views of the petitioner that support should be provided for the community as well as the vulnerable of the District.

Councillor Mrs S A Giles commended the presentation of the petition and referred to the difficulties that some St Neots residents had in terms of affordability to visit Huntingdon to visit the Council headquarters.

Members noted the concerns raised by Councillor Ms S Smith in respect of the calls managed by the Call Centre and ability to support the transition of face to face enquiries to the telephone, as well as concern for suggested home visits for the vulnerable both for the individual and Officer visiting.

In thanking the petitioner for the presentation, Councillor Mrs S J Conboy commended the progress that had been made by the Council in providing alternative support as this affected many other areas of the District with limited bus services as well as St Neots.

Members noted the concern raised by Councillor J C Cooper-Marsh that the effect of closure would impact on groups such as Disability Huntingdonshire that was already struggling to meet the needs and support for disabled people in the District.

The Executive Councillor for Digital and Customers, Councillor D M Tysoe, explained that the priority for the Council was to provide the best service to its customers and highlighted the substantial drop in attendance figures year on year to the Customer Service Centre in St Neots which had demonstrated that demand for services had been changing. With the introduction of Universal Credit this had also changed the Council's relationship with customers and Councillor Tysoe reminded Members that the Council had welcomed the opening of a shared centre at the Council's headquarters in Huntingdon working with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that had led to an improved service to customers requiring the services of the Council and DWP.

Attention was drawn to the nature of the visits to the St Neots Customer Service Centre, with over half visiting to submit documentary evidence for claims that could be met in the future by online submission. Members also noted the figures presented on those registered for the Customer Portal with over 4K registered since going live and one third in receipt of benefits, as well as over 50% of those registering were out of normal office hours. It was further noted that St Neots represented the highest number of accounts on the Portal.

Members were acquainted with details of work being undertaken working with the Library Service to support those residents without access to the Internet and further details of case studies of individuals who had used the Customer Service Centre previously but had been encouraged to make use of alternative methods to support access to the Council's services.

In thanking the petitioner, Ms M Edwards, for presenting the petition and Members for their comments, the Chairman encouraged further contact to be made with the Executive Councillor to highlight any further areas of concern with support needed going forward for the residents that had previously used the Customer Service Centre.

17 MOTION ON NOTICE

Councillor T D Sanderson moved and it was duly seconded by Councillor C Maslen that –

"This Council expresses its concern at the lack of foresight in projecting a £190,000 profit for One Leisure for the 2018/19 financial year which instead has seen a loss of £279,000 a variance of £469,000 or 176.7%. This Council calls for more realistic projections for the duration of the Medium Term Financial Strategy approved by Council in February."

In response Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Resources, indicated his surprise at the motion presented and confirmed that there had been a variance of 6% rather than 176.7%. Furthermore he explained the Council actively sought grant funding to help deliver the Healthy and Active Lifestyle Service and expenditure fluctuated on this year on year. Councillor Gray explained that the Council had the best financial record of any District in Cambridgeshire and encouraged Councillor Sanderson to address the detail of any proposals in the draft budget cycle. He also confirmed that he believed the projection to be fair but had fluctuated and been subject to events to vary it.

Councillor Sanderson confirmed that he was attempting to obtain more realism and the 176.7% had been presented in the Integrated Performance Report and welcomed the opportunity to meet and discuss ideas.

Following debate, and having been put to the vote, the Motion was declared to be LOST.

18 STATE OF THE DISTRICT 2019 (ANNUAL REPORT)

(Councillor J P Morris entered the meeting at 8.15pm)

The Chairman invited the Executive Leader, Councillor G J Bull to address the Council on the State of the District 2019 and to open the debate which was scheduled to follow. A copy of the PowerPoint presentation is appended in the Minute Book.

In his opening remarks Councillor Bull began by taking Members back to the status of Huntingdonshire in 1960/61 with a population at least half the size of present figures and the geographical area changed significantly since then with the disappearance of air bases, growth in towns and general increase in population throughout the District. With the growth in population it's necessary to continue to evolve and change to meet expectations and provide the best possible service. Councillor Bull explained that the Conservative Manifesto had been translated into the Council's Corporate Plan and the Council's performance was measured against this.

Attention was drawn to key statistics in terms of how the Council was meeting expectations with a high volume of days spent by volunteers to support the Council's services and commended the work of the Active Lifestyles Team, as well as the income of £3.6m achieved from the Commercial Estate and Property Fund and homelessness prevention. Councillor Bull re-emphasised the message of the success of the Customer Portal and targets in achieving recycling and referred to the income collected from the Community Infrastructure Levy whereby policies were being developed for its distribution.

In referring to the challenges for the future, Councillor Bull highlighted the likely continued increase in population, as well as an ageing demographic, retaining the vibrancy of the town centres with retail declining and developing new ways of working to support the skills in business changing. The Annual Governance Statement had highlighted a shortage of skills in the area to meet the growing demands of businesses establishing in the District and with improved infrastructure and connectivity, improvements were necessary to meet this demand.

In drawing Members attention to the environment and sustainability, Councillor Bull referred to a recent meeting he had held to discuss the global and national agenda that had re-enforced the need for the Council to take action. He further emphasised the requirement to be more creative with resources and his desire to establish Huntingdonshire as a Unitary Authority.

In concluding, Councillor Bull thanked his Cabinet colleagues and Officers and the Corporate Team in the production of the materials to support his State of the District address.

In response and on behalf of the HDC Independent Group, Councillor T D Sanderson referred to the optimism presented by the Executive Leader and suggested that the Council needed more realism in respect of the problems faced. In particular the budget deficit faced by the Council at the end of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and continued overspends in some service areas. Concern was further highlighted in relation to the closure of the Customer Service Centres in St Neots, Ramsey and Yaxley and the turnover of staff at the Call Centre that had been impacting on the number of calls answered by Advisors.

Councillor Sanderson referred to his concerns with the high number of homeless families, incompleteness of implementation of the new car parking tariffs in the car parks across the District, civil on street parking enforcement still undertaken by the Police and reduction in the availability of funds through the Community Chest budget.

In agreeing with the Executive Leader that it helped to be reminded of why Members joined the District Council to support the residents, Councillor Mrs S J Conboy highlighted her concerns with the continuing issues with the Combined Authority. In particular the rural and urban split with the continuing practical challenges experienced in the quality of life and welcomed the opportunity to work with Councillor Bull as a partner.

In thanking Councillor Bull for his presentation and the Council Officers for their hard work over the past year, Councillor P Kadewere referred to the praise that the Council had been successfully delivering services for lower cost but despite the cuts by Central Government he suggested that this challenge may be also self-inflicted.

The Labour Group remained concerned that the Council had been making unnecessary cuts with the deliberate decision to decline the small additional Council Tax increase allowed by law. In focussing on the future, it was suggested that prioritisation be made to the genuine needs of the residents and applauded the steps taken to enable better digital access to Council services and prevention of homelessness. Councillor Kadewere concluded by highlighting the biggest challenge for the Council in the housing situation and delivery of enough affordable housing across the District and awaits the delivery of this through the new Local Plan.

Councillor D A Giles referred to improvements in the presentation of the State of the District Annual Report but indicated his continued concern with the length of stay in temporary B and B accommodation for homelessness families as still too

long, but congratulated the efforts that had been made to reduce the waiting time. He further raised the continuing widespread problem of fly posting and graffiti and the threat to the High Streets with online shopping and the increase in the prevalence of charity shops due to the application of zero business rates but these had been developing into wider boutique style shops that could be something that the Overview and Scrutiny Panels could look into.

The Deputy Executive Leader, Councillor R Fuller, indicated his disappointment with the opposition, in particular their issues of concern but offering no suggested solutions or input into how they might be tackled or how the Council could do things differently. In agreeing that the 6 weeks stay in B and B accommodation for homelessness families was too long, Councillor Fuller indicated that their manifesto pledge had been to eradicate this by the end of this term and continued to undertake work to achieve this. He further confirmed that the number of families that had been placed in temporary accommodation was approximately 15 at any one time not the misquoted numbers of around 200. With this in mind the Council was set to deliver 55 temporary units of accommodation in the District and was on track to deliver this by the end of next year, as well as the tripling of the numbers of affordable housing in the last few years that should be acknowledged.

Councillor Fuller explained that Huntingdonshire was a large Council that delivered wide and complex services and the solution delivered today will not necessarily meet the demands and needs in a few years' time. Despite the negativity presented from the opposition, he welcomed the opportunity to explore solutions with ways of working differently and encouraged a fully costed alternative budget.

In concluding, the Executive Leader indicated his support for working collaboratively and working in the best interests of the residents and businesses of Huntingdonshire. He further acknowledged that there had been challenges that had meant standards had not been at the accepted level but confirmed his agreement with Councillor Mrs Conboy of the importance of retaining the unique character of Huntingdonshire with the urban and rural split, as well as focussing on many issues that had been highlighted this evening such as the decline of the High Street.

19 CORPORATE PLAN - REFRESH 2019/20

Further to Minute No. 18/35 of the meeting of the Council held on 17th October 2018, comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth) and recommendation of the Cabinet at their meeting held on 18th July 2019, consideration was given to a report by the Business Intelligence and Performance Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on an update on the refresh of the Corporate Plan 2019/20.

In welcoming the refresh, Councillor T D Sanderson indicated his hope that it would begin to tackle some of the issues that had been highlighted this evening. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the revised key actions and performance indicators for inclusion in the Corporate Plan for 2019/20 be approved.

20 THE ROLE OF THE THIRD SECTOR

The Chairman welcomed Mrs J Farrow, Chief Executive of Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations who, with the assistance of a PowerPoint presentation, (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) proceeded to provide Members with details of facts and figures on the Third Sector. Attention was drawn to the national annual level of income of registered charities compared with community organisations locally. Members further noted the figures for volunteering nationally compared with local figures, as well as the proportion of voluntary sector workers employed nationally compared with locally that had experienced a decline across the county. With this in mind, Mrs Farrow highlighted the biggest barriers locally to voluntary organisations were the lack of funding, as well as staff, trustee and volunteer recruitment issues.

Members noted the ongoing challenges to the voluntary sector, in particular the reduction in grant funding and difficulties experienced in Huntingdonshire and Fenland in accessing Lottery funding bids. Attention was drawn to the complex commissioning environment with new rules and guidance, as well as addressing more donor fundraising and challenges with having enough capacity to meet demand through volunteer recruitment.

Arising from a question by Mrs S J Conboy on what Members should take away from this evening, Mrs Farrow explained that it was necessary to work together and include discussions with the voluntary sector at early stages as they may be able to offer solutions, as well as considering whether the voluntary sector may be able to do the job better.

Councillor J A Gray initiated the message to Members to encourage more volunteers and energise people to get more involved and welcomed Mrs Farrow's view on the prevalence of charity shops appearing on the High Street. In response, Mrs Farrow explained that volunteers can be of any age and also the sector had welcomed an increase in business partners who had been able to offer more professional advice to local businesses. In respect of charity shops, Mrs Farrow explained that she too had seen a change in the town centres and although the issue of business rates was not something that she could address, the beneficial aspect of residents visiting town centres to visit such premises and the resultant time spent in the towns should outweigh any of concern with the change in provision.

In response to a question from Councillor P Kadewere on the effect of the reduction in funding to Clinical Commissioning Groups had had on services, Mrs Farrow explained that it had impacted upon various groups including the Stroke Association, car schemes for the vulnerable and Carer's Trust.

21 QUESTIONS TO MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

Arising from a question from Councillor T D Sanderson on delays with the Trinity Place car park in Huntingdon and whether both Sainsbury's and Waitrose had agreed to the new car parking tariffs, the Executive Councillor for Operations and Regulation, Councillor Ms M Beuttell, confirmed that they had the agreement of

Sainsbury's and work was continuing with Waitrose, as well as work to resolve the issues with opening of Trinity Place car park.

In response to a comment from Councillor P L R Gaskin on the successful Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding of £500k for improvements to path and cycle routes in St Neots Riverside Park, Councillor R Fuller, Executive Councillor for Housing, Planning and Economic Development, explained that it had been recognised with St Neots as the largest town in the District that had seen its fair share of growth the Cabinet were keen to restore the link and see improvements through the community infrastructure and thanked Councillor Gaskin, Wells and Prentice for their representations.

Arising from concerns raised by Councillor P Kadwere in relation to accidents on Buttsgrove Way, Huntingdon and lack of response from the County Council, the Managing Director undertook to liaise with Councillor Kadwere separately to address this issue.

Councillor J P Morris raised a question in relation to a recent Select Committee report that had noted that 60% of transport between 1 and 2 miles were made by motor vehicle and questioned whether the District Council would consider ring fencing a percentage of CIL funding to support active travel initiatives and whether the question could be asked of the Mayor of the Combined Authority to ring fence a percentage of transport budget for active travel projects such as improvements to cycling and walking infrastructure. In response, Councillor Fuller explained that although he had not had the opportunity to read the report, the County Council had a Walking and Cycling Strategy and the current CIL process of allocating funding was not ring fenced and was reluctant to consider such an approach but welcomed consideration of such future projects and would support where possible. In relation to the Combined Authority it was suggested that this recommendation be put forward as part of the Greater Cambridge Partnership Transport consultation that had been actively working to develop better and greener transport networks.

22 REVIEW OF THE CODE OF PROCUREMENT

In conjunction with a report by the Procurement Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) Councillor L W McGuire, Chairman of the Corporate Governance Committee, presented details of changes to the Code of Procurement to ensure that social value was considered in all invitations to tender for services which would bring about employment, community and environment benefits to the District.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the proposed amendments to the Code of Procurement as set out in the Appendices to the report now submitted be approved.

23 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CORPORATE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE 2018/19

In conjunction with a report by the Head of Resources (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) Councillor L W McGuire, Chairman of the Corporate Governance Committee, presented the Annual Report for 2018/19 of the Corporate Governance Committee that outlined the work that had been undertaken by the Committee over the previous year. It was confirmed that the Committee was of the view that the Council's governance and internal control procedures were sound. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Annual Report 2018/19 of the Corporate Governance Committee be received and noted.

24 CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH COMBINED AUTHORITY - UPDATE

In conjunction with the decision summaries of the recent meetings of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, Councillor G J Bull presented an update of their activities. Copies of the decision summaries are appended in the Minute Book. Councillor Bull referred to the forthcoming Agenda of the Board on 31st July 2019 that would be looking at the affordable housing programme, Housing Development Company, Cambridge Autonomous Metro, the A428 consultation response, St Neots Masterplan and transitional funding for the University of Peterborough. He also reported upon changes to the Portfolio membership.

Councillors and D B Dew and Mrs S J Conboy provided an update on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and reported upon the turnover of Members of the Committee that had had an impact on their work but had now recommenced with their new membership, focussing on pre-scrutiny rather than post-scrutiny. Councillor Mrs Conboy referred to her attendance at her first meeting and concern expressed that Members had not traditionally seen all of the papers, including those that were commercially sensitive.

Members were provided with an update on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Audit and Governance Committee by Councillor L W McGuire and referred Members to their unaudited accounts, a similar issue that had been experienced by the District Council that had been raised in his capacity as Chairman of the Corporate Governance Committee at their last meeting in July 2019 and sought reassurances that the audit would be completed over the Summer period. Similar concerns were raised in relation to the turnover of staff at the Combined Authority and their HR policies and Councillor McGuire reported that they had recently appointed an HR Manager that should assist with some concerns raised in the past. Councillor McGuire also undertook to raise the issue of inaccessibility to confidential papers as raised by Councillor Mrs Conboy.

25 OUTCOMES FROM COMMITTEES AND PANELS

A copy of the list of meetings held since the last meeting of the Council held on 15th May 2019 is appended in the Minute Book and Members were advised that any issues or questions could be raised in relation to these meetings.

Arising from a question by Councillor Mrs A Diaz on the recent closure of the squash courts and the decision making process, the Executive Leader confirmed that due process had been considered with full debate at the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Customers and Partnerships) and Cabinet.

26 USE OF SPECIAL URGENCY PROVISIONS 2018/19

Consideration was given to a report by the Executive Leader on the use of special urgency provisions taken throughout the previous year (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

27 VARIATIONS TO THE MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PANELS

On the recommendation of Councillor Mrs S J Conboy following the resignation of Councillor D Underwood, it was

RESOLVED

- (a) that Councillor Mrs S J Conboy be appointed to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Customers and Partnerships) in place of former Councillor D Underwood;
- (b) that Councillor Mrs S J Conboy be appointed to the Corporate Governance Committee in place of former Councillor D Underwood; and
- (c) that Councillor M Grice be appointed to the HDC Ventures Shareholder Reference Group in place of former Councillor D Underwood.

The meeting ended at 9.47pm.

Chairman