

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held as a REMOTE MEETING via ZOOM on Wednesday, 16 December 2020.

PRESENT: Councillor J W Davies – Chairman.

Councillors T D Alban, L A Besley, Mrs M L Beuttell, G J Bull, E R Butler, S Bywater, B S Chapman, J R Clarke, Mrs S Conboy, S J Corney, S J Criswell, D B Dew, Ms A Diaz, Mrs A Dickinson, R Fuller, I D Gardener, 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 Neish, J M Palmer, K I Prentice, A Roberts, T D Sanderson, Mrs S Smith, D Terry, R G Tuplin, D M Tysoe, S Wakeford, R J West and Mrs S R Wilson.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors S M Burton, J C Cooper-Marsh, Mrs P E Shrapnel, Mrs J Tavener and D J Wells.

29 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman referred to some sad news regarding the recent death of Raj Mamedovs from Operational Services who had passed away due to Covid-19. He had worked for the Council for 10 years and would be greatly missed by those who worked with him. Members and Officers observed a minute's silence in his memory and thoughts are with his family and friends.

30 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on the 14th October 2020 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

31 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

32 CHAIRMAN'S ENGAGEMENTS

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).

33 EXECUTIVE LEADER'S UPDATE

The Chairman invited the Executive Leader, Councillor R Fuller to address the Council.

In his introduction, Councillor Fuller paid tribute to the hard work and diligence to the people of Huntingdonshire, despite the hardships the vast majority of residents had acted sensibly to help keep transmission rates of Covid low that has meant the area of Huntingdonshire being ranked one of the consistently lowest rates of Coronavirus in the country. Members noted that the Council had been working hard to keep residents updated and informed and worked with the communities to provide them with what they need to feel safe. However, with the Christmas break approaching and a planned relaxation of the rules Councillor Fuller stressed to Members that now was not the time to be complacent and undo the efforts of the past few months. With the rules being temporarily relaxed it has not meant that the virus has gone away and Councillor Fuller urged people not to get relaxed about the seriousness of the present situation and asked that they continue to exercise the pragmatic caution going forward.

Councillor Fuller continued with thanking the local businesses for their fortitude and resilience, with very many suffering through no fault of their own. It was explained that Officers were directed to do everything possible to provide support, making no distinction as to a once size solution and offered tailored support where needed. Members were advised that this had been undertaken successfully with many examples of where support had been provided to help livelihoods, but unfortunately it was not possible for the Council to save every business and every job with the resources available.

Members noted the continuation of administration of the Government support in the form of millions of pounds of grants for eligible businesses. Local Restrictions Support Grant and newly expanded Additional Restrictions Grant had been providing vital support to those businesses, but was not possible to recompense every business for what has been lost as a result of the pandemic as there has not been enough provision of funding to do this, nor was it the Government's intention.

Councillor Fuller explained that the Council would continue to target support at the recovery of the District's economy through the designing of further business recovery schemes that will support the development of the Council's emerging Economic Growth Strategy.

Attention was drawn to the Think Local campaign that had been running since October that had supported the District's market towns and high streets that had been fully supported by communities and residents that would continue alongside the recovery of towns into 2021 and beyond that will be paramount to the recovery in the District as a whole.

Members were reminded of the early stages of plans for market town regeneration similar to the £12m St Neots regeneration plan that was recently submitted as part of the Government's Future High Streets Fund, meaning further investment in Ramsey, St Ives and Huntingdon. Furthermore, in the shorter term, Members were appraised with progress being made with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority with £1.5m of short term investment to help with immediate Covid recovery. The campaign would continue into the New Year, encouraging residents to Think Local and attention was drawn to the Council's Covid safe Christmas activities taking place in the District's towns and encouraged residents to use this as an opportunity to thank local businesses and utilise the independent retailers occupying the high streets.

Turning to car park usage and footfall data, Councillor Fuller reported that this had shown a quicker recovery, with towns outperforming national comparators and car park usage was recovering at a better rate than footfall and outside the period of the second lockdown there had been an increase in car park ticket sales week on week since the re-introduction of charging and longer parking sessions taking place meaning more people are visiting the towns and spending longer in them.

Councillor Fuller commented that the Council had worked hard to deliver a positive end to 2020 with the Think Local campaign and the festive town centre activities, however the first few months of 2021 would still continue to be a difficult time for the District's businesses. The Council would continue to support businesses, address long term development and investment and continue to promote the Think Local campaign and welcomed Members support in this.

In his concluding remarks, Councillor Fuller placed on record his thanks and on behalf of his Group of the dedicated service that the Officers had given to the community over the last few months and the continuation of working in difficult circumstances, that they were a credit to this Council and the efforts had been appreciated. He further thanked the Opposition Leaders for their support and community leadership and the different approach to opposition politics that has had to find a new way of working to benefit the wider interests of the communities. A final thanks was made by Councillor Fuller to his Deputy, Cabinet and Group that had stepped up admirably and played their part in what had been achieved this year in a very unexpected and interesting first twelve months as Leader.

As Leader of the HDC Independent Group, Councillor T D Sanderson thanked the Executive Leader for his generous remarks towards the other Group Leaders and returned the compliment to the Leadership Team for their briefings and the Managing Director for keeping them so well informed. He further wished Councillor D J Wells well in his onward recovery after recently being taken ill and concurred with the Leader's tribute to the Council staff, whilst reiterating his comments from the previous Council meeting on their excellent work from top to bottom. He commended the support provided for the communities and continuing to provide services of re-housing people, paying benefits, keeping the streets clean and taking decisions to help our communities, operating seamlessly and deserve a lot of praise for it. With another lockdown since the last Council meeting had meant more pressure on our local businesses and Councillor Sanderson agreed that it was not possible to save every local business, particularly the hospitality sector that had been hard hit locally and nationally.

Councillor Sanderson referred to the comments on the high street and Future High Streets Fund and welcomed working with colleagues on these projects and the potential for substantial funding that he was equally keen to bring to the other towns in the District with the support of the Independent Group.

As Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Councillor Mrs S J Conboy echoed the sentiments of fellow Members and placed on record her considerable thanks on behalf of all of the Members to the staff at the District Council who had worked tirelessly and exceptionally for this community and based on feedback from colleagues in other parts of the country, she felt that the District Council had a

very positive story to tell about the work it had done for its communities. She related this not just for the emergency support and relief, but in the ongoing commitment and toll it's taken on staff but still remained committed to deliver such services over the Christmas period in such an exceptional year. Councillor Mrs Conboy gave thanks to all staff in every role for the support they have provided for this community, as well as the political leadership and the difficulties faced by the Leader in a time like this.

In acknowledging the incredibly challenging year for Councillor Fuller, his Team and Cabinet colleagues, Councillor Mrs Conboy commended his hard work for keeping them all fully informed as part of the Leadership Group, whilst putting politics aside and putting the community at the front and foremost of all his work to which she was grateful. She was further encouraged by the positive message of getting people back onto the high streets to help the businesses thrive and in conclusion thanked everyone and community for playing their part.

Councillor P Kadewere, as Leader of the Labour Group echoed the comments of the other Opposition Leaders on the performance of the District Council and thanked the Leader for a well prepared speech in encouraging the communities to stay safe and support provided for the businesses. In addition his thanks went to the staff in handling the pandemic, but remained disappointed with all the work that had been undertaken in keeping the levels low had not meant that the District was being changed from the Tier 2 restrictions and asked the Leader to take forward the question as to why the District was combined at the same level as Cambridge and Peterborough despite the differences in levels.

Councillor R J West highlighted the Executive Leaders recent anniversary in his position and commended him in his role, as well as being grateful for his leadership and reminded Members of his message that working together can achieve so much and with many of the Members providing a number of years' service. He further paid tribute to the staff and Managing Director for their work with much to be thankful for in these difficult times and was pleased that the Council had found leadership to be proud of and indicated his hopes for 2021.

34 QUESTIONS TO MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

Arising from a question from Councillor C J Maslen in relation to accurate and speedy communication in the resolution of problems from residents and the identification of relevant Officers to assist through the provision of a staff list, the Executive Leader, Councillor R Fuller responded by referring to the difficulties with Officers working remotely this year and the simplicity that had been removed with not having a desk telephone to contact them by. He further referred to a process for Members that encouraged them not to contact the Officer direct but contact the relevant Head of Service or Service Manager who would be best placed to direct any such enquiry. If the problem was not resolved and the difficulties still existed, it was suggested that contact be made with the relevant Portfolio Holder.

In relation to a question raised by Councillor Ms S Smith on car parking fees across the District and advised the Executive Councillor for Operations and Environment, Councillor Ms M Beuttell, that she would put the detail of her request in writing and asked for response in writing with a timescale within a month of when the detail might be received. In addition, Councillor Ms Smith

referred to the difficulties with quantifying data as a result of the pandemic but asked for an update on Quarter 2 and Quarter 3 to ascertain the increase or decrease in the usage of car parks to determine the effects of the car parking charges across the District and although encouraged to hear the increase in footfall and increase in car park usage requested to be provided with these figures over a longer period going forward. In response, Councillor Ms Beuttell explained that the data required was not available as a result of the breaks in charging for six months and undertook to provide a full detailed response when such data might be available.

Councillor J P Morris raised a question in relation to civil parking enforcement and appreciated that this may have been delayed due to the Covid situation but as the issue of dangerous, illegal and unauthorised parking was a matter of concern for many Members he enquired as to whether any progress had been made in progressing this project. Whereby, the Executive Councillor for Operations and Environment, Councillor Ms M Beuttell reported that more information would be available and presented to Members in January 2021.

In response to a question from Councillor D A Giles on an update of the Executive Leader's request for a further £500k from the Combined Authority to meet the immediate recovery needs of St Neots and Councillor R Fuller explained that the Mayor of the Combined Authority was of the view that as a substantial amount of money had already been allocated to St Neots in the sum of £4.1m it was explained that the District Council was investigating to see whether any of the schemes could be brought forward as part of the Future High Streets Fund to try and accelerate any of the Covid recovery work in St Neots. In response to a supplementary question, Councillor Fuller explained that his understanding was that the £4.1m was the funding allocated to the St Neots Master Plan project that included the bridge and various other projects.

Arising from a question from Councillor P Kadewere on the criteria for the distribution of the Covid vaccine in Huntingdonshire, the Managing Director undertook to provide a link to all Members on the published list of priorities identified by the NHS that had been structured around age profile and underlying health issues.

35 TREASURY MANAGEMENT SIX MONTH PERFORMANCE

Consideration was given to a report by the Council's Finance Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) providing a six-month update in respect of treasury management activity for the period 1st April to 30th September 2020. Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources, drew Members attention to the main development since the last report in so far as there had been a fall in the Bank of England base rate soon after the pandemic broke out and had dropped further since but as this was not a major source of revenue for the Council. It was reported that the performance was as expected and the importance of the ongoing Commercial Investment Strategy and providing revenue to support the Council's front line services equating to around 20% of the £4m revenue budget on a net basis. The report provided an important update for Members highlighting the safety of the investments and cash had been well looked after and paid tribute to the Members of the Finance Team during this difficult period looking after and stewarding the finances of the District Council.

Councillor B S Chapman raised a question in relation to the reduction of £4.774m in the capital value of investments and not taking into account those properties that had been purchased before the Commercial Investment Strategy (CIS) the loss was in the region of £7m in terms of reduction in capital value. Although it was reported that £1.3m of investment income was being received back it was forecast nationally that all property rents and capital values were likely to decline further in the short and medium term even if there was a recovery in 2022 and questioned whether the Council should be retaining property that was reported by expert opinion to continue to fall further in capital value over the next few years despite a revenue return less than the reduction in capital value.

In response, Councillor Gray reported that the Council had no plans to dispose of any of the property held for investment and drew Members to the values of these assets that had been made in the early part of lockdown this year where there was considerable uncertainty over property values and the Auditors had been erring on the side of caution when these had been assessed. Furthermore, Councillor Gray explained that the value was also dependent upon how much was left on the leases attached to the properties, where the property value increased as a new lease was agreed. Attention was drawn to this evidenced in the report with considerable work undertaken on the existing portfolio but had been suffering the same as the wider property market being under pressure and as a result of active work to renew leases the property prices had continued to rise. Councillor Gray reported upon his confidence with the properties listed, with the exception of the Rowley Centre that he felt was under the most commercial pressure but as the Council was the landlord was very conscious of the importance of the Centre for the residents of St Neots.

In relation to a supplementary question by Councillor Chapman and was pleased to note that the Council had been re-negotiating rents at higher than the market value and quoted the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors reporting figure that a large proportion of rents nationally for retail, office and industrial properties had been re-negotiated down but the nationally reported forecast was for significant falls in capital values and whether Councillor Gray agreed with this forecast. In response Councillor Gray reported that the Council had not retained many retail premises but the important factor was the location and he explained that the Council was fortunate to be located geographically in an area of growth and economic activity was taking place, as well as people re-locating to the area and the evolution of how people were working differently as a result of the pandemic with companies giving thought to expanding their office base outside of London.

In concluding, Councillor Gray reassured Members that the Council was not complacent in its approach to managing these investments and referred to the hard work of the Estates Team who were professional in their undertakings and understood their business.

In response to a question raised by Councillor Dr N Johnson on assistance for individuals struggling to pay bills and the avoidance of court action by the Council, as it was outside the remit of the Item under discussion Councillor Gray undertook to co-ordinate with Officers and liaise with Councillor Dr Johnson outside of the meeting on this matter.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that that the Treasury Management Performance during the period 1st April to 30th September 2020 be noted.

36 CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH COMBINED AUTHORITY - UPDATE

In conjunction with the decision summaries of the recent meetings of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, Councillor R Fuller presented an update of their activities. Copies of the decision summaries are appended in the Minute Book. As there was no discussion relating specifically to Huntingdonshire from the meeting held on 25th November 2020, Councillor Fuller indicated for Members that if they wanted to raise anything explicitly for the District he was more than happy to raise at a future meeting of the Combined Authority.

Councillor S J Corney provided an update on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee, in conjunction with information provided by Councillor Mrs P A Jordan. In so doing, Members attention was drawn to the status of the development of the University of Peterborough Phase One was on track and the Board had increased the Apprenticeship programme looking at a £20m apprenticeship levy funding scheme. At the November 2020 meeting Mayor Palmer was in attendance and there were questions raised regarding vacant positions and a specific question was raised in relation to the assurance provided in 2019 that a public transport link would be provided to Alconbury Weald to be in place by 2021, whereby it was reported that this assurance had come from Homes England and Urban and Civic and the Mayor undertook to follow up this issue.

Members were provided with an update on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Audit and Governance Committee by Councillor G J Bull.

37 OUTCOMES FROM COMMITTEES AND PANELS

A copy of the list of meetings held since the last meeting of the Council held on 14th October 2020 is appended in the Minute Book and Members were advised that any issues or questions could be raised in relation to these meetings.

38 VARIATIONS TO THE MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PANELS

There were no changes to report.

The meeting ended at 7.02pm.

Chairman