

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (PERFORMANCE AND GROWTH) held in Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 2 February 2022.

- PRESENT: Councillor S J Corney – Chairman.
- Councillors E R Butler, B S Chapman,
D B Dew, I D Gardener, Dr P L R Gaskin,
M Haines, A Roberts, T D Sanderson,
Shellens and S Wakeford.
- APOLOGIES: An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor J P Morris.
- IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor J A Gray and J Neish.

49. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1st December 2021 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

50. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

51. NOTICE OF KEY EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

The Panel received and noted the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions (a copy of which has been appended in the Minute Book) which has been prepared by the Executive Leader for the period 1st February 2022 to 31st May 2022.

52. A428 DEVELOPMENT CONSENT ORDER UPDATE

By means of a report by the Strategic Growth Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the A428 Black Cat to Caxton Gibbet Improvements Scheme Development Consent Order Position Review was presented to the Panel.

The Panel heard that dialogue between Huntingdonshire District Council, Cambridgeshire County Council and Bedfordshire County Council was open and ongoing, following an enquiry from Councillor Chapman on the matter.

Councillor Roberts stated that, whilst he appreciated the timescales involved in the project, this should not be at the detriment of the detail, especially on biodiversity matters. The Panel heard that timescales are set by the Planning

Inspectorate and have to be adhered to. All matters continue to be addressed until the Examination close, at which point, the Inspector will consider any matters outstanding.

Following a further question from Councillor Roberts, it was confirmed to the Panel that the difference between County and District Council standards and HS2 standards as referred to in the cultural heritage section related to archaeological aspects.

Councillor Chapman observed that multiple traffic management studies were currently ongoing within St Neots but expressed concerns that the findings of each study may not take the resulting outcomes of the other studies into account. This point was noted.

Having welcomed the report, the Panel thereupon

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be encouraged to endorse the recommendations contained within the report.

53. FINAL 2022/23 BUDGET AND MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2023/24 TO 2026/27

By means of a report by the Chief Finance Officer (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Final 2022/23 Revenue Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy (2023/24 to 2026/27); including the Capital Programme was presented to the Panel.

Following a question from Councillor Chapman, it was confirmed to the Panel that the New Homes Bonus was as a result of an annual report being submitted rather than a trigger point to achieve.

Councillor Chapman additionally commented that detail in relation to projects would be helpful in enabling the Panel to make informed observations and discussions. Historically commercial sensitivity had been cited as a reason for less detailed information than desired. This point was noted.

The report was praised by Councillor Roberts, who felt that the emphasis was just right. He also observed that with a strong local economy and a plethora of new business creation within the district, would there be any scope to be more optimistic in the figures. The Panel heard that whilst motivation could be drawn from the inspirational local businesses and their creative ways of working, the budget

had been set with realistic aims in mind.

Councillor Roberts additionally queried the consistency of the amends made to the pre application fees in Annex A. The finance team confirmed that this point would be investigated and reported back to the Panel at a later date.

The proposed increase in Council Tax was queried by Councillor Wakeford, who also questioned the rationale for not having done so in the previous financial year and further, how this had impacted upon the current finances. The Panel heard that the previous years Council Tax freeze was the right thing to do for the residents of Huntingdonshire and the importance of striking a balance between spend and funds raised was emphasised. Councillor Wakeford was satisfied that this increase had been included into the budget across the medium term period, however he questioned the stability for the remaining years of the medium term and particularly what position could be expected in the next financial year. The Panel were reassured that the facts had been presented to allow for informed debate and that the budget was as conservative and realistic as possible to allow for strong progress in the coming municipal year.

Councillor Dew observed that the New Homes Bonus had been utilised to good effect over past years, and that having expressed initial doubts over the Commercial Investment Strategy (CIS), this had been well implemented to the benefit of the Council. He queried whether there had been any indication on the future travel of funding and the Panel were informed that advice had been taken from Pixar to allow for the most accurate estimate in this matter.

In response to questions from Councillor Shellens and amiable debate with the Executive Councillor, it was confirmed that the underspend had had a positive impact on the reserves. The Panel also heard that since 2014, the New Homes Bonus had been used in line with the CIS projects, however given the economic climate in the current financial year, it had been returned to the budget to strengthen the Council's financial position.

Councillor Shellens further questioned the substantial degree of risk associated with income forecast from traded services. The Panel were reassured that the legacy commercial estate held by the Council had formed the development of the CIS. Complete transparency is given through CIS reporting and this strategy has brought much needed income into the Council's budget. It was also noted that CIS acquisitions are currently at 97% occupancy.

Following a question from Councillor Sanderson, the Panel

heard that leisure centre figures showed the predicted return of customers to centres but that these were also realistic numbers. It was further confirmed that leisure services had undergone additional scrutiny and work had been undertaken to restructure leisure costs. It was noted that the Panel would like to see a breakdown of costs by centre in the future.

Having welcomed the report, it was therefore

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be encouraged to endorse the recommendations contained within the report.

54. 2022/23 TREASURY MANAGEMENT, CAPITAL AND INVESTMENT STRATEGIES

By means of a report by the Chief Finance Officer, (a copy of which was appended in the Minute Book), the 2022/23 Treasury Management, Capital and Investment Strategies was presented to the Panel.

Following an initial question by Councillor Shellens on the length of the report, the Panel heard that this was to ensure that all items were covered in sufficient detail.

Councillor Shellens additionally queried the use of Arlingclose forecasts, following which, the Panel heard that although economic forecasts were used as a guide, they were not relied upon for anything which could not be reacted to.

It was observed by Councillor Wakeford that there was scope for greater alignment between the strategies and new environmental principles. This point was noted and would be included in future reports.

Following a query from Councillor Shellens, the Panel heard that interest rates were not as low as one would expect and that this had not been a competitive landscape to operate in.

Having welcomed the report, it was thereby

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be encouraged to endorse the recommendations contained within the report

55. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE REPORT 2021/22, QUARTER 3

By means of a report by the Chief Finance Officer (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Finance Performance Report 2021/22, Quarter 3 was presented to

the Panel.

Following a question from Councillor Wakeford on high and unbudgeted costs for temporary staffing within the Development Management Team, the Panel were assured that permanent staffing solutions had been put in place and this budget should be back on track in future reports.

Having welcomed the report, it was therefore

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be encouraged to endorse the recommendations contained within the report.

56. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT 2021/22, QUARTER 3

By means of a report by the Business Intelligence and Performance Manager & the Performance and Data Analyst (a copy of which was appended in the Minute Book), the Corporate Performance Report, 2021/22 Quarter 3 was presented to the Panel.

Councillor Roberts shared his appreciation that context had now been added to sections of the report, however he queried why the Bridge Place car park project had been removed from Appendix C. The Panel heard that there had been no progress in this project and it had been withdrawn as a result.

Following a question from Councillor Shellens, the Panel heard that direction of travel could be ascertained by comparing each quarters report which highlights the trackability and traceability of progress.

Having welcomed the report, it was thereupon

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be encouraged to endorse the recommendations contained within the report.

57. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

With the aid of a report by the Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme was presented to the Panel.

Chairman