

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held in the CIVIC SUITE (LANCASTER / STIRLING ROOMS), PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 11 December 2024

PRESENT: Councillor S R McAdam – Chair.

Councillors T Alban, B S Banks, M L Beuttell, A Blackwell, R J Brereton, Catmur, S Cawley, B S Chapman, J Clarke, S J Conboy, S J Corney, S J Criswell, L Davenport-Ray, D B Dew, S W Ferguson, I D Gardener, C M Gleadow, J A Gray, J E Harvey, M A Hassall, P J Hodgson-Jones, S A Howell, N J Hunt, A R Jennings, P A Jordan, M Kadewere, P Kadewere, D N Keane, C Lowe, R Martin, B A Mickelburgh, D L Mickelburgh, J Neish, Dr M Pickering, T D Sanderson, D J Shaw, S L Taylor, I P Taylor, D Terry, C H Tevlin, S Wakeford and N Wells.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors M J Burke, S Bywater, A E Costello, K P Gulson, J E Kerr, B M Pitt and R A Slade.

46 PRAYER

Jon Randall, Vicar of Huntingdon opened the meeting with a prayer.

47 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on the 16th October 2024 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

48 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor C H Tevlin declared an Other Registrable Interest under Minute No. 24/51 by virtue of the fact that her employer works in partnership with the Charity – Garden Organic and did not vote on this item.

The Chief Executive, Mrs M Sacks, declared an interest under Minute No. 24/55 by virtue of owning a second property within the District. Although not a decision maker, the interest was declared for transparency purposes.

Councillors S Corney, L Davenport-Ray, I P Taylor, S L Taylor and T D Sanderson declared Disclosable Pecuniary Interests under Minute No. 24/55 by virtue of owning a second property within the District and vacated the room during discussion on this item.

49 CHAIR'S ENGAGEMENTS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair took the opportunity to remind the Council of his annual Carol Service which would be taking place on Wednesday 18th December at 6pm at All Saints Church in Huntingdon. He encouraged all Members to attend.

The Council noted those engagements attended by the Chair and Vice-Chair since the last meeting (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). In doing so, the Chair reported that he had been unable to attend the Mayor of Sandy's Carol Service on Sunday 8th December 2024.

50 QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

The Chair reported that that there had been no public questions received by the deadline for consideration by the Council.

51 NOTICE OF MOTION

See Minute No. 24/48 – Members' Interests.

Councillor M A Hassall moved, and it was duly seconded by Councillor S W Ferguson that -

'This Council notes:

The cost-of-living crisis, food shortages, global conflicts, climate change and ongoing pandemic recovery efforts significantly impact food security. It is imperative that our residents have access to an adequate supply of fresh food for their daily needs. This motion is in line with the Joint Administration's aim to 'Do, Enable and Facilitate' within our local communities. It also aligns with, 'Priority 1: Improving quality of life for local people', of HDC's Corporate Plan.

This Council acknowledges:

1. The increasing need to prioritise residents' health and well-being in our corporate strategies.
2. The compelling evidence linking people's health and well-being to the availability of locally produced, non-ultra-processed, fresh food.
3. The real hunger resulting from the cost-of-living crisis, emphasising the necessity of affordable, healthy food.
4. The potential for community-led food cultivation to reduce NHS and social care costs by combating loneliness and promoting well-being.
5. The existence of underutilised publicly owned land that could serve both community food growing and enhance public spaces.

This Council resolves:

- a) To refer the following options to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Community and Partnerships) and then the Cabinet for consideration -

1. **Mapping Council-Owned Land:**

- Identify and create a map of all Council-owned land suitable for community cultivation.
- Ensure this map is publicly available at no cost to residents and actively promoted across all wards.
- Consider land suitable for food cultivation or biodiversity unless it contains proven hazards or is slated for development within 24 months.

2. Facilitating Community Cultivation:

- Make Council-owned land available for cultivation through simple licenses granted to community organisations at no cost.
- Ensure licence conditions do not create significant barriers for residents in terms of finances or practical requirements.
- Extend Council public liability coverage to include food-growing projects on public realm land, relieving community groups of this burden.

3. Opportunities for Community Groups:

- When community groups cultivate public realm land for food growing or wildlife spaces, allow them an opportunity to bid for the land if it becomes available for sale.
- Provide necessary infrastructure such as water access or water harvesting to enable sustainable cultivation.

4. Allotment Provision:

- Adhere to the 1969 Thorpe Report's recommendation of a minimum allotment provision equivalent to 15 plots per 1,000 households.
 - HDC to compile comprehensive statistics on allotment provision and take-up across Huntingdonshire. This data will provide valuable insights for future planning and community engagement.
- b) To actively promote volunteering opportunities to encourage wider community involvement in cultivation.
 - c) To take consideration of and be consistent with any ongoing, 'Foraging Maps', or similar initiatives within HDC or other Huntingdonshire organisations in the outcomes resulting from this motion.
 - d) To write to MPs representing our Council area, urging their support for a national "right to grow" as articulated in Amendment 483 (Community Cultivation Schemes) in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.'

In presenting the proposed motion, Councillor M A Hassall explained that the subject of the motion addressed the urgent need for food security in the face of the cost-of-living crisis, food shortages, global conflicts, climate change and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and that it aligned with the Council's Corporate Plan to improve the quality of life for local people. He also drew attention to the motion being passed at other local authorities and emphasised

that its intention was to refer options to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Communities and Partnerships) and then the Cabinet for consideration. Councillor Hassall also outlined more broader concerns regarding the need to foster a more receptive environment for member-led initiatives and the difficulties he had experienced in bringing the item to Council for discussion. He suggested that there was a need for further training for all councillors to provide guidance on the process and to ensure transparency and accountability in the decision-making process.

In seconding the motion with the caveat that it needed to be practical and affordable and did not expose the Council to undue financial and administrative burdens, Councillor S W Ferguson drew attention to the fact that not all residents had the ability or the permission to produce their own food. With reference to the planting of vegetables and flowers in community areas at Loves Farm, St Neots, he reiterated that urban agriculture needed to be a community endeavour which best served those who were least able to afford their own fresh produce.

An amendment to the motion was moved by Councillor L Davenport-Ray and duly seconded by Councillor S Wakeford that –

‘Background:

The cost-of-living crisis, food shortages, global conflicts, climate change, and ongoing pandemic recovery efforts significantly impact food security. It is imperative that our residents have access to an adequate supply of fresh food for their daily needs. This motion is in line with the Joint Administration’s aim to ‘Do, Enable and Facilitate’ within our local communities. It also aligns with, ‘Priority 1: Improving quality of life for local people’, of HDC’s Corporate Plan.

Council Acknowledges:

1. The increasing need to prioritise residents’ health and well-being in our corporate strategies.
2. The compelling evidence linking people’s health and well-being to the availability of locally produced, non-ultra-processed, fresh food.
3. The real hunger resulting from the cost-of-living crisis, emphasising the necessity of affordable, healthy food.
4. The potential for community-led food cultivation to reduce NHS and social care costs by combating loneliness and promoting well-being.
5. The existence of underutilised publicly owned land that could serve both community food growing and enhance public spaces.

Council Resolves to Refer the Following Information to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Communities and Partnerships):

1. Council-Owned Land:

- Opportunities for town and parish councils under this council’s “Transfer of Public Open Spaces Policy” adopted in November 2023

- Opportunities for leasing or licensing small parcels of council land (less than 0.25 acres) under this Council's Disposal of Small Land Parcels and Disposal Policy
- A reminder of this council's recent work on the biodiversity of strategic council owned sites, including provision of species suitable for foraging

2. Facilitating Community Cultivation:

- A reminder of this council's recent work on the biodiversity of community sites, including community orchards

3. Opportunities for Community Groups:

- This council's commitment to engaging with communities under the Healthy Open Spaces Strategy adopted in October 2020.
- This council's commitment to engaging with communities under the Engagement Principles adopted in 2023.

4. Allotment Provision:

- The District Council's responsibilities and legal limitations regarding allotments.
- The responsibilities of Town and Parish councils regarding allotments.
- A reminder of this council's commitments to protect against the loss of Open Space (including allotment space) under Local Plan Policy LP32: Protection of Open Space
- The opportunities for town and parish councils to designate Local Green Space via a Neighbourhood Plan
- The opportunities for town and parish councils to propose land to be reserved for allotments via the Local Plan Call for Sites exercise

Additional Commitments:

1. Actively promote volunteering opportunities to encourage wider community involvement in cultivation.
2. The outcomes resulting from this motion should take consideration of and be consistent with any ongoing, 'Foraging Maps', or similar initiatives within HDC or other Huntingdonshire organisations.
3. Write to MPs representing our Council area, urging their support for a national "right to grow" as articulated in Amendment 483 (Community Cultivation Schemes) in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill's 2023 parliamentary debate.

4. Local members to actively share with their residents the opportunities already available for local people to promote small-scale cultivation across Huntingdonshire.'

In presenting Councillor L Davenport-Ray explained that her intention in proposing the amendment had been to draw attention to the activities which the Council already undertakes and the opportunities Huntingdonshire residents already had. Her proposal was designed to enable this information to be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Communities and Partnerships) with a view for further discussion, without being constrained to the items within the original motion. She had also sought to clarify that the legislation referred within the motion had now been enacted and emphasised her concerns regarding the absence of any mention of risk, which would be inherent within the schemes proposed.

A debate then ensued during which Councillors S L Taylor, C H Tevlin and S Wakeford indicated that they would be supporting the amendment. Whilst Councillors P Hodgson-Jones, C Lowe, R Martin, B Mickelburgh indicated they were unable to support it.

Speaking in support of the proposed amendment and the proposal to refer the information to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel, (Environment, Communities and Partnerships), Councillor S L Taylor drew attention to the work and investment which had already been undertaken by the District Council to protect and manage the natural environment, the Policy which had been adopted in November 2023 for the transfer of Open Spaces to Town and Parish Councils and the Council's Healthy Open Space Strategy. Members were informed that the Council already had 14 Community Projects enabled within the District and Community Groups who were interested in food cultivation could contact the Parks and Open Spaces Team for a further discussion. It was also her understanding that those Authorities who had adopted the motion elsewhere had been allotment providing authorities with resources in place to extend community gardens.

In welcoming the amendment as a mechanism for refining the wording of the original motion, Councillor C H Tevlin with reference to her previous work with the Charity – 'Garden Organic' outlined some of the benefits associated with the enabling of community gardens and the involvement of parishes and communities in local food production. She also emphasised given the current situation with food instability, the importance of the Council discussing the matter as it was an issue affecting local residents.

In indicating his own support for the proposed amendment, Councillor S Wakeford explained that many of the specific proposals within the original motion appeared costly, some were not realistically possible, whilst others appeared to conflict with other District Council policies. Having acknowledged that it was not appropriate to mandate or constrain the areas of activity undertaken by Overview and Scrutiny, Councillor Wakeford emphasised that the amendment formally provided the Panel with information that was relevant to the ideas within the original motion and would enable them to undertake further work, to work up further proposals for consideration by the Cabinet if they so wished.

Speaking against the proposed amendment, Councillor P Hodgson-Jones suggested that it did not add anything of value to the original motion. He also took the opportunity to emphasise that it was not the role of the Council to be referring matters for consideration to the Overview and Scrutiny Panels, as their work programme and the proposals they choose to refer to Cabinet should be initiated within the Panels themselves. Councillor C A Lowe also took the opportunity to reflect her surprise that the matter was being discussed at Council, given that allotments were managed by Town and Parish Councils and her concerns regarding the potential for costly duplication should this be progressed.

Councillor B Mickelburgh drew attention to the imminent review of the Council's Commercial Investment Strategy, part of which would look at the Council's existing land and buildings. In doing so, he indicated his preference for incorporating these suggestions into one piece of work. He also urged Members with comments regarding the Council's Constitution and the Council's Procedure Rules to feed this into the Constitution Review Working Group.

Councillor B S Chapman, whilst unsure whether to support the amendment at this stage, made reference to the original designs for the Loves Farm Estate in St Neots and the loss of allotment provision during the planning process. He took the opportunity to suggest that efforts were made to ensure that the importance of allotments were emphasised within the planning process and that areas of designated land were not subsequently repurposed.

Councillor R Martin concurred with the views of his other Group Members that the proposed amendment added little in terms of value to the original motion. He also outlined his concerns regarding the potential for conflict between the proposals. and the Transfer of Public Open Spaces Policy adopted in November 2023

Following the debate, a response from Councillor Hassall, the amendment on being put to the vote was declared to be LOST.

A debate then ensued on the Substantive Motion during which Councillors P Hodgson-Jones, L Davenport-Ray, J Gray, N Hunt and S Wakeford indicated that they were unable to support it.

In doing so, Councillor P Hodgson-Jones reiterated that the Council should not be mandating the work of Overview and Scrutiny and that it would have been more appropriate to have been initiated by the Panel with a then finished product brought through to Council if this was considered appropriate. He also indicated that he was unclear as to whether what was being proposed was within the power of what the Council was able to deliver.

Councillor L Davenport-Ray indicated her agreement to the comments made by Councillor P Hodgson-Jones and explained that her amendment had been proposed in an effort to seek to ensure that the work of the Council was being created in a Constitutionally correct manner. She hoped that even should the motion fail, that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Communities and Partnerships) might still choose to investigate the topic further and identify some ideas for further consideration.

Having also acknowledged that the matter should have gone directly to Overview and Scrutiny, Councillor J A Gray also expressed his hope that the relevant

Panel would select the matter for further consideration and investigation given its importance and the fact that responsibility sits across all three tiers of local authority within Cambridgeshire. He also indicated his agreement with the comments made by Councillor Mickelburgh regarding the need to consider matters relating to Council land in conjunction with the review of the Council's Commercial Investment Strategy.

In responding to the comments made regarding Overview and Scrutiny, the Vice Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Customers and Partnerships) Councillor N Hunt outlined the work which had been ongoing to improve the Overview and Scrutiny process and procedures. In doing so, he encouraged Councillor Hassall to submit his proposal through the newly developed submission process for consideration to form part of the Committees future work programme.

This was a view echoed by the Assistant Deputy Executive Leader, Councillor S Wakeford who whilst could not support the motion encouraged Councillor Hassall to bring forward elements of it to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Customers and Partnerships) for further consideration.

Following a response from Councillor M A Hassall who referred again to the uncertainties surrounding raising motions at Council meetings and the approval of the motion by other Councils, the motion was put to the vote. Whereupon, it was declared to be LOST.

At the conclusion of the discussion on this item, the Chief Executive took the opportunity to address the Council. In doing so, she explained that different Councils might make different decisions on similar motions for a range of reasons. These could include differing Council Constitutions, different objectives, different corporate priorities of differing points of debate There was no right or wrong decision in these cases.

The Council were also advised that support was available to all Members wishing to submit a Motion to a future meeting from the Democratic Services Team and the three Statutory Officers. Future training requirements would be considered at the next meeting of the Member Development Working Group and any requests could be raised at the next meeting.

52 QUESTIONS TO MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

With reference to the recent tree planting in St Neots as part of the Queen's Green Canopy project, Councillor B S Chapman commented on the positive work which had been undertaken in partnership with St Neots Town and Cambridgeshire County Council. Having been urged to visit the area and view the work herself, the Executive Councillor for Open Spaces, Waste and Street Scene Councillor S L Taylor welcomed the collaborative work that had been undertaken and undertook to visit shortly.

Councillor C Gleadow, speaking as the local member for the St Ives South ward sought clarification regarding the steps which were being taken to mitigate against a perceived increase in the numbers of homeless people living in temporary accommodation. In response to which the Executive Councillor for Resident Services and Corporate Services explained that the statistics were monitored on a quarterly basis as part of the Council's regular performance

monitoring. There were two ways in which the Council attempts to keep numbers down, the first by bringing more affordable houses online whilst the Council's homelessness team worked hard to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place. Councillor Ferguson explained that there had been a slight decrease in numbers during the previous quarter, however he undertook to establish the current figures to ensure that if there had been an increase that this was being reacted to in the best possible way. Councillor Ferguson went on to reiterate that homelessness continues to be a financial risk to the Council and for those that found themselves homeless it continued to be an awful situation.

With reference to the recent consultations on the Local Plan, Councillor C A Lowe expressed her concerns regarding the difficulties experienced by residents in completing the online forms which may have deterred individuals from responding to the consultation. She also expressed concerns regarding the volume of information presented as part of the consultation, the absence of any area specific drop-in sessions and the number of consultations being undertaken at one time. In response to which, the Executive Councillor for Planning Councillor T Sanderson explained that it was recognised that there had been some issues with the online forms and feedback had been provided to the company used, who had also been asked to review the lessons learnt from the process. In terms of responses received, the Executive Councillor was pleased to report that a total of 5469 responses had been received, together with 210 emails which were still being processed and 2 petitions. This was significantly more than those received from the consultation on the last stage of the previous Local Plan and a tribute to the Planning Team, local Members and the Town and Parish Councils. With reference to the comments made concerning a requirement for bespoke area specific consultation events, the Executive Councillor explained that the consultation was intended to obtain feedback on the plan for the entire District area.

Having commented on the fact that the increase in responses received might be a reflection of local people's concerns about housing development in the area in light of the forthcoming National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), Councillor J A Gray asked the Executive Councillor for Planning for his view on the increased housing targets set by the new government. In response to which, Councillor Sanderson explained that he was pleased with the Council's current record in building affordable housing and complying with the current NPPF. He acknowledged that the new NPPF would increase the targets for the District, however care need to be taken to ensure that the Authority didn't fall back into the 'tilted balance'. He also recognised the concerns of local people about increased development within the area and whilst the District had no firm plans in place at the current time, he agreed that it was a reflection as to why responses had been higher to the Local Plan consultation. However, despite the increased Government targets, he was confident that the Council would be able to meet them.

Councillor R Martin questioned whether the Administration intended to bring forward proposals to utilise the new powers relating to high street rental auctions which had been made possible under the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 and came into effect on 2nd December 2024. In response, the Deputy Executive Leader Councillor S Wakeford explained that now the secondary legislation had been enacted, the Administration would be looking at the opportunities that were provided in line with the Council's priorities. In response

to a supplementary question, Councillor Wakeford indicated that he was not prepared to commit to a timeline as to when the matter would be considered within the democratic process, however he reiterated that some initial discussions had already been held and the Administration would commit to considering how best to utilise these powers now that the Government had brought them into force.

Councillor A R Jennings sought clarification as to whether the Christmas Tree Doorstep recycling programme which was raising money for the East Anglian Children's Hospice would be available to all residents, or only to those who had subscribed to the green bin subscription service. The Executive Councillor for Open Spaces, Waste and Street Scene undertook to respond to the Councillor outside of the meeting.

With reference to the recent Call for Sites and in response to a question from Councillor D Mickelburgh, the Executive Councillor for Planning provided an update to Members on the process for consideration of those sites which were submitted to the Council after the original deadline. As part of which, the Council were reminded that the Planning Team had opened an ongoing call for sites on 1st October 2024, which would run until 31st December 2024. Members were informed that any sites received would be addressed using the usual methodology and would be subject to a separate consultation to enable local communities to have their say before the preferred options are issued. Members were also advised that sites which were discounted by the Council's Local Planning Policy Advisory Group were still contained within the documentation for Members to view.

In response to a request from Councillor C H Tevlin for an update on the latest planning service statistics, the Executive Councillor for Planning provided an update for the Council. In doing so, Members noted that 89.7% of major applications had been processed on time, against a target of 82%. The statistics for minor applications were just below target, so there was room for improvement although household applications had been processed at a rate of 97%. Councillor Sanderson also undertook to provide feedback on the methodology used within the Local Plan Process to Fenstanton Parish Council and any other Parish Council who requested it.

53 COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WEALTH STRATEGY DELIVERY FUND

With the aid of a report by the Interim Corporate Director (People) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Council considered a report seeking the adoption of a Community Health and Well Strategy and the approval of a Delivery Fund to enable progress to be made with delivery.

In introducing the report, the Executive Leader explained that the Strategy was supported by the Cabinet in September 2024 demonstrating the Council's commitment to place residents at the heart of service delivery. It also aligned with the Council's Priority to 'Improve the Quality of Life for Local People'. Council's attention was then drawn to the three core themes within the Strategy – economic resilience, social connection and physical and mental health.

The Council were also reminded that the May 2024 Corporate Peer Challenge had identified the need to properly resource the delivery of the Huntingdonshire

Futures Strategy, and the fund would enable the Council to do this in part. The Community Health and Wealth Building Strategy directly addressed five themes of that Strategy.

In terms of the proposed new delivery fund, the Council were advised that this had been made possible from in year exceptional income from higher interest rates and that the fund would follow the principles of a sovereign wealth fund, whereby a one-off windfall income was treated as exceptional and is invested for the longer-term benefits of the residents who live there. It was also explained that other partners would be encouraged to contribute to the fund to embed a holistic approach to social success and to support cross partner working. By inviting partners to co-design the process, it was hoped to deliver a health model which they wished to fund on an enduring basis.

Having acknowledged the benefits of co-production in engaging the views of local people as part of the process, the Executive Leader reiterated that the Council were committed to evidencing the impact of the Strategy to ensure it was providing value for money. The Council were also advised that it was proposed to bring further details of the operation of the delivery fund to Overview and Scrutiny for further input and review.

In commenting on the report, Councillor R Martin emphasised the need for a set of clear performance indicators to ensure that the Strategy and its initiatives were having a meaningful impact. He also emphasised the need for such indicators to be regularly provided to ensure transparency and suggested that quarterly reporting through the democratic process would enable the Council to pivot if the Strategy was not delivering what had been promised, whilst also developing public trust.

Whilst acknowledging many of the positive ideas within the Strategy, Councillor J A Gray expressed his concerns at the absence of any detailed proposals regarding the governance of the delivery fund. In response to which, the Executive Councillor for Climate, Transformation and Workforce reinforced the comments outlined within the report that open governance and transparent reporting of both spend and impact would be central to the use of the delivery fund. She also reiterated that subject to approval of the Fund, a detailed report outlining the mechanics of its operation would be brought to Overview and Scrutiny for further review. Her comments were supported by Councillor Wakeford who concurred that many of the concerns raised would be addressed in the forthcoming report on the governance processes. Councillor Wakeford also took the opportunity to address comments which had been made regarding income generation targets in the current year which had allowed the Council to bring forward the proposal.

Councillor Davenport-Ray also took the opportunity to highlight the importance of the community wealth aspects within the proposal and the importance of allowing residents a say in what these funds should be used for.

Finally, Councillor Hassall emphasised the need to involve partners and secure partnership funding to assist with the implementation of the Strategy. He was hopeful that the concerns he had raised at Overview and Scrutiny regarding the absence of any success criteria would be addressed to ensure that it would be successful.

In drawing the discussion to a close, the Executive Leader thanked all Members for their contributions and reiterated the intention to bring detailed proposals on the operation of the delivery fund to Overview and Scrutiny for further review and consideration. She also acknowledged the need for performance indicators to be visible and robust but emphasised the need to be swift and adept to make the best use of the fund to ensure that it made a genuine difference to Huntingdonshire residents.

Whereupon it was

RESOLVED

- a) that the Community Health and Wealth Building Strategy as appended as Appendix A to the report now submitted be approved; and
- b) that the creation of a £750k Delivery Fund be approved for use over the next 3 years to support the delivery of the Community Health and Wealth Building Strategy; noting the intention to bring detailed proposals on the mechanics of operation to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for further input and review.

54 ADJOURNMENT

At 8.56pm, it was

RESOLVED

that the meeting stand adjourned.

Upon resumption at 9.07pm

55 COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS

See Minute No. 24/48 – Members' Interests.

At 9:08pm, Councillors S Corney, L Davenport-Ray, I Taylor, S Taylor and T D Sanderson vacated the room for this item.

Consideration was given to a report by the Revenues and Benefits Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) proposing the implementation of additional Council Tax Premiums in relation to unoccupied properties across the District.

In introducing the report, the Executive Councillor for Resident Services and Corporate Performance reported upon the 2021 Census figures which had identified that there were 1.62 million vacant properties in England and Wales. Council was also advised that the number of long-term vacant homes had increase by 10% over the last 5 years which had led to a number of negative of consequences: including a reduced housing supply and increased local prices in the rental market. Neighbourhood decline had been seen in areas where there were large numbers of empty properties, with reduced community cohesion and empty properties becoming targets for vandalism, arson and squatting.

Having been reminded that the Local Government and Finance Act 1992 had previously provided the Authority with several measures to deal with unoccupied properties within the District, the Council were advised that the 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act provided Council's with new powers to introduce stiffer penalties. The Act enabled the Council to introduce a Council Tax Premium for empty and unfurnished homes after 1 year, rather than the current 2-year period and to also introduce a premium for those with second homes. Both premiums would be charged at 100%, coming into effect from April 2026.

The Council's attention was also drawn to proposals to adopt a policy setting out exceptions to the premiums in line with any regulations or guidance issued by Central Government which it was proposed to delegate to the Section 151 Officer in consultation with the Executive Councillor for Resident Services and Corporate Performance. Following comments made by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Communities and Partnerships) regarding the need to act with compassion in some cases when determining exemption and discounts, the Executive Councillor indicated that he would be accepting the offer from them to help him with the review of this activity.

In reviewing the contents of the report, the Leader of the Opposition Group emphasised the importance of evaluating the impact of the policy to ensure it was both effective and equitable. Whilst any proposals to incentivise the use of empty homes could have a significant positive impact for housing availability and affordability within the District, it's success would hinge on its thoughtful implementation, its robust monitoring and an approach which considered local context. He also urged the Executive Councillor not to limit any exceptions to the regulations or guidelines issued by Central Government, but to give due consideration to the local factors or specific challenges which were unique to Huntingdonshire. Having welcomed the inclusion of an additional recommendation, requiring a report back to Members 12 months following its implementation, Councillor Martin also suggested that this should include a breakdown of any exemptions or exceptions to allow monitoring of these to also take place.

Councillor P Hodgson-Jones expressed his concerns that in bringing forward these proposals the District Council were penalising individuals for owning second properties, as opposed to those who rent second properties to avoid having to pay a premium upon it. He sought further clarification on that aspect of the proposal.

Having commented on the housing crisis affecting Britain and having made reference to the significant increase in average rent costs over the past 3 years, together with the increase in the numbers of long-term empty properties, Councillor N Hunt welcomed the steps being taken by the Joint Administration. He also welcomed the continued inclusion of the recommendation that a report would be presented to Overview and Scrutiny after a twelve-month period to enable the Panel to review the impact of the Policy and consider whether any further improvements could be put in place.

In drawing the discussion to a close and in response to the comments which had been made, the Executive Councillor for Resident and Corporate Services undertook to commit (with input from Overview and Scrutiny) to treat exemptions fairly and compassionately to address the concerns which had been raised. He

also reiterated that it had been decided to introduce both premiums in April 2026 to avoid any confusion for residents.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

- a) that the existing empty homes premium be amended to charge the additional 100% Council Tax premium after one year of the conditions being met, rather than the current two years, with effect from 1 April 2026;
- b) that the introduction of a second homes premium of 100% be approved with effect from 1st April 2026;
- c) that delegated authority be given to the Section 151 Officer in conjunction with the Executive Councillor for Resident Services and Corporate Performance, to adopt a policy setting out exceptions to the premiums in line with any regulations or guidance issued by Central Governance and to make subsequent updates to the policy as and when required; and
- d) that an update on the number of properties falling under the scheme be reported back to the democratic cycle once the new policy has been in place for 12 months.

At 9:28pm, Councillors S Corney, L Davenport-Ray, I Taylor, S Taylor and T D Sanderson took their seats at the meeting.

56 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2025-26

A report by the Revenues and Benefits Manager was submitted (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) reviewing the Council Tax Support Scheme in accordance with Schedule 1a (5) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992,

In introducing the report, Councillor S W Ferguson, the Executive Councillor for Resident Services and Corporate Performance reminded Members that one of the Council's principal objectives was to improve the quality of life of its residents, to prevent people from entering and to help those already in crisis.

The Executive Councillor reported that since the Scheme was revised in April 2024, the number of households receiving 100% support with their Council Tax had increased from 1,307 in March 2024 to 3,893 in August 2024. Furthermore, by the end of August 2024 an additional 708 households also received some support with their Council Tax and the number of Council Tax bills sent to CTS had reduced by 10%. The revised scheme had also resulted in a significant reduction in administrative overheads which included the issue of 615 fewer reminders and 527 fewer court summons by the Revenue and Benefits Team. Whilst the proportion of changes that were now able to be processed automatically had also led to a reduction in the times required to process changes to circumstances.

The Leader of the Opposition Group, Cllr R Martin commented that it was promising to see many of the outcomes following the implementation of the scheme. However, with reference to a specific case within his ward he

commented on a problem which had occurred due to the automation of processes and problems with the postal service that might have been avoided with a human element to the process. In response to which, the Executive Councillor undertook to discuss this and issues relating to the receipt of reminders and summonses with the Revenue and Benefits Manager.

In drawing the discussion to a close, the Executive Councillor paid tribute to the Revenues and Benefits Team for their efforts in bringing the revisions to the Scheme to fruition. He drew attention to the positive impact that the scheme had had upon the residents of Huntingdonshire and in reducing the Council's overheads. Whereupon and having been duly proposed and seconded, it was

RESOLVED

that the scheme principles for 2025-26 remain unchanged, ensuring that the scheme continues to deliver support to low-income households across the District in line with our Corporate Priority to improve the quality of life for local people.

57 GAMBLING ACT 2005: STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

Consideration was given to a report by (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) to which was attached a revised draft Statement of Principles under the Gambling Act 2005. The Council is required to undertake a review of its Statement every three years, with the last review having taken place in 2021.

Councillor N Wells, Chair of the Licensing Committee explained that the Gambling Act requires the Council to prepare and publish a Statement of Principles outlining the principles which the Council proposes to apply when exercising its functions under the Act. The Council were informed that the current Statement expires on 31st January 2025, and should the Council have failed to adopt a new statement it would be unable to fulfil its statutory duties. The proposed Statement had been the subject of public consultation and had been endorsed by the Licensing Committee at their meeting in October 2024.

It having been duly proposed and seconded, it was

RESOLVED

that the Gambling Act 2005- Statement of Principles 2025-2028 as appended to the report now submitted be approved to come into effect on 31st January 2025 for a period of three years duration.

58 TREASURY MANAGEMENT 6 MONTH PERFORMANCE REVIEW 2024/25

Consideration was given to a report by the Council's Director of Finance and Corporate Resources (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 2024.

By way of background, the Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources reminded the Council that the 2024/25 Treasury Management Strategy was approved on 21st February 2024. He explained that Treasury Management was

the management of the local authority's borrowing, investments and cash flows, its banking, money market and capital market transactions, the effective control of the risks associated with those activities and the pursuit of optimum performance.

Members were then provided with further details regarding each of the areas of analysis these included a wider economic review, the performance of Council funds, the approach taken to risk management, details of the Council's non treasury investments and the Treasury Management Indicators used by the Authority. Members were advised that the Council's Section 151 Officer was content that all treasury management activities undertaken during the first half of the financial year had complied fully with the CIPFA Code of Practice and the approved Treasury Management Strategy.

In considering the contents of the report, Councillor J A Gray commented on the additional return which had been achieved on investment interest return compared to the budgeted position and an explanation was provided for this. A suggestion was also made that when considering the proportionality of investments, a better metric to consider might be what proportion of the Council's net budget, is the income of the commercial investment portfolio currently making. In response to which, the Executive Councillor agreed that was a point worthy of further consideration. Efforts had been made over the course of the previous two years to improve the reporting of financial information for all members of the Council and he was keen to improve transparency further, including reporting on investment properties. Members also welcomed the fact that the Commercial Investment Strategy had been sufficiently robust to provide a resilient amount of income to the Council and looked forward to its forthcoming review.

With reference to comments which had been made to the proportionality of investments, Councillor P Hodgson-Jones drew attention to the differences between the way in which the Council accounts are presented compared to corporate accounts and the useful measures which could be missed from this type of reporting. He emphasised that when considering the proportionality of investments for example, the focus should be on the return from investment. In general terms the lack of transparency in the way in which public sector accounts were reported contributed to the overall problems with a transparency in local government finance, which meant that there was an absence of appropriate scrutiny in the best way to make investment decisions.

In response to which, the Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources concurred with the need for greater transparency to enable better informed decision making. The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth) Councillor C Gleadow added that efforts had been made to improve training for Panel Members and provide better information to assist with scrutiny in this regard.

59 CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH COMBINED AUTHORITY - QUESTIONS

The Council received and noted copies of the decision summaries from recent meetings of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA)

and Members were advised that any issues could be raised in relation to these meetings.

In response to a question from Councillor M A Hassall regarding the recruitment of District Council employees by the CPCA and whether partners were taking any specific actions to mitigate against this, the Executive Leader was invited to respond. In doing so, she explained that all Public Sector organisations were required to advertise on the open market and that District Council employees were able to look to the market for further employment. She went on to explain that the District Council had benefitted from employees who had moved to partner organisations because of the understanding of the Authority that they take to their new organisation. Similar and reciprocal benefits were seen when individuals moved from other organisations to the District Council. A healthy turnover of staff also provided an opportunity to recruit new employees with new skills and knowledge which could also be of a positive benefit to the organisation. In this regard, she was pleased to report on some positive appointments which had been made recently.

The Executive Leader undertook to respond in writing to the specific question regarding how much the CPCA staffing budget has increased over the previous two years.

With reference to the forthcoming Extraordinary meeting of the CPCA Board to discuss the use of an underspend to fund the cap on bus fares to the end of March 2025, Councillor J Neish outlined his concerns at the long term sustainability and the absence of a longer term strategy. Having referred to a several positive initiatives which had been put in place by the CPCA to promote public transport, he suggested it may better to address some of the areas in Huntingdonshire where few or no routes exist. In response to a question regarding her attendance and her position, the Executive Leader reiterated that the proposal represented expenditure of a time limited underspend and in her opinion supporting the £2 cap was appropriate at this stage. In the longer term, work was continuing at pace around bus routes and franchising and the Board had been advised that the outcome would be available shortly to assist with longer term decision making. Councillor Conboy reiterated that she would continue to promote the needs of the rural areas. She was pleased to report that visual mapping of routes had been possible and would help to identify those areas which had limited services.

In response to the Executive Leader's remarks, Councillor Neish outlined his additional concerns that the proposal had not been presented to the CPCA's Overview and Scrutiny committee. The Executive Leader explained that developments had been taking place at pace and the proposal had come through at short notice, missing the Overview and Scrutiny cycle. She urged those with an interest to watch the Board meeting on Friday and reiterated that she was keen to see the timetable for the strategic pieces of work which would provide reassurance that Huntingdonshire has the kind of public transport service to which it aspires.

Following concerns by Councillor C H Tevlin regarding the feedback she had received from residents concerning the difficulties they had experienced with the recent Bus Franchising consultation, the Executive Leader undertook to report this back to the CPCA. Councillor Tevlin also used the opportunity to highlight

the importance of the survey for those residents in the rural areas who needed additional bus routes. Comment was also made regarding the importance of implementation within the timeframe.

In response to a question from Councillor L Davenport-Ray regarding the concept of Local Growth Plans, the Executive Leader reported that the work undertaken so far reflected the conversations undertaken within the Council in terms of growth, together with the principles within the Corporate Plan. Members were advised that discussions had centred around themes of 'good growth' 'sustainable growth' and not growth at all costs. Whilst some of the elements which had been identified as being important had been reflected in the initial drafting, the Council were advised that a bigger piece of work would come forward in due course which would require contributions from all.

In response to comments made by Councillor J A Gray regarding the need to tighten up on situations where governance processes appear to have been circumvented or deficient, the Executive Leader undertook to feedback the comments raised by Councillor Neish regarding the absence of any overview and scrutiny involvement in the development of the CPCA proposals. Councillor Gray also commented on three other instances experienced during the evening's Council meeting where he felt governance improvements needed to be made.

60 OUTCOMES FROM COMMITTEES AND PANELS

A copy of the list of meetings held since the last meeting of the Council held on 16th October 2024 is appended in the Minute Book and Members were advised that any issues or questions could be raised in relation to these meetings.

There were no questions raised.

61 VARIATIONS TO THE MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PANELS

There were no changes to report.

The meeting ended at 10:12pm.

Chair.