HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the CABINET held in the CIVIC SUITE (LANCASTER/STIRLING ROOMS), PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON, PE29 3TN on Tuesday, 12 November 2024

PRESENT: Councillor S J Conboy – Chair.

Councillors L Davenport-Ray, S W Ferguson, J E Harvey, B A Mickelburgh, B M Pitt, T D Sanderson and S L Taylor.

APOLOGY: An Apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor S Wakeford.

44 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15th October 2024 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

45 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor L Davenport-Ray declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest under Minute No. 24/46 by virtue of owning a second property within the District and vacated the room during discussion on this item.

The Chief Executive, Mrs M Sacks, declared an interest under Minute No. 24/46 by virtue of owning a second property within the District. Although not a decision maker, the interest was declared for transparency purposes.

46 COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS

See Minute No. 24/45 – Members' Interests.

At 7:03pm, Councillor L Davenport-Ray 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 1.5 million vacant dwellings in England which was not that dissimilar to the figures reported for those on the social housing waiting list nationally. The proposals being considered by the Cabinet would help to take steps towards resolving the housing crisis by bringing more properties into use for social housing. It was acknowledged that reduced supply and a shortage of housing was driving up rents and housing prices making it difficult for residents to afford their own homes. In noting that around 600-700 homes remained vacant in Huntingdonshire, it was reported that the Council Tax Premium would be

introduced for empty and unfurnished homes after 1 year, rather than the current 2 year period and a premium would also be introduced for those with second homes. Both premiums would be charged at 100% coming into effect from April 2026.

Attention was then drawn to the views of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Communities and Partnerships) where discussion had taken place at their meeting on 7th November 2024 on exemptions for the empty homes premium. The Panel had been offered the opportunity to form a Working Group to discuss the matter further following the release of legislation from the Government which was welcomed by the Cabinet. Executive Members also expressed support for the Panel's proposed additional recommendation requesting an update of the numbers of the properties falling under the scheme to be reported back to the democratic cycle once the new policy had been in place for 12 months.

Matters that were discussed included the timing of the proposals and whether the premium for empty homes should be introduced in April 2025 as opposed to April 2026 and the importance of clear communication and messaging out to residents to help distinguish between the two premiums. In respect of the former, the view was held that it would be better to wait for the legislation around exemptions to be released whilst also enabling residents longer to prepare for the changes.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that Council be recommended to:

a) amend the existing empty homes premium 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 1st April 2026;

b) approve the introduction of a second homes premium of 100% with effect from 1st April 2026;

c) provide delegated authority for 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 Government, and to make subsequent updates to the policy as and when required; and

d) agree that an update of the number of the properties falling under the scheme be reported back to the democratic cycle once the new policy has been in place for 12 months.

At 7:12pm, Councillor L Davenport-Ray took her seat at the meeting.

47 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.

By way of background, the Executive Councillor for Resident Services and Corporate Performance reported that since the scheme was revised in April 2024, the number of households receiving 100% support with their Council Tax had increased from 1,300 in March 2024 to 4,000 in August 2024. Furthermore, an additional 708 households now also received some support with their Council Tax since March 2024. The scheme had resulted in a significant reduction in administrative overheads which included 615 fewer reminders and 527 fewer court summons.

The Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources commented upon the positive impact the scheme had upon the residents of Huntingdonshire and referred to the Community Health and Wealth Strategy which would further bring social equity to the benefit of the District's residents.

In response to a question raised by the Executive Councillor for Planning querying the impact of the scheme upon Town and Parish Council precepts, it was confirmed that the draft Council Tax Base would be circulated around to Town and Parish Councils at the end of November 2024.

In noting the views of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Communities and Partnerships) and having expressed their support for the proposals, the Cabinet

RESOLVED

> to recommend to Council 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 the Corporate Priority to improve the quality of life for local people.

48 ONE LEISURE PV SOLAR INSTALLS

With the aid of a report by the Facilities Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Cabinet gave consideration to a proposal to proceed with the project to install Solar Photovoltaic (PV) Panels at various One Leisure sites.

The Executive Councillor for Communities, Health and Leisure introduced the report, and in doing so, reported that the proposals had resulted from the core of the Climate Strategy work and the Council's quest to become net zero in carbon emissions by 2040. Whilst a number of challenges remained on this journey, including matters such as external funding and the development of new technologies, the proposals before Cabinet sought to reduce the Council's carbon emissions whilst also generating financial savings. The total project cost would be £412,000 with a payback period of 8.25 years. The funding for the project was proposed to be met from Council reserves.

Attention was then drawn to the views of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Communities and Partnerships), where particular mention was made of the variation in the payback period across all sites. A suggestion had been made by a Member of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel to utilise the funding for the St Ives site for battery storage across the three sites. The Cabinet concurred that this suggestion was not deemed suitable at the present time as it was felt that the current proposal generated a positive return for the Council. Additionally, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Communities and Partnerships) had proposed an additional recommendation for consideration by the Cabinet relating to applying greater weight to tender applicants from within the District. The view was held that it would be difficult to redraft the Council's current procurement policy within the timeframes given and that it would be preferable to work with the supplier which had already been identified.

Matters that were discussed included the savings on utility costs to be achieved as a result of the project and the potential increases in electricity costs in future years. In concurring with the suggestion made by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environment, Communities and Partnerships) for the Panel to see the progress of the project as it developed and after 12 months of implementation, it was

RESOLVED

that Cabinet

(a) approve the project to be funded by the use of reserves, and the project to be added to the Council's capital programme to be delivered across the 2024/25 and 2025/26 financial years; and

(b) delegate the Director of Finance & Corporate Resources (Section 151), in consultation with the Executive Councillor for Finance & Resources to make any consequential amendments to budgets and release of necessary funds to deliver the project.

49 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT 2024-25 QUARTER 2

With the aid of a report prepared by the Assistant Director (Strategic Insights and Delivery) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Cabinet received an update on delivery of the Corporate Plan during Quarter 2 of the 2024/25 financial year.

In introducing the report, the Executive Councillor for Resident Services and Corporate Performance drew attention to a number of performance indicators which were showing as red or amber. These were as a result of cyclical variations such as the drop in One Leisure admissions which was expected to peak again in the New Year, the time taken to process Disabled Facilities Grants, Council Tax collection rates and the number of days taken to process new claims for Housing Benefit. In respect of the number of households in temporary accommodation, the Cabinet were pleased to note that whilst the figures had risen in Quarter 1 they had dropped back down again in Quarter 2. Members were however mindful that this performance measure was largely outside of the Council's control. Mention was also made of the performance measures relating to the garden waste subscription service, composting levels, residual waste per

household and missed bin collections. In terms of the latter, the Cabinet were reminded that recent flooding events had meant that a number of bins were not able to be collected.

The Executive Councillor for Parks and Countryside, Waste and Street Scene highlighted the benefits of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) being located within Pathfinder House which enabled effective collaborative working with the Council's Residents Advice Team. She then drew attention to the outreach sessions undertaken by the CAB every 4 weeks across the District. Having queried the "RAG" status of the action relating to future demand for Further Education provision in the St Neots area and development of the Local Skills Implementation Plan, the Chief Executive reported that a representative of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority would be delivering a presentation on skills at a forthcoming Informal Cabinet meeting. Additionally, the Executive Councillor for Resident Services and Corporate Performance undertook to review the matter outside of the meeting.

Having received and noted the views of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance & Growth) and in thanking Officers for their hard work and efforts in producing the report, it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet note the progress and performance made during Quarter 2, as summarised in the Corporate Performance Report attached and detailed in Appendices A and B of the report now submitted.

50 FINANCE PERFORMANCE REPORT 2024/25 QUARTER 2

The Cabinet received and noted a report by the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) presenting details of the Council's financial performance for 2024/25.

Members noted that at the end of Quarter 2, there was a revenue forecast underspend of £1,915,000 and a capital forecast underspend of £1,160,000. The reasons for this were as noted within the report. In terms of revenue, Cabinet Members were encouraged by the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources to give consideration to the effective utilisation of the underspend, ensuring appropriate resources were directed to areas where there were pressures or increased business need. In respect of capital, it was reported that whilst it might be concerning when programmes were not delivered this was not unusual. Assurances were delivered that projects were given the appropriate level of scrutiny by Officers which was particularly important as the Council approached Quarter 3 when the Council would set the Minimum Revenue position which formed part of the annual budget setting process. Reference was then made to the collection of Council Tax, Business Rates and sundry debt, an area that was subject to review by Officers in ensuring that any monies owed to the Council were being collected.

The views of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance & Growth) were presented by the Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources and in doing, so, comment was made upon the accidental savings that were being achieved as a result of vacancies in posts.

The Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources then went on to suggest an additional recommendation for consideration by the Cabinet in respect of the proposed contribution relating to the Community Wealth Fund. The Chief Executive reported that this was currently not included within the 2024/25 budget and to ensure due process, the matter should be referred on to Full Council on 11th December 2024 for consideration. Whereupon, the Cabinet

RESOLVED

(a) to consider and comment on the revenue financial performance for the financial year 2024/25 Quarter 2, as detailed in Appendix 1 and summarised in paragraph 3.2 of the report now submitted;

(b) to consider and comment on the capital financial performance for 2024/25 Quarter 2, as detailed in Appendix 2 and summarised in paragraph 3.3 of the report now submitted; and

(c) to refer the proposed contribution to the Community Wealth Fund on to Full Council on 11th December 2024.

51 TREASURY MANAGEMENT 6 MONTH PERFORMANCE REVIEW 2024/25

A report by the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources was submitted (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) updating Members on the Council's treasury management activity for the first 6 months of the year, including investment and borrowing activity and treasury performance.

The Financial and Treasury Accountant delivered an update to Members reporting that interest rates had fallen from 4.9% to 3% over the reporting period. Consequently, the Council's cash balances were holding up well. Updates were then delivered on borrowing, investing and the Liability Benchmark.

Having been presented with the views of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance & Growth) by the Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources, the Cabinet

RESOLVED

(a) to note the treasury management performance included in the Treasury Management 6 Month Performance Review, for the first 6 months of 2024/25; and

(b) to recommend the report to Council for consideration.

The meeting concluded at 7:53pm.

Chair