

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held as a REMOTE MEETING via MICROSOFT TEAMS on Wednesday, 17 June 2020.

PRESENT: Councillor J W Davies – Chairman.

Councillors T D Alban, B S Banks, L A Besley,
Mrs M L Beuttell, G J Bull, S M Burton, 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 P E Shrapnel, Mrs S Smith,
Mrs J Tavener, D Terry, R G Tuplin, D M Tysoe,
S Wakeford, D J Wells, R J West and Mrs S R Wilson.

APOLOGY: An Apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor J C Cooper-Marsh.

12 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

13 EXECUTIVE LEADER'S UPDATE

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

Councillor R Fuller explained that given this was the first time that the Council had met in public since the start of the pandemic, it was now appropriate for him to talk to all Members about the Council's response to the coronavirus and provide a brief overview of the plans for recovery.

The Council were reminded that traditionally the Executive Leader presents a State of the District Address to Members in July, however given that the meetings in May and July had been combined, he would begin his address by giving a brief update of the Council's performance over the 2019/20 Municipal Year.

The Council were advised that during the majority of the last year the District Council has performed strongly in a number of different service areas. The Council had managed to deliver the highest number of new affordable homes across the District in more than a decade. By maintaining the manifesto commitment to fund the homelessness trailblazer early intervention project despite the cessation of Government funding, the Council had managed to prevent 521 cases of homelessness. Nearly 30% more successful preventions

than the previous year. The Council's persistence in working towards eradicating the usage of bed and breakfast accommodation had also delivered a 90% reduction in the numbers of people housed in such accommodation.

Councillor Fuller explained that a further manifesto commitment had also been successfully met with 60% of household waste now being recycled or composted. One Leisure also had experienced another exceptional year with admissions increasing yet again.

Members were reminded that the Council had been able to successfully deliver such strong service delivery through the pursuit of a prudent financial strategy. Without the use of a Commercial Investment Strategy, for example, it would not have been possible to achieve such strong performance or to survive the current crisis.

Councillor Fuller also reported that it had also been pleasing to see the reduction in staff sickness days from 9.2 to 6.5 days per full time equivalent member of staff.

Until around March 2020, the Council had every expectation that it would be able to continue to build on the strong performance of the previous year.

Councillor Fuller reminded Members that on 18th March 2020, in his first public statement on coronavirus, he had reiterated that Huntingdonshire District Council's priority at this time would be to support and protect its communities and that as Executive Leader he would do everything possible to assist our business community, maintain the essential services that the residents relied upon and support the most vulnerable residents in the District. This has guided all Council activity over the past three months in response to coronavirus.

Councillor Fuller then drew Members attention to some of the work that the Council had undertaken during the pandemic. A number of Council staff had been redeployed to assist with the delivery of prescriptions and food parcels and efforts to contact vulnerable residents. New teams and processes have also had to be established at pace to deal with business grants. Attention was also drawn to the 'We Are Huntingdonshire' web site as a portal for all members of the community to access information. The business pages alone had received 25k visitors and the District Council's Economic Development Team have been working to support local businesses sending 40k emails so far, signposting to support and advice. As a result of which Huntingdonshire businesses have received £650k of capital grants from the Combined Authority, more than any other District within the County and 170 jobs have been guaranteed.

Councillor Fuller went on to mention the District Council's waste collection service. Whilst many Councils had ceased to provide certain services, in Huntingdonshire a full-service delivery had been maintained throughout the crisis. In addition, the service had also managed to absorb the collection of 135 lorry loads of waste. Tribute was also paid to the Operations Service, which alongside only 5% of other Councils within the Country had managed to maintain full-service delivery.

Reference to the Revenue and Benefits service was also made and the role it has played in quickly providing help and support to those residents who most

needed it. Huntingdonshire has been one of the few Councils in the country to implement a Council Tax deferral scheme, which has resulted in the Team processing 3k applications. In addition, the scheme to distribute £500k in Council tax support was also dealt with by this Team.

With reference to communication with residents and new ways of working, Council's attention was drawn to the fact that prior to the pandemic, arrangements for an online customer portal had been put in place, more services were now available online and the Council Anywhere programme had been rolled out to Members and Officers which has enabled the Authority to act at pace to maintain service delivery. During the pandemic, 400 members of Council staff seamlessly moved to working from home and the Council's Call Centre was also able to become a remote operation with to-date over 135k calls being answered at home. Nearly 1k new customer portal accounts were also created.

In terms of communication, it was reported that the District Council had communicated in new ways with great effect. District Council tweets have been viewed 214k times and an email newsletter reaching 70k residents directly.

As lockdown is now beginning to ease, Councillor Fuller explained that the District must now begin to channel its activity into Huntingdonshire's recovery. Members were advised that the Cabinet would be focusing on four themes until there was a firmer steer nationally from Central Government.

Prior to the pandemic, the Council was already actively preparing plans for town centre investment and regeneration. Whilst the Council will now have to consider the impact of coronavirus on its financial position it remains the intention to proceed with investment in town centres. Support which will be needed now more than ever before.

The Council's commitment to offering a helping hand to the communities which need it will also continue. As the full impact of coronavirus continues to become apparent, the Authority shall carry on providing that 'helping hand' to residents.

Current events have also demonstrated the importance and value of parks, open spaces and the environment to the residents of Huntingdonshire. Councillor Fuller reiterated that the District Council will continue to maintain excellent services to support pride of place.

The unprecedented challenges the District Council faced demanded a speedy reconfiguration of service delivery and Members were advised the challenges that lie ahead will require further reprioritising and reshaping of what the Authority does. New ways of working which have been developed in recent months and new areas of focus which have proved valuable should not be lost and the speed of delivery of momentum should be harnessed. The District Council will seek to build on the community spirit within Huntingdonshire in future years.

The significant loss of Council income which has been experienced and which will continue to be experienced will undoubtedly take its toll on the ability to balance budgets and continue to operate in the same way. However, Councillor Fuller reiterated that as a result of many years of sound financial management,

the District Council will emerge from this crisis and will not suffer the same fate of many other Councils in a less fortunate position.

Members were reminded that the last three months had seen the most challenging circumstances that many people have ever known. The incredible way that volunteers, community groups and parish councils have responded have made the Executive Leader immensely proud of the Huntingdonshire Community and he reiterated that if we can maintain and continue to build upon that community spirit, Huntingdonshire will have a positive future.

In concluding his address the Executive Leader took the opportunity to place on record his sincere thanks, those of his Group and to all of the District Council's dedicated officers who have all worked tirelessly to keep services running, deliver new services and help Huntingdonshire communities through this difficult time. He also paid tribute to the leadership of the District Council's Managing Director, the support received from his Deputy, Councillor Neish, the Cabinet and all colleagues around the Chamber for championing their communities and stepping up in new ways.

Finally, the Executive Leader expressed his appreciation to all the Opposition Group Leaders who throughout this period had nobly set aside their political differences and worked together to support the organisational response to the crisis. In other areas of the country, local authorities had not been so fortunate.

In his role of as Leader of the HDC Independent Group, Councillor T D Sanderson addressed the Council. In doing so, he congratulated Councillor J W Davies on his election to the position of Chairman and thanked the Executive Leader for producing a comprehensive report pulling together the considerable challenges facing the District Council.

Councillor Sanderson reiterated that having looked at the Minutes of the last meeting, the District Council could not have imagined then that it would be faced with the situation that it now finds itself in. He emphasised that the Council should be proud of its achievements to help the most vulnerable residents within Huntingdonshire which he had seen first-hand in the Huntingdon North ward, one of the most deprived parts of the District. He was delighted to see some of the changes which had been made, for example the reconfiguration of the Community Chest grant award funding which would make a difference to local communities suffering as a result of the coronavirus.

Councillor Sanderson also expressed his support for the aspirations which were demonstrated within the themes which the Council intends to pursue during the recovery period. He reiterated that public spaces within the District had become increasingly important as people were now able to leave their homes. He paid tribute to the District Council's staff who had been involved in the maintenance of these spaces during the lockdown period.

Councillor Sanderson also paid tribute to the work which had been undertaken by the Council in getting Huntingdonshire towns working again, helping shops to open and comply with new safety measures and he reported that comments from the market towns had been highly favourable.

Councillor Sanderson reiterated that this had been an extraordinary time for everyone and expressed his appreciation to colleagues and staff for the work they had undertaken in rising to the challenges which had been posed.

In concluding his remarks, Councillor Sanderson requested clarification as to when the Overview and Scrutiny Panels would recommence their meetings and asked whether more detailed information regarding the impact of the coronavirus on the Council's budget and the loss of income could be provided to Members.

Councillor Mrs S J Conboy, Leader of the Liberal Democrats Group, was invited to address the Council meeting. In doing so, she echoed the sentiments of the Executive Leader and Councillor Sanderson. She also drew attention to the considerable achievements by the District Council pre-Covid which should not be lost sight of.

With regards to the pandemic and the impact upon Huntingdonshire, Councillor Mrs Conboy took the opportunity to pay tribute to everyone for coming together for the benefit of the residents in the community at this time. She also expressed appreciation to Councillor Fuller for his outstanding leadership and to the Managing Director and her team for the support provided to all communities across the District and their visibility. She also referred to the contributions made by a number of elected members across the chamber who have worked hard to rally and support their communities.

Councillor Mrs Conboy went on to pay tribute to the organisational approach which the District Council has taken to the pandemic which had not been typical of other councils and expressed her appreciation for the exceptional level of engagement with the opposition groups and the frequency of updates. The operation of the Council's emergency plan, a matter of debate at the Corporate Governance Committee for many years, had worked extremely well when it was needed.

She explained that she has received many comments from residents on the focus of front-line services of which they were extremely assured to find that when they needed services, these were provided in a timely fashion. The District Council had been quick to respond to the changing needs within the District, particularly around Council Tax and grants, support for local businesses.

With reference to the fact that the District was now entering a new phase of the pandemic, Councillor Mrs Conboy welcomed the focus upon the recovery and emphasised that there was lots to unite all members of the community around the priority themes.

With regards to the economic position of the District Council, Councillor Mrs Conboy was reassured to hear that it would not be in the position of other authorities who would be severely financially challenged in the future. She went on to welcome the resumption of meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels from the start of next month and the opportunity which might be presented to reposition the operation of this function. It was inevitable that the priorities of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels will have changed since the start of the pandemic and it was important for them now to look forward to enable the District Council to provide the best and most robust responses post Covid.

Councillor P Kadeware, Leader of the Labour Group, reiterated his Group's support to the Executive Leader and the extraordinary commitment shown by District Council staff during this period. He was truly grateful for the way in which help has been provided for residents and the regular updates from the Executive Leader on how the Council was navigating through the pandemic. He reiterated that whilst there would be a need to review in more detail some of the specific decisions made during this exceptional period with regard to improving the Council's steps and budget changes but indicated that this was not for today and he asked when Members will have opportunity to scrutinise the issues through the normal Overview and Scrutiny process.

Having been invited to comment on the Overview and Scrutiny function, the Executive Leader was pleased to confirm that the intention was to recommence operation of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth) on 8 July 2020. At this meeting, it was intended to present the decisions which have been taken under the Executive powers that the Council holds during the pandemic. He went on to explain that it had been difficult to resource the Panels during the Covid response period and there had also been very little policy development for them to scrutinise. However, it was intended to have a full meeting schedule up and running following the Summer recess in September 2020.

With regards to the future focus of Overview and Scrutiny, the Executive Leader agreed that inevitably the focus would now shift. He explained that he would be meeting shortly with the two newly appointed Chairmen to discuss the role of these Panels going forward. It was his view that there was an opportunity for scrutiny to play a more active role in the policy investigation work, together with monitoring of the Council's budgets. There would also be an in-depth role for the Performance and Growth Panel in monitoring the health of the economy. He explained that inevitably as the Council moves through the recovery phase there will be a new focus to the work and he was happy to work with both Panels to achieve this through regular attendance and engagement by Members.

Councillor S Corney paid tribute to the 'We Are Huntingdonshire' website which had been a great source of guidance to signpost residents to help and support during the lockdown period.

Councillor Dr N Johnson echoed the comments which had been made to the District Council by the Labour leader. He went on to ask about the Black Lives Matter movement and whether this had had any effect on the District Council's thinking for the future in planning for recruitment with the rising awareness of discrimination. In response, Councillor Fuller explained that Huntingdonshire had not traditionally had these types of issues. Whilst there were a number of diverse communities within the District, there have always been excellent relationships between all sections of the community and this was not a significant issue that had been experienced. Given the prominence that the wider agenda is receiving nationally, Councillor Fuller suggested that the District would seek to review this but he stressed that he did not believe there would be any significant work to be done. Huntingdonshire has always had a diverse community, has always maintained good relations and will continue to do so.

14 APPOINTMENT OF CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER AND SECTION 151 OFFICER

With the assistance of a report by the Managing Director (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) regarding the legislative duty placed on the Council to appoint a Section 151 Officer, the Council were reminded that the designation was held currently by the Council's Finance Manager on an interim basis for a period not to exceed 12 months. This period was due to expire on 14 October 2020.

Having regard to the need to formalise a more permanent arrangement for these duties to be undertaken now that the senior management reorganisation within the organisation had been completed, it was

RESOLVED

- (a) that Claire Edwards, Finance Manager, be appointed permanently as the Council's Chief Finance Officer/Section 151 Officer; and
- (b) that the Council's Constitution be updated to reflect the changes that resulted from this appointment.

The meeting ended at 7.23pm

Chairman