

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held as a REMOTE MEETING VIA ZOOM on Wednesday, 14 October 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, Mrs S Conboy, S J Corney,
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, Dr N Johnson,
P Kadewere, D N Keane, C J Maslen, L W McGuire,
D J Mead, J Neish, J M Palmer, K I Prentice, A Roberts,
T D Sanderson, Mrs P E Shrapnel, Mrs J Tavener, D Terry,
D M Tysoe, S Wakeford, D J Wells, R J West and
Mrs S R Wilson.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors J R Clarke, J C Cooper-Marsh, S J Criswell, M J Humphrey, Mrs P A Jordan, H V Masson, J P Morris and R G Tuplin.

15 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meetings of the Council held on the 17th June 2020 were approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

16 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

17 CHAIRMAN'S ENGAGEMENTS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Council noted those engagements attended by the Chairman and Vice-Chairman since the last meeting (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book).

18 EXECUTIVE LEADER'S UPDATE

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

In opening his remarks, Councillor Fuller drew Members attention to the recent announcement by the Prime Minister setting out how the country would continue to fight back against coronavirus, protect the NHS and save lives whilst keeping the economy running to safeguard jobs and livelihoods. He also made reference to the robust action taken by the Government in September, introducing the Rule

of Six, placing restrictions on hospitality opening hours, advising people to work from home where they can and the introduction of tougher enforcement measures.

However, Members were advised that the numbers of Covid patients admitted to intensive care units in some parts of the Country had now increased and if infections continued to rise, these hospitals could find themselves treating more patients than they did at the peak of the first wave. In Huntingdonshire, Councillor Fuller reported the number of cases per 100,000 of the population had risen nearly tenfold in a few short weeks and he emphasised the importance of everybody playing their part in being responsible and following the guidance to control the spread of the virus and protect the local economy, local jobs and the livelihoods of residents.

Councillor Fuller encouraged Members of the Council and the community to act in a spirit of togetherness to suppress the virus to avoid any increase of the Covid alert level in Huntingdonshire which he believed would be catastrophic to the local economy. In this respect, Members were advised that the Leader and the Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority were united in their views that local lockdowns must be considered on a district by district basis rather than at a county or regional level.

The impact of Covid had accelerated the demise of town centres and high streets across the country. Although Members were advised that Huntingdonshire's market towns were faring well in the circumstances, it was reported that pre-pandemic, the high street was already facing significant challenges with 12% of all UK shops vacant in March 2020 and retail floor space estimated to shrink further as a result of the pandemic.

Members were reminded that people had noticed significant changes during the lockdown with many deciding that a better way of doing things was possible and Councillor Fuller reiterated that the District's town centres must also form part of this approach, whilst valuing the local environment more and sharing a stronger sense of community.

In addressing the vision for Huntingdonshire town centres, Members noted that doing nothing was not a realistic option to compete with online shopping and the changing nature of consumer habits. In this respect, attention was drawn to the Council's submission of a £12 million Future High Streets Fund plan to transform St Neots, with similar plans to prepare Huntingdonshire's other market towns for a post-Covid future to support their recovery.

Members noted that the Council had been successful in securing £300k from the Combined Authority to develop similar multi-million-pound investment and regeneration plans for the other market towns and had been actively working with Mayor Palmer on plans to utilise £1.5 million of Covid recovery funding that the Combined Authority had agreed for Huntingdonshire's towns. In addition to

this, Councillor Fuller explained that he had also written to the Mayor to request a further £500k to meet the immediate recovery needs of St Neots.

Councillor Fuller drew Members attention to other initiatives that had been launched recently and supported by the District Council. These included HDC's 'Think Local' campaign which would run until January 2021, building upon the success of the 'Reopening Huntingdonshire' campaign in promoting what Huntingdonshire high streets have to offer. Reference was also made to the launch of free public access Wi-Fi covering the centre of St Neots, which would shortly be rolled out to the other market towns and Members were informed that the District Council had also been working with Openreach to deliver full fibre broadband across Huntingdonshire, with St Neots and its surrounding villages having been recently announced as the first phase of this rollout. Further work was being undertaken with Openreach to expand this coverage to other parts of the District, both urban and rural.

In his concluding remarks, Councillor Fuller reminded Members that few areas of society had been more affected by coronavirus than the town centre economies but this administration was meeting the challenge head on and taking a strategic and proactive position to supporting them. In addition to the £50 million of grants and business rate reliefs the Council had already delivered to local businesses, the Council was setting out a strong vision for the future prosperity of Huntingdonshire and delivering investment and opportunities to make our towns fit for the future.

Finally, the Executive Leader emphasised that although the weeks and months ahead would continue to be difficult, he encouraged Members to champion a positive future for Huntingdonshire and continue to harness the same spirit that had helped the District get through the year so far. He remained confident that the Huntingdonshire community would overcome the challenges it faced and continue to prosper.

As Leader of the HDC Independent Group, Councillor T D Sanderson thanked the Executive Leader for the detailed statement and was encouraged to hear the work being undertaken to support the high streets and town centres. He further praised the work of the District Council in its support of the most vulnerable residents. In commenting upon the unpredictability of the years events, reference was made to impact on the Medium Term Financial Strategy arising from the closure of leisure centres, suspension of car parking charges and the reduction of income from the Commercial Investment Strategy. Councillor Sanderson also made reference to the financial support which had been provided from Central Government which was unlikely to be adequate to meet the cost of the Covid response. He concluded by thanking Councillor Fuller on behalf of the opposition groups for keeping them informed during the various political leadership meetings in the true spirit of co-operation and joint working during these unprecedented times.

Councillor P Kadewere, as Leader of the Labour Group welcomed the report from the Executive Leader and in noting an increase in Covid cases and hospital

admissions questioned whether there were any precautions that needed to be undertaken or advice provided to members of the public in our communities. In his concluding remarks, Councillor Kadewere commented upon the excellent work in combatting the pandemic and his hope that much of the collaborative working would continue. He also requested that such funding from the Combined Authority be distributed in all towns across the District with all resources shared.

As Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Councillor Mrs S J Conboy echoed the comments from the previous Group Leaders thanking Councillor Fuller and the HDC Team and placed on record her thanks to the leadership of the Managing Director and the Senior Leadership Team. In the challenging time everyone had pulled together when communities needed it most, ensuring this was done as safely and smoothly as possible, whilst reassuring residents that they came first. In light of the continuing challenges for Huntingdonshire communities, Councillor Mrs Conboy focussed on the positives being undertaken regarding future resilience with the support of the Liberal Democrat Team. In concluding, Councillor Mrs Conboy expressed her appreciation to the Executive Leader and Senior Leadership Team for the regular briefings ensuring that Members were fully informed of relevant matters and issues and which had also enabled issues and concerns to be fed in at a local level through casework. Recognition was also given to genuine challenges still facing the area that can be worked through together as Members of the District Council.

In response to a question from Councillor B S Chapman with regard to the increase in number of Covid cases and representative number of cases per 100k, Councillor Fuller confirmed that current cases in the District were just over 50 per 100k. Although this was relatively low in context of the size of the District, he stressed that we should not be complacent about the seriousness of the situation. Whilst the majority of the residents were complying with restrictions, there continued to be some who needed the message to be reinforced.

In concluding the discussion on this item, the Executive Leader expressed his appreciation to the Group Leaders for the sentiments they had expressed and agreed with their spirit of cooperation that had been exercised since the beginning of this crisis. He reiterated that it had been evident that certain matters transcend party politics at a local level in Huntingdonshire and the Political Leaders had been excellent in their support during this difficult period. He conveyed his thanks to every one of them.

19 QUESTIONS TO MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

Arising from a question from Councillor A Roberts on an assessment of the effectiveness of the social distancing measures that had been deployed at One Leisure facilities since re-opening, Councillor K I Prentice, Executive Councillor for Leisure and Regulatory Services explained that an enhanced cleaning regime had been implemented, controlled access to centres rolled out and segregation of certain parts of equipment. As well as re-designation of some parts of the sports hall to maximise use across the widest range of activities to maintain safe and practical social distancing and this had been encouraging with attendance numbers rising since re-opening the leisure centres in mid-July 2020. He further reported that One Leisure had been trying to increase capacity with rising demand and customers had been welcoming the measures established to protect them as well as the staff and expressed his appreciation to the One

Leisure staff for their hard work and adaptability in such difficult circumstances together with their professionalism.

In relation to a further supplementary question from Councillor Roberts on how well the Customer Services Team had been coping with the current situation, the Executive Councillor for Corporate Services, Councillor D N Keane, reported upon of how proud he was in the way that the Team had adapted to change and very quickly transformed to a remote working Team providing the same level of service. Since the reopening of Pathfinder House there had been on average 6-8 people per day, with only two requiring face to face meetings, whilst the others had been triaged to self-service via the customer portal. Councillor Keane explained that this could all be attributed to good management, staff engagement and use of the technology available.

Arising from a comment by Councillor T D Alban on his appreciation to the Enforcement Team across the District addressing the increased instances of fly tipping, particularly along B660, whereby the Teams had taken action quickly to clear and check for evidence and he urged colleagues to ensure that such instances are reported. Councillor Ms M Beuttell, Executive Councillor for Operations and Environment concurred with the sentiments of Councillor Alban, particularly the hard work of the Teams involved and undertook to pass on the message of thanks to the respective Teams.

Councillor T D Sanderson raised a question in relation to the updated position on the Future High Streets Fund (FHSF) submission for St Neots and the subsequent position on the compulsory purchase of the Old Falcon Hotel on the Market Square. The Executive Leader reported that the FHSF had been submitted a few weeks ago and there had been a process of clarification on a few issues for every applicant whereby additional information had been required to be submitted. It was the expectation that any outcome on success or otherwise might not be known until the latter part of the year, with 100+ applications to consider, it was not clear as to what scale of options might be possible until the level of financial support was known. Referring to and responding to a request from the Mayor of St Neots, Councillor Fuller explained that a summary of the detail of the bid was being prepared so that it could be shared publicly for Members and the public.

In response to a question from Councillor P Kadewere on the continued closure of the toilets at Huntingdon Bus Station and any plans to re-open the facilities in response to a request from Shop Mobility to assist those visitors to the town with medical conditions, Councillor Fuller, Executive Leader explained that unfortunately such facilities could not be made Covid safe and it was illogical to re-open whilst such precautions were necessary.

Councillor B S Chapman raised a question in relation to liaison with bus companies, particularly Stagecoach's recent announcement of significant route changes in Huntingdon and St Ives and loss of the X5 service in St Neots. Whereby Councillor Fuller explained that there was not a relevant Portfolio Holder as this was not a District Council service and suggested that his concerns might be better raised with colleagues at other authorities. However, in relation to the X5 service Councillor Fuller explained that he had raised this issue with the Mayor of the Combined Authority and it had been explained that the Mayor had commissioned a new bus service and feedback had been well received, with the

public embracing the new service which had been demonstrated by usage numbers. He further suggested that any other concerns should be fed through and they would be raised at the appropriate level.

Councillor Chapman sought further clarification on the transport liaison officer at the District Council as general feedback on the new service demonstrated a more inferior level of service with no ability to take cycles onto this bus and no Public Wi-Fi, nor toilet facilities and asked that the Leader take these comments back as feedback on the replacement service.

Arising from a question from Councillor C Maslen on rejuvenation of St Neots with the closure of more shops in the town and possibility of re-visiting the car parking charges with a possible reduction in charges at the Riverside Car Park in the short term to encourage more footfall into the town centre and further plans for on-street parking enforcement, Councillor Ms Beuttell, Executive Councillor for Operations and Environment reported that there were no plans to reduce any car parking charges and since the re-opening of the town centres car parks had been very full. She further updated that the on-street parking enforcement would be looked at further in the ensuing year.

Councillor S Wakeford further pursued the question raised previously by Councillor Kadwere in relation to toilet facilities not being Covid secure and questioned whether the same thresholds were being applied to hospitality venues or had they found a way round this to open with such facilities, whereby Councillor Fuller, Executive Leader explained that in most hospitality venues they had a team of dedicated staff available all day to maintain the necessary cleaning regime whereas the District Council unfortunately could not provide the same level of service with someone stationed outside such facilities throughout the day.

In response to a question from Councillor Mrs S J Conboy on the preparedness of the District Council to assist with the expected second wave of Covid, Councillor Fuller, Executive Leader explained that the initial response provided by the District Council had not realistically been stood down from assisting and it had the ability and capacity to re-establish any support measures for those vulnerable groups, although any redeployment of resources may have implications and delay the delivery of other activities or projects.

20 CORPORATE PLAN REFRESH 2020/21

Further to the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth) held on 16th September 2020 and comments raised therein and recommendation of the Cabinet at their meeting held on 17th September 2020, consideration was given to a report by the Business Intelligence and Performance Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on an update of the refresh of the Corporate Plan 2020/21.

The Executive Leader explained that a four year Corporate Plan had been adopted before the last election cycle in 2018 but had taken the opportunity to review this given the unprecedented circumstances being faced by the Council in order to consider the relevance and any changes that might be needed to be made in year to reflect what is happening around us, as well as looking at the Key Performance Indicators to see if any weaknesses needed tightening. He

further drew Members attention to the “golden thread” that sets out the direction and acknowledges the challenges open to us and sets out the opportunities and priorities. Further reference was made to the Community Impact Assessment that sat behind this document and had been put together in response to Covid and the Policy Framework library of work being undertaken and how they fit into the Corporate Plan and the overarching corporate direction.

Councillor T D Sanderson referred to firming up the timetable of consideration of the strategies identified in the Appendices to the report now submitted, whereby Councillor Fuller explained that an ambitious schedule had been set for some of the reports although some such as the Housing Strategy had moved at pace through the utilisation of specific expert resources to support the project and given the change in circumstances he and the Managing Director had been in discussion about being pragmatic about the scheduling of the priority policy areas on the understanding that some may not be delivered to the original timetable.

Councillor Mrs S J Conboy welcomed the refresh of the Corporate Plan going back to first principles of what the Council wants to achieve and referred to the difficult budget decisions still to be made, together with the great deal of uncertainty and hoped that this would remain as a live document for future refresh's. Whereby Councillor Fuller reported that this was a one year refresh document for the remainder of the Municipal Year and a new four year Corporate Plan would be produced in time for the next term of administration beyond the next election cycle, but was not intrinsically linked to the forthcoming budget. However, it was not sensible to commit to things where there was no certainty that it would be delivered.

RESOLVED

that the revised key actions and performance indicators for inclusion in the Corporate Plan for 2020/21 be approved.

21 CODE OF FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT 2020/21

By way of a report by the Finance Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources presented details of the outcome of the review of the Code of Financial Management as endorsed by the Corporate Governance Committee at their meeting on 23rd July 2020. The Code was reviewed regularly to ensure it reflected current legislation and the changing needs of the Council.

In referring to the Internal Audit Service, Councillor Mrs S J Conboy sought assurance that the service would continue to have unfettered access and sufficient resources to undertake its duties to be undertaken. Whereby Councillor Gray explained that the service would continue to have free, full and unrestricted access to services and functions and all Council assets, systems, documents, information, employees and Members as set out in the Code. He further explained that there was a restructuring of the resource following the departure of the Internal Audit Manager and they had been working to see how a solution could be delivered effectively. Although there was an interim solution in place, it was felt that consideration should also be given to a shared service that could

deliver across multiple platforms the internal audit outturn that the Corporate Governance Committee valued highly.

As Chairman of the Corporate Governance Committee, Councillor G J Bull assured Councillor Mrs Conboy that the Corporate Governance Committee was equally eager to ensure that there was provision for a significantly active and well-resourced Internal Audit Section. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the revised Code of Financial Management as appended to the report now submitted be approved.

22 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CORPORATE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

In conjunction with a report by the Acting Internal Audit and Risk Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) Councillor L W McGuire, former Chairman of the Corporate Governance Committee, presented the Annual Report for 2019/20 of the Corporate Governance Committee which outlined the work that had been undertaken by the Committee over the previous year. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Annual Report 2019/20 of the Corporate Governance Committee be received and noted.

23 TREASURY MANAGEMENT SIX MONTH PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Consideration was given to a report by the Council's Finance Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) providing a six-month update in respect of treasury management activity for the period 1st October 2019 to 31st March 2020. Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources, drew Members attention to the stable outcome during this period which showed the difference between borrowing that had been undertaken with an average amount payable at 2.76% compared to yields on investment of 6.5%.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that that the Treasury Management Performance during the period 1st October 2019 to 31st March 2020 be noted.

24 LICENSING ACT 2003: STATEMENT OF LICENSING POLICY

On the recommendation of the Licensing Committee at their meeting held on 30th September 2020, consideration was given to a report by the Acting Operations Manager (Business) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) to which was attached a revised draft Statement of Licensing Policy under the Licensing Act 2003. The Statement sets out how the Council will exercise its statutory duties relating to its licensing function.

Councillor K Prentice, Executive Councillor for Leisure and Regulatory Services explained that the draft Statement had been approved for public consultation by the Licensing Committee at its meeting on 24th June 2020. Consultation had taken place during the period 29th June to 12th September 2020 in accordance with the Cabinet Office guidelines and Members were advised that the Statement had now been amended to take into account, where appropriate, consultation responses.

Councillor B S Chapman referred to a response that had been submitted on behalf of St Neots Town Council and although they were satisfied and supported the Statement he requested for completeness a confirmation that the response had been received. Councillor K Prentice undertook to investigate and provide a direct response to Councillor Chapman.

RESOLVED

that the Council's Licensing Act 2003 Statement of Licensing Policy be approved for a five-year period commencing on 7th January 2021.

25 USE OF SPECIAL URGENCY PROVISIONS 2019/20

Consideration was given to a report by the Executive Leader on the use of special urgency provisions taken throughout the previous year (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Subject to the correction of the year of the date of decision on the Commercial Investment Strategy Asset from 2020 to 2019, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

26 CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH COMBINED AUTHORITY - UPDATE

In conjunction with the decision summaries of the recent meetings of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (copies of which are appended in the Minute Book), Councillor R Fuller presented an update of their activities. Attention was drawn to progress that had been made in relation to the A141 and St Ives Transport Study, whereby funding had been agreed to move the project onto the next stages and £300k secured at the Board meeting in September 2020 to develop St Neots style plans for the other three market towns in the District.

Arising from a question from Councillor B S Chapman on progress with continuing discussions on super-fast broadband in the District with £2m put aside to proceed with the project to ensure the economic vibrancy of the towns, whereby Councillor Fuller referred to his report earlier to Members on the full fibre agenda and understood that Councillor Chapman was referring to the gigabit voucher scheme in operation by the Combined Authority that had been utilised more recently by Councillor Gardiner delivering full fibre using vouchers and combination of other funding in Spaldwick and his Ward. The work in St Neots being undertaken by Openreach was under their commercial remit but the

District Council had been working with them to establish what funding gap was needed in terms of the feasibility of rolling it out to rest of the District.

Councillor S J Corney provided an update on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee and drew Members attention to the attendance by Baroness Brown of Cambridge as Chairman of the Independent Climate Change Commission, who provided an update on process for appointing the Chairman and Members to the Commission. It was understood that she would be reporting to the Board further in November 2020.

Members were provided with an update on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Audit and Governance Committee by Councillor G J Bull and particular attention was drawn to a workshop on the new Constitution and subsequent changes that Peterborough City Council no longer provided Internal Audit services for the Combined Authority. It was noted that a new contract had been signed with RSM International to provide an internal audit service and they had met the client partner. Furthermore the Framework of Accountability would be considered at their meeting on 27th November 2020 and the Mayor would also be in attendance to answer any questions that may arise from the recent letter to be issued by the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government.

27 OUTCOMES FROM COMMITTEES AND PANELS

A copy of the list of meetings held since the last meeting of the Council held on 17th June 2020 is appended in the Minute Book and Members were advised that any issues or questions could be raised in relation to these meetings.

28 VARIATIONS TO THE MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PANELS

There were no changes to report.

The meeting ended at 7.25pm.

Chairman