

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (PERFORMANCE AND GROWTH) held as a Remote Meeting via Zoom on Monday, 25th January 2021

PRESENT: Councillor S J Corney – Chairman.

Councillors E R Butler, D B Dew, I D Gardener,
Dr P L R Gaskin, J P Morris, A Roberts and S Wakeford.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors B S Banks, M S Grice, Mrs J Tavener and D J Wells.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors T D Alban, S J Criswell, Ms A Diaz,
Mrs A Dickinson, Mrs S Smith, D M Tysoe, and
Mrs S R Wilson.

53 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were received.

54 COVID-19 RECOVERY PROGRAMME

By means of a report by the Interim Corporate Director (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) and with the aid of a presentation the Council's Covid-19 Recovery Programme was presented to the Panel.

Following a question by Councillor Criswell it was confirmed that the recovery programme would involve collaboration between the different public bodies and that an important aspect of the programme was to ensure that Officers were aware of the key priorities. Members were also reassured that Parish and Town Councils would be involved in the recovery programme.

Councillor Wilson commented that residents had understood that some services could not operate as normal during the pandemic but there was an expectation that, as soon as practicable, services should return to full operating capacity.

Councillor Smith commented that a number of Parishes were very organised in distributing food packages to vulnerable residents, however the challenge was to secure sufficient donations to meet demand. She stated that more donations were required, possibly from a central source, for the food poverty project to be successful.

A question was asked by Councillor Tysoe on how the Council could gauge whether objectives had been achieved or projects had been successful. The Interim Corporate Director responded by stating that key measures had been established that would be monitored and that, where necessary, there would be reference back to higher-level measures in the Community Impact Assessment.

It was acknowledged that there would be a data lag in some areas and that some objectives and projects would be easier to measure and track than others.

The issue of funding was raised by Councillor Butler. In response, the Panel was informed that all projects were subject to a bidding process and that multiple sources of funding were available. In addition, the Council could collaborate with partners who had access to alternative sources of funding.

Discussions ensued regarding the Council's objective of expanding its core information on local businesses. Following suggestions from Members, the Panel was informed that Officers had already held discussions with the local Chambers of Commerce and the local branch of the Federation of Small Businesses. The Interim Corporate Director also stated that the Council was aiming to build on the information it had to get a better understanding of business needs.

In discussing the work of voluntary organisations, Councillor Alban stated that there was a lot of positive work that could be harnessed for the good of the community. He also stressed the importance of working with communities rather than imposing solutions on them.

Councillor Tysoe commented that, when working with 'at risk' residents, it was important to recognise that not all of them identified themselves as being 'at risk'.

Councillor Roberts enquired as to the purpose of providing support and advice to businesses on digitisation. The Panel was informed that it was to help businesses establish an online platform where one did not currently exist. This would give them the opportunity to increase their customer base and to sell goods and services to people residing outside of the District.

After a question from Councillor Smith, it was confirmed that the Council had established links with faith groups.

A discussion on the objective 'a skilled and engaged workforce' ensued. Councillor Dew commented that all projects under this objective would be important in recovering from the economic effects of Covid-19.

Councillor Gardener raised a query about the location of job clubs and was informed that Officers work with existing job clubs but that when looking to establish new ones critical mass was taken into account. It was also confirmed, after Councillor Alban asked a follow-up question, that Officers would collaborate with neighbouring authorities where appropriate.

Councillor Roberts questioned whether the Council would improve digital 'not-spots' as part of the digital infrastructure project. In response, the Panel was informed that Officers were working closely with Connecting Cambridgeshire in improving coverage across Huntingdonshire. The Interim Corporate Director added that an alternative broadband provider 'County Broadband' were looking at connecting 32 villages across Huntingdonshire. He added that it was difficult to connect those areas that were not near physical infrastructure. Councillor Alban added to the discussion by stating that the provision of broadband to places with a population of fewer than 50 people was difficult as the cost per household was prohibitively expensive.

Councillor Wakeford questioned whether the Council could provide any practical support to young entrepreneurs. Members were reminded that some projects were more developed than others. There was a theoretical base behind each project, and this would be applied in this instance.

Following a query from Councillor Alban on rough sleepers, the Panel was informed that the Council was continuing to provide them with the necessary support. In addition, the Council encouraged rough sleepers to register with a GP to ensure they were able to receive vaccines. The Chairman asked whether the Council would consider a similar approach to Cambridge City Council by providing rough sleepers with modular homes. The Panel was informed that the situation in Cambridge was different, but Officers were monitoring this initiative in case any transferrable lessons could be learnt.

A discussion ensued on the healthy living project. Councillor Morris emphasised the importance of including in it a focus on mental health. The point was noted but it was necessary to be clear on the Council's role in supporting the NHS.

In discussing the objective 'a greener future' Councillor Gardener commented that connectivity between villages and towns should be included when considering walking and cycling routes. Councillor Morris added that in doing so more children would be encouraged to walk to school. Councillor Diaz added that where cycle lanes were in place, students were prepared to use them. However, Councillor Tysoe made the observation that agencies did not work as collaboratively on creating new walking and cycling routes as might be desired. In response, Members were informed that the purpose of the project was to create plans so that when infrastructure matters were under consideration, they could be referred to by civil engineers.

Questions were raised on the Council's project to reopen One Leisure. The Interim Corporate Director recognised that it would be a challenge. The service was awaiting the publication Government guidance before decisions could be taken on when the centres would reopen and how they would operate.

Councillor Dickinson asked whether it was planned to increase the number of electric charging points in the Council's car parks. The Panel was informed that the Council had submitted a bid to the Combined Authority for funding for this purpose and that there was a programme to install more charging points, which would be presented to Overview and Scrutiny and then the Cabinet in February.

Questions were raised about rental income from the estates' portfolio. It was recognised that the difficult economic climate represented a challenge for businesses, and the Council's Commercial Estates Manager took this into account in her dealings with clients.

Councillor Tysoe suggested that the Council should consider leveraging similar schemes and projects by other agencies and at the same time take steps to ensure that work was not duplicated. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

- a) that the report be received and noted, and

- b) that further reports be submitted as required as the Programme develops.

Chairman