

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, 17 October 2023

PRESENT: Councillor S J Conboy – Chair.

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

36 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 19th September 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

37 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillors L Davenport-Ray, T D Sanderson and S Wakeford declared potential interests as Members of the Development Management Committee.

It was confirmed that if during the course of the meeting interests needed to be declared, advice would be provided and they would leave the debate.

38 PLANNING SERVICES - UPDATE

With the assistance of a report by the Chief Planning Officer (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Cabinet received an update on progress being made to embed improvements and reduce the backlog within the Planning Service, together with an update on progress with the Local Plan.

In introducing the item, the Executive Councillor for Planning reported on several key issues within the report. He was pleased to report a 34% reduction in the number of planning applications waiting over 26 weeks between 24 October 2022 and 1 April 2023 and that the option for applicants to engage in pre-application discussions had been re-established. He also emphasised the change to processes so that amendments to applications were no longer accepted, with the exception of large-scale major applications. In terms of those areas still requiring improvement, Cabinet Members were advised that improvements continued to be required in areas such as planning enforcement, which required an increase in staff.

Having had their attention drawn to the comments of Overview and Scrutiny, the Executive Councillor highlighted that lessons had been learned from complaints taken to the Local Ombudsman; and reiterated that Town or Parish Councils were encouraged to engage with the Planning Team with regards to work on the Local Plan, particularly if the Call for Sites had caused confusion. Cabinet was also reminded that work was being undertaken regarding the governance

arrangements for the Community Infrastructure Levy which would consider plans made by Government.

Several matters were then raised and discussed by the Cabinet. This included the potential impact of significant changes in the national approach to plan-making without suitable transition arrangements. The Executive Councillor responded by updating Members on recent announcements and by emphasising the need for changes to be accompanied by adequate resourcing. Cabinet Members also discussed the introduction of the No Amendments Policy which, whilst not to the satisfaction of all, had proved invaluable in improving the quality and speed of decision making. Further, the pre-application advice service and planning conditions assisted in preventing demand for amendments. In recognition of comments expressed by Councillor Pitt, the Executive Councillor suggested that the forthcoming training session for Town and Parish Councils could be used as an opportunity to confirm their understanding of the process and ask them to highlight any difficulties experienced.

Cabinet Members also commented on the growing number of Neighbourhood Plans which had been adopted within the District. In light of their comments about encouraging a greater number of towns and parishes to pursue the adoption of a Neighbourhood Plan, it was again suggested that the forthcoming training session would be an opportunity to promote the Plan process.

It was agreed the Tree Officer start date should read November 2023. Having commended the Planning Teams for their hard work and effort in seeking to achieve the more positive position which the Service now found itself in, it was

RESOLVED

- (a) that progress on improvement to the planning service to date be agreed; and
- (b) that the position on the progress of the update to the Local Plan be noted and agreed.

39 MARKET TOWNS PROGRAMME AUTUMN UPDATE - 2023-2024

A report by the Regeneration and Housing Delivery Manager was submitted (a copy of which was appended in the Minute Book) providing an update on activity across the strands of the Market Towns Programme for Quarter 2 of 2023/24.

In updating Cabinet on the overall programme, the Executive Councillor for Jobs, Economy and Housing Councillor S Wakeford drew attention to the milestones that had been reached within the St Neots Town Centre Improvements Project which was scheduled for delivery from October 2023, with works in the Market Square starting in January 2024. The Council's contractors for the Priory Centre had also now established a Building Delivery Group to take the project to construction phase.

In Huntingdon and St Ives, Councillor Wakeford was pleased to report that the Shop Front Grant Scheme had been launched in July and the Council were progressing with Digital wayfaring across the four market towns.

Attention was then drawn to the comments and questions of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth) and the responses which had been provided at their meeting on 4th October 2023.

Cabinet Members representing St Neots outlined their excitement at the imminent works at the Priory Centre and in the town centre and the market square which it was anticipated have significant social, cultural and economic impact for the town. Having acknowledged the loss of disabled parking spaces within the market square, the Executive Councillor explained that efforts had been made to mitigate the impact of this on affected communities, such as widening of parking bays and pavements, and that the wider impact of the town centre improvement works would bring additional accessibility benefits to the town.

Cabinet Members went on to discuss the risk of inflation to the project management of the programme, given the construction industry had seen materials and labour costs significantly increase over the past year. In response to this, Councillor Wakeford outlined the considerable effort made to mitigate this risk through thorough scrutiny and robust governance frameworks.

Whereupon, and having noted expressions of interests from other towns and large villages within the District to form part of future programmes, it was

RESOLVED

To note progress on all the projects within the Market Towns Programme and specifically the following the:

- (a) appointment of a contractor to deliver the St Neots Town Centre Improvements (Market Square and adjacent Highways / junctions) and commencement of works in October 2023);
- (b) progression of the Priory Centre improvement project including the appointment of a multi-disciplinary team to develop proposals and support delivery;
- (c) commencement of delivery of the Huntingdon & St Ives works, including roll out of the Shop Front Improvement Grant scheme.
- (d) Delivery of the Digital Information Screens project in Huntingdon, St Neots, St Ives and Ramsey.

40 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

that the public be excluded from the meeting because the business to be transacted contained exempt information relating to the financial or business affairs of a particular person (including the authority holding that information).

41 MARKET TOWNS PROGRAMME AUTUMN UPDATE - 2023-2024 (PART 2)

See Minute No. 37 – Members' Interests.

The Cabinet considered an exempt report (a copy of which is appended in the annex to the Minute Book) which provided an update on the St Neots Market Town Programme (Old Falcon Inn & St Neots Charter Market).

Having received an update from the Executive Councillor for Jobs, Housing and Economy which included the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance & Growth) on the matter, Councillor Wakeford then responded to comments and questions from Members of the Cabinet. Whereupon, the Cabinet

RESOLVED

- (a) that recommendations a – c of the exempt report be approved;
- (b) that agreement be delegated to the Regeneration and Housing Officer after consultation with the Executive Councillors for Jobs, Economy and Housing and the Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources to pursue recommendation (d) of the exempt report; and
- (c) that authority be delegated to the Chief Executive after consultation with the Section 151 Officer, Executive Councillor for Jobs, Economy & Housing and Executive Councillor for Finance and Resources to in accordance with recommendation e (paragraph 4.12) of the exempt report now submitted.

Chair