

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held in the Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 25 July 2018.

PRESENT: Councillor R J West – Chairman.

Councillors B S Banks, R E Bellamy,
L A Besley, G J Bull, S M Burton, E R Butler,
S Bywater, B S Chapman, J R Clarke,
J C Cooper-Marsh, S J Corney, S J Criswell,
J W Davies, D B Dew, Ms A Diaz,
Mrs A Dickinson, R Fuller, Dr P L R Gaskin,
D A Giles, J A Gray, 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,
J P Morris, J Neish, J M Palmer, K I Prentice,
T D Sanderson, Mrs P E Shrapnel,
Mrs S Smith, Mrs J Tavener, R G Tuplin,
D M Tysoe, D R Underwood, S Wakeford and
J E White.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors J D Ablewhite, T D Alban, Mrs M L Beuttell, Mrs S Conboy, Mrs S A Giles, M S Grice, D J Mead, D Terry and D J Wells.

18. PRAYER

The Reverend of St Andrew's Church, Great Staughton, Nicki Bland, opened the meeting with a prayer.

19. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman presented to the Council an account of the activities both he and the Vice-Chairman had attended since the last meeting. In so doing, he summarised his attendance at various events including Flag Raising Ceremonies for Commonwealth Day, Armed Forces Day and for the Royal Air Force Centenary Celebrations, as well as supporting local charities including the East Anglian Children's Hospice, Cambridge and Huntingdon Deaf Children's Society and St John's Ambulance and attending services for St Georges Day, Memorial Day at Madingley and the installation of the Mayor of Peterborough. Together with Councillor Ms A Dickinson, the Chairman also reported upon his support for the cake stall at Pathfinder House in support of the Council as a Dementia Friendly Workplace.

20. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meetings of the Council held on the 23rd May and 27th June 2018 were approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

21. MEMBERS INTERESTS

Councillor K I Prentice declared a non-statutory disclosable interest in Item No. 22 by virtue of his employment. Councillors B S Chapman and D A Giles declared non-statutory disclosable interests in Item No. 22 by virtue of their membership of St Neots Town Council.

22. MOTION ON NOTICE

(See Minute No. 21 for Members' interests).

Further to Minute No. 44 (b) of the meeting of the Council held on 13th December 2017, Councillor B S Chapman moved and it was duly seconded by Councillor D A Giles that –

“The Falcon Hotel on St Neots Market Square has been closed for the past decade. The building occupies a central position at the heart of St Neots and its current appearance and lack of use is damaging to the local St Neots economy.

The appearance of the Falcon Hotel is unsightly and damaging to St Neots tourism and attractiveness of the Market Square to local residents and visitors. It is damaging to the local retail economy and impacts profitability and sustainability of local shops, pubs and restaurants. The Falcon Hotel is a prominent feature of the St Neots Riverside as well as the town's Market Square but currently has a significant negative impact on both vistas.

The Falcon Hotel offers Huntingdonshire District Council an opportunity to play a part in reversing the decline of the St Neots economy.

Last summer an online petition calling for HDC to Compulsorily Purchase the Falcon Hotel was supported by over 600 signatures in a period of one week.

It is therefore proposed that Huntingdonshire District Council in its capacities both as Local Planning Authority and the Principal Authority responsible for St Neots Economic Development commit to serving a Compulsory Purchase Order on the owner of Falcon Hotel, St Neots.”

An amendment to the motion was moved by Councillor R Fuller and duly seconded by Councillor G J Bull that –

“The Falcon Hotel on St Neots Market Square has been closed for the past decade. The building occupies a central position at the heart of St Neots and the District Council recognises that The Falcon is a visually important element of St Neots Market Square and its future use can make a collective positive contribution to the vibrancy and economic success of the town centre.

Previous action by the District Council, through a Section 215 Notice, to improve the external appearance of this Listed building has been successful in preventing further decline, but a viable future use for the building must be found. The District Council's strong stance on resisting inappropriate development of the site through the statutory

planning process has been consistently upheld by independent Inspectors at Appeal and the planning status and potential of the site is thereby increasingly clear.

That importance is reflected in the ongoing work of the newly formed St Neots Master Plan for Growth Steering Group, on which the District and Town Councils, along with others, are represented.

The District Council supports work to find an appropriate use for the building and will continue to facilitate discussions to bring this forward, by whatever mechanisms are appropriate. This includes the exploration of a Compulsory Purchase Order option if the use of the building cannot be resolved voluntarily with the site owner or via an open market solution.

In progressing those discussions, it is important to recognise that any use of the building must be operationally and financially sustainable in its own right and should not be on the premise of any ongoing public subsidy.

It is therefore proposed that Members acknowledge and support the work that is already being undertaken to bring the building back into active use for a purpose that St Neots needs and that will give it a viable future.”

Councillor Fuller explained that it would not be usual practice for the District Council to serve a Compulsory Purchase Order on the building and referred to the near completion of phase one of the St Neots Master Plan, where at phase two there would be work undertaken to look for business cases to explore.

Councillor Bull informed Members that he and Councillor Chapman had discussed the demise of the building and impact that it had on the town, but concurred with Councillor Fuller’s views that the Council would be unable to commit to a Compulsory Purchase Order.

The following amendment to the Motion was moved by Councillor N Johnson and duly seconded by Councillor C J Maslen –

“that the words “if no meaningful progress is made within three months the Council be seen to proceed to seeking a Compulsory Purchase Order” be inserted after the sentence ending “open market solution”

On being put to the vote the amendment was declared to be LOST.

In response, Councillor Chapman explained that he had supported what Officers had achieved at the District Council with the building and had been continuing to work with them to resolve the problem. He further informed Members of the impact that building and its location was having on the local economy and suggested that the amendment as proposed by Councillor Fuller was contrary to the Planning Policy of the Council, whereas his motion was in line with the regeneration group of the Combined Authority. It had been an ongoing issue for over 12 years, with numerous attempts to set up meetings with the owner and Councillor Chapman suggested that the only planning application that had been submitted during this time had

been as a result the petition calling for a Compulsory Purchase Order of the building.

Councillor D A Giles explained that there had been numerous issues with various buildings located in St Neots town centre over the years, including the former Paines Brewery and the Tomson and Lendrum building, but had been resolved through the intervention of the District Council and it was hoped that a similar approach could be applied to The Falcon Hotel. Although indicating his reluctant support for the proposed amendment, Councillor Giles referred to the potential support that could assist the regeneration project through Combined Authority funding, whereby the Managing Director explained that a bid could be submitted for re-use of the building but to be sustainable in its own right and not reliant on an ongoing subsidy.

In referring to his passion for the Falcon Hotel, Councillor Chapman drew Members attention to the consultation that was undertaken on the Neighbourhood Plan for St Neots and the Falcon Hotel had been highlighted as a high priority and item of concern for the town. He suggested that the proposed amendment to the motion had weakened the approach to resolving the problems with the building.

In indicating the cross-party support for Councillor Chapman's proposal, Councillor Johnson questioned the difficulty for succeeding with this project without a time limit imposed. In response, Councillor J A Gray explained the difficulty with imposing a Compulsory Purchase Order on the building and in order for the Compulsory Purchase Order to legally succeed the Council would require an end use for the building. In line with Policy P3 of the St Neots Neighbourhood Plan 2014-2029, Councillor Gray explained that support would be provided to regenerate the Falcon Hotel, not necessarily through committing the Council to acquire the building and the success would be measured by persuading the owner to take action, this could be by way of a consortium of local people to acquire the building.

Councillor K I Prentice shared the passion for taking action but explained that any action needed to be in the best interests of the Council and for St Neots. Councillor Maslen also referred to the importance of the building and suggested taking forward development of the building to bring back into use as a hotel.

In sympathy with Councillor Chapman and the residents of St Neots, Councillor D B Dew explained that it was not possible make policies without thorough planning and suggested that the St Neots Master Plan Steering Group was a mechanism to be used to research the options thoroughly before taking any unnecessary action such as a Compulsory Purchase Order, that was not likely to succeed.

In referring to the lack of a timeline the following amendment to the Motion was moved by Councillor Giles and duly seconded by Councillor Maslen –

“that the words “after 12 months” be inserted after the words “Compulsory Purchase Order option” in the fourth paragraph.

On being put to the vote the amendment was declared to be LOST.

In accordance with paragraph 11.12 of the Council Procedure Rules, Councillor Fuller proposed a closure motion that was duly seconded by Councillor Dew and upon being put to the vote it was CARRIED. He further requested a recorded vote on the motion and in accordance with paragraph 14.4 of the Council Procedure Rules the following Members voted for, against or abstained from the Motion.

For the Motion – Bellamy, Besley, Bull, Butler, Bywater, Clarke, Corney, Criswell, Davies, Dew, Dickinson, Fuller, Gaskin, Gray, Gulson, Humphrey, Jordan, Keane, Masson, McGuire, Morris, Neish, Palmer, Prentice, Tavener, Tuplin, Tysoe, Underwood, West and White.

Against the Motion – Banks, Burton, Chapman, Cooper-Marsh, Sanderson and Shrapnel.

Abstentions – Diaz, D A Giles, Johnson, Kadewere, Maslen and Wakeford.

23. STATE OF THE DISTRICT 2018 (ANNUAL REPORT)

The Chairman invited the Executive Leader, Councillor G J Bull to address the Council on the State of the District 2018 and to open the debate which was scheduled to follow. A copy of the PowerPoint presentation is appended in the Minute Book.

In his opening remarks Councillor Bull began by emphasising some important facts about Huntingdonshire that informed local policy making. In particular, the population of the District was predicted to grow by over 17%, with a large increase in the elderly. He also referred to the rural/urban population split and the trend for a decline in the rural population that may be attributed to the larger villages becoming more urban.

Members' attention was drawn to the low unemployment rate for the District compared with neighbouring Districts, although there was a requirement to increase the number of individuals with higher level qualifications to ensure that the District maintained a skilled and motivated workforce. In referring to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, Councillor Bull reported that three pockets existed in Huntingdonshire, namely the east of St Neots, North Huntingdon and parts of Ramsey and had been taken into account as policies develop focussing on the housing accommodation types, economic growth, skills and provision of leisure facilities.

In referring to the other major challenges faced by the Council, Members' focus was drawn to the external pressures, including Brexit, a reduction in Central Government funding, an increasing demand for services as the population grows and other major external policy pressures such as the reduction in plastics recycling by China impacting upon our planned reduction in landfill.

Councillor Bull stressed the importance of focussing on the needs and welfare of the local residents, enabling the provision of good quality services at a fair value. The District Council itself was also a significant local workforce with over 700 permanent staff and gross

expenditure of nearly £80m.

Referring to the Corporate Plan for 2017/18, the vision was to improve the quality of life, deliver economic growth and provide value for money services for the people of Huntingdonshire. Focussing on the main priorities and looking back at performance in enabling communities, Councillor Bull reported that the Council has successfully implemented a Homelessness Strategy and action plan that had resulted in the prevention of 363 cases in 2017/18 and a success that should be celebrated. In so doing, Councillor Bull congratulated the Officers involved in delivering this achievement and although not eradicated the problem, the Council had delivered higher than the target that had been set.

In focussing on the priority and performance of delivering sustainable growth, the provision of rural exception sites had assisted in delivering local housing for local people, the Local Plan had been submitted for independent examination and Councillor Bull paid tribute to those Members that had been involved in the St Neots Master Plan.

In highlighting the performance against the priority of becoming a more efficient and effective Council, Councillor Bull referred to the pressures on the Council's budget, but alongside this the successes that had been achieved was the co-location of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) with Citizens Advice in the Council offices at Pathfinder House, Huntingdon. He also reported upon the success of the Mosaic Transformation programme, with attendance at a recent market stall event and was encouraged to witness the enthusiasm from staff to develop ideas for change and produce creative solutions. The Council had also introduced an Apprenticeships Scheme, with the recruitment of 11 apprentices that had led to the successful employment of five on permanent contracts throughout the Council.

Members noted that the updated Corporate Plan had not currently been formally approved but Councillor Bull indicated that the Conservative manifesto that had been presented at the recent elections in May would assist in forming the basis of the updated Corporate Plan and he then drew Members' attention to his policy priorities. These included continuing to work closely with the Combined Authority to deliver the required infrastructure needs, improving relationships with Town and Parish Councils and continue to support the Mosaic Transformation programme to encourage the ethos of customer service throughout the Council.

Focussing on other main priorities, Councillor Bull indicated his keenness to continue to work to improve the delivery of affordable homes, encouraging Members of the Council to engage in the decision making process and continue to maintain the highest standards of probity in public life. In concluding his address, Councillor Bull paid tribute to his fellow Cabinet Members, in particular his Deputy, the Executive Support Team and Councillors S J Criswell and Ms J Tavener for their support in his previous and current ward respectively.

The Chairman reminded Members of the decision made by the Council to suspend Council Procedure Rule 11 (Rules of Debate) to

enable a full debate to be made by Members on the State of the District in an open manner. The Council therefore

RESOLVED

that Council Procedure Rule 11 (Rules of Debate) be suspended for the duration of the discussion on Minute No. 23, during which time the common law rules of debate be observed by Members and applied by the Chairman.

In response, Councillor B S Chapman, Leader of the HDC Independent Group, indicated that he supported the direction of the Council in many areas but highlighted some concerns. In particular, reference was made to his concerns with the Commercial Investment Strategy and investment of the shopping centre out of District in Sudbury. In so doing, he drew Members' attention to the drop in the commercial value of the asset that had not been in accordance with the predicted yield of 6% return on investment, thereby resulting in a net loss to the Council when the property was sold.

By reference to the areas of deprivation in the District, Councillor Chapman noted the success of the DWP and Citizens Advice co-location but outlined his concern that half of the planned housing growth was in the south of the District where there still required a Customer Service presence in St Neots to support this growth and the requirements of the growing population. Councillor Chapman also highlighted his concerns in the light of the disappearance of the revenue support grants and impact this would have locally to deliver the five year plan for housing growth, as well as ensuring that the infrastructure was in place to assist development.

In thanking the Executive Leader for his presentation, Councillor P Kadewere, Leader of the Labour Group, welcomed the Council's efforts to focus on the causes of constituents needing our services rather than focussing on the problems in isolation and welcomed progress on this in the coming year. Furthermore, he applauded the work of the Officers in its progress so far with the Local Plan to enable planning applications to be considered on their merits in the interests of constituents. In concluding, he endorsed the Council's support to ensuring the delivery of affordable housing and welcomed the review by Overview and Scrutiny of the Council's performance in terms of its delivery of affordable housing.

Councillor D R Underwood, Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, thanked the Executive Leader for his address and for the Council's achievements over the past year. He indicated his Group's support to develop ideas and his awareness of the need for a new Local Plan to direct development in a measured and consistent way. He commended the intervention made on homelessness but voiced his concerns with approach to the Corporate Plan. In particular the lack of reference to supporting those with disabilities and although acknowledged the Council's support for Citizens Advice, Councillor Underwood requested that Council policy focus on the support of charities. In concluding, Councillor Underwood asked that the Council put pressure on the Combined Authority to focus on the improvements necessary to public transport across the District.

Councillor T D Sanderson outlined his concerns with the Council's budgetary pressures, drawing particular attention to the overspend in the Operations Division and his concern that the level of service in grounds maintenance had not been as high as previous years. He also indicated concerns with the drop in income for One Leisure balanced against the recent investment in the service.

In indicating his encouragement of the Executive Leader's address, Councillor D A Giles suggested that it had not gone far enough in particular areas such as the post 65 residents and the growing elderly population, having a clearer vision for anti-deprivation measures including the provision of more social housing and youth projects, as well as encouraging industry to be located next to such areas.

Councillor D M Tysoe concluded the debate by referencing the recent market place events as part of the Mosaic Transformation programme and was encouraged by the Officers attendance that would be driving forward changes that the Council needed to support the residents of the District.

24. QUESTIONS TO MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

In response to a question by Councillor D A Giles and by reference to the performance reported by the Executive Leader in Minute No. 23 ante that 79% of calls made had been answered by the Call Centre, on the possibility of revisiting the policy of requesting Members to make calls via the Call Centre to take the pressure off the already overworked Call Centre staff, Councillor D M Tysoe reminded Members of an email that had been circulated to advise of forthcoming changes to be made to the Call Centre in its call handling system by provision of a menu approach to assist in the direction of services for customers. He further explained that if a Member was already in a dialogue with an existing Officer, the contact should continue through the Officer and not through the Call Centre.

In light of the Council's recent success in hosting a delegation from China, Councillor P Kadewere asked the Deputy Leader, Councillor R Fuller, for his support in welcoming the Zimbabwean Tourist Authority, whereby Councillor Fuller welcomed the suggestion to extend an invitation to such groups.

In the absence of Councillor Ms M Beutell and in response to a question from Councillor T D Sanderson on the timescale of publication of the Council's Car Parking Strategy and whether it would include civil parking enforcement and details of the schedule of maintenance of weeds, Councillor G J Bull requested that the question be put in writing to ensure a full reply could be provided.

By reference to a question by Councillor B S Chapman on transport infrastructure and the number of schemes that had been funded through the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) as well as the Deputy Leader's control over delivery of the schemes, he referenced a document published by Cambridgeshire County Council detailing 110 infrastructure schemes that had been agreed by the District Council and its links to the sustainability of the Local Plan. In response, Councillor R Fuller indicated his lack of understanding in Councillor Chapman's basis of fact and explained that the CIL would

not fund all infrastructure projects across the District and requested that he provide further evidence to support his question and to substantiate his claims.

25. CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH COMBINED AUTHORITY - UPDATE

In conjunction with the decision summaries of the recent meetings of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, Councillor G J Bull presented an update of their activities. Copies of the decision summaries are appended in the Minute Book.

Councillor Bull reported upon his attendance at a meeting held earlier that day and discussion on a review of its Constitution and proposals to introduce a structure of three Committees for transport, skills and housing and communities. He also informed Members of the establishment of the Business Board, as well as progress on the Independent Economic Review and indicated that this authority had provided a response to the latest consultation, as well as informing Members that the Combined Authority and Greater Cambridge Partnership had agreed upon a Transport Strategy to deliver.

By reference to the map highlighting the Index of Multiple Deprivation as referred to in the presentation in Minute No. 23 ante, Councillor Bull highlighted the extent of the disparities across the Combined Authority area that the Mayor was attempting to address. In concluding, Councillor Bull congratulated Councillor L W McGuire in his recent appointment as Vice-Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee of the Combined Authority.

In response to a question by Councillor B S Chapman on clarity of funding for the St Neots Master Plan as reported on page 32 of the decision summary, Councillor Bull confirmed funding for what was in place at the moment.

Councillors D B Dew and T D Sanderson provided an update on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Sanderson reported that there had been three meetings since his appointment and informed Members of the issues surrounding the recent call-in and at business discussed at the recent meeting held on 23rd July 2018, including a presentation received on the Community Land Trust.

Councillor Dew reported that Members of the Committee had doubled up to work together and look at specific areas of the Combined Authority, with his focus on skills and Councillor Sanderson's focus on transport. They had also received a presentation from the Mayor. Councillor Dew indicated his concern with the Council's original approach of a suggested zero budget contribution to the Combined Authority, but remained concerned with the amount of time that was impacting upon the Executive Leader and would revisit this issue after the Summer and the development of the new Committees.

26. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CORPORATE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE 2017/18

In conjunction with a report by the Internal Audit and Risk Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) Councillor L W McGuire, Chairman of the Corporate Governance Committee, presented the Annual Report for 2017/18 of the Corporate Governance Committee that outlined the work that had been undertaken by the Committee over the previous year. Councillor McGuire paid tribute to the previous Chairman, former Councillor M Francis, and previous Members that had served on the Committee.

Focussing on the forthcoming year, Councillor McGuire indicated his focus on challenging and improving the governance arrangements and welcomed input from Members of the Committee to maintain awareness of the issues identified. In particular, reference was made to concerns surrounding the roll-out of the Council Anywhere Project in relation to cyber security, as well as issues surrounding the delay in implementation of the Council's new financial management system. In light of the fire at the Document Centre, Eastfield House in Autumn 2017 and the subsequent disruption to the service as well as CCTV, there would be focus upon understanding the business continuity plans in place in view of the commercialisation project and working with external providers. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Annual Report 2017/18 of the Corporate Governance Committee be received and noted.

27. HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL VENTURES LTD - SHAREHOLDER REPRESENTATIVES AND REFERENCE GROUP

In conjunction with a report by the Managing Director (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) Councillor J A Gray Executive Councillor for Resources presented a report on a proposed mechanism to be taken by the Council as shareholder of its Local Authority Trading Company, HDC Ventures Ltd and proposals for establishment of a Shareholder Reference Group.

The Council had established a Local Authority Trading Company, HDC Ventures, with its purpose to enable the Council to participate in commercial trading activities. With the day-to-day operation of the company being the responsibility of the Directors and the Council was the sole Shareholder, Councillor Gray explained that it was necessary for the Council to determine a way of engaging with the Directors of the Board of the Trading Company. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

- (a) that Councillor J A Gray be appointed as Shareholder Representative to act on behalf of the Council as Shareholder of the Council's Local Authority Trading Company;
- (b) that the Shareholder Representative's Terms of Reference as appended to the report now submitted be approved; and
- (c) that a Shareholder Reference Group be established comprising four Councillors to be politically balanced.

In response to a question by Councillor B S Chapman on whether the appointment of the Shareholder Representative was in addition to the non-Executive Directors and questioned the number. In response, Councillor Gray reported that there were currently three serving Directors and former Councillor D Brown had submitted his resignation from the Board. Councillor Chapman further questioned point 2 in the terms of reference and whether the action would be taken without the approval of the Shareholder Reference Group, whereby Councillor Gray explained that the Shareholder Representative would not be taking any action that had not been agreed by the Council in terms of its strategic direction.

Arising from a question from Councillor S Wakeford regarding the size of the Shareholder Reference Group, Councillor Gray explained that the size that had been determined was felt appropriate to the requirements currently but suggested that this could be re-visited in the future.

28. USE OF SPECIAL URGENCY PROVISIONS 2017/18

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). Councillor G J Bull advised Members of the procedure to consider a key decision that had not been included on the Notice of Key Decisions and reported that this provision had been used on three occasions in the previous year to consider the procurement of Commercial Investment Strategy assets. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

29. OUTCOMES FROM COMMITTEES AND PANELS

A copy of the list of meetings held since the last meeting of the Council held on 21st February 2018 is appended in the Minute Book and Members were advised that any issues or questions could be raised in relation to these meetings.

Arising from the reduction in the number of Overview and Scrutiny Panels from three to two, Councillor B S Chapman asked that the Minutes of the last meetings of the Municipal Year of the three Overview Scrutiny Panels be re-instated on the Council's Minutes system Modern.gov.

30. VARIATIONS TO THE MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PANELS

There were no changes to report.

The meeting ended at 10.00pm.

Chairman