

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30pm on 26 NOVEMBER 2013**

Present: Councillor E Godwin – Chairman.
Councillors G Barker, I Evans, S Howell, D Morson and J Rich.

Also present: Councillor J Ketteridge (Leader), Councillor R Chambers (Portfolio Holder for Finance), Councillor H Rolfe (Portfolio Holder for Communities and Partnerships) and Councillor A Walters (Portfolio Holder for Community Safety).

Mrs D Cornell, Chairman of Tenants Regulatory Panel.
Mr S Mills (Public Transport Development Manager) and
Mr M Garner (Passenger Services Director) - Stansted Airport.

Officers: R Auty (Assistant Director Corporate Services), R Dobson (Principal Democratic Services Officer), P Evans (Housing Business & Performance Manager), R Harborough (Director of Public Services), S Jackson (Economic Development Officer), S Joyce (Assistant Chief Executive-Finance), M Perry (Assistant Chief Executive-Legal), J Pine (Planning Policy/DM Liaison Officer) V Taylor (Business Improvement and Performance Officer) and A Webb (Director of Corporate Services).

SC36

AIRPORT RELATED PARKING

Councillor Godwin welcomed Matthew Garner and Steve Mills of Manchester Airports Group, the owners of Stansted Airport.

Mr Garner gave a presentation on Stansted Airport Parking.

Members were informed that currently 17.67 million passengers per annum (mppa) were using the Airport, and that a new terminal transport project was to be implemented at a cost of £80 million. The presentation gave details of the Airport's current car parking estate and records showing the proportion of air passengers' journeys to the Airport made by different private and public forms of transport. Mr Garner drew attention to a reduction in private car transport to 35% (down from 52%); and to a significant increase in bus and coach transport (from 7% to 25%); and to the fact that rail continued at approximately 25% of all journeys to the airport.

Mr Garner said Stansted Airport's strategy would be to focus on the percentage of journeys between private car and bus or coach. An element of private car journeys were "kiss and fly". Stansted Airport was keen to reduce this proportion, as it was losing transport market share to kiss and fly, and because this type of journey represented 40% of the Airport's carbon footprint.

Mr Garner presented a slide showing numerous sites outside Stansted Airport boundaries which were purportedly being offered as airport parking.

Regarding fly parking, he said the Airport had a free hotline for to enable the public to report incidents of fly parking.

Mr Garner invited Members to put questions.

Councillor Godwin thanked Mr Garner for his presentation and put to him a number of comments. She said she had received many complaints from people in her ward, Birchanger, that the new car park arrangements were confusing. The signage was poor and the express parking area was too small. The drop-off period of 30 minutes was too short, resulting in people receiving fines through circumstances beyond their control.

Mr Garner said the drop off time was 60 minutes.

Councillor Godwin raised further issues. She said the concession pass, which the Airport claimed was available to local people, was almost impossible to obtain, and after trying to access it by telephone, online and by applying in writing she had given up. She felt Airport parking was not working for local residents. Public transport to the Airport was not a realistic option for many people in the district. Parking needed to be clearer and easier; the local concession scheme was very difficult to access; the telephone number for reporting Airport related parking was not sufficiently publicised.

Mr Garner accepted the signage was not good enough but he hoped this aspect would be addressed. Regarding the concession, this was the first time he had heard that it was not operating as it should; if this was confirmed to be the case he would tackle it. Regarding the flyparking hotline, it was periodically publicised through the parish councils and would be again. The hotline had been used 56 times this year so it was necessary to understand whether this related to a peak period or was representative of the frequency of calls generally.

Councillor Evans said one of the main concerns of residents related to the effectiveness of the hotline, as there was no feedback. She had seen a report which listed three calls from Meadowcroft in Stansted. She understood from the resident concerned that they felt frustrated that nothing seemed to happen, and the telephone line was a 'black hole'.

Mr Garner said a quarterly forum reviewed the data from the hotline to identify any pattern and whether it was in fact airport related or for other causes, such as rail users. Where there was a particular issue, action would be taken, an example being the residents' parking scheme in Takeley.

Councillor Morson asked what feedback was given to those who reported flyparking. Mr Mills said feedback would not generally be given to each caller.

Councillor Howell thanked Mr Garner and Mr Mills for attending and said he was very much of the view that the Council was in partnership with the Airport. He considered Stansted should be "an airport in the countryside", with all airport parking within its confines. Regarding the drop-off time 5 minutes, this was too short in duration. "Kiss and fly" was the only option for most residents from his area of the district, and 15 minutes was not long enough, for example where people were dropping off an elderly relative.

Mr Garner said the average drop off duration was in fact between 3 and 7 minutes, so in the main the drop off arrangement worked smoothly. It would be possible to look at this but there were operational considerations to be taken into account regarding peak capacity at different times of day.

Councillor G Barker asked about parking for those using the railway station at the Airport. Mr Garner said he did not have that information and but that there was parking for season ticket holders.

Councillor Evans asked whether there was any data regarding use of trains going to Stansted Airport as it seemed most were by no means full and were often almost empty.

Mr Garner said the peak times for trains and for flights did not completely dovetail, so MAG was looking at a collaborative approach with Greater Anglia. The Transport Working Group was looking at data from the barrier system for parking for the next three years to build a picture from trend analysis.

Councillor Rich said there was frustration at the Airport's unwillingness to become a transport hub. The train service between Stansted Mountfitchet and Stansted Airport was four minutes' duration and ran once an hour; this was of no use to Stansted Mountfitchet residents. The scheduling of the train service could be very good for both local residents and the Airport, but he understood there were contractual restrictions on allowing trains to the Airport to stop also at Stansted Mountfitchet. This was one of the largest villages on the London line; many of the Airport's workforce lived in Stansted Mountfitchet. Councillor Rich said on the occasions when commuter trains were cancelled the Stansted Express should stop at the village, as last winter's experience should not be repeated.

Mr Mills said the scheduling of the trains was not within the control of the Airport but lay with the rail franchise holder and the Department for Transport.

Mr Garner said he was not aware of any contractual mechanism which imposed a financial penalty on Stansted Express trains if they stopped at Stansted Mountfitchet. A collaborative relationship was the aim but in reality these kind of improvements took time.

The Chairman asked about the discount for train travel available to staff at the Airport and asked whether this was also available to contractors, as at Birchanger there had recently been an incident when a number of vans had been parked up and their occupants had all then got into one van, presumably to save on parking costs at the Airport.

Mr Mills said the discount was available to all staff; 400 of these discount cards were sold each month, providing staff with a discount of 8%.

Councillor Evans said the lack of taxi competition at the Airport was a problem in that the price of a taxi from the Airport was incredibly high.

Matt Garner said he agreed with this view and Stansted Airport was keen to introduce competition for taxis.

Councillor Godwin asked a question on behalf of a member who could not be present tonight: at other airports in the world free parking was offered for local people within the Airport grounds – could this be introduced?

Mr Garner said the Airport offered an hour of free parking in Mid-Stay; local residents were also offered a 75% discount for set-down.

The Chairman said more clarity was needed. Mr Garner agreed.

Councillor Morson asked about the map showing commercial parking which was being offered illegally outside the Airport boundary.

Mr Garner said that he would be meeting with the Chief Inspector and Trading Standards to ensure this situation was monitored; four individuals had been arrested at the weekend and the police were clamping down; methods such as CCTV were being looked at so as to catch repeat offenders; and the Airport was aware of certain locations along the dual carriageway also subject to flyparking which raised questions of safety.

Mr Mills said there was a clear policy that there should be no parking outside the Airport boundary and Stansted Airport was working with enforcement officers.

The Chairman thanked Mr Garner and Mr Mills for attending, and asked if they would attend again next year to update the Committee.

SC37

TENANTS REGULATORY PANEL

The Housing Business and Performance Manager presented a report giving details of the work of the Tenants Regulatory Panel which was producing a report on voids.

Mrs Daphne Cornell said the panel scrutinised the Council as an entirely independent entity, and its members felt they were able to express the tenants' perspective of the Council's housing service. The work involved was quite demanding, but the panel continued to benefit from and were very appreciative of assistance given by the Housing Business and Performance Manager. Mrs Cornell was hopeful the report could indicate ways in which the process could be improved to enable tenants on the waiting list to move into void properties more quickly. At its next full meeting in January officers and Tenant Forum members would have an opportunity to comment on the report.

Councillor Morson asked what the Tenants Panel would do differently if they had to go through this process again; whether the panel had chosen the subject of voids to scrutinise; and what future topic they would look into.

Mrs Cornell said tenants had tried their best to be independent, but had felt they were too far removed from officers, so there was a need to get this balance right. The panel had chosen voids as many other councils were doing so; future subjects for scrutiny would be discussed at the panel's meeting later this week.

Councillor Evans asked whether it had been difficult to find panel members. Mrs Cornell said it was not easy to recruit members, although advertisements which had twice been placed in *Housing News* had resulted in people coming forward with issues for the panel to consider.

The Chairman thanked Mrs Cornell for her report, and said she looked forward to receiving a future update.

SC38

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P Davies, S Harris and E Oliver.

Councillor G Barker declared a non pecuniary interest in relation to the item on rural broadband in that his home was served by broadband supplied by Buzcom.

SC39

MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the meetings held on 15 October and 11 November 2013 were received, considered and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

SC40 **MATTERS ARISING**

(i) Extraordinary Meeting 11 November 2013

The Minutes were amended to show that Councillor Rich was present.

SC41 **SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The Assistant Director Corporate Services said items not currently scheduled and shown in red were yet to be allocated to meetings. They would be included on future agendas.

SC42 **RURAL BROADBAND**

The Committee considered a report on rural broadband, recommending that officers continue to monitor the progress of the wireless service provided by Buzcom in the district and that officers continue to work closely with the Broadband Delivery UK Superfast Essex programme.

The Economic Development Officer said superfast broadband was a necessity for many users in the district. The Government was supporting a superfast broadband service to rural areas through the Essex Superfast programme. In addition the Council had provided a grant of up to £30,000 to Buzcom to provide a wireless superfast broadband service. Officers considered the technology Buzcom provided was robust; feedback from businesses was positive and the company had over 700 customers in the district. On the negative side, coverage was not as comprehensive as had been envisaged as there had been problems siting equipment on two of the main towers serving the district, one at Barkway and one at High Garrett.

Also the service had not been installed at customers' houses and premises the rate which had been hoped. Buzcom had taken on more staff in order to speed up the installation process. A further issue was the communication with those who had registered for the service which was not as effective as it could have been. For a rural area such as Uttlesford wireless technology was very important and in combination with other suppliers people should be able to access superfast broadband.

The Economic Development Officer showed information indicating coverage in the district. It was important that the Council continue to lobby the Essex Superfast programme as overlaying coverage with Buzcom would fill in the gaps which would otherwise not be covered until 2015. Buzcom was therefore very important for Uttlesford. The plan was to improve coverage from 40% to 65% with government funding; ultimately to achieve 90 – 95%.

Members commented on the importance of having 'line of sight' for wireless coverage to operate properly, and on the need to ensure this district's interests were not prejudiced by competition between authorities over strategic sites.

Councillor G Barker said it was important to emphasise that locations serving businesses rather than domestic users were the priority. The Economic Development Officer said the priorities for the Superfast programme were business parks and businesses in general.

The Director of Corporate Services said Buzcom would draw down £5,000 when the lease was finalised for the High Garrett tower. There had been some delay due to negotiations with Kent Police over the rates required. The contract between the Council and Buzcom made further provision for incentive payments of £10,000 when certain targets had been met. So far this money had not been requested.

The Economic Development Officer said the Council would shortly receive a further government funded application for 2G equipment to be installed on an existing mast in the district, which would contribute to filling in the mobile phone blackspots.

Councillor Evans asked how businesses in the district could find out which areas were in broadband blackspots. The Economic Development Officer said the Superfast Essex Programme website identified such areas.

Councillor Rolfe said it was of particular importance to Uttlesford that it should gain better broadband coverage due to the rural nature of the district. The work being done to improve this coverage was excellent, and it was the intention to continue to lobby to achieve as full a coverage as possible with BT and Buzcom by 2016.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Rolfe and Mr Jackson for the information they had given and asked for a further update to be provided to the Committee in the next few months.

SC43

2014/15 BUDGET PLANNING

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance presented a report giving an overview of the budget process and the documentation that would be coming forward for review. The report included a copy of the financial outlook and 2014/15 budget strategy report which had been approved by the Cabinet in October, together with the results of the public consultation process.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance said this report set the scene for discussion on the budget in February. He had included in the report non-prescriptive suggestions for how members might approach scrutiny of the budget.

The Assistant Chief Executive Finance drew attention to a number of points. He said the report on the Financial Outlook and 2014/15 budget Strategy set out what Cabinet wished to achieve. Forecasts for the next five years were set out in the budget model summary, and Members should note the great uncertainty regarding future Government funding, particularly as in 2015 there could be a change of government. It was sensible to plan for a £1.3 million deficit, and Cabinet had decided to plan for a reduction in funding of £300,000 per year, rather than attempt to address this deficit in one year.

The Assistant Chief Executive Finance referred Members to the consultation asking for residents' views on the priorities for setting the budget, which would be taken into account. However as only 61 people had submitted replies, the Cabinet would exercise caution in having regard to these responses, and it was for Scrutiny Committee Members to consider whether that was right, and whether the absence of any strong indications on budget priorities could be taken as an indication of an endorsement of policies. Members agreed this was a sensible approach.

The Assistant Chief Executive Finance said consultation had been conducted primarily only online, in contrast to previous years.

Councillor Chambers said the low response rate could reasonably be taken as an indication that people were happy with the current financial priorities. Future consultation would be carefully looked at to ensure more people were reached.

Councillor Godwin said the Council needed to have the security of knowing that people supported this budget.

Councillor Rich said it was inadvisable to rely on such an absurdly small number of responses. The Council should be cautious about giving the results disproportionate publicity.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance drew Members' attention to the key actions and budget strategy for 2014/15. He said unless there were to be a significant change in circumstances, the budget would not provide for cuts in services to make financial savings. Efficiency savings would continue to be sought.

Councillor Godwin asked a question about an unscheduled payment which she understood had been made in respect of the parking partnership. The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance said he was not aware of any payments that had not been contractually agreed.

Councillor G Barker declared a disclosable pecuniary interest in that his wife was the Council's representative on the North Essex Parking Partnership.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance said he would clarify the financial situation by means of a note to members, but he could assure members that there was no unplanned expenditure in connection with the partnership.

Councillor G Barker asked about the local plan statement referred to in relation to the New Homes Bonus. The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance said Councillor S Barker had requested that housing numbers be included in the report to provide context.

Councillor Chambers said the financial stability provided by the New Homes Bonus for the medium term was extremely important, but the government was currently proposing to top slice each authority's award and divert that funding to its Local Economic Partnership. This prospect was a cause for concern. The Council was making representations to the DCLG. It could be necessary for local government structure to change dramatically in the future to respond to financial pressures.

Councillor Godwin said the Government had to be realistic. The council was doing the best it could. She was pleased the indications were that Council Tax would not be increased in the next year.

Councillor Howell said Members were elected to make decisions, and it was exasperating then to have to engage in public consultation regarding how to reach those decisions. He endorsed the plan to freeze council tax. He supported the continuation of the Council's steady approach to reach a cumulative budget reduction of £1.3 million by 2018/19. Members needed to remind themselves that these were straitened times, and the Council faced a substantial challenge which it was necessary to address now.

Councillor Chambers said it would be important to look at the non-statutory services offered by the Council but there was no intention this year to cut services or to cut support to voluntary organisations.

The Assistant Chief Executive-Finance agreed with these comments. He said he hoped that for the next few years the budget would not prevent the Council from performing the same functions as currently, but in the 5 year plan there was inevitably a need to cease offering some aspects of the service. There were difficult decisions ahead for members in determining priorities. By the end of the decade the Council would be entirely dependent on income it generated itself, therefore a disciplined approach would be needed.

Councillor Godwin thanked the Assistant Chief Executive-Finance and Councillor Chambers for their report.

SC44

STATUTORY SERVICES

Members considered a schedule identifying which services performed by the Council were statutory and which were non-statutory.

Councillor Howell said the information was very useful. The Director of Corporate Services said the Council's Corporate Management Team had reviewed all council-run functions. Members should be aware that there were some services which included both categories of functions. There were questions to be considered as to whether some statutory functions could be provided externally.

Members wished to look at how each service was delivered and whether there were alternative options. Comments were made regarding the process to be followed in looking at the services.

The Director of Corporate Services said such scrutiny should start with front-facing services.

It was agreed that Councillors Godwin and Morson would talk to officers to produce a work programme to enable the Committee to scrutinise all services.

SC45

PLANNING

Members considered a scoping report on Planning. Councillor Howell said he was content with the approach proposed by this report, as he had had some concerns initially that reasons put forward by Councillor Watson for looking at Planning had related to individual planning applications. As Chairman of Performance and Audit Committee, he was very pleased to be able to report to Scrutiny Members that there was sustained good performance within the Planning Service which was continuing to achieve "green" status in its performance indicators.

Councillor Godwin congratulated the Director of Public Services on the Planning service's performance.

The scoping report was approved.

The meeting ended at 9.40am.