

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES,
LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on THURSDAY, 17 JUNE
2021 at 7.00 pm**

Present: Councillor N Gregory (Chair)
Councillors A Coote, C Criscione, G Driscoll, G LeCount (Vice-Chair) and G Sell.

Officers in Attendance: R Auty (Assistant Director - Corporate Services), C Edwards (Democratic Services Officer), G Glenday (Assistant Director Planning), L Howells (Economic Development Officer), C Shanley-Grozavu (Democratic Services Officer) and A Webb (Director of Finance and Corporate Services).

Also in attendance: Councillor J Evans (Portfolio Holder for Planning and the Local Plan), Councillor N Reeve (Portfolio Holder for Economy and Investment) and Councillor M Caton.

SC18 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received from Councillors Jones and De Vries.

SC19 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 May were approved as a correct record.

SC20 RESPONSES OF THE EXECUTIVE TO REPORTS OF THE COMMITTEE

SC21 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL IN OF A DECISION

Councillor Criscione said he was disappointed that he had not been notified officially of the decision to challenge the Stansted Airport Appeal through the courts. Although Councillor Driscoll said he had received an e-mail from the Council, members thought there needed to be greater transparency and better communication.

Councillor Evans assured members that there was no intention to be discourteous; an e-mail had been sent to all Councillors and he had not had any prior knowledge of the decision. He said he did not know how one newspaper in Bishops Stortford had managed to publish the decision before the e-mail was sent.

Members were concerned that the decision had been made by the scheme of delegation, and therefore without any political input.

Councillor Coote said that this discussion needed to take place but he suggested that the proper way forward would be to bring the matter back as a future agenda item to allow for considered debate. He agreed that it should include the issues of governance.

Councillor Evans said he had recommended to the Director of Public Services that a memo be sent to all Councillors, with a timetable of the next steps and an explanation of what was now involved in the legal process going forward.

Further to a question from the Chair, the Director of Finance and Corporate Services said he had been consulted on the decision, and he was content as the Section 151 Officer that it was a sound spend of money and a relatively small amount for the first stage of the two stage process.

SC22 **CABINET FORWARD PLAN**

The Chair said there was no detailed implementation plan for the Environment and Climate Change Portfolio in the forward plan. The plan was duly noted.

SC23 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT RECOVERY PLAN**

Councillor Reeve as the Portfolio Holder for the Economy and Investment introduced the report. He asked that the Committee reviewed the plan and provided comments in order that it could be finalised at Cabinet in July. He highlighted the following:-

- The staff numbers had increased from 1.5 to 3.5 full time equivalents.
- The priorities were:-
 - Business engagement and support
 - Information, advice and guidance
 - Skills and training
 - Creating jobs and inward investment
 - Creating a greener local economy
- The current proposed spend across the 5 priorities was £347k.
- The next step was to work on the strategy for 2022 to 2024 which would be published early next year.

He said that life was difficult for many people in the district, with high unemployment and struggling businesses, which posed an unprecedented challenge for the Council. The statistics showed that in Uttlesford 140 businesses per month were approaching the team for assistance, (this is usually 2 to 3 businesses per month), and at the end of May there were 1,930 residents claiming Universal Credit which was the largest number on record.

He thanked the Economic Development Officer and her team for all their hard work.

Councillor Caton was invited to speak to the Committee. He said there was no mention of the investment at the Little Canfield site. He thought the Business Park would help with the inward investment objective.

He was concerned that the Stansted Mountfitchet economy was in decline, possibly due to a lack of commuters but mainly because the airport was not at capacity. This meant that employees were not using the shops and facilities in the area.

He welcomed the investment in Tourism but thought that the timing of the publicity material was too late in the summer and hoped that it was not too Saffron Walden-centric.

In response to Councillor Caton and other questions from Members, Councillor Reeve and the Economic Development Officer said the following:-

- There were two main grants still available, the Essex Business Adaptation fund and a new Restrictions grant; the details were on the website. The Restart grant was also available but only up to 30th June 2021.
- The Little Canfield Business Park would feature in the next delivery plan.
- Tourism publicity would be delivered earlier than the date in the report and would be district wide.
- Data on car parks could be provided and work was on going to collect footfall data. Both sets of data included comparisons with levels before the pandemic.

In response to a question from Councillor Coote, the Economic Development Officer said that the data collected helped the team to make informed decisions. For example, where to target marketing and in terms of the car park data this could be used to show the quieter days of the week when coaches could be incentivised to visit. She said it also helped to target money to the right place and make better decisions on spending.

In response to a question from Councillor Criscione, Councillor Reeve said inward investment was at the top of the agenda, especially with a growing population. He said there was a need for jobs and employment needed to be suitable for the population and the area. He said the inward investment would link into other initiatives including the Environmental strategy and the Cambridge student work recently carried out to look at 'What does the green economy mean to Uttlesford?' Councillor Reeve said he needed to decide what the focus would be for inward investment but he wanted to particularly focus on the green economy. A group called 'Innovate' was doing some work around this subject for the Council.

The Economic Development Officer asked Members to get the message to residents about the grants that were on offer.

Councillor Sell said that research was important and asked if a questionnaire, aimed at businesses, about their experience during the pandemic, could also be considered to provide some hard evidence. Councillor Reeve said that this could be taken forward but to ensure there was no duplication he would check that similar data was not being collected already.

Councillor Coote said there was data from the bid in Saffron Walden and asked if other areas had the same data. The Economic Development Officer said they were in touch with different partners including the Saffron Walden Business Improvement District (BID) and did use the data that they collected. She said they had developed strong relationships with partners in all different areas of the district including towns and villages and this would allow the team to respond to whatever happened next.

The Chair agreed with Members that the Economic Development Recovery Plan was achieving great things with limited funds and had good targets and measureable outcomes set in place.

SC24 **STANSTED AIRPORT APPEAL - REQUEST FROM FULL COUNCIL**

Councillor Caton was invited to speak and he set out his concerns. He thought there were a number of governance issues as a result of the appeal, and said that there needed to be a comprehensive review, not only related to planning issues. He said an internal review would not be as transparent as an independent one.

The Chair thanked Councillor Caton for his comments and agreed that the governance issues were of great importance, as well as the decision making process and transparency. He said that Scrutiny had a duty to residents to conduct the first review and then if required an external inquiry could follow on. He also agreed that seeking advice on governance matters from external experts would be important.

Councillor Driscoll questioned whether the review should come after the final appeal had finished as he was concerned that it could produce a whole different outcome.

The Chair said that the preparatory work could be carried out at this stage, and some historical aspects reviewed, not least to include the governance issues.

Councillor Sell said it was important that the task and finish group had the resources, including financial, that were needed to carry out the work efficiently.

Councillor Criscione agreed with Councillor Driscoll and said it should be sensitively managed; he supported moving to a review.

The Chair read out paragraph 14:-

"...Furthermore, Council calls on the Scrutiny Committee, at the appropriate time, to consider whether there is a need to initiate a Member-led review and, if so, to engage with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) or similar body to audit and scrutinise the process which commenced under the previous Administration in 2018"

He asked if the Committee wanted to take on the request of Full Council to undertake the review, there was unanimous consent in favour.

There was a further unanimous vote in favour of setting up a task and finish group to carry out this work.

The Chair said the task and finish group would be set up with 5 members: -
Councillor Le-Count – Chair
Councillors Coote, Criscione and Fairhurst
A Liberal Democrat member to be nominated by Councillor Caton.

The members agreed and voted unanimously for the proposed members of the task and finish group.

The Assistant Director – Corporate Services said the fifth member did not need to be formally agreed by the Committee, he said the details could be circulated once confirmed.

The Chair requested that an early meeting be convened, and asked if a draft terms of reference; a work programme and some initial observations could be brought back to the Committee as soon as possible and by September.

The Assistant Director – Corporate Services confirmed that the Monitoring Officer would be the Lead Officer for the group.

The Chair said there also needed to be some independent advice and Mr Sharp from the LGA had been suggested relating to the planning issues. He said advice and guidance from someone regarding Governance would also be needed.

The Chair said the task and finish group would have a huge amount of work. He said the Governance issues were of equal importance to any planning matters and these could be looked at straight away without interfering with the on going legal process.

Councillor Evans said the composition of the group made sense and he thought an outside advisor would be able to provide the necessary guidance and clarity to the group.

In response to a suggestion from Councillor Criscione to ask for initial advice from the Centre of Public Scrutiny (CfPS), the Assistant Director – Corporate Services said that their view had previously been that planning issues were not a scrutiny function, therefore he questioned whether they would be the best option.

RESOLVED to:

- I. Establish a Task and Finish Group in order to review the Stansted Airport Appeal process
- II. Appoint Councillors LeCount, Coote, Criscione, Fairhurst and a Liberal Democrat Member to the Task and Finish Group.

- III. Request that the Task and Finish Group bring back terms of reference for approval by this Committee no later than the September 2021 meeting.
- IV. Request that the Terms of Reference include any details of external support, if required.

SC25 **WORK PROGRAMME 2021/22**

The Chair said that paragraph 19 of the report showed the five highest priorities of work:-

Post-Covid economic recovery
Major planning application processes - (an existing workstream)
Corporate Plan/Delivery Plan (an existing workstream)
The deliverability of the Climate Change action plan
MTFS/Budget (an existing workstream)

It was agreed that the five top priorities and the Stansted Airport Appeal task and finish group would be sufficient work for the year. The Assistant Director – Corporate Services said that if there was capacity later in the year then another item could be added.

Councillor Driscoll asked if number 7, Local Highways Panel, could be made the reserve position as he thought it was an important item.

Councillor Driscoll said the airport fly parking was not an issue at the moment but should be considered in the future if necessary.

RESOLVED to approve the work programme as set out in the report.

The Chair thanked everyone and ended the meeting.

The meeting ended at 8.32pm.