

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES,
LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on THURSDAY 3
FEBRUARY 2022 at 7.00 pm**

- Present: Councillor N Gregory (Chair)
Councillors A Coote, C Criscione, G Driscoll, V Isham, R Jones,
P Lavelle, G LeCount, G Sell and J De Vries
- Officers in attendance: T Coleman (Interim Director of Planning), C Edwards
(Democratic Services Officer), P Holt (Chief Executive), A Knight
(Assistant Director - Resources), J Walsh (Planning
Transformation Lead) and A Webb (Director - Finance and
Corporate Services)
- Also present: Councillor J Evans (Portfolio Holder for Planning and the Local
Plan), Councillor N Hargreaves (Portfolio Holder for Finance and
Budget), Councillor P Lees (Leader of Uttlesford District Council)
and Councillor N Reeve (Portfolio Holder for Economy and
Investment).

SC46 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence received.

SC47 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2021 were approved.

Councillor Jones proposed and Members agreed that the Lead Member approach for matters of general committee business would no longer be used.

SC48 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair said it had been suggested that the Scrutiny annual report be discussed at the meeting after March to enable the results of that meeting to be included in the report. Members agreed.

He proposed that in the future if there was evidence that some areas were performing well, the Committee would take a lighter touch. This meant that Officers did not have to produce long detailed reports and the Committee's time would be used as efficiently as possible. The Members agreed and therefore this would be implemented from the next meeting.

SC49

STANSTED AIRPORT APPEAL REVIEW

Councillor LeCount gave a verbal update to the meeting. He said that work had started and documents had been passed to the independent panel members. He said there would be a draft report later in February that would be presented to the working group. The main report would be ready by April 2022.

The Chief Executive said that this was a sensitive subject due to the process of fee negotiations that were still on going with the Airport and therefore details could not be discussed more fully. He said that he appreciated the public interest in the report, which he said would be fully published, debated and lessons learnt.

He said that necessary documents and evidence had been handed over and that part of the interim report process would be to test with Members of the Working Group that the list of documents was complete.

Councillor LeCount said that he would be asking Members to provide questions to put to the independent group to ensure a robust process with the correct focus.

SC50

PLANNING REVIEW PROGRESS REPORT

The Chair said that this report was an update following the review of the planning function, the subsequent appointment of two interim senior managers and the detailed recommendations provided by this Committee through Councillors Jones and Criscione.

Councillor Evans presented the report which had been drafted by the Planning Transformation Lead. He said there were 85 tasks and actions in total shown using a traffic light system: -

- 35 tasks were at green and had been completed.
- 10 were red but these were wish list items.
- The remaining 40 tasks were amber and were being worked on.

He said progress was good and there would be a more comprehensive report in March.

The Interim Planning Director said this review was on track to be completed by the end of March, but she said it was an ongoing process that was dependent on other factors.

She said that there was a national issue around the recruitment of planning staff at a senior level and this would need to be considered in the long-term using other ways to train younger staff members to a senior level through graduate schemes and apprenticeships.

She said that once there was a Local Plan in place, the Council would be in a much stronger position and Officers would be able to provide more guidance and support to the Planning Committee when making decisions on applications before them.

She said that the Local Plan was vital as the initial step to ensure that decisions were made more quickly as they would be based on the adopted policies. She said once this was in place all other supplementary planning documents could then be implemented.

She said the next 18 months would ensure that the Development Management function was structured in a streamlined way in order to provide a better service when the Local Plan was put in place. A Project Officer had been appointed to check that the commitments in the Planning Performance Agreements (PPA's) were met.

In response to Members questions the following responses were given: -

Councillor Evans said that there were challenges to recruit within the planning function but the closing date for applications to appoint the Director of Planning had not yet been reached, (the closing date for applications was 16th February 2022), and therefore he could not comment on what response had been received.

He said that the improvement of the service for residents and Members could not be quantified by one item or be given a specific date for completion, but he said that by the summer there would be significant changes and improvements.

The Chief Executive said that where planning staff would be based was part of a bigger issue of getting staff back into the buildings. He said that there would be drop in facilities for members of the public and the working pattern of all staff would be based on the business need as well as individual preferences. He said that he hoped this would be clearer by April when the Government legislation came to an end.

There was discussion by Members regarding the difficulties of getting hold of the Planning department and particularly enforcement by phone or e-mail. Members said that there needed to be a much better system of reply. There was a training need for young apprentices and planners if they were mainly based at home to fill the gap that working alongside someone and learning from them would create.

Councillor Evans said that the red items were not lower priority and were essential as part of the process. He said the report explained the significance of the Infrastructure Funding Statement, the first of which had been recently published on the website. He said that there was some funding in the budget for next year which would ensure that the technical work could be completed.

He said that PPAs had historically been created on an ad hoc basis but there were plans to standardise these so that they were Uttlesford District Council documents in terms of style and stated requirements. This meant that applicants and developers would be asked to agree to the Council's terms and conditions.

The Planning Transformation Lead said that the new Project Officer was in place and was looking at the PPA's, focusing on best practice guidance and making the documents simple and straight forward. She said the current PPA's could be serviced but in the future resources would be considered for every PPA.

Councillor Evans said that incentives for developers to apply for a full application rather than outline followed by a full application would be looked at.

The Chair said that the Committee noted that there were clear plans in place with the focus on implementation and a strong team. He said that the concerns raised regarding service levels would be taken on board by the Chief Executive and he suggested that the report be remitted to Cabinet and revisited at the September meeting for a full update.

AGREED: That the report be remitted to Cabinet.

SC51 **CORPORATE PLAN 2022-2026**

The Chair said that the Corporate Plan stated in paragraph 9 that it would not be substantially altered, he said it was an aspirational document with the detail being in the other reports that fed into it, (the budget, Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the corporate plan delivery plan). He asked the Leader how she would reconcile the reality of the budget and the delivery plan.

The Leader said that all the evidence would be reviewed and any decisions that needed to be made would be addressed, she said the Chief Executive and his team were looking at all the possibilities going forward.

Members agreed that this document related to the Administration's ambitions and therefore it was not necessary to scrutinise in depth as this would come with the focus on the delivery plan which would be presented at the next meeting.

SC52 **MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY AND BUDGET PROPOSALS 2022/23**

The Chair said that although all the budget was important, he thought that given the circumstances of the budget reduction this would be the Committee's focus in terms of how to proceed with the necessary cost cutting and revenue enhancement.

Councillor Hargreaves presented the report and said he would concentrate on the General Fund and Council Tax, the MTFS for the next 5 years and matters that were discussed at the Investment Board which took place yesterday.

He said that the Commercial Strategy had been discussed at the Investment Board meeting and had provided an update on the Council's investments along with the change of rules from the Government in December and how this would be dealt with. One area of risk that had not been included was the possibility of a debt cap from the government, who could mandate that a Council could not borrow over a certain amount. He said that this risk was low, and the new rules were being followed, but this would be added to the main risk list document.

He said the Local Plan had a budget of £6.8m which had been set aside over a 5-year period. He said that this budget already existed but had been brought together to make it clearer and to show how it would be spent over the years.

He said there were problems with Uttlesford Norse, this had been identified as a risk but did not present a financial risk. He said that if money needed to be spent to resolve this problem it would come from the Housing revenue account.

The Chair asked if the 4.9% increase in rent offered value for money for the tenants considering there could be problems with service levels for repairs and maintenance.

Councillor Hargreaves said that he thought the increase did offer good value and had been agreed with the Tenants Forum. He said that there was also the option of applying for Housing Benefit if residents were not able to afford their rent.

The Chair agreed to take this issue out of the meeting to discuss further.

Councillor Hargreaves continued with his presentation, he said that Council Tax would be rising by £5 a year which equated to an increase of 3.09%. This would raise an extra £190,000.

He said it was a balanced budget with a small surplus of £346,000.

He highlighted the table on page 144, item 19 which was a comparison table showing the changes from last years Council Tax requirement 2021/22 to this years 2022/23. He said the inescapable growth figure of £1.9m included costs for Little Canfield, increased agency costs for driver shortages, staff increases and transformation costs. The service growth figure included the S106 IT system for process control and a new system for monitoring IT system vulnerability.

He said the fair funding and business rates reforms had not been carried out, and there was a further one-year extension of the New Homes Bonus with no legacy payments.

He said the MTFs showed in paragraph 7 how the Commercial Strategy had to be changed. He said the Council would continue to develop the Chesterford Retail Park (CRP) with the option of buying the other part Stane Retail Park under the new rules.

Finally, he highlighted the table on page 87 the General Fund 5 Year Summary and the deficit of £5.6m in 2026/27. He said that the intention would be to partly offset this by selling one of the commercial assets and using the profits for capital expenditure in order to bring the deficit amount down to £2.6m.

In response to Members questions the following responses were given: -

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said that the pay award offer for 2021/22 had been turned down by the Union. He said there was a process in place to try and resolve this and the 2022/23 award could not be finalised either. He said there was money in the budget to cover this but thought it unwise to declare the percentage put aside at this point.

Councillor Hargreaves said that there was publicity on the website regarding the ward initiative, he suggested that the best way to publicise was locally.

He said that out of 300 Councils there were only 10 Councils with investments of serious concern, but the new rules effected all Councils.

The Chief Executive said there was a modest driver vacancy challenge. He said it was a tough market to recruit and there were agency drivers being used which cost more. He said there were initiatives to train up drivers within the Council and there were currently 4 members of staff undergoing a programme of training.

Councillor Hargreaves said that he thought the finance department was effectively structured, but he appreciated that there were only a few senior members of Finance staff. He said that the department was efficiently run but this did mean that there was a risk if something happened to one of the staff members.

The Chief Executive said that it was a very lean organisation which meant there was a challenge with resilience issues. This was the same across all departments in the Council and he was aware of the problems it raised.

Councillor Hargreaves said there was a plan to provide long term sustainability of the Council, but this was a work in progress, and he could not give any assurances or a definitive answer yet.

He said he was not aware that an equality impact assessment had taken place in terms of the rise in rent charges but said that the rise had been reviewed with the Tenants Forum. He said that he would investigate this further and would consider carrying out the relevant assessment.

Councillor Hargreaves said there were discussions at the Investment Board meeting on how to increase revenue. He said it was difficult to raise much extra income through regular services, but car park charges could be an option, however this would be balanced along with the need of local businesses. He said that the focus would be through the commercial investment side and the renting out of the London Road offices.

He said the Council owned the land at Chesterford Retail Park which meant a higher rate of return could be achieved.

The Assistant Director – Resources said that there was a typing mistake on page 161, and the contract end date for North Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP) should be March 2022. Other inconsistencies in the car parking data on page 50 which stated the income was assumed to be returning to normal levels and on page 145 and 153 stating a reduction in the budget would be investigated. She said the uptake in car parks differed across the district, but she would provide a breakdown by e-mail to the Committee.

The Chair thanked Councillor Hargreaves and the team on an enormous amount of work. He said there needed to be urgency on taking the necessary steps to find the revenue enhancing and cost cutting measures required and asked for early visibility. He suggested an update and progress report before the summer.

He said that it was important that the burden should fall on those most able to bear it. The Committee agreed to remit the report to Cabinet with appropriate comments.

AGREED: That the report be remitted to Cabinet with appropriate comments.

The meeting ended at 9.00pm.