

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES,
LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on TUESDAY, 17
JANUARY 2023 at 6.00 pm**

Present: Councillor N Gregory (Chair)
Councillors G Driscoll, V Isham, R Jones, P Lavelle, G LeCount
(Vice-Chair), S Luck, G Sell and G Smith

Officers in attendance: J Clements (Interim Local Plan and New Communities
Manager), D Hermitage (Director of Planning) and C Shanley-
Grozavu (Democratic Services Officer)

Also Present: Councillors M Caton (Liberal Democrat and Green Alliance
Group Leader), J Evans (Portfolio Holder for Planning, Stansted
Airport, Infrastructure Strategy and the Local Plan) and N
Hargreaves (Deputy Leader of Council)

SC41 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence have been received from Councillors Criscione and De Vries.

There were no declarations of interest.

SC42 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as a correct record.

SC43 LOCAL PLAN UPDATE

The Interim Local Plans and New Communities Manager provided an update on the current progress of preparing the Local Plan. He said that the rapid staff turnover had resulted in the loss of local knowledge and understanding of the broader context of the plan's preparation. However, to date, the Local Plan team were only approximately one week behind their project timetable.

Following the introduction, the Director of Planning highlighted that staff retention and recruitment was a top priority. This was echoed by the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure Strategy and the Local Plan, who also gave thanks to the Interim Local Plans and New Communities Manager, as he was shortly stepping down from his role by mutual agreement.

The Chair asked if there were any other matters on the risk register which may need to be brought to members' attention. The Interim Local Plans and New Communities Manager explained that there was a range of risks which the team continued to monitor, including choosing sites for strategic growth and meeting the housing number target. Due to staff numbers, their focus was on site assessments and liaising with infrastructure provisors on strategic site viability, in order to be ready to start site selection at the end of March.

In response to a question about the approach in which transport surveys were undertaken, officers clarified that they would be unable to make any decisions on where to assess transport if they had no indication of sites. The Site Screening process filtered out potentially undeliverable sites and allowed officers to begin to make some assumptions which could be tested in the relevant studies. If these sites were not feasible, another set of sites could then be tested.

Members discussion turned to the turnover of staff, which was reported to be 58% in the past 12 months, and had put the progress on the Local Plan's preparation at severe risk. The following was noted:

- The Director of Planning had conducted exit interviews with outgoing staff, but there was not a common theme for their resignations. Members raised concerns that further assurance needed to be made that it was not due to a culture problem.
- The small size of the Local Plan team had always reduced the ability to be resilient as typically, one person specialises in one area.
- There were a number of factors which made it difficult to recruit planning professionals. These included an increase of staff moving into the private sector and Brexit regulations making it more difficult to employ planners from countries such as Greece, where the planning system is based in many ways on the British system.
- All vacancies in the Local Plan team were advertised on a microsite for Uttlesford Planning jobs throughout December 2022. In addition, these posts were also advertised through other channels, as part of the wider service recruitment. This included in the Planning Magazine, the Planning Resource email bulletins and an article published about working for Uttlesford in Planning Resource. The email bulletin alone was shared to over 19,000 planning professionals.
- As a longer-term solution to recruitment, the Planning Department were looking at growing their own talent. This included attending the Uttlesford Career Fair, appointing more career grade planners and liaising with HR for apprenticeship funding. The Director of Planning had also joined the recruitment panel for Public Practice, an initiative supported by DLUHC, where organisations "bid" for professionals.
- There had been a review into advertisement and job descriptions of Planning staff, with each officer now having a learning and development plan. Officers felt the greater emphasis on career progression, as opposed to salary, would attract the right candidates to apply.
- Members raised concerns that there needed to be more senior staff in order to make an impact on the emerging Local Plan.
- The Director of Planning was looking into alternative delivery models for the Local Plan, including commissioning sections of the plan out to the Private Sector, creating a Council-run consultancy service, or retaining a consultancy as a knowledge bank to use if needed. These were not preferred options however.
- As a whole, the Cabinet were supportive of the Local Plan team and, as many of them had professional backgrounds, appreciated the problems of recruitment and retention. The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure Strategy and the Local Plan

had fortnightly meetings with senior officers to regularly discuss these issues, alongside other matters.

Officers clarified that, if there was to be a delay to the Local Plan, then this would be clear in the upcoming weeks once the current round of recruitment was in its latter stages. They said that there were some advantages to a delay, such as the NPPF consultation and possible changes to housing target calculations, however the district would still remain open to speculative longer for even longer.

Members expressed concerns in regards to residents being ill-informed of the current progress of the Local Plan and some argued that they were not convinced that the current administration were as open as previous ones, in regards to their working group arrangements. The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure Strategy and the Local Plan responded that a number of workshops had been undertaken where there was an opportunity for members to have an open discussion. Furthermore, there was a memorandum to the public and members were also in a position to provide updates to their Parish Councils. To date, only one public meeting of the Local Plan Leadership Group had been cancelled; the other "cancellations" were either provisional reserve dates which were no longer required or where a different format was held instead.

Officers added that, whilst it was good to have regular engagement, there needed to be boundaries to stop consulting and to start making decision which could be consulted on. Anything discussed in a public meeting could affect someone's interest, such as the value of land, and having certain discussions in these forums could be seen as prejudicing later decisions. Rather than having a demanding schedule of reporting, workshops were a space to tentatively discuss sensitive material and where no grandstanding otherwise displayed in public meetings would get in the way of the development of the plan. The draft Local Plan would have the explanations as to how the options were chosen and the evolution of judgements which interested parties could then comment on.

In response to a question about feeling pressure to deliver the Local Plan, officers indicated that they did not feel pressure from members or other staff, but were determined to get the right result for the district. The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure Strategy and the Local Plan said that he did not see his role as political and sought to make decisions based on independent advice. He had accountability for the functions of the portfolio, but did not accept political discharge of the role.

The Chair requested that a further update be brought to the Committee before Council operations ceased for the pre-election period.

The report was noted.

Councillor Smith left the meeting at 19:30

Meeting ended 19:58