

## GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE: MINUTES

Date: 22 December 2020

Time: 10.00 a.m. to 1.12p.m.

Venue: Virtual Meeting

Present: Councillors Bailey, Bates, Bywater, Count (Chairman), Criswell, Dupré, Giles, Goldsack, Hickford (Vice-Chairman), Hudson, Jenkins, Kavanagh, McDonald, Meschini, Nethsingha and Schumann

### 291. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies were received from Councillor Sanderson.

Councillors Bywater, Criswell and Giles declared non-statutory disclosable interests under the Code of Conduct in Agenda Item 10 (minute 300), as members of Huntingdonshire District Council.

### 292. Minutes – 24th November 2020 and Action Log

The minutes of the meeting held on 24th November 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman when the Council returned to its offices. The Committee also noted the action log and agreed to support the first action to amend the minutes of the meeting of 20th October 2020.

### 293. Petitions and Public Questions

No petitions or public questions were received.

### 294. Integrated Finance Monitoring Report for the period ending 31st October 2020

The Committee received a report detailing the financial information to assess progress in delivering the Council's Business Plan. The overall revenue budget position was showing a balanced position at year-end. Attention was drawn to the table on page 14 detailing the Council's estimate of the full potential financial consequences of the pandemic through an additional and enhanced process, which was also showing a broadly balanced position. The key variances were parking enforcement where the November lockdown restrictions had worsened the position, and the increase in the financial pressure on physical disabilities. Attention was drawn to Children's Services where the confirmation of the grant for unaccompanied asylum seeker children had been received, and there had also been an improvement in the Children in Care Transport budget. It was noted that debt charges were lower than expected due to favourable interest rates. Members were advised on the Contain Outbreak Management Fund where further tranches could be received in the future. Individual Members raised the following issues in relation to the report:

- queried with regard to the Children in Care Transport budget whether there had been a change in the quality of contacts given the reduced spending on contact visits over the summer term due to the majority of these taking place remotely. The Chairman of Children and Young People Committee reported that there was no evidence that the standard of discussion was different. The Service Director: Communities and Partnerships added that he was not aware internally of any impact on quality but agreed to ask the Service Director: Children and Safeguarding to provide a short briefing note. **Action required.**
- queried what elements of the budget would be affected by the major uncertainty about pandemic impact in the second half of the year and the range of that uncertainty. The Head of Finance explained that, at the point the report was produced, the main uncertainty had been the compensation the Council would receive for lost sales, fees and charges, which amounted to 4 to 7 million for the whole year depending on what happened in the remaining months. The Council had submitted a claim to Government for the first four months of the year. There was also financial uncertainty around the demand led services such as adults, children, and the Council's shielding and community response. Different NHS schemes had been operating in relation to Adult Services meeting various levels of demand, which were very changeable, resulting in the need for the Service to respond quickly. The Council had also purchased additional emergency beds for learning disability. There was an expectation that there would be further pressure in Children's Services so additional investment was available for early help but given the uncertainty around timing it would also feed into the business planning process. He acknowledged that the range of uncertainty was broad with variances in the millions but it was reducing as the Council approached the end of the budget year.
- queried the impact in relation to the quality of service of the deferred service restructure in Strategic Management – Children and Safeguarding and the recruitment to vacancies taking longer than anticipated in the current climate. The Head of Finance reported that the restructure was scheduled to take place in early help rather than safeguarding and it had not had an adverse impact on outcomes. He agreed to provide the Committee with a detailed response. **Action required.**
- thanked officers for all their work in reopening Duxford Primary School following the fire. The Local Member asked for a copy of the Business Case for the rebuild submitted to the Capital Programme Board. **Action required.**
- thanked the Head of Finance and his Team and all staff across the Council for their hard work in providing some financial clarity but highlighted the need for financial clarity from the Government particularly with regard to the losses experienced by Council to enable it to plan for next year. The Chairman reported that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) had delivered the contents of the recent financial announcement. He explained that he had made representations regarding the fact the highways breakdown was not part of this announcement. The Head of Finance added that the Government had funded the Council's claim completely for the loss of sales, fees and charges following certification by the Section 151 officer. It was noted that the scheme would continue in the first three months of next year.

- queried the positive and negative impacts of virtual meetings on the quality of outreach services provided. The Chairman reported that this work was ongoing. He explained that the pandemic had identified benefits in terms of finance and productivity but there were also negatives. The Council was continually analysing the situation so that the benefits could be retained and the negatives could be addressed.

The Chairman commented that there was a limit as to what the Government would expect local authorities to deal with themselves. It was using DELTA returns every quarter to check the impact of the pandemic on local authorities and to a large degree reverse funding it.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the receipt of the £5.2m Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) from the Department of Health and Social Care for ring-fenced purposes, and delegating agreement of detailed allocations to the Director of Public Health and Chief Finance Officer, as set out in section 5.1.

## 295. Covid-19 Update Report

Given the rapidly changing situation and the need to provide the Committee and the public with the most up to date information possible, the Chairman reported that he had accepted this as a late report on the following grounds:

1. Reason for lateness: To allow the report to contain the most up to date information possible.
2. Reason for urgency: To enable the Committee to be briefed on the current situation in relation to the Council's response to Covid-19.

The Chief Executive introduced the report updating the Committee on the Council's ongoing response to the current Coronavirus pandemic. She explained that the situation had changed significantly since the publication of the report with Joint Management Team (JMT) Gold and the Strategic Co-ordination Group meeting across the weekend and on 21 December to look at the right actions and communications for Cambridgeshire following the Government's announcement.

The Director of Public Health provided an update on the epidemiology for Cambridgeshire focusing on the rapid rate of change. She drew attention to the incidence rate set out in the report of 85 cases per 100,000 for the 7 days up to 10 December and explained that this had doubled in just six days to 170 cases per 100,000, which reflected a similar rate for the East of England as a whole. The number of outbreaks was therefore increasing so arrangements for managing outbreaks would continue to operate throughout the Christmas period. She set out the number of cases and rate of change for the area as follows:

Area	Cases	Rate of Change
England	284	63%
East of England	374	99%

Cambridgeshire	170	108%
Cambridge City	181	122%
East Cambridgeshire	140	50%
Fenland	190	62%
Huntingdonshire	144	165%
South Cambridgeshire	194	133%

It was noted that the figures relating to deaths remained the same as set out in the report. She reminded the Committee that the Christmas advice also remained the same. However, national advice had changed the response to Christmas from a five day window for Christmas bubbles to one day. The Council's advice was that the safest way for people to spend Christmas was at home with the people they lived with already, and to communicate virtually with wider family or to meet outdoors. Meeting indoors increased risk but the Council did have advice on how to make this safer.

The Service Director: Communities and Partnerships provided an update on the continued actions taking place throughout the pandemic. He reminded Members of the work of the Countywide Co-ordination Hub which had been and remained active throughout the whole period. The Hub had continued to support people who were clinically extremely vulnerable and those who were self-isolating. It was also now supporting transport solutions for people to access vaccination sites as well as the management of the Winter Support Grant Scheme. The warehouse at Alconbury Weald was well stocked with food supplies, PPE and other essentials and replenished after use. In paying tribute to the Council's partners, Members were informed of the work of the Community Resilience Group, which would continue beyond the pandemic.

The Committee was aware that Peterborough was now in Tier 4. There had been a concerted effort to keep rates as low as possible but a new strain of the virus had led to higher infection rates. A new Tier 4 rapid response plan had been created with the following five strands:

- communications and engagement
- compliance particularly in hotspot areas
- contact tracing (currently a 85-90% success rate across the city)
- removing barriers to self-isolation with a local discretionary scheme to support residents
- Winter Support Grant distribution which had seen 40,000 vouchers issued in Cambridgeshire to eligible families. Across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough 3,500 requests had been received for additional support, which would be responded to by Christmas Eve

Members noted that the Council was sharing work with District Council colleagues to ensure rapid response plans were robust.

The Head of Communications and Information reported that she had been working throughout December with communications leads in public sector organisations in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough to update materials to the general public including specific advice for the Christmas period. Following the recent announcement by Government, the Communications Cell had removed all out of date material to avoid conflicting messaging. A new plan was proposed for the coming weeks, which would

continue with the same messages with the key message, that the safest thing to do was to stay in your own household and meet virtually. It was noted that Zoom was providing unlimited access over the Christmas period. The five key communication messages to be distributed by key advocates were as follows:

- the new strain of virus was more transmissible
- the single theme of the rules was reduce your contact with people outside your household
- promoting the support available for businesses and residents
- mental health support in the form of formal advice as well as befriending
- hope in the form of vaccination, which would take time

The Chairman, on behalf of the Committee, thanked the Chief Executive and her Management Team for all their hard work to keep the residents of Cambridgeshire safe and for being so in control of the situation. He reiterated the face, space, hands message and urged the public to pull together to keep safe until the vaccine was rolled out. The other Group Leaders echoed those thanks and to all staff across the Council and asked to be kept informed across the Christmas period.

Individual Members raised the following issues in relation to the report:

#### Cambridgeshire

- highlighted the need to recognise the impact of the Government's announcement on people across the whole county particularly those who were feeling isolated or lonely. It was therefore important to ask the community and volunteers to get back in touch with their neighbours.
- queried whether the Council could encourage people to behave as if they were in Tier 3 in order to reduce the risk of going into Tier 4. The Chairman reported that the Council could not contradict national advice but could still encourage people to reduce their social contacts.

#### Tier 4

- queried whether Cambridgeshire residents on the border of Tier 4 areas could access shops in these areas. The Director of Public Health advised people to stay local as much as possible and avoid crossing the border from lower tiers into Tier 4 areas.
- queried whether Peterborough going into Tier 4 had impacted on services. It was noted that Peterborough City Council's approach was to ensure minimal impact but services which remained opened needed to be delivered safely. Every single service was currently being risk assessed in light of the Tier 4 guidance, which would enable decisions to be taken about services. It was noted that the City Council was keen to sustain services which were key to supporting vulnerable people.

#### New variant of Covid-19

- queried whether the new variant of Covid which had contributed to increased infection rates in Peterborough was also the cause of the steep rise in the rest of

Cambridgeshire. The Director of Public Health reported that a considerable amount of work was taking place nationally but it was not possible at the moment to get feedback on individual local authority areas. However, it was likely that the increase in cases in the East of England was associated with the new variant.

- queried the plans to reopen schools after Christmas particularly given the impact of the new variant on children and young people, and for schools bordering Tier 4 areas. The Service Director: Communities and Partnerships reported that the Service Director: Education was in daily contact with the Department for Education. There was no guidance available yet but the Service Director: Education would continue to keep everyone briefed. He reported that there had been some announcements regarding a staggered return for secondary pupils in order to carry out testing. It was noted that children of key workers would be prioritised first. There would then be a programme of testing for teachers once a week moving to daily testing. This would also include children in a cohort with someone who had tested positive for Covid.

#### Test and Trace

- welcomed the high test and trace figure for Peterborough and queried how this figure could be improved. The Service Director: Communities and Partnerships reported that the system was improving all the time. He was confident that the Council had a great model across Cambridgeshire based on the Peterborough pilot, which was funded by the County Council and delivered by the Environmental Health Teams in the District Councils. In Peterborough, it was proposed to make contact with people who it was known should be self-isolating which would be replicated in Cambridgeshire.

#### Communication

- highlighted the time delay in the last lockdown regarding the communication to people asked by the Government or NHS to shield. It was queried whether these people could be contacted directly if there was a tier change, as it was important there was no delay. The Service Director: Communities and Partnerships reported that 7,000 extremely vulnerable people in Peterborough would be receiving a letter setting out the new guidance. He acknowledged the need to reach out to the extremely vulnerable in Cambridgeshire with a reminder of the support arrangements available and to advise them to keep abreast of any future announcements. **Action Required.**
- welcomed all the communication actions taking place but queried what was being done to inform vulnerable people who did not have a computer. The Head of Communications and Information reported that the Council was not relying solely on social media but had paid for printed adverts in local newspapers and would be doing radio, including community radio, up to 23 December. It was noted that the District Councils were being asked to distribute materials through their usual routes. The Service Director: Communities and Partnerships reported that the Council was working hard to forge a new kind of relationship with Town and Parish Councils and City Residents' Associations who generally published newsletters or had websites. He added that since the start of the pandemic the Council had kept a close eye on

isolated and excluded groups who might not be in touch with mainstream channels. The needs assessment summary for these groups had been refreshed but their communication needs would need to be assessed.

- highlighted the fact that communication was working as the co-ordinators of the volunteer hubs in East Cambridgeshire had been receiving information about the epidemiology to send out to volunteers in the community. Attention was drawn to the exceptional work which had taken place between Districts and the County.

#### Vaccination

- requested a list of the vaccination centres each time there was an update. The Director of Public Health reported that she would take this forward through her links with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). **Action Required.** The Head of Communications and Information added that Local Members would be contacted as soon as information regarding the role of Primary Care Networks was available from the CCG.
- requested information on the process for GP surgeries contacting people to be vaccinated. The Director of Public Health reminded the Committee that the CCG and NHS were delivering the vaccination programme through GP surgeries so it was important to await information from the local NHS. The Chairman asked for a link to 'Frequently Asked Questions' on the NHS website to be placed on the Council's website. **Action Required.**
- queried whether the Council could put pressure on Government to vaccinate teachers in order to reduce the pressure on schools. The Director of Public Health explained that decisions regarding vaccination were taken by the National Committee on Immunisation and Vaccination. It was noted that representations had been made nationally, regionally and locally. The Chief Executive, as chair of the Eastern Region National Vaccination Deployment Group, added that the Group had raised this issue nationally and was continuing to lobby.

In conclusion, the Chairman congratulated the calm and confident way officers had dealt with changes in the pandemic, which should provide the public with confidence.

It was resolved unanimously to:

note the progress made to date in responding to the impact of the Coronavirus.

## 296. Strategic Framework

The Committee considered a report on the Council's Strategic Framework which described how the Council's key strategies fitted together to ensure that its plans were driven by a shared vision for the county and focused on achieving a number of outcomes for the citizens of Cambridgeshire. Members noted that the framework was reviewed annually as part of the business planning process. The strategic priorities had been updated with the Covid recovery in mind. Although it was a four year framework, it was likely that it would be reviewed in two years to reflect that recovery work.

Individual Members highlighted the following issues in relation to the report:

- the need to reflect the good work carried out by the Combined Authority in relation to the recovery of the local economy in order to ensure integration.
- the fact that page 1 of the framework referred to “Our booming economy should be supported” but there was no reference in the document to say how it would be supported.
- the lack of reference to public transport including rail in the section on page 6 “Cambridgeshire: A well-connected, safe, clean, green environment”. The Chairman acknowledged that this omission would need to be addressed.
- the need to acknowledge that this document had not been revised but was just based on last year’s document, which was understandable considering the pressures placed on staff due to Covid. It was suggested that there needed to be a much bigger review of the Council’s priorities once the pandemic ended. The Chairman clarified that the framework was about how the Council operated and in the main the priorities such as supporting vulnerable people remained the same. He added that the County’s economy was still booming albeit in a different way showing resilience during the pandemic. He welcomed any specific examples from Members.
- the need to include skills as a skilled workforce played an important role in relation to supporting vulnerable people.

The Chairman proposed an amendment, seconded by Councillor Nethsingha, to delete “recommend” and add “comment on” and to add “draft” before “Strategic Framework”, which was carried unanimously.

It was also resolved unanimously to:

review and comment on the draft Strategic Framework as part of the 2021/22 Business Plan.

## 297. Business Planning Proposals for 2021-26 - Current position

The Committee considered a report detailing the current business planning position and estimates for 2021-2026, the impact of Covid-19 on the 2021-2022 financial position, the principal risks, contingencies and implications facing the Committee and the Council’s resources, and the process and next steps for the Council in agreeing a business plan and budget for future years. The Chief Finance Officer reported that the one year Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) had been more positive than first anticipated but did not address the underlying financial challenges. The Committee was reminded that all Members had received a briefing note on the Council’s recently received provisional grant settlement, which contained both positives and negatives. It was noted that it was proposed that the Council receive more Covid-19 funding but less funding in relation to the care element and less new homes bonus than expected.

Overall the outcome was significantly better than the numbers contained in the report. The Committee was informed that there was a CSR planned for next year which would

shape the Council's medium term financial position. Members noted that it was unlikely to change the basis on which local authorities were funded. They were informed that the impact of the variant would bring additional pressures so assumptions would be identified in the next report to Committee. In conclusion, the position was far better than the Council had anticipated so the report to the January meeting would contain a range of options for Members to consider in order to achieve a balanced budget for 2021-22.

The Chairman drew attention to Section 2.2.1 on fairer funding and in particular the difference in Revenue Support Grant between Cambridgeshire, the Shire County average and the London Borough average. He was of the view that local taxation would not be as high if the Council received a fair funding settlement. It was important to note that this discrepancy applied to all public services in Cambridgeshire. Whilst the additional support from Government was acknowledged, it was important that Cambridgeshire was recognised nationally for the contribution it made to the Treasury. He also drew attention to the benchmarking in Section 2.2.2 which showed that Cambridgeshire was providing a high quality output based on only £1,000 per head.

Individual Members raised the following issues in relation to the report:

- highlighted the work MHCLG was doing on behalf of local government.
- stressed the importance of reigniting the case for fairer funding. It was noted that residents in rural areas were paying £96 per head more in Council Tax compared to residents in non-rural authorities. They were getting £107 less from settlement funding assessment, £11 less in specific social care costs, and £4 less in new social care grant. The gap between urban and rural Skills Fund Agency spend had risen from 41 to 61%. Rural areas were getting 42% less in government funded spending power.
- expressed concern about endorsing recommendations c) and d) when so much was still unknown and out of date. The Chairman reminded the Committee that these recommendations referred to specific proposals within the remit of General Purposes Committee only. Another Member expressed reservations about endorsing the recommendations particularly when the report was based on a 1.99% Council Tax increase when the Council could opt for 4.99%. The latter would provide an additional £9m to invest in vulnerable people, the economy and roads. The Chief Finance Officer reported that the budget set out in the report was based on a 2% Adult Social Care precept and not a 1.99% increase in Council Tax.
- acknowledged the case for fairer funding but expressed frustration that over the last eleven years the Council had not taken the option of increasing Council Tax to the maximum permitted by Government, which would have resulted in a further £64m (cost of approximately £4 to £5 per individual household per month) to invest in Cambridgeshire on roads, youth clubs, Children's Centres, action to target flooding, and to prevent higher rates and charges for the elderly. It was therefore difficult to argue for fairer funding when the Council had not taken advantage of the options made available to it by the Government. The Chairman of Children and Young People Committee highlighted the exceptional services being delivered by the People and Communities Directorate. Another Member highlighted the impact of Council Tax increases on the residents of Cambridgeshire who were struggling

during this difficult period. The Chairman commented that there would have been no flexibility as the £64m referred to would have been allocated against services resulting in the need for cuts to be made in order to make a difference to the budget setting process. He reminded the Committee that benchmarking demonstrated that the Council had the majority of its services delivering high outcomes at low cost without the need to tax more.

- questioned whether the diverse commercial investment portfolio had been performing well before the pandemic. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the investment portfolio had been performing well with only one investment not performing at the level anticipated. This related to student accommodation in Cambridge where a site nearby with lower rental rates had now recently increased its rates in line with the market. The Chairman of Commercial and Investment Committee reported that the Council's commercial investments had brought in £42m in funding to invest in front line services.
- suggested that the scenarios set out in Section 3.4. had been based on arbitrary suppositions rather than inter-dependent factors as set out in the report. For example, the decision to reopen schools was entirely independent of the R number and course of infection. It was therefore felt that the scenarios had been slightly less useful than they could have been. It was acknowledged that the Council had moved away from this approach to a narrower field of probabilities. It was therefore questioned whether that approach still held bearing in mind that there could be an absolute explosion of the virus after Christmas and the impact of Brexit, which could widen out the predicted budget gap. The Chief Finance Officer acknowledged that it was not possible to identify the financial impact of the variant at this stage. There were therefore more risks in the business plan than was previously the case so there would be more provisions in the report to be presented in January.
- queried whether there was any flexibility regarding the increase in the Adult Social Care precept of 3%. It was noted that although the Regulations were still not available, the Council had been informed that it could flex this increase anyway it wished over the next two years. However, MHCLG could not promise that the Adult Social Care precept would continue from 2022-23.
- queried whether there was a need to reconsider corporate building space given that staff were travelling less, which could be an ongoing reduction in the future. The Chief Finance Officer reported that it was believed that the current way of working would need to be built into the Council's modus operandi. The accommodation needed to host staff going forward would be part of an ongoing review but it was too early at this stage to make a decision.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) Note the progress made to date and next steps required to develop the business plan for 2021-2026
- b) Note the impact of COVID-19 on the Council's financial planning

It was resolved by a majority to:

- c) Endorse the budget and savings proposals that were within the remit of the Committee as part of consideration of the Council's overall Business Plan
- d) Endorse the changes to the capital programme that were within the remit of the Committee as part of consideration of the Council's overall Business Plan

## 298. General Purposes Committee Agenda Plan, Training Plan and Appointments to Outside Bodies and Internal Advisory Groups and Panels

The Committee considered its agenda plan and noted the following changes:

- Corporate Risk Register moved to March
- Joint Adults and Children's Transport Policy – Transformation Fund Bid addition to January meeting.

The Committee resolved unanimously to note its Agenda Plan.

## 299. Exclusion of Press and Public

It was resolved by a majority:

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of the following report on the grounds that it was likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information under paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 as it referred to information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

*(Councillor McDonald left the meeting at this point)*

## 300. Huntingdon West of Town Centre Link Road Land Purchase

The Committee received a report on the Huntingdon West of Town Centre Link Road land purchase.

It was resolved by a majority to agree the recommendations set out in the report.

Chairman