

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE: MINUTES

Date: 23 March 2021

Time: 10.00a.m. to 11.40a.m.

Venue: Virtual Meeting

Present: Councillors Bailey, Bates, Bywater, Count (Chairman), Criswell, Dupré, Giles, Goldsack, Howell, Hudson, Jenkins, Kavanagh, Kindersley (substituting for Councillor McDonald), Meschini, Nethsingha, and Schumann

310. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies were received from Councillor McDonald.

Councillor Kindersley declared a non-statutory disclosable interest under the Code of Conduct in Agenda Item 4 (minute 313), as a member of the Cam Academy Trust. He reported that he would not take part in the discussion or the vote in relation to recommendation e).

311. Minutes – 26th January 2021 and Action Log

The minutes of the meeting held on 26th January 2021 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman when the Council returned to its offices. In noting the action log, the following issues were raised:

- requested, in relation to the action at item no. 305, the timescale for improving the IT system, and whether there were any plans to change the coding to differentiate between gully or drainage work. The Chief Finance Officer (CFO) reported that the Committee would receive a written response. **Action Required.**
- requested, although not directly related to the Action Log, the need to remind Skanska to carry out good housekeeping following the completion of roadworks. It was important that the performance of its operators was monitored in relation to this issue. The Chairman asked for the Committee to receive an update. **Action Required.**
- confirmed, in relation to the outstanding action at item no.306, that District epidemiology was included in the report at agenda item no.5 – Covid-19 Update Report and was available via the national Coronavirus dashboard where District rates were updated daily.

312. Petitions and Public Questions

No petitions or public questions were received.

313. Integrated Finance Monitoring Report for the period ending 31 January 2021

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 forecast year-end underspend of -£4.9m. It was noted that all claims for lost sales, fees and charges had been approved by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The Council was also in a more favourable position than expected in relation to NHS contributions particularly around hospital discharge. Members were informed that some of the increases expected in the forecast had not yet materialised during the current lockdown. Whilst the current situation had improved, the Council was cognisant of additional pressures in the future particularly relating to Adults Services, the risk to local taxation levels, and the impact of the local government pay claim submitted by the Unions to Local Government Employers.

Speaking as the Chairman of Environment and Sustainability Committee (E&SC), Councillor Schumann drew attention to recommendations d) and e), which demonstrated the Council's positive commitment to the decarbonisation agenda and its Climate Change Strategy. He explained that the schemes had been scrutinised continuously by the E&SC and the Advisory Working Group. Although the schemes were challenging, E&SC had acknowledged the importance of the net reduction in carbon. It was noted that these schemes would be monitored going forward with a proposal for the schemes to be brought back to General Purposes Committee (GPC) if there were any changes.

He then drew attention to the vagaries around Government grant schemes in relation to recommendation f). The Renewable Heat Incentive funding was dependent on the heat network as opposed to the infrastructure behind the heat network. The project had therefore been split in two with separate applications for grant funding. It was noted that this was therefore the reason why GPC was being asked to approve the establishment of a special purpose vehicle wholly owned by the Council.

One of the Lead Members for E&SC drew attention to the need to update GPC on the report. She reported that E&SC had agreed unanimously to amend subject to a "positive Net Present Value" to subject to an acceptable Net Present Value. The Chairman of E&SC explained the background to this change. It was noted that the Council was not sure the solar car port at Alconbury would return a positive Net Present Value but it would be entirely inappropriate for the Council not to install carbon reduction measures in the new Civic Hub.

Another Member drew attention to recommendation g) which had been endorsed by Commercial and Investment Committee (C&IC). He reminded GPC that the Council had declared a climate emergency and welcomed the commitment to decarbonisation. He stressed the importance of therefore not compromising on climate change which was the most urgent issue facing the world. He was of the view that it was wrong to prioritise a modest increase in income over the future of the planet. He would therefore not be supporting recommendation g) which proposed investing in funds which invested in natural gas. Other Members stressed the importance of not investing in funds which invested in bringing fossil fuels out of the ground.

The Chairman of C&IC confirmed that the Committee had debated for some time the issues raised in relation to recommendation g). An amendment had been agreed at the meeting which set out that as Fund D was moving towards withdrawing investment in natural gas then the Committee should review the situation in six months' time. He added that the investment was so fluid that the Committee could then either withdraw or increase its funding in the Fund. The Chairman asked officers, if the recommendation was passed, to circulate the report from C&IC on the review to GPC to enable it to re-examine the investment if necessary. **Action Required.**

It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) Note the £0.277m additional contributions for Local Highways Improvements as set out in section 6.6;
- b) Note the £0.670m additional contributions for Highways Maintenance schemes as set out in section 6.6;
- c) Note the additional £1.3m capital grants and contributions due to be received by Connecting Cambridgeshire, £240k in 2020/21 and £1,060k in 2021/22, as set out in section 6.7;
- d) Approve additional prudential borrowing of £448k in 2020/21 and £480k in 2021/22 (total £928k budget) for the Alconbury Civic Hub Solar Carports scheme, as set out in section 6.8;
- e) Approve additional prudential borrowing of £3.145m in 2021/22 for Schools Low Carbon Heating Investments at Comberton Village College and The Galfrid Primary school, as set out in section 6.9;

(Councillor Kindersley did not vote or take part in the debate on this recommendation)

- f) Approve amendment to the capital budget to facilitate incorporation of a company limited by shares, wholly owned by the County Council, for the Swaffham Prior Community Heat project, as set out in section 6.10; and
- g) Note the £0.25m additional capital grant funding for the Girton to Oakington Cycling scheme, previously recommended in the December 2020 report, as set out in Appendix 3.

It was resolved by a majority to:

- h) Note the intention to invest for treasury management purposes into collective Infrastructure Funds, subject to endorsement by the C&I Committee in March, as set out in section 7.7.

314. 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 reminded Members that it had been a year since the first national lockdown began, which was being recognised by a national one-minute silence at 12.00noon to reflect on what had happened. Although the vaccination programme had made good progress and there had been a reduction in case rates, it was important to note that the fight against the pandemic was not over.

The Council was working on a new Local Outbreak Management Plan informed by the Government's new Contained Framework which would be considered by the Local Outbreak Engagement Board (LOEB) on 25 March 2021 for submission to Government by 26 March 2021. In addition to the LOEB, she provided an outline of the governance arrangements to meet the Contained Framework, which included weekly meetings of the Health Protection Board, twice weekly meetings of the Strategic Co-ordinating Group linking to fortnightly meetings of the Regional Partnership Team with the regional Director of Public Health, and thrice weekly meetings of the County Council Gold group. There were also a number of groups meeting the response needs relating to Covid-19. She drew attention to the roadmap out of lockdown for staff in relation to how the Council worked as an organisation. It was noted that Teams had been asked to review their Team Charters with final versions by the end of April to inform the Council's future way of working.

The Director of Public Health provided an update on the epidemiology for Cambridgeshire which showed up to 17 March an incidence rate per 100,000 cases of 52 for Cambridgeshire and 116 for Fenland. There was currently a stabilisation of rates both nationally and locally with a background of large increases in testing of people without symptoms. It was noted that the impact of children returning to school on 8 March would be seen within four weeks after the change. She drew the Committee's attention to the higher case rates for Fenland, which was similar for Peterborough and South Holland. This geographical area had been recognised locally and nationally as an area of enduring transmission with specific factors preventing case rates from falling dramatically in lockdown. In response, the Cabinet Office Covid-19 Field Team had visited Cambridgeshire to meet with various people and organisations to discuss these factors. The three-day visit had been very constructive, and meetings would continue both nationally and regionally to address the root causes of enduring transmission.

Members were informed that the Vaccination Programme led by the NHS had resulted in nearly 350,000 people being vaccinated by 14 March in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough with 96% of over 70s vaccinated. It was noted that the Council and the CCG had recently established a Vaccine Inequalities Group to address the issue of access to vaccination and vaccine hesitancy for some groups. Attention was drawn to the new issues reflected in the Local Outbreak Management Plan, which included vaccination, community rapid testing, the risk of new variants of concern and how they were dealt with, and work to address enduring transmission in Fenland. It was also noted that there was a considerable amount emergency work which needed to be consolidated in the plan as national government was relying on local authorities to continue their day to day work in relation to communication, community engagement, enforcement, Covid safety, working with businesses, outbreak management, surveillance and contact tracing in order to keep rates down. This plan had helped the Council quantify the staffing and infrastructure needs for the next twelve months.

The Director of Business, Improvement and Development reported that the Recovery Board was considering the roadmap out of lockdown and the vulnerable needs assessment work. The last meeting of the Board had discussed how the Council would work in the future focusing on new key outcomes to avoid defaulting back to how it had worked before. The Council would be building on what it had learnt during the pandemic, including Team Charters, to inform a new model of working for the Council. There was also a need to refresh needs assessments to reflect national changes. It was expected that existing inequalities and vulnerabilities in Cambridgeshire would be exacerbated by the pandemic. Members were reminded that GPC and Communities and Partnership Committee (C&PC) had already signalled resource to build a strong community infrastructure.

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

- highlighted the importance of continuing to drive down the infection rate but queried whether the direct link to serious illness and deaths had now been broken by the Vaccination Programme, which would be an important message to address vaccine hesitancy. The Director of Public Health acknowledged that the correlation between case rates, hospitalisation and deaths had changed significantly, which was recognised locally and nationally. It was important to note that deaths had been very much focused on the oldest population whilst the age rates for hospitalisation were spread more widely. She reported that she had asked national and regional organisations to share any modelling on this issue locally as soon as possible. It was noted that there was still the possibility of a high rate of spread among the young working population and it was important to understand how this would impact on the more vulnerable.
- highlighted the need to monitor the regional data on vaccination and infection rates per setting in order to review the impact on areas e.g. geographical and care homes where the infection rate was higher, as this would then inform what the Council could do better. The Chairman acknowledged that the Council was trying to get the best data available. The Chairman of Health Committee added that national and regional data was available as set out in the Director of Public Health's report which went down to district level.

- suggested that it should not come as a surprise that Fenland was an area of enduring transmission given the level of deprivation, housing and working conditions which were determinants of health. There was concern that the Council's programme to address these issues had not been that successful. The incoming Council was urged to focus on Fenland as a priority. The Chairman highlighted the work which had already taken place in Fenland such as reducing smoking by around 11% the second lowest in the county, work programmes to address fitness levels, and the diversion of children's and families work from buildings to outreach programmes. He reminded the Committee of the motion he had presented to Council which provided a target for this work. It was important to note that this was a long-term piece of work as changes could not be made instantly. He acknowledged that the gap had been closed between Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire on where they were seven years ago, but they had then accelerated from that point. The Chairman of C&PC reminded the Committee that social mobility was already a high priority for the Council. The Chairman of Health Committee reported that the Healthy Fenland Fund provided a significant amount of funding for the area every year to achieve results.
- highlighted the need to address complacency and false confidence following the success of the vaccination rollout. It was noted that the number of people attending local centres for lateral flow tests was also decreasing. The Service Manager for Communications acknowledged the level of complacency in the community. The Communications Plan for the next few months was therefore focused on everyone continuing to do the right thing in order to meet key milestones. It was noted that Communications produced and circulated to Councillors toolkits on a weekly basis, which provided messages to share on social media and with local groups.
- highlighted the possibility of Communications providing messages through local medical centres and vaccination centres. The Service Manager for Communications reported that she would liaise with the Communications Team at the CCG regarding what guidance was given to people. Another Member raised the need to explore all other communication opportunities such as GP and District Councils contacting people via the e-mail addresses they held on record, and village magazines. The Service Manager for Communications confirmed that she would also pick the issue of GP e-mail addresses up with the CCG. She reassured the Committee that the Communications Team did not rely solely on social media but did use other forms of communication such as radio, billboards, newspapers, roundabout advertising and village magazines. **Action Required.** The Chairman of Health Committee added that a lot of information was available via social media. He encouraged Members to copy messages on the Council's Facebook page to all parishes. As community leaders, it was important that Councillors took the lead and published their own messages about Covid 19 in parish magazines.
- requested information on the proportion rather than number of people from minority ethnic groups who had been vaccinated, which would be helpful to promote vaccination uptake. It was asked whether this could be resolved at a national or regional level. The Director of Public Health reported that a significant amount of work was taking place on this issue. However, it was difficult to provide an accurate picture as forecasts were based on the 2011 census. It was noted that in order to do this accurately, the Service would require access to national NHS databases. It was

therefore important to work with all communities to address issues. A way forward was detailed work with the GP practices which took time.

- highlighted the fact that vaccination centres with stocks of vaccine had been told that they could not offer it to the under 50s age group even though they had supplies. It was queried whether this was a national directive given the expected dip in supplies in April. The Director of Public Health confirmed that the national focus was currently on priority groups 1 to 9 which included under 50s with health conditions.
- highlighted concerns raised by a couple of members of the public regarding the risk of blood clots resulting from the vaccine. It was queried whether there was any evidence of this in Cambridgeshire. The Director of Public Health reported that the weight of evidence from the Medicines Health Regulatory Agency showed that the vaccine was safe with no evidence of links to blood clots. She reported that no concerns had been raised in Cambridgeshire. The Chairman added that, in his opinion, it was safer to take the vaccine than not take it. Another Member highlighted the importance of getting the message out that getting ill from Covid was by far the biggest risk compared to the safety of the vaccine. Covid rates needed to be reduced to suppress the virus so it was important to get the message out to the public that they still needed to take precautions. The impact of long Covid on younger people also needed to be raised.
- highlighted the disproportionate number of deaths in care homes in the early days of the pandemic and the vaccine hesitancy amongst some care home workers. It was queried how the Council could persuade care home workers to have the vaccine. The Chairman commented that this was the subject of national debate. The Council was doing everything it could to encourage care workers to take the vaccine.

In conclusion, the Chairman thanked the Council's staff for the part they had played during Covid-19 particularly the Director of Public Health who was retiring at the end of April.

It was resolved unanimously to note the progress made to date in responding to the impact of the Coronavirus.

315. Opus LGSS Update

The Committee considered a report detailing some proposed changes in respect of Opus Limited, a joint venture company, which provided agency workers to its shareholding councils. Attention was drawn to the background to the creation of the company in particular its excellent financial performance. As a consequence of the changes to local government that were occurring in Northamptonshire, an alternative structure needed to be considered for Opus. Members noted the proposed new structures at Section 2.5 and 2.6 of the report reflecting whether Peterborough City Council joined or did not join the vehicle. The Opus Board also wanted to change the way that any future profits were distributed, which would involve future dividends being distributed on the basis of Gross Margin generated on throughput of work by each of the shareholding councils. It was noted that this proposed change would result in a slight reduction for Cambridgeshire but the report set out how the Council's position

would be protected, which included the appointment of the Director of Customer and Digital Services to the Board.

The Chairman thanked the Chief Finance Officer who was retiring at the end of April for his services.

One Member commented that the joint venture company was not about generating huge profits. However, the proposed change in the way future profits were distributed was a reward for putting more work through the organisation. It was therefore queried how this perverse incentive could be limited. The Chairman compared the company to ESPO where the Council was not the direct purchaser. The Council would always try to get the best staff from the best source but it was useful to also have a dividend.

It was resolved unanimously to approve:

- a) The change to CCC's shareholding in Opus Limited in order to support the potential on-boarding of other Local Authority partners;
- b) The change in dividend distribution policy to one based on "Gross Margin" generated by throughput of work;
- c) The appointment of the Director of Customer and Digital Services as the Shareholder Representative on the Board of the Company.

316. Treasury Management Report – Quarter Three Update 2020-21

The Committee considered the third quarterly update on the Treasury Management Strategy 2020-21, approved by Council in February 2020. Attention was drawn to the table on page 68 of the agenda, which showed that the Council was weighted to short term borrowing but gradually over time there was a strategy to lengthen that maturity profile as demonstrated in Section 6.3 of the report. It was also noted that the PWLB premium had been reduced. The Chairman added that he had been concerned about the amount of short-term borrowing. He was aware that interest rates were likely to remain low for possibly as long as three years, which could provide favourable opportunities for the Council.

It was resolved unanimously to note the Treasury Management Quarter Three Report for 2020/21.

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

The Committee resolved unanimously to note its Agenda Plan.

Chairman