

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD AS AN ONLINE MEETING ON
TUESDAY 3 NOVEMBER 2020, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor J Wyllie (Chairman)
Councillors S Bell, M Brady, R Buckmaster,
A Curtis, I Devonshire, H Drake, J Frecknall,
M Goldspink, D Hollebon, I Kemp,
D Snowdon, M Stevenson and N Symonds

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors L Haysey and P Ruffles

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Lorraine Blackburn	- Scrutiny Officer
Richard Cassidy	- Chief Executive
Alex Cook	- Customer Services Team Leader
Jonathan Geall	- Head of Housing and Health
Peter Mannings	- Democratic Services Officer
Tyron Suddes	- Projects and New Business Manager
Su Tarran	- Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service
David Thorogood	- Environmental Co-Ordinator
Brad Wheeler	- Senior Licensing

Ben Wood

and Enforcement
Officer
- Head of
Communications,
Strategy and
Policy

208 APOLOGY

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Kaye. It was noted that Councillor Kemp was substituting for Councillor Kaye.

209 MINUTES - 15 SEPTEMBER 2020

It was moved by Councillor Goldspink and seconded by Councillor Devonshire that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, this motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

210 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman said that the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 came into force on Saturday 4 April 2020 to enable councils to hold remote committee meetings during the Covid-19

pandemic period. This was to ensure local authorities could conduct business during this current public health emergency. This meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was being held remotely under these regulations, via the Zoom application and was being recorded and live streamed on YouTube.

The Chairman explained why the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) report had not been included on the Agenda. He said that the CfPS (now called the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny) and the Head of Legal and Democratic Services had advised that the former CfPS wanted to arrange a workshop zoom meeting with all Members of both Overview and Scrutiny and Audit and Governance Committees. The final report would be submitted to Overview and Scrutiny Committee and, if necessary, recommendations would be made to the Executive.

The Chairman referred to the report at the last meeting on Enhancing the Council's working arrangements with registered Social Landlords. He said that this matter was being held over until a larger piece of work was completed but the matter had been included on the Work Programme so that this was kept on the radar of Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

211 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

212 PRESENTATION BY THE LEADER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE - HOW THE COUNCIL REACTED TO THE CORONA VIRUS

The Leader and the Chief Executive gave a

presentation that detailed the ways that East Herts Council had responded to the ongoing situation regarding Coronavirus. The Leader referred to the pandemic milestones and said that the process of moving into phase three and the exit and into recovery would be the subject of a very long discussion.

The Leader referred in detail to the Council's phase one response back in March. She congratulated Officers on the transition to homeworking in what for some had been very difficult circumstances. She said that the public had not been aware of any break in service during the transition to full homeworking.

The Chief Executive praised the huge effort that had gone into moving Officers to homeworking at very short notice without any significant drops in service. He referred to the work that had been undertaken with the County Council in supporting vulnerable people during the lockdown. He said that the basic systems held up well and the core services were able to keep running. Members were advised that East Herts Council had arranged for 24 rough sleepers to be accommodated in temporary hotel accommodation.

The Chief Executive commented at length about the support the Council had given to local business in terms of retail reliefs and business grants, as well as advice in respect of operating safely within the government guidance. This had included regular weekend visits to business by Environmental Health Officers and the Police when pubs were allowed to re-open. He said that staff had been asked to complete a Health and Wellbeing Survey and this would be

repeated and a range of media was being used to keep in touch with Officers.

The Leader commented on the wider countywide role of the Council and the various operations and forums that were active during the phase one response. She referred in particular to the work of the Community Reassurance Cell and summarised phase two controls and priorities for July to December 2020.

The Chief Executive said that some successful town centre groups had been formed with input from Hertfordshire County Councils, Town Councils, the Police and other groups to create safe spaces for shopping and to support local business. He referred to the economic impact of the current situation for East Herts and local business.

The Leader referred to changing behaviours of customers in terms of increased digital engagement being the biggest legacy of lockdown. She also commented on a number of budgetary pressures including a monthly loss of income of £800,000. The Leader referred to the MTFP budgetary gap of £4m and the need to make net savings of £1m per year for the next two years and £2m for the 2023/24.

The Leader commented on the need for discussions about “agile work” going forward as well the importance of cross departmental working. She presented some facts and figures in terms of the numbers of cases in East Herts as at 2 November 2020. The Chief Executive talked about the Council’s priorities between now and the end of phase two and

summarised a number of reflections for the Council from the last eight months.

Following the presentation, Members asked a number of questions of the Leader and the Chief Executive. Members received the presentation.

RESOLVED – that the presentation be received.

213 REVENUES AND BENEFITS ANNUAL REPORT

The Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Services submitted a report to update the Committee regarding the Shared Service in terms of performance reporting, other challenges and the budget outturn.

Members were advised that Officers had achieved very good average performance figures over the year in respect of processing housing benefit claims and change events. The Head of the Shared Service said that this performance was key to minimising waiting times for customers experiencing financial difficulty and also maximised the subsidy the Authority received from the government.

The Head of the Shared Service said that caseloads had been consistently reducing for a number of years and there had been a reduction in post last year although there had been a 30% increase on last year's figures already this year.

Members were advised that recovery of overpaid housing benefit was a substantial area of activity with significant amounts of money involved. The Head of

the Shared Service referred to some comparison graphs and tables for Stevenage and East Herts. She said that Officers had now got to a point where more debt was being recovered than was being raised.

The Head of the Shared Service commented at length about discretionary housing payments and the increasing pressure from people affected by single room subsidies and from those who were struggling even though in receipt of universal credit. She updated Members in respect of Council Tax Support, which was the local scheme that had replaced Council Tax Benefit in 2013.

Members were also updated as regards to Council Tax in that 1000 new properties had been added each year for the last couple of years and the value of collection had increased. There were some people who were just outside the benefits scheme who were now beginning to struggle with payments of Council Tax each month.

The Head of the Shared Service said that universal credit changed frequently which affected the ability of customers to clear liabilities in respect of Council Tax. She said that last year East Herts Council collected £109.5m and Stevenage Borough Council collected £49m.

Members were reminded of the £56m of business rates that East Herts Council was tasked with collecting, subject to a number of reliefs that business could apply for, some of which were mandatory and others were discretionary. The Head of the Shared Service explained that less fraud work was currently

being carried out by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) due to pressures related to the impact of Covid-19.

Councillor Goldspink referred to the technical terms in the report asked a question about how overpayments arose for customers. The Head of the Shared Service explained that this often arose due to changes in circumstances that had not been communicated to Officers by customers. She also explained that if the Council did not act quickly to changes in circumstances, this counted against the Authority in terms of the subsidies it could receive.

Councillor Snowdon commented on the debt burden and the issue of locating the right people to collect any outstanding arrears. The Head of the Shared Service said that the Council did have access to HMRC data and this assisted Officers in contacting customers to discuss issues such as instalment arrangements and in supporting Officers to try and locate people. Members received the report.

RESOLVED – that the report be received.

214 UPDATE ON SUSTAINABILITY ACTION PLAN

The Head of Housing and Health submitted a report that presented the latest version of the East Herts Sustainability Action Plan. The action plan had been prepared in order to respond to the carbon neutrality commitment agreed in the Council's Climate Change Motion of July 2019.

The Head of Housing and Health said that Officers would welcome Members' input in respect of the proposed actions and whether these were sufficient to meet the broad objective of the Council's Climate Change Motion of July 2019. He said an update would be submitted to this Committee twice a year and that Officers would monitor and update progress and actions and publish this to the website on a monthly basis.

The Head of Housing and Health said that the third element of the recommendation was an annual update to Members in respect of progress in the reduction in carbon against target, as this was a fundamental element of the climate change motion.

Councillor Goldspink asked if Members could have sight of the carbon assessment tool. She also asked what proposals were intended to switch off lighting automatically at Wallfields in addition to the proposal for LED lighting as well as whether there were any proposals to install shutters for the Office. Councillor Goldspink also questioned the heating grants to encourage people to switching from oil to gas boilers in terms of whether the Council should be encouraging the use of gas boilers.

Councillor Goldspink said that she was very pleased about the improvements to Grange Paddocks Leisure Centre. She commented that the anti-idling campaign outside schools and town centres was an excellent idea.

The Environmental Sustainability Coordinator said that

the Carbon Assessment Tool was an excel spreadsheet which assisted Officers with their deliberations and he was happy to demonstrate this to Members rather than trying to explain it.

Members were advised that LED lighting had been installed both internally and externally at Wallfields and this was zoned. If no Officers were in a particular area of the Wallfields Office, the lights would go off. The Environmental Sustainability Coordinator said that this level of control had been in place for some time and further improvements were planned. He said that there were no plans to install shutters at Wallfields.

The Environmental Sustainability Coordinator advised that there was an externally funded heating grant for up to 20 private sector homes plus 12 properties in the rental sector. He said these grants were to assist people who had a gas main nearby but were not connected to it. Members were advised that gas was more environmentally friendly than home heating oil and cheaper than using bottled gas. He referred to the carbon saving over home heating oil and the matter of fuel poverty as well as the potential for the potential future introduction of a part hydrogen mix into the piped gas network.

Councillor Frecknall asked whether there could be a section on the East Herts website with hints and tips for residents in terms of reducing their carbon footprint. He asked if there had been provision of £40,000 in the capital programme for solar panels at Wallfields. The Environmental Sustainability Coordinator advised that the £40,000 was in the capital

programme and the Head of Property was leading on that particular project for Wallfields, which would include web based metering on Council buildings.

The Environmental Sustainability Coordinator said that access to advice on behavioural change was very important for residents as was signposting residents to the good advice which was available but not readily accessible. He said that the website would be instrumental in terms of informing residents.

Councillor Frecknall proposed and Councillor Drake seconded, a motion that the recommendations detailed in the report, be supported. After being put to the meeting, and a vote taken, this motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that (A) Members confirmed that the current actions included in the initial iteration of the Sustainability Action Plan met the broad objectives of the Climate Change Motion;

(B) Officers be asked to provide written progress reports to the Committee on a twice yearly basis to add to any views Members might wish to make on the monthly updated published on the council's website; and

(C) Officers be asked to provide Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the reduction in carbon against target on an annual basis, both in relation the council's activities and across the whole District.

215 EAST HERTS COUNCIL COMPLAINTS 2019-20

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy submitted a report that summarised the customer complaints that had been made to the Council. He said this was an annual update and it also included the vexatious complainant policy.

Members were advised that it tended to be Development Management and Operations that the public most complained about and full details were explained in the report. Members were advised that after those 2 areas, the next most complained service areas were Revenues and Benefits and the Housing Service.

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy referred to a number of extracts from the local government and social care ombudsman, which was where customers were referred to if they continued to be dissatisfied with East Herts Council's stage one or stage two responses to a complaint.

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said that he believed that the complaints process was healthy and was not necessarily about being right or wrong.

Members were advised that a longstanding issue had been one of performance in that the Council had not been responding to complaints quickly enough. The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy explained that Leadership Team had been receiving

regular updates and that performance had now improved.

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said that the vexatious complainant policy had not been used and that the current policy did not have the effect that Officers would have liked. He hoped that the new policy would have more impact.

The new policy would give Officers more flexibility in terms of how they dealt with people.

Members were advised that losing the label of vexatious would make dealing with complaints more effective as Officers could restrict the volume of contact or limit this to email only by way an example of the scale of intervention. The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said the new policy would have to be taken to full Council.

Councillor Goldspink said she had been very concerned in terms of the deficiencies such as the failure to log complaints and the loss of knowledge when Officers left the Authority. She said however that she was very pleased to see that the suggestions of a critical friend had been sought and that these suggestions were being adopted.

Councillor Curtis proposed and Councillor Goldspink seconded, a motion that the issues in the report and progress made to date on addressing them be noted and that the unreasonable and persistent Behaviour Policy be recommended to Council for approval.

After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, this

motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED - that (A) the issues in the report and progress made to date on addressing them be noted; and

(B) the Unreasonable and Persistent Behaviour Policy be recommended to Council for approval.

216 CORPORATE PLAN UPDATE

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy and the Projects and New Business Manager submitted a report that provided an update on progress towards meeting the actions and targets set out in the Council's Corporate Plan entitled "East Herts: A Place to Grow".

Members were advised that following the scrutiny review, these reports would be submitted to Overview and Scrutiny instead of Audit and Governance Committee (formerly known as Performance, Audit and Governance Oversight Committee).

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said that was update in terms of progress against the Corporate Plan and some of the actions had changed since January and a refreshed Corporate Plan would be issued towards the end of the financial year.

The Projects and New Business Manager reminded Members of the four key themes of the Corporate Plan and set the context in terms of the quarter two data that had informed the report, from 1 April to 30 September 2020.

Members were provided with an overview of the progress against the actions detailed in section three of the report and referred to a graph that set out the expected outcomes at the end of quarter two. The Projects and New Business Manager referred in particular to the good work that been undertaken in respect of growing the East Herts lottery.

Members were advised that the carbon assessment tool had been finalised to enable the assessment of the carbon footprint of key projects. In respect of the digital by design thread, the East Herts customer charter had been completed and had been published.

The Projects and New Business Manager said, as a direct impact of Covid-19, two climate change film festivals and two electric vehicle road shows in Hertford and Bishop's Stortford had been cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions. These events had been rescheduled to take place in Spring 2021.

Members were advised that, in respect of digital by design, work that had been commissioned to reassess customer requirements at Wallfields and improve the customer journey and self-service in the reception had been put on hold as the reception was currently closed and Officers were reassessing future front of house requirements for the new normal.

Members were given a brief overview of the performance health indicators listed under section 4 of the report and Members were given a detailed update in respect of performance indicators which were

performing well.

The Projects and New Business Manager covered a number of performance health indicators that were not performing to target such as the time taken to process housing benefit new claims and change events, (perhaps due to Covid-19). Members were advised that the percentage of good satisfaction ratings from the website had dropped and Officers had sought to make the Gov.metric system widget more visible to encourage more customer feedback and the ratings were now starting to improve.

Councillor Goldspink asked about work to assess the carbon footprint of proposals relating to Hertford Theatre in terms of whether this would be done before or after the works were completed. She also asked about the work to make the register of the Council's assets more visible and on the excellent campaign to discourage motorists from leaving vehicle engines idling.

The Projects and New Business Manager said that he would talk to the relevant project leads to get answers to some of the questions raised by Councillor Goldspink. Councillor Buckmaster said that one of the appendices incorrectly stated that strategic site BISH6 had been granted planning permission but that a decision has not yet been made as this was for consideration by Members of Development Management Committee on 4 November 2020. The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy apologised for that oversight and said that he would clarify that point with the report author. Members

received the report and noted the progress made to date against the corporate plan.

RESOLVED – that the progress against the corporate plan to date, be noted.

217 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report that presented the consolidated work programme for consideration by Members. She said that the Hertfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner had confirmed that he would be giving a presentation at the next Overview and Scrutiny meeting on 8 December, along with Chief Inspector Orton.

Members were advised that the Head of Operations would be presenting a report from the Parking Task and Finish Group to the Executive on 24 November 2020. The Scrutiny Officer reminded Members that this matter was first presented to the Executive on 11 February. She said however that this matter had been kept under review as the landscape of parking had changed due to Covid-19.

The Scrutiny Officer stated that she had been liaising with the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny regarding holding a Workshop Zoom meeting to enable Members to scrutinise the report that followed the review of Scrutiny. She said that all Members of Overview and Scrutiny and Audit and Governance Committees would be invited and she was awaiting confirmation that this would take place on 3 December

2020.

Members were advised that the report would be submitted to Overview and Scrutiny and then, if necessary, the Committee could make recommendations to the Executive.

The Scrutiny Officer drew Members' attention to a number of issues which might be of interest and were contained within the Council's Calendar:

- a briefing on 11 November 2020 on the Hertfordshire Growth Board and Capital Projects Review;
- training in respect of building control and social media on 12 November 2020;
- the Director of Public Health would be providing Members with a further briefing on Covid-19 on 18 November 2020 at 2 pm, on how to respond to a Local Outbreak; and
- Clarion Housing will providing a further presentation on 19 November 2020 regarding how they had responded to Covid-19, including an update in relation to Clarion Futures.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that, as development of the Council's Budget and the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) moved forward, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) had confirmed that they would be providing all Member Training on Local Government Finance on 1 and 14 December 2020.

In reply to a query from Councillor Kemp regarding diary indications showing one of the above meetings

as cancelled, the Scrutiny Officer said that she would be resending a diary invitation to Members shortly.

The Scrutiny Officer responded to a query from Councillor Brady regarding the answer given to a public question by Councillor Williamson at Council on 21 October regarding the capital budget. She said that an all Member Briefing had been arranged for 11 November 2020 regarding a review of capital projects.

It was moved by Councillor Devonshire and seconded by Councillor Goldspink that the draft consolidated Work Programme be approved. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that the draft consolidated work programme be approved.

218 URGENT ITEMS

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at 9.15 pm

Chairman
Date