

THE DISTRICT COUNCIL OF TANDRIDGE

STRATEGY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Minutes and report to Council of the meeting of the Committee held in the Council Offices, via Zoom on the 28 July 2020 at 7.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillors Elias (Chair), M.Cooper (Vice-Chair), Botten, Bourne, Caulcott, Davies, Duck, Langton, Lee, Milton, Pursehouse and Sayer

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Allen, Bloore, Connolly, Farr, Fitzgerald, Lockwood, Mills, Swann, Morrow, Ridge and N.White

71. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 9TH JULY 2020

The minutes of the meeting held on the 9th July 2020 were approved as a correct record.

COMMITTEE DECISIONS (Under powers delegated to the Committee)

72. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS POLICY

A report was presented to inform the Committee about recent expenditure from the Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) budget and to seek approval for an updated policy for the administration of DHPs.

The report explained the intended purpose of DHP's, namely to provide Housing Benefit claimants with further financial assistance in situations where a local authority considers that additional help with housing costs is required. Each council received a grant from the Government for DHPs and had the option to pay up to two and a half times in excess of the grant allocation. Information was provided regarding:

- the amount of grant received by TDC in recent years, together with the total permitted and actual levels of expenditure; and
- a summary of all claims received in recent years.

In response to a Member's question, the Committee was advised that the Council's expenditure on DHPs in 2019/20 amounted to £141,709 (as per the table in 2.5 of the report) and that the £129,994 quoted in the table at 2.7 was incorrect.

The Council's DHP policy had been in place since March 2015 and a proposed updated version was considered. It had not been deemed necessary to recommend any significant changes, other than to improve layout and formatting.

RESOLVED – that:

- A. the current position regarding Discretionary Housing Payment applications and payments be noted; and
- B. the updated policy attached at Appendix A to the report be adopted and approved for publication.

73. REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

The Council had continued to adopt the Government's 'default' Council Tax Support Scheme (CTSS) since the abolition of the former national Council Tax Benefit regime in 2013. The Committee considered a report which identified the potential merits of amending the Authority's current CTSS and explained the statutory requirements for consulting with relevant parties regarding any proposed changes.

In April 2021, the Council's benefit system provider would be changing from Capita to Northgate. The report explained the background to this arrangement, together with the associated financial advantages of making any changes to the CTSS in 2021/22 as opposed to delaying them for a further year.

RESOLVED – that:

- A. a public consultation exercise be undertaken between August and October 2020 regarding potential amendments to the Authority's Council Tax Support Scheme; and
- B. a further report be submitted to the Committee's meeting on the 24th November 2020 regarding proposed amendments to the Scheme (for 2021/22) in light of the consultation findings.

74. BUDGET MONITORING

A Council-wide budget monitoring report for 2020/21, using data for the period 1st April to 30th June 2020, was presented. Members were advised that the current forecast General Fund overspend for 2020/21 had reduced to £1,870,750 (compared with the £2,576,727 overspend projection reported to the previous meeting). This was in light of recent confirmation that a grant of £120,000 would be forthcoming as part of the Government's Covid-19 support programme for local authorities. The current projection also reflected a £500,000 reduction in the Local Plan budget.

The Housing Revenue Account was now forecast to be £142,300 underspent at year end. The projected underspend on the capital programme had increased to £102,370,800. Commentary was also provided on the latest cash flow position.

RESOLVED – that the Council's overall financial position be noted.

75. INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF GOVERNANCE

This review had been conducted by the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) and had been informed by interviews with senior Members and Officers, and documentary evidence. The review had culminated in a report with recommendations for improving the Council's governance, a copy of which was presented to the Committee. The report acknowledged that certain recommended actions were already underway, namely the introduction of regular Group Leader meetings, the development of a strategic plan, and the drafting of a set of protocols to support policy making and to help clarify roles and relationships.

The report made a number of recommendations, including:

- actions relating to information access and sharing, e.g. increased provision of Member briefings and Member working groups; continuation of Group Leaders' meetings; and reconvening meetings of the Standards Committee; and
- changes to the remit and focus of the Strategy & Resources and Overview & Scrutiny Committees and full Council.

The Officer commentary accompanying the report confirmed the Council's initial response to the review to date, including briefings for Members and senior Officers which enabled attendees to question the report's author, Ed Hammond. The Standards Committee had met on the 21st July 2020 and Member development sessions had been delivered by the Local Government Association.

The Committee was advised that work was underway to develop new processes for the identification / drafting of committee reports; protocols for signing off minutes and for decision-making relating to planning (among other topics); and a fortnightly briefing note for Members. Further Member development sessions were also being planned. Officers intended to work with Members to develop detailed plans to address all remaining recommendations of the review.

Councillor Elias proposed from the Chair that, in place of the recommendations within the officers' covering report:

"That the Committee resolves to refer consideration of the Independent Review of Governance to a specially convened meeting of the Standards Committee, such meeting to be held as soon as possible."

Upon debating the matter, Councillor Botten proposed that Councillor Elias' motion be amended by the replacement of 'Standards Committee' with 'Strategy & Resources Committee'. This was agreed.

RESOLVED – that consideration of the Independent Review of Governance be referred to a specially convened meeting of the Strategy & Resources Committee, such meeting to be held as soon as possible.

76. STRATEGIC PLAN

Work had begun in January 2020 to develop a strategic plan for the Council, including workshops with Members and Officers to explore potential priorities, informed by analysis of local demographic, economic and social information. Meetings had also taken place with stakeholders and partners to understand their perspectives and hopes for the District. This work was paused in mid-March due to COVID-19 but, in order to progress the matter, Group Leaders came together in July to review progress and identify priorities for action. The independent review of governance (Minute 75 above) had highlighted the need for the Council to define a clear set of priorities / objectives to provide clear direction to Officers and to ensure that scarce resources were targeted where they are most needed.

Arising from the above, a draft strategic plan had been developed. This was presented to the Committee, together with a covering report. The report highlighted the current context of:

- the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic upon the local government sector; and

- the opportunity for the Council to make a positive contribution in response to the Government's forthcoming White Paper on recovery and devolution and to drive a bid for a unitary authority in the east of the county in the interests of local residents and businesses.

The proposed strategic plan contained the following high-level priority outcomes, underpinned by actions, to be achieved by working in partnership with other public-sector agencies and businesses within the District and beyond:

- 1) **Building a better Council** – making the Council financially sustainable and providing residents with the best possible services;
- 2) **Making Tandridge a good place to live and work** - with homes, open spaces and infrastructure that meet local needs now and into the future;
- 3) **Supporting economic recovery in Tandridge** – from lockdown to growth that everyone benefits from;
- 4) **Becoming a greener, more sustainable District** – tackling climate change.

During the debate, Councillor Sayer proposed that the first sentence of the third paragraph of the introduction to the strategic plan be amended to:

“Although close to London, we are a very rural district, with almost 94% covered by Green Belt. ~~Many residents commute into London and enjoy living in a District~~ Most residents travel to work by car to areas outside of Tandridge District but enjoy living in the District with beautiful green spaces and a large number of listed buildings and conservation areas.”

This was evidenced by statistics within the 2011 census. Potential sources of more current data to help substantiate the amendment were suggested. In this respect, it was agreed that officers should seek the most up to date sources of data available to inform the next version of the strategic plan.

Councillor Caulcott proposed an alternative description for Priority 2, namely “*Creating the homes, infrastructure and environment we need, both now and in the future*”.

Members also expressed the view that different parts of the strategic plan should be owned by the respective Policy Committees as appropriate. Councillor Botten proposed an amendment to this effect.

The plan would be kept under review to ensure appropriate flexibility in response to changing circumstances.

RESOLVED – that this first version of the draft strategic plan be approved, subject to:

- (i) the first sentence of the third paragraph of the introduction being amended to:

“Although close to London, we are a very rural district, with almost 94% covered by Green Belt. ~~Many residents commute into London and enjoy living in a District~~ Most residents travel to work by car to areas outside of Tandridge District but enjoy living in the District with beautiful green spaces and a large number of listed buildings and conservation areas.”

- (ii) Priority 2 being amended to:

“Creating the homes, infrastructure and environment we need, both now and in the future”

- (iii) all four Policy Committees being able to own and monitor delivery of relevant parts of the strategic plan which fall within their respective terms of reference; and
- (iv) an updated version be submitted to a future meeting, informed, as far as practicable, by up to date and accurate data.

77. PERFORMANCE & RISK

In light of the emerging strategic plan, a report was considered with proposals to hold workshops for members of each Policy Committee to identify the committees' key strategic performance indicators and associated targets. Once these indicators and targets were confirmed, reports would be submitted to each committee, including, on an exception basis, information on actions being taken to address any indicators where performance was off-target.

The report also proposed a new approach to risk identification, analysis and reporting. This would involve extracts from the corporate risk register being brought to future meetings of the Committee for review. Officers would also seek to ensure that the risk analysis submitted to Members was presented in light of the most up-to-date information.

RESOLVED – that the report be noted and that the following comments be taken into consideration:

- (i) risk ratings should help inform future priorities in terms of identifying areas of activity the Council should focus on, given on-going resource constraints; and
- (ii) risks rated amber (as well as red) should be reported to relevant committees for review.

78. COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEW- CATERHAM VALLEY PARISH COUNCIL

A report was considered regarding the Parish Council's wish to increase the number of its seats from six to ten. Legislation required such changes to be based on the outcome of community governance reviews, to be conducted in accordance with statutory guidance, including:

- setting terms of reference;
- consulting with parishioners and other stakeholders on draft proposals; and
- taking representations into account.

Community governance reviews could be initiated by a petition, the District / Borough Council itself or, as in this case, a request from a Parish Council.

The report included a provisional timetable and processes for a community governance review of Caterham Valley Parish Council which could culminate in ten Parish Councillors being elected at that Council's next scheduled election in May 2021.

However, the Committee concluded that it would be premature to proceed with a community governance review at the present time in light of the imminent White Paper on recovery and devolution. Members were mindful that the White Paper was likely to trigger the establishment of unitary authorities in place of the present 'two-tier' system which could, in turn, strengthen the case for a Town Council to cover Caterham and possibly, surrounding areas.

RESOLVED – that further consideration of the matter be deferred until greater clarity emerges from the forthcoming devolution White Paper in terms of the implications of the possible establishment of unitary authorities.

79. FREEDOM LEISURE

The Committee resolved that webcasting be terminated for this item as it would otherwise involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the paragraph 3 of part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 ("*Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person, including the authority holding that information*").

The Committee received a verbal update following recent discussions with representatives of Freedom Leisure regarding the scope for its facilities within the District to reopen. It was acknowledged that a special meeting of the Committee might be required to resolve the matter, rather than wait until the next scheduled meeting on 22nd September 2020.

The following Councillors declared non-pecuniary interests in respect of this matter:

- (i) Councillor Bloore (member of Freedom Leisure - user of the de Stafford leisure centre)
- (ii) Councillor Connolly
- (iii) Councillor M. Cooper (his wife and daughter are members of Freedom Leisure)
- (iv) Councillor Morrow (member of Freedom Leisure - user of the de Stafford leisure centre)

Rising 9.21 pm