

Present: Councillor Stephen Woodliffe (Chairman), Councillor Anton Dani (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Tom Ashton, Alison Austin, David Brown, Paul Goodale, Martin Howard, Frank Pickett, Judith Skinner and Yvonne Stevens

Officers –  
Assistant Director - Assets and Senior Democratic Services Officer

## **24 APOLOGIES**

There were apologies for absence from Councillors Alan Bell and Viven Edge. Notice was received that Councillor Paul Goodale was attending as a substitute for Councillor Bell.

## **25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

Councillors Paul Goodale, Judy Welbourn and Stephen Woodliffe declared their Membership of the Joint Scrutiny Panel (Minute 27 refers) and Councillor Goodale added that he was a Member of the Town Board. Councillor Tom Ashton declared his Membership of East Lindsey District Council's Executive and, as such, would not take participate in the debate on this item.

## **26 PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

None.

## **27 JOINT BBC-ELDC SCRUTINY OF THE STRATEGIC ALLIANCE**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committees of Boston and East Lindsey commissioned a Joint Scrutiny Panel to undertake a review of the Strategic Alliance and merged workforce.

The Chairman of the Panel presented its report on the review to the Committee, asking Members to recommend it for consideration at the next full Council meeting.

The Panel met 3 times, interviewed 6 witnesses and conducted a survey of Boston Borough and East Lindsey District Councillors to canvass their views. The scope of the Panel's work, the questions put to witnesses, the results of the survey and the notes of the Panel's meetings were appended to the report.

The Panel Chairman explained that managing scrutiny across the two authorities was not easy in terms of aligning Councillors' diaries to attend joint meetings. The Panel appreciated the support, guidance and expertise from the Scrutiny, Safeguarding & Executive Support Officer and the Assistant Director – Corporate and were grateful to the witnesses who participated in the process.

Witnesses gave a wholly positive picture of the progress of the alliance, illustrated by examples of how teams across the two Councils had come together. The Panel sought, and received, assurance that the projected savings outlined in the original agreement

were being achieved. The Panel asked for examples of how collaborative working had furthered opportunities for both Councils and further suggested ways in which the alliance could effectively use combined power to achieve successful outputs. Members had asked about how the merging cultures of two and, now, three Councils could be successfully managed and had highlighted ways of doing this in its recommendations to create a common identity for this large area of Lincolnshire.

The Panel sent out a questionnaire to all Councillors to gauge their views on how the alliance was progressing. Several common themes emerged from the 15 responses received, which formed the basis of some of the Panel's recommendations. These included clear lines of communications, cementing relationships, alignment of policies and joint meetings.

The Panel Chairman added that not all Councillors were positive about the alliance and many had not responded to the questionnaire.

The Vice-Chairman then addressed the Committee and explained that

The Panel agreed the following recommendations.

1. That staff 'snapshot' surveys are reported to Overview / Scrutiny on a 6-monthly basis along with staff turnover figures, in order to monitor any significant changes;
2. Review the ICT roadmap priorities and ensure that shared email addresses for officers is given the highest priority;
3. To develop a shared strategy to ensure that staff are valued and given opportunities to progress, with a view to enhancing recruitment and retention;
4. To better communicate to staff, councillors, and residents any relevant updates or priorities, and to celebrate the successes across the alliance;
5. To provide opportunities for more collaborative working for all councillors, such as scrutiny panels, project groups, and other shared opportunities across the alliance / partnership, especially where there is commonality, e.g., licensing and planning policy;
6. To provide an opportunity for councillors to visit partner districts to meet other councillors and gain an awareness of the 'place' of other districts;
7. Move to an alignment of policies, e.g., procurement, climate change, and recycling;
8. To encourage the development of a strong sense of identity within the 3 areas of the alliance and the opportunities that they offer. This will help develop a sustainable, resilient, and vibrant economy and population;
9. To prepare a strategy so the partnership is fully prepared for the possibility of devolution.
10. That the alliance should work together to lobby the government to ensure the financial sustainability of the IDBs on which the residents and the land of the 3 councils heavily rely;
11. To convene a shared scrutiny panel of the 3 Councils in the new Partnership at the end of the first and second year, in order to undertake a review of the Partnership and merged workforce.

The Panel's Vice-Chairman reiterated that it had not been easy to get Members together and it would be more difficult with a third authority, but it was essential to make the process productive and allow everyone to have their say.

The alliance encouraged each authority to retain its identity and sovereignty, which was crucial. More joint working would be beneficial and it was essential that scrutiny committees monitored surveys to maintain momentum and ensure staff were behind it because some concerns had been raised. There would be a report to a future scrutiny committee and an annual review.

During debate, there was concern about some comments in Appendix D and the issues raised, particularly regarding communications. Members were aware of the pressure on staff, which needed close monitoring. It was felt the Partnership was asking a great deal of senior staff in terms of workload and the geographical area that they had to cover, which needed to be addressed to ensure they did not lose key personnel. There seemed to be more negative comments than positive; however, the focus had to be on the positive in order to move forward.

Other Panel Members commented that it had been good to discuss matters with ELDC Members and find they had similar views. It was satisfying that they had produced recommendations and their work had achieved a way forward. The survey was now two months old and some Councillors might have changed their views. It would be essential to review matters six-monthly and proceed with three-way scrutiny, which was the right way forward.

A Member expressed concern in case the recommendations were accepted by one authority's executive body and not another's. The Portfolio Holder explained that Executive Members did not work in isolation; they held joint liaison meetings and this would continue with the three authorities. There had been many changes since the process began and some negatives had arisen, so there might be compromises, but the process was bringing the positives together. It was a great achievement from the Joint Scrutiny Panel, demonstrating that joint scrutiny worked well.

The Finance Portfolio Holder expressed surprise about comments concerning communications, as Members had been given all officers' contact details and responses were received within two days.

The Leader commented that there were many positives from the process and that partnership working was an established way of making progress.

<b>RESOLVED: That the recommendations of the Joint Scrutiny Panel be recommended to Full Council at its next meeting.</b>
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## **28 LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2022/23**

The Head of Revenues and Benefits presented a report on the review of the Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme with proposals for the next financial year 2022/23.

The Committee was asked to review the scheme to date and the proposals for the 2022/23 scheme as part of the ongoing consultation and make recommendations on the proposals for Cabinet consideration on 8<sup>th</sup> December. The proposed 2022/23 scheme would be submitted to Full Council for formal approval by Full Council in January 2022.

The report contained details of the operation of the previous Council Tax Benefit scheme for comparison purposes. It also contained the projected costs of the scheme. However, it was pointed out that the level of CTS always fluctuated throughout the year and the exact expenditure would only be known at the end of the financial year. The costs of the CTS scheme were borne by the major precepting authorities, 11% of which was borne by the Council.

Members were reminded that the CTS scheme related purely to working age people, as the scheme for pensioners continued to be prescribed by Government and they received 100%. The Council had taken the local decision to protect war pensioners and this had continued since the scheme's introduction. The scheme continued to be means-tested in the same way as the previous benefit scheme. Entitlement for working age claimants was capped at 75%; therefore, they had to pay at least 25% of their council tax.

CTS was linked to claims for Universal Credit (UC) and the decision had been taken to update CTS in line with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Previously, CTS claims had to be reassessed every time there was a change to UC. However, in 2021/22 a decision had been taken to make a change to the scheme so that any UC changes would only be reassessed every three months, though this could be overridden if necessary. This provided stability in terms of CTS awards and was working well.

The DWP had not published its plans yet for completing the full migration to UC for working age claimants and the timescale therefore remained uncertain, but it was now apparent that it would not be complete until 2025. The numbers claiming UC had significantly increased, particularly since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In considering the options for the 2022/23 CTS scheme, given the ongoing uncertainties due to the pandemic and the migration to UC, there was no overriding reason for fundamental change at this time. Reductions in the level of support could have a significant impact claimants' ability to pay and the Council's ability to collect money; it would be counter-productive to try to make savings.

Through the consultation, views for 2022/23 were being sought on whether the Council should retain its current scheme for the next financial year, to provide continuity. Each year the Government reviewed and, generally, increased the amount people needed to live on for the calculation of welfare benefit. By applying the same changes to the CTS scheme, the Council would ensure that it remained up to date with the DWP allowances and premiums each year.

Separate to the consultation proposals, an administrative change was proposed for introduction into the CTS scheme, which would not change the core scheme policy, its intent or principles, but would make it easier for new claimants to access CTS. Most new claims for CTS were received by claimants who had applied for UC. Applications for UC were made to the DWP, applications for CTS needed to be made to the local authority. This meant that the claimant had to deal with two organisations and make separate applications to get the help they needed. Where a UC claimant indicated they would like to apply CTS when making their UC claim, details were sent to the relevant council through the Universal Credit Data Sharing hub (UCDS). The introduction of a link to the award of UC for CTS would remove the current requirement for the customer

to make a separate application for CTS. It was proposed that for 2022/23 the scheme was amended to enable a UCDS new claim notice from the DWP, to be treated as a CTS application, thereby simplifying the process for the claimant.

Members welcomed the proposals, including the administrative change to link claims for UC to the CTS scheme.

In response to questions, the Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that an element of Government grant funding for the CTS scheme remained, but the amount could no longer be identified. People who did not claim UC would have to apply directly to the Council for CTS. There were a number of discounts applicable to CTS, including the single person discount and some discretionary discounts. The Revenues and Benefits department did have a significantly high workload, particularly as was also responsible for delivering Test & Trace support payments. The workload was at a peak and it was very difficult to forecast ongoing levels due to the pandemic. CTS expenditure was currently decreasing, but this was also very difficult to forecast.

Members expressed concern about the department's workload and felt that consideration should be given to taking on additional staff.

The Portfolio Holder advised Members that the department had achieved a significant reduction in the backlog of work since the transfer to PSPS.

**Action: SH**

Advise Members of the length of delay for claimants making paper-based applications for CTS.

**RESOLVED that it be recommended to Cabinet that:**

- 1. The current Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme be retained for 2022/23 to provide continuity.**
- 2. The CTS scheme be uprated in line with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).**
- 3. The CTS scheme be linked to the award for Universal Credit to enable a new claim notice to be sent from the DWP through the Universal Credit Data Sharing hub that will be treated as a CTS application, thereby removing the current requirement for the claimant to make a separate application for CTS and so simplify the process.**
- 4. Staffing levels be closely monitored and additional staff be recruited as required.**

**29 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION (LGA) PEER REVIEW - PROGRESS UPDATE**

The Assistant Director – Corporate presented a report on the delivery of recommendations put forward by the Local Government Association following their

Corporate Peer Review of the Council in 2019 and a subsequent Health Check of the Communications Service.

The table at Appendix A provided the status of each recommendation, which had been rated according to red, amber and green. The Committee was asked to note the significant progress made to deliver the recommendations. Of course, some recommendations had been superseded because the Strategic Alliance and the South East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership had taken place since the peer review was carried out and these would be reviewed again in that context.

The Leader described the review as positive, with many aspects rated as 'green', and stressed the importance of promoting the borough and the Council. The document still contained important matters that remained relevant that would be taken forward.

Members agreed, noting the significant number of recommendations that had been implemented, though there was a note of caution that some matters rated green that were still ongoing, such as waste management, economic growth and the response to the pandemic. It was agreed that the matters rated red needed attention, but that they should promote the borough and what the Council had achieved.

### **30 ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE CORPORATE STRATEGY**

The Deputy Leader presented a report by the Assistant Director – Corporate on the annual review of the Council's Corporate Strategy.

Full Council adopted the Corporate Strategy in November 2020 following consultation with stakeholders, including the Committee. At that time, a commitment was made to review its priorities annually to ensure they remained relevant. The report before the Committee was part of this review process and provided an opportunity for Committee Members to recommend any changes to the strategy they felt it required.

The main priority focused on people and the others focused on achieving prosperity, environmental awareness and high quality services for the people.

As discussed at its adoption, some of the strategy's priorities aimed at a long-term vision and only the key building blocks for these would be in place within by 2024, but these would move the Council towards that vision.

Members' comments included:

- Concern in achieving the priority relating to the environment because of the problems of fly tipping;
- Acceptance that the delivery of affordable housing was currently co-funded, whereas the strategy could reflect a vision of where the Council provided its own housing at some stage in the future;
- The reference to PE21 was confusing, as a project no longer existed in that form;
- There should be more mention of flooding, particularly in view of a map published recently showing the extent of the risk of flooding in the area;
- It was crucial that the priorities be supported by policies to ensure they were achieved.

In response, the Deputy Leader explained that this was the Committee's opportunity to assess whether the strategy's priorities themselves were fit for purpose, rather than the performance of specific services to achieve them.

The provision of affordable housing could only ever be achieved by working with partners, which included the use of Government grants.

The statement on *Inward Investment* was sound in terms of ambition, but thought would be given to rewording the reference to PE21.

The strategy only contained four priorities in order to keep the document clear and concise and the wording was brief to ensure it would remain flexible and did not restrict officers. It was agreed that it was the policies and processes behind the priorities that would take the strategy forward.

The Leader referred to the Environment Agency's significant investment in the area as well as the operation of the barrier and reassured Members that flooding was high on the agenda and likely to be the first policy adopted across the three authorities of the South East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership.

**RESOLVED: That the Corporate Strategy and its Corporate Priorities be supported and the Committee's comments be reported to Cabinet on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2021.**

## 31 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered its current work programme along with Quarter 1 performance information and the draft Forward Plan.

A Member raised the issue of the licensing of private rented accommodation and stressed the importance of addressing the problems arising from over-crowded properties as soon as possible in view of the adverse effect on the welfare of the people living there and those that lived nearby.

The Assistant Director - Assets explained that a report would be presented to the Committee in February, explaining the exact details of the legal framework for housing control and suggested Members could consider establishing a Task and Finish Group to look into the details in depth to see what action the Council could possibly take.

The Deputy Leader suggested that an all-Member Briefing could be held on the matter in order to fully inform Members before the Committee considered the officer's report in February.

### **Action: AF**

Seek to arrange an all-Member Briefing to cover the legal framework for housing control with respect to Houses in Multiple Occupation and housing regulation in general, to take place before the Committee's meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

### **Action: JC**

Amend the work programme as follows:

13<sup>th</sup> January 2022

- Lincolnshire Discretionary Housing Assistance Policy
- Cultural Strategy
- Annual Safeguarding Report

17<sup>th</sup> February 2022

- Centrepoint Outreach and Council Homelessness Services
- The Legal Framework for Housing Control

7<sup>th</sup> April 2022

- Mayoralty item

The Meeting Closed at 8.45 pm