

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Monday, 18th January, 2021
6.00 - 7.40 pm

Attendees	
Councillors:	Chris Mason (Chair), Paul Baker, Dilys Barrell, Nigel Britter, Iain Dobie, Sandra Holliday, Martin Horwood, John Payne and Klara Sudbury
Also in attendance:	Councillor Atherstone (Cabinet Member Economy & Development), Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive – CBC), Councillor Hay (Leader), Councillor Jeffries (Cabinet Member Housing), Paul Jones (Executive Director Finance & Assets), Darren Knight (Executive Director People & Change), Steve Slater (Interim Chief Executive – CBH) and Martin Stacy (Lead Commissioner for Housing Services)

Minutes

1. APOLOGIES

No apologies had been received.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Mason declared a prejudicial interest in agenda item 8 (Housing Review) as a Board Member of Cheltenham Borough Homes and would be handing over the chair and not participating in the debate of that particular item.

Councillor Barrell declared a personal interest in agenda item 8 (Housing Review) as her son worked for Cheltenham Borough Homes.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the last meeting had been circulated with the agenda.

Upon a vote it was

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 02 November 2020, be agreed and signed as an accurate record.

4. PUBLIC AND MEMBER QUESTIONS, CALLS FOR ACTIONS AND PETITIONS

There were none.

5. MATTERS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE

There were none, but the Chairman took this opportunity to raise something with the committee.

He advised that the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at Forest of Dean District Council had approached scrutiny chairs at all Publica

partners and suggested a joint scrutiny meeting to discuss the Campbell Tickell report and concerns that Publica were failing to address the issues raised within that report, the suggestion being that rather than every partner holding an individual meeting on this particular issue; there should be one joint meeting.

The Chairman was supportive of this proposal but had stipulated that the Vice-Chairs should also be invited to participate, rather than there being only one member representative from each council. He invited members to share their thoughts on what was being proposed and the members that spoke were fully supportive of the proposal to undertake joint scrutiny and when the question of feedback to this committee was raised, the Chairman confirmed that both he and the Vice-Chair would feedback to this committee.

6. BUDGET PROPOSALS 2021-22

In the absence of the Chair of the Budget Scrutiny Working Group (BSWG), the Executive Director of Finance and Assets explained that the BSWG had met last week to scrutinise the Cabinet budget proposals, which were currently out for public consultation. Councillor Babbage, as Chair of that group, had produced a briefing paper, which summarised what was discussed at that meeting, but the Executive Director was happy to take any questions and answer them directly, or take them back to Cabinet as part of the consultation.

The Chairman reminded members that they had received the briefing from the BSWG and whilst no decision was required, the committee could make recommendations to Cabinet where necessary, and invited members to ask any questions or make any comments. There were none.

The Chairman thanked the BSWG for preparing their briefing and the Executive Director for his attendance.

7. CABINET MEMBER ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Atherstone and reminded the committee that she had been invited as the newly elected Cabinet Member Economy and Development, to outline her priorities for the coming year and what she hoped to achieve. A paper had been circulated with the agenda, which set out her ambitious plans to support the development of her portfolio, which were particularly relevant due to a number of key priorities for the borough, including Cheltenham's COVID-19 economic recovery growth plans and development of sustainable and affordable housing, among others.

A member felt that the term 'reimagining the high street' captured exactly what was required and whilst he had no doubt that the Chamber of Commerce and BID would represent the views of the town centre high street, he queried if and how the cabinet member planned to engage with and support shopping centres, including the Princess Elizabeth Way shopping centre. Members were assured that the Cheltenham economic recovery task force and plan included all retail centres and high streets, but the 18 month programme had been broken down into manageable and workable work streams, with the town centre high street being the starting point, but with all being considered at some point in the programme.

Asked if and how councillors could get involved, the Cabinet Member encouraged all members to access the business plan via the 'Moving to

Cheltenham' website, as this document not only set out the 9 key priorities, but also expanded to demonstrate the scope for community engagement. She asked that any members or residents contact her in the first instance, in order that she would direct them to the relevant officer.

The term 'Counter Culture' was new to her too, but in essence meant taking different approaches and encouraging creativity as a means of repurposing the town centre to aid economic growth. She would ensure that members were made aware as soon as the plan had been published. In terms of eco-tourism, there were many aspects that she felt could be looked at which were well suited to the town, including, encouraging visitors to access the town by train, on foot or by bicycle rather than by car, promoting tourism within our parks and ensuring recycling facilities were widely available and there was also an opportunity to bring more green technologies to the town. Admittedly there were more adventurous options but she did not feel that these were all particularly well suited to Cheltenham. She stressed that this work was at a very early stage and would again ensure that members were made aware once the plan had been published.

Asked about whether she felt that the LEP had different perspectives or priorities to those held by the council, she explained that she was not in a position to be able to answer that that question as she had not yet had an official (virtual) meeting with the LEP leadership, though she had been in contact, informally, with the Deputy Chief Executive (xxx). She reassured members that the lead officer at CBC, the Director of Planning, Place & Growth was meeting regularly with the LEP on the skills, jobs and apprenticeships sub-group, which had only convened in September 2020 and she was confident that the roll out of the roll out of the strategy would mean that a formal meeting would soon be arranged.

Each of the plans that were being developed, would include clear and measurable objectives and she encouraged members to tune into Cabinet meetings and/or read reports in order to stay informed on these issues.

A number of members congratulated Councillor Atherstone on her appointment and commended her clear enthusiasm for her new role. They wished her well and looked forward to future updates on progress.

8. STRATEGIC HOUSING REVIEW

Having declared a prejudicial interest, Councillor Mason handed over the chair to Councillor Horwood, as Vice-Chair and left the room.

The Vice-Chair explained that having reviewed the forward plan as part of the agenda setting process for this meeting, lead members had requested that this item come to committee prior to Cabinet. The draft Campbell Tickell report had been circulated with the agenda, along with a discussion paper which provided some context to the issue, as well as options for the committee to consider.

The Vice-Chair welcomed Gareth Edmundson, Chief Executive and Councillor Jeffries, Cabinet Member Housing, as well as Steve Slater, Interim Chief Executive at CBH and Martin Stacy, as the Lead Commissioner for Housing Services.

Gareth Edmundson reiterated that this was an opportunity for O&S to ask questions and provide feedback prior to Cabinet considering a report on the 26 January, which had now been published and recommended that the Campbell Tickell report be endorsed and the strategic review be taken forward and implemented. He felt it was a huge credit to both CBC and CBH that despite all the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic had presented, both organisations wanted to move forward with an ambitious shared agenda, including cyber, regeneration, growth and investment in housing, as well as the flagship programme; tackling child poverty, delivering inclusive growth and making sure no child is left behind. Housing is so fundamental to all of these priorities, it was considered important to ensure that the partnership was as strong as it could be. The impact of the pandemic and on our ability to deliver those shared priorities in the medium and long term, made it even more appropriate to look at the existing relationship between CBC & CBH. Given the added pressure of the Covid-19 response, every effort was made to ensure that the review did not risk operational delivery. This was achieved by both organisations working in partnership to jointly commission the review. Gareth wished to put on record his thanks to Steve Slater and CBH for the way in which they have embraced and approached the review, and participated in identifying opportunities for the relationship to evolve and strengthen. Clearly, as part of any meaningful review, there was a need to consider an alternative service model to act as a comparator and therefore Campbell Tickell were asked to consider the option of bringing the service back in-house. It was also felt that this was a good way of validating the options that were open to the council. The recommendations from Campbell Tickell to retain CBH provides an extremely strong platform on which to continue to deliver our ambitious priorities for the future, together.

The Cabinet Member Housing stated that had hoped to be able to bring the Cabinet report to this committee, but circumstances including Christmas and Covid, had prevented this from being possible. The drivers for this review had come into sharp focus during the first national lockdown in March, with communities at the forefront. Ultimately an invigorated partnership would benefit those communities further. He noted his thanks to both Gareth Edmundson and Steve Slater and whilst there was lots of work to be done, he felt the review put the partnership in the best position from which to take it forward.

Steve Slater echoed what had been said by Gareth and the Cabinet Member. In spite of the challenges posed by Covid, the review was timely and welcome, particularly for him as a newly appointed Interim Chief Executive, as it validated the great work that CBH do, as well as highlighting where they could build upon those strong foundations and take it to the next level. He looked forward to taking forward the 11 priorities highlighted within the revised business plan and exploring opportunities to work even more closely with CBC to deliver some exciting projects for residents and communities going forward.

The following responses were given to member questions:

There were large sums of money at CBH's disposal and a need for new affordable housing, but CBH could be fairly slow in terms of progress in this area, in his opinion. Would this improve?

There were lots of things that CBH did well in terms of performance monitoring and some of their systems and practices, which CBC could learn from, but likewise CBC could assist CBH in strengthening areas of their business to expedite delivery of some of their priorities. One key area was housing investment and how best to invest that money to achieve the best outcomes, as well as pushing forward the delivery of housing investment more generally. The Campbell Tickell recommendations will be reviewed and implemented by shared governance arrangements detailed in the Cabinet report, this will help to make sure there are the right people and skills, as well as learning from each other, to ensure a successful and expedited delivery of priorities.

Steve Slater assured members that in terms of new supply a lot of work had gone on behind the scenes and there was a strong pipeline of affordable housing and regeneration but acknowledged that there was more work to be done in terms of other streams. CBC and CBH were awaiting receipt of a report to consider the pros and cons of outright sale and as soon as that was received and digested, they would be looking to press on as quickly as possible with this element of delivery to supplement the ongoing work on affordable delivery, regeneration, and entering the private rented market. He hoped to reassure members that CBH were looking at all areas of the business to make sure that they were driving innovation and not just supply, but also modern methods of construction. But in order to have a major impact on all their activities, CBH were looking to tap into their partners across Cheltenham and Gloucester, to ensure that they could drive out as much benefit for communities as possible. A key driver for him and his Executive Leadership Team was how CBC could use their local on the ground knowledge and align that to partners who had resources they wanted to use to deliver great services in Cheltenham, but didn't always know where to focus their efforts.

The Cabinet Member Housing assured members that in terms of innovation, everything was being considered, including 3D printing, which hadn't quite made it over the line, modular housing, about which there had been many conversations and passive and carbon neutral homes, but as well as this, the technologies within those buildings.

There had been criticism of the NHS Trust for continuing a consultation during the pandemic. Could Campbell Tickell really have sufficiently explored CBH given the environment and circumstances they were working in?

Gareth Edmundson did not believe the pandemic had resulted in a less robust review by Campbell Tickell. He assured members that they had been given a considerable amount of information in advance, to be able to identify any areas of interest within scope and they had spoken to a broad range of people at both organisations including officers, members and tenants

What steps were being taken to address some of the suggestions within the report?

There are area for improvement identified and the review would allow the partnership to evolve. Identified efficiencies did not necessarily mean savings, but rather would provide more choice and opportunities for investment and how resources are spent. There would also be increased activity in support of key

areas such as becoming carbon neutral by 2030, bringing forward new housing supply as quickly as possible and looking at the commercial opportunities, but there were other smaller issues that the partnership could work together on. He felt that part of recovery was being able to look back in 5-10 years and say that communities were in a stronger and more resilient position, to deal with future challenges and this is an ultimate aim.

In addition, the Cabinet Member wished to remind members that CBH were lead players in the Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) world and hugely respected. He had often said that arms length meant shoulder to shoulder, but he felt CBC and CBH would now be holding hands to build a stronger partnership and to an extent and for him that was an exciting prospect.

Throughout, a number of members had not only welcomed the review and recommendations, but also took the opportunity to praise CBH for the work that they do, with one member suggesting establishing CBH was 'the best decision CBC ever made'.

The Vice-Chair reminded members that the committee were able to make a recommendation to Cabinet and the paper included two options based on the Campbell Tickell report, option 1 to retain the partnership but work to improve it still further, or, option 2, to take the service back under council control. He felt that based on what he had heard, members were resoundingly supportive of option 1 and with no members indicating otherwise he moved to a vote on recommending option 1 to Cabinet.

Upon a vote it was unanimously

RESOLVED that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend that Cabinet approve the recommendation to retain CBH, working to improve the partnership still further.

9. FEEDBACK FROM OTHER SCRUTINY MEETINGS ATTENDED

The Chairman reminded members that updates on recent meetings of the Police and Crime Panel and Gloucestershire Economic Growth scrutiny committee, had been circulated with the agenda and members were asked to contact the relevant member directly with any questions.

Councillor Horwood apologised for not having circulated anything in advance of the meeting, citing IT issues. His written update is attached at Appendix 1 and he read this to the committee.

A member shared her experience of Gloucester A&E prior to the pandemic and having had to wait 4 hours to be admitted, whilst enormously busy, she was struck by how incredibly kind and upbeat all staff were. She had discussed the delays with the ambulance staff who had suggested that the main cause for delays was the fact that Cheltenham had been closed. Councillor Horwood echoed these sentiments and confirmed that there was universal praise for NHS frontline and management staff who were coping well under an enormous amount of stress. He explained that delays in handovers from ambulance to A&E were due to the fact that given the high occupancy of hospital beds, there was a shortage of beds to which A&E patients could be moved, and new patients couldn't be admitted to A&E until those patients had been moved out.

He assured this committee that HOSC did challenge whether such delays were due, in part, to the closure of Cheltenham and were always told this was not the case, but he felt that it was evident that waiting times were deteriorating, even back in July and August, when the pandemic was at its lowest. Whilst there was a commitment to reopen Cheltenham on the previous basis, he had concerns about how this would operate and how resilient it would be. He suggested that there was an option for HOSC to refer the issue to the Care Quality Commission but noted that now was probably not the best time to do such a thing.

Another member queried whether the HOSC could challenge the emphasis that was given to efficiency within the NHS generally, over resilience. He argued that a degree of slack within the system was a good thing, citing Germany which had three times as many hospital beds as this country. Councillor Horwood felt this was a perceptive analysis. He and other HOSC members were worried that the reconfiguration and centralisation of key services would result in Cheltenham running as a cold site, with lots of planned appointments and surgery, highly efficient, but with minimal margin for error and resilience issues when something out of the ordinary occurs at Gloucester.

He highlighted his growing scepticism about the ability of HOSC to actually challenge these things. It seemed to him that in reality HOSC had few powers apart from being able to refer matters to the Secretary of State and felt that they were regularly provided with data and reports that tended to support whatever the management plan was. He suggested that it would be for Cheltenham to raise this issue with higher political powers or scrutiny bodies nationally, if this was to be challenged.

There were no further questions and the Chair thanked Councillor Horwood for his update.

10. CABINET BRIEFING

The Chairman congratulated Councillor Hay on her recent appointment as Leader of the Council and welcomed her to her first O&S meeting in her role as Leader. Members were reminded that a briefing had been circulated with the agenda but in addition to this the Leader said a few words.

She explained that having been in post for only 4 days not including weekends, and with Christmas and the third national lockdown there was not an awful lot to brief the committee on. However, a working group of members and officers had met to discuss the JCS going forward and she reiterated her hope that weekly dashboard data would soon be able to be shared widely and whilst this was not yet the case, she could assure members that in terms of the vaccination programme, we were doing well.

There were no questions and the Chairman thanked the Leader for her attendance.

11. REVIEW OF SCRUTINY WORKPLAN

The work plan had been circulated with the agenda.

The chairman confirmed that the lead members would be meeting soon to agree the agenda for the next meeting, with an increased focus on the forward plan.

Having invited comments from members, one queried the Community Levy Infrastructure item. The Democracy Officer explained that the reference to a delay related to Cabinet. It was due to go in January but had been deferred until April because the Joint Action Group were not able to meet until the 14 January. As such, this item would be considered by the committee in March, prior to Cabinet in April.

An officer had asked if the committee wished to review the grants given to the Holst Museum and Cheltenham Festival of Performing Arts, but given the increased focus on corporate priorities, neither item had been added to the agenda. The lead members would soon be meeting to agree the agenda for the next meeting and consideration would be given to whether the committee should consider these issues.

12. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 - EXEMPT INFORMATION

Upon a vote it was unanimously

RESOLVED that in accordance with Section 100A(4) Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining agenda items as it is likely that, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, if members of the public are present there will be disclosed to them exempt information as defined in paragraph 3, Part (1) Schedule (12A) Local Government Act 1972, namely:

Paragraph 3; Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)

13. STRATEGIC WASTE SITE

The Chairman explained that having considered an earlier paper on the issue of the strategic waste site, the committee had asked to be kept updated.

Cabinet were scheduled to consider a report in November 2020 but the pandemic had caused delays to the project and rather than simply wait for the report to be rescheduled, before considering it, the Chairman had asked for a briefing on progress. This was exempt due to the commercial sensitivities around the issue and the Officer had not been asked to attend as this was simply an update, rather than there being any recommendations to consider.

In response to those members that queried the value of such an update, the Chairman reminded the committee that similar briefings on other projects had been circulated in the past and that such briefings provided the committee with an overview, and scrutiny would come at a later date.

14. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting was scheduled for the 8 March 2021.

Chris Mason
Chairman