

MINUTES of a meeting of the CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the Forest Room, Stenson House, London Road, Coalville, LE67 3FN on THURSDAY, 5 DECEMBER 2024

Present: Councillor S Lambeth (Chair)

Councillors M Ball, C Beck, M Blair-Park, M Burke, K Horn, A Morley, R L Morris, S Sheahan and J Windram

In Attendance: Councillors J Legrys, R Johnson and P Moulton

Portfolio Holders: Councillors K Merrie MBE

Officers: Mr A Barton, Mrs C Hammond, Mr T Devonshire, Mr P Stone, Ms J McGarry, Mr M Murphy, Ms J Rochelle, Mr P Sanders and Mrs A Thomas

20. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies received.

21. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor M Ball declared during discussion that he had a registerable interest in item 8, Council Tax Discounts and Exemptions/ Business Rates Relief, as the owner of a rental property within the district.

22. PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

There were no questions received.

23. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 29 August 2024.

It was moved by Councillor A Morley, seconded by Councillor S Lambeth, and

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 August 2024 be approved as an accurate record of proceedings.

**24. COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN - PERFORMANCE REPORT - QUARTER 2 2024/25
COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN**

The Head of Human Resources and Organizational Development presented the report.

Members asked several questions about the audit backlog. The Strategic Director of Resources set out plans to resolve the issues for the Statement of Accounts in respect of the financial years 2021/22 and 2022/23 to be considered at the 9 December meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee, in line with Government deadlines and stressed that the authority was now in the process of rebuilding assurances. He regularly updated the Audit and Governance Committee on the situation. He also clarified for the Chair that the authority had been charged the standard fees by the Council's external auditors for the 2021/22 and 2022/23 accounts, but discussions were ongoing nationally to challenge this.

Members also asked the Strategic Director of Resources about recent limited assurances in internal audits. He advised that there was an action plan in place to respond to the limited assurances received, and he was confident they would be resolved when the next annual internal audit opinion was produced in 2025. He also agreed to provide Members with the number of limited assurances as a percentage of overall assurances.

The Chair thanked Members for their comments which would be presented to the Cabinet on 25 February 2025.

25. LGA PEER REVIEW

The Chief Executive presented the report.

A discussion was had about the Council's engagement with local businesses and attention to their needs, with some Members expressing some concern, particularly regarding the logistics industry. The Chief Executive advised that the Peer Review Team recognised the active Economic Development Team who had forged strong links with local businesses. She had personally visited many of the large employers in the district, and was aware of their needs, views and what they offered to the district's employment profile.

The Chair requested a profile of how logistics employment within the district was distributed. The Chief Executive said she would consult with the Economic Development Team and would arrange for relevant data to be shared with the Committee.

An extended discussion was had about the Freeport. Members expressed some concern about engagement with some local stakeholders, governance arrangements and communications with Members. The Chief Executive advised that the Infrastructure Portfolio Holder represented the Council on the Board, whilst she and the Strategic Director of Place had regular briefings with Labour Group leaders and the shadow Portfolio Holder. She had also suggested to the Chief Executive of the Freeport that they broadened their community engagement activities to involve local parishes and local ward Members. Any company wishing to locate within the Freeport had to pass rigorous checks.

In response to a question about communications with Council staff, the Chief Executive explained how the Council Delivery Plan fed into service level plans and then down to personal development reviews. There were regular staff roadshows, workshops for senior officers, as well as knowledge sharing events with front line staff. This was a work in progress but a key area of importance to her. Relatedly, she wanted to know Members preferences regarding Member Development Workshops which could be led by the LGA or senior officers at the Council.

Members asked several procedural questions. The Chief Executive explained who the peer review team membership had been. The Strategic Director of Communities, himself a peer reviewer on occasion, advised that findings always reflected a consensus position agreed between the peer reviewers, and were then moderated for fairness and balance by LGA specialists. He did note nevertheless that there were some inevitable limitations with the three-day snapshot model of peer review.

Several Members commended the positive findings and welcomed the wide basis of consultation. The Chief Executive also clarified that all participants had been thanked with a personal letter from her.

The Chair invited the Portfolio Holder to address the Committee.

The Portfolio Holder addressed the committee. He felt some of the profiling data around employment in the district, requested by the Chair, might be regarded as commercially sensitive, and so businesses would likely be reluctant to provide it.

The Chair thanked Members for their comments which would be presented to the Cabinet on 17 December 2024.

26. CONSULTATION ON ENABLING REMOTE ATTENDANCE AND PROXY VOTING AT LOCAL AUTHORITY MEETINGS

The Democratic Services Team Manager presented the report.

A Member asked about the experience of remote meetings during the Covid-19 period. The Democratic Services Team Manager advised that there were teething issues, Members had occasionally dropped out of meetings, but decisions were made appropriately and in line with constitutional necessities.

The committee broadly supported the idea of remote attendance in principle, though there was considerable emphasis that it must apply only in exceptional circumstances, and Officers must thoroughly consider what constituted an exceptional circumstance and how this was to be set out in clear rules for Members. Some Members also suggested potential limit on how many times a Member could attend remotely in a given civic year.

The Democratic Services Team Manager acknowledged these concerns. The suggestion was that that two thirds of a Committee must always be present in-person, including the chair and deputy chair. It was hoped that clear guidance would be provided by the LGA regarding what constituted 'exceptional circumstances', and this could be modified to suit the Council's specific needs, if required.

The Committee was strongly opposed to the idea of proxy voting, which some Members suggested, implied pre-determination. The Chair explained that a proxy Member could vote however they wished and therefore could be informed by discussion at the meeting. A discussion was had about moving a recommendation to Cabinet supporting the principle of remote attendance but opposing proxy voting.

The Chair invited the Portfolio Holder to address the Committee.

The Portfolio Holder welcomed the debate, and shared the concerns of the Committee that what constituted 'exceptional circumstances' must be clearly set out, and he also shared the committee's aversion to proxy voting.

It was moved by Councillor S Sheahan, seconded by Councillor A Morley, and

RECOMMENDED THAT:

The principle of remote attendance be endorsed, but the Cabinet response to question 10 of the consultation, regarding proxy voting, be 'no'.

The Chair thanked Members for their comments which would be presented to the Cabinet on 17 December 2024.

27. COUNCIL TAX DISCOUNTS AND EXEMPTIONS/BUSINESS RATES RELIEF

The Strategic Director of Resources presented the report.

A Member supported the policy but hoped other work regarding empty homes would also continue. Officers confirmed that it would, and this policy was simply another tool for Officers to utilise. They also noted that specific data regarding empty properties by year and by ward had been provided at the last meeting of Full Council.

Some concern was expressed regarding houses under repair being subject to council tax, which a Member felt would discourage refurbishment and thus the properties re-entering the housing market. He was also concerned about the removal of the one-month grace period when rental properties were between tenancies. Officers advised that there was discretion regarding properties undergoing refurbishment.

A Member was concerned about lack of attention to probate within the report. Officers advised that council tax was not applied to properties in probate for 12 months afterwards. It was agreed that communications around this would be helpful for the public.

Members remained divided on the merits of some aspects of the policy to be recommended to Cabinet. It was agreed each aspect of the policy would be voted on separately and presented as recommendations to Cabinet.

Proposal 1 was considered.

By affirmation of the meeting, it was

RECOMMENDED THAT:

Second Home owners to pay double Council Tax (a 100% surcharge) from day one.

Proposal 2 was considered.

By affirmation of the meeting, it was

RECOMMENDED THAT:

The six-month 50% Council Tax discount for major repairs and charge full council tax from the point of ownership be removed.

Proposal 3 was considered.

By affirmation of the meeting, the proposal to recommend to Cabinet the removal of the one month 100% council tax discount for empty, unoccupied and unfurnished properties and charge full council tax from the point of ownership, was rejected.

Proposal 4 was considered.

By affirmation of the meeting, it was

RECOMMENDED THAT:

The Council charge Empty one to five years, twice standard council tax (200%), Empty five-10 years three times the standard council tax (300%), Empty 10 years or more four times the standard council tax (400%).

28. ITEMS FOR INCLUSION IN THE FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to any items of the work programme.

Chair's initials

The Strategic Director of Resources clarified that Transformation updates would be included within quarterly performance monitoring. This would include both qualitative and quantitative data.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 8.07 pm