

# **CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL**

Minutes of a meeting of the **Economy and Growth Committee**  
held on Tuesday, 12th September, 2023 in the Committee Suite 1,2 & 3,  
Westfields, Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

## **PRESENT**

Councillor M Goldsmith (Chair)  
Councillor N Mannion (Vice-Chair)

Councillors D Brown, A Critchley, B Drake, M Gorman, A Harrison, A Heler,  
G Marshall, C Naismith, C O'Leary, P Redstone and F Wilson

## **OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE**

Peter Skates, Acting Executive Director Place  
Charles Jarvis, Head of Economic Development  
Steve Reading, Finance Officer  
Mandy Withington, Team Manager Legal Services  
Rachel Graves, Democratic Services Officer

## **22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillor J Clowes. Councillor A Harrison  
attended as substitute.

## **23 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

In relation to Item 5 – Farms Policy, Councillor A Heler declared that she  
had a cousin who was a tenant on a Council farm.

In relation to Item 6 – Handforth Garden Village, Councillors P Redstone  
declared that he had previously been a member of the Strategic Planning  
Board where the Handforth Garden Village had been discussed.

In relation to Item 6 – Handforth Garden Village, Councillors A Critchley  
declared that he was a member of the Strategic Planning Board that had  
approved Handforth Garden Village planning application.

## **24 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

### **RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 July 2023 be approved as a  
correct record.

## 25 PUBLIC SPEAKING/OPEN SESSION

Sue Helliwell attended the meeting and spoke in relation to Item 5 – Farms Policy and stated that she had concerns about the Council selling off agricultural land and that the Council should be supporting any young person who wanted to start out in farming rather than selling the land for housing. She asked how the Council advertised that they had farms for tenancy. She stated that the report said that there could be solar panels on some farms and asked if this was the case, would the Council get the investment from renewable energy, or would it sell the land off and allow others to profit? She also asked if any farmland would be turned into allotments that town and parish councils would take on and that town and parish councils' precept would reflect this, and what happened if a town or parish council does not wish to take on the allotment? She stated that no amount of tree planting was going to make a difference to a climate emergency as would just be replacing the trees that have been chopped down elsewhere for housing and in some cases, it would take over 30 years for some trees to fully mature. She appreciated that the Council was under considerable financial constraints, but selling off green and pleasant pastures was not the answer and stated that she had been told that thousands were being spent on adult social care, and asked how much was going on private care homes?

The Chair responded that this report was the start of the review and that there was no-preconceptions of what the outcome would be. A report would be brought back to the Committee come back with recommendations. It would be up to the Advisory Group to consider the selling of land and other uses for the land. The Chair confirmed that the farms were advertised on the Cheshire Farms' website, in the local press and in the national farming press such as the Farmers Guardian and Farmers Weekly, and that the adverts were shared by other groups to their members - for example Cheshire NFU and Cheshire Young Farmers. In terms of renewable energy, the Council was looking to invest in renewable energy and reports relating to solar farm investment had previously been considered by the Committee. With regards to the question on land being used for allotments, this was for consideration as part of the review. This was not the committee for asking about social care. The Council did not own any care homes so will be paying the private sector for this as the Council had a statutory duty to provide care.

Councillor Rachel Bailey spoke in relation to Item 5 – Farms Policy and stated that she believed a policy of allowing new entrants to benefit from our Farm Estate also supported local communities and the Rural Economy. She stated that it was important for the Member Advisory Group to have a balance of representation and knowledge and asked for the inclusion of the Cheshire National Farmers Union, Cheshire Young Farmers and Reaseheath College in those presenting evidence. She also asked that the meetings were announced on the Council's Website and open to public attendance. She referred to Table 1 para 15 Terminations & Grants 2012 to 2023 and stated that this suggested that farms had

already been taken out of action, without a supporting policy and paragraph 23 which stated that '47.36 hectares identified for woodland creation this autumn and feasibility work on a further 88.60' and asked what precedent did this set and how would Members ensure the updated policy was little more than a retrofit. Cllr Bailey also asked if the policy review included the land at Leighton Hall Farm, which whilst purchased as part of the farms policy, the supporting property remained empty and the land beyond the Biowise food and garden waste plant, was rented to a neighbouring farm.

## 26 FARMS POLICY

The Committee considered the report which set out the process to be undertaken to refresh the policy for the Council's farms estate.

The current policy, which was agreed in 2012 and reviewed in 2018, was to offer modern tenancies to new entrants on larger, more economic, holdings with the aim of supporting entrants into the farming and required tenants to manage the land in a manner that balanced economic and good environmental practice. The farm estates generated a gross income for the Council of approx. £788k.

Since the policy was agreed there had been changes which could impact on the Council's approach to the farm landholdings. These included the way Central Government approached farming continued to change; the Council had pledged to be carbon neutral by 2025 and to use its influence to assist the Borough to be carbon neutral by 2045, and the Council was in a fundamentally different economic position than it had been in the past with increasing pressures on capital and revenue budgets.

The report proposed that a Member Advisory Group of 5 members, on a proportional basis, be established to receive evidence and consider the options and advise on the setting of any recommendations with the objective that a revised policy be adopted in 2024/2025.

**RESOLVED:** That the Committee

1. approve that a review of the Farms Policy is undertaken and engagement with key stakeholders is progressed.
2. approve the setting up of a Member Advisory Group to give direction, receive evidence, and advise on the options and enable a draft revised policy for 2024/2025.
3. note that a further report will be presented to Committee outline the outcome of the review and seeking endorsement to a new policy.

## 27 HANDFORTH GARDEN VILLAGE PROGRESS UPDATE

The Committee considered the report which provided an update on the Handforth Garden Village since last discussed by the Committee in February 2023.

The Handforth Garden Village was a major long-term project for the Council, which had the capacity to generate capital receipts and presented an exemplary opportunity to promote sustainable development and place making.

Following the approval of the planning application in January 2023, the Economic Development Team had been working to progress the key actions. Expert advisers had been instructed to update the valuation from the original 2021 assessment with indications that the garden village would be financially viable and cash positive for the Council. A report on this work would be brought to the Committee later in the year. A separate team had been appointed to undertake optimisation work examining the current proposals for the initial preparation and infrastructure work and would seek to maximise deliverability whilst still meeting anticipated planning requirements.

The Economic Development Team had engaged with the Local Planning Authority to identify an alternative mechanism to enable the obligations set out in the s106 agreement to be secured. It was proposed that a Memorandum of Understanding would be submitted, confirming how and when the relevant obligations in the agreed s106 agreement would be met. This mechanism would overcome the issue that the Council as landowner could not enter into a legal agreement with the Council as Local Planning Authority.

A Member Advisory Group was proposed to be set up with five members from the Economy and Growth Committee. The Advisory Group would advise officers on activity associated with the development of Handforth Garden Village, which would have implications and impacts on the Council's reputation and/or on the broader local community.

In response to a question on the sustainable development of the Garden Village, the Head of Economic Development responded That the key principle of a garden village were a that was a sustainable community with the buildings being sustainable and it was a sustainable place for people to live, with employment opportunities, leisure facilities, schools and other facilities you would expect to see in a village. There would be a number on site and off site mitigations to increase biodiversity and undertook to provide a written response on this.

**RESOLVED:** That the Committee

- 1 nominate up to five members from the Committee to sit on the Handforth Garden Village Member Advisory Group and subject to

nominations received and appointments approved by the Head of Governance and Democratic Services in line with the relevant protocols in the Constitution.

2. Delegate authority to the Director of Growth & Enterprise (current Acting Executive Director – Place), to finalise, sign and submit Memoranda of Understanding to the Local Planning Authority, committing the Council as landowner/developer to meet obligations of the s.106 Agreement associated with planning permission 19/0623M.
3. recommend to the Finance Sub-Committee that the existing Handforth Garden Village budget in the Council's Capital Programme is separated into two project budgets, with the new project being titled Handforth Garden Village S.106 Development Obligations and having a budget currently estimated as circa £7m to cover the first tranche of S.106 contributions associated with the initial infrastructure works.
4. note the intention of officers to utilise funds allocated for the Garden Village in the MTFS to instruct further priority workstreams in advance of grant of planning permission and approval of the final Business Case.
5. note the intention to bring a further report to Committee once ongoing viability and business case work is completed, to seek authority for the next stage of the project.

## 28 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered the Work Programme for the remainder of the 2023/24 municipal year.

The Director of Enterprise and Growth reported that an additional item for the November meeting would be the Mid-Year Review of Performance.

It had been mentioned in the Handforth Garden Village discussion that there may be a need for an additional committee meeting in December, but it was currently proposed that this would be an item for the January meeting to ensure that all the information was received to create the business case. However, if the business case was ready for December then approval would be sought to hold the additional meeting.

It was asked if the Committee could receive feedback from the registration pilot for private sector landlords, and also on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, for which the submission of bids had recently closed.

The Head of Economic Development provided a brief update on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and reported that 25 applications had been received, which had been appraised independently from the Council

because the Council had also put in applications for bids. The recommendations will be reported to the UKSPF Local Partnership Group in October and following this the successful projects would be known. It was expected that a progress report would be taken to the Corporate Policy Committee, who had originally approved the process.

**RESOLVED:**

That the work programme be noted.

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and concluded at 2.53 pm

Councillor M Goldsmith (Chair)