

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCILLORS' REPORT



Report Reference C-22-04
Meeting Date 23rd May 2022
Agenda Item 7

REPORT OF CLLR TONY DEAN

REVIEW OF PLANNING DEPARTMENT

The review is reaching the end of Phase 1, and the report is being written as we speak. It was meant to be presented to the Environment and Communities Committee in our June meeting but may be held up by the process of sign-off by senior officers (I hope not!). This kind of review is inevitably fraught with difficulties as all department members have their own views as to what needs changing, and how to improve performance, and some managers may feel that all suggestions of change are a criticism of their decisions over the last few years.

Opposition to change is always difficult to overcome but I hope the right decisions are being made and we will soon have the interim 'quick win' proposals to approve in our committee. The later phases will look at longer term issues like a new IT system and even the use of Google Earth and drones to obviate the need for officers to visit every single application site – all 21st century stuff which goes against the established grain but will be needed to reduce the backlog – along with a successful recruitment and retention policy.

I remain Chair of the Members' Advisory Panel for this review.

NET ZERO BY 2025 PROGRESS

The Council's environment team are making valiant efforts to complete the actions on the action plan before 2025, and there is a chance they will complete the whole list in time, although that is dependent on some outside factors. I was doubtful we could achieve 2025 when it was first mooted, but was very happy to have an aspirational and stretching target, as this creates urgency and helps justify spending. I really hope we achieve this target (although some of the trees planted will have to grow to maturity before it is a real net zero sum), but even if we just miss it, we will be there before 2030 which is the target date for most Councils. The difficult bit, of course, is influencing individuals and businesses in Cheshire East to also make the necessary changes to drastically reduce their carbon footprint, if possible to zero when our power supply becomes carbon free – nuclear and renewables only.

GENERAL COMMENTARY

The Council has produced a report on the first year of the Committee system, which replaced the Cabinet system last year. The report is generally positive but endorses my own view that it is too early to make a proper judgement as the settling in period is still ongoing. One of the problems many of us feel, on both sides of the chamber, is that constitutional changes put in place at the beginning of the

process have made it very difficult for many councillors to have an adequate voice. For example, it is now quite difficult to table an agenda item due to the approval hoops it has to negotiate, and the early notice required, and the rules for Notices of Motion to the main Council are even more restrictive. Some people think that these constraints mean that the promised increase in democracy of the Council as a whole has not materialised. My own view is that the constitution is a living document and we should make modifications as necessary to get the democratic 'feel' back into the process, without creating interminable meetings. Watch this space.

Over the last two years, the Council has received very generous amounts of government COVID funding to be distributed across the Borough, and as a result has been able to add over £1m to the General Reserve, but more importantly to create a new 'Smoothing' Reserve of over £8m. It was this reserve that the opposition parties wanted to partially use (£2.25m) to keep the basic increase in Council Tax to 1.99% this year, instead of 2.99%, due to the tsunami of living cost increases hitting our residents. Sadly we lost the vote.