



EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL

Minutes of an extraordinary meeting of the Council of Broadland District Council, held on Thursday 12 May 2022 at 7pm at the Council Offices

Members Present: Councillors: R R Foulger (Chairman), S C Beadle, N J Brennan, D J Britcher, S J Catchpole, J K Copplestone, A D Crotch, J Davis, J J Emsell, J F Fisher, N J Harpley, S I Holland, C Karimi-Ghovanlou, E C Laming, K E Lawrence, J Leggett, K G Leggett, T M Mancini-Boyle, I N Moncur, M L Murrell, G K Nurden, G Peck, R E Potter, S M Prutton, S Riley, D Roper, C E Ryman-Tubb, L A Starling, D M Thomas, J L Thomas, K A Vincent, S A Vincent, J M Ward, F Whymark

Apologies for Absence: Councillors: A D Adams, P E Bulman, B Cook, S C Gurney, D Harrison, L H Hemsall, D King, S Lawn, I J Mackie, J A Neesam and N C Shaw

Officers in Attendance: The Managing Director, the Director of Place, the Director of Resources, the Director of People & Communities, the Chief of Staff (Monitoring Officer), the Assistant Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer), the Assistant Director of Individuals and Families, the Democratic Services Manager and the Democratic Services Officer (JH)

Also in Attendance: One member of the press.

117 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from members.

118 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A D Adams, P E Bulman, B Cook, S C Gurney, D Harrison, L H Hemsall, D King, S Lawn, I J Mackie, J A Neesam and N C Shaw.

119 FUTURE OFFICE ACCOMMODATION PROJECT – APPRAISAL AND BUSINESS CASE

Members considered the report of the Director of Resources, which sought Council agreement to purchase the Horizon Centre either individually or jointly with South Norfolk Council.

Before the debate, the Monitoring Officer reminded members that a mutual confidentiality agreement was in place and should members want to refer to information contained within the confidential appendices, the meeting would be required to move into private session.

Following a request by a member, it was proposed, seconded and

RESOLVED

To suspend standing orders to allow members to speak in both the public and private sessions of the meeting.

The Portfolio Holder for Transformation and Organisational Development then introduced the report, referring to the advantages of moving to the Horizon building. He informed members that the move would allow the Council to improve on its environmental commitment, reducing both Councils' carbon footprint, and providing opportunities to reduce running costs across both sites in Broadland and South Norfolk. He explained that Broadland Council had been considering a move out of Thorpe Lodge for over ten years, and this was now feasible due to the collaboration with South Norfolk Council. He drew attention to the savings to be made and reminded members that the costs of moving would be offset by the redevelopment of Thorpe Lodge. This was an opportunity to allow the One Team to work from one building, and he stressed that the staff were an important asset and that the majority of them supported the move to a more modern building. He then turned to the recommendations arising from the Cabinet meeting, held earlier that day (and tabled at the Council meeting) and proposed that they be accepted, and this was duly seconded by the Leader of the Council.

It was then proposed, duly seconded, and

RESOLVED that a recorded vote be taken on the recommendations.

Two short videos of officers discussing the potential move were then played to members and these highlighted the staff's support for the One Team to be located in one building.

One member expressed strong concerns that one of the videos had suggested that the Police and Children's Services relied upon off-chance conversations regarding confidential matters and stressed that this needed to be properly managed. In response the Portfolio Holder for Transformation and

Organisational Development reminded members that the role of the Help Hub was to ensure that a whole range of organisations such as the Police and Children's Services, worked alongside each other and were able to share relevant information, in a timely manner.

During debate, some members expressed concerns over the proposals, and were disappointed that the potential to stay at Thorpe Lodge had not been further explored. Cllr S Riley, the Vice Chairman of the Future Office Accommodation Project Working Group explained that the Group had been unable to further its investigations into this matter due to South Norfolk's refusal to relocate there. He was confused as to why South Norfolk would not consider Thorpe Lodge yet was prepared to move to a building only a few miles away.

Cllr Riley felt that the Horizon building was not the right fit for the Council and presented too many risks. He believed that a much more affordable option would be to renovate Thorpe Lodge, with the installation of double glazing, insulation, solar panels and the provision of more parking. A member commented that they believed that the current number of parking spaces available at Thorpe Lodge was in line with Norfolk County Council Parking Planning guidance.

Cllr S Holland, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group suggested that there was no certainty with regard to the projected savings, the proposals presented a number of high risks, and a number of issues remained unresolved. She also had doubts as to the environmental credentials of the building and queried whether the overall situation with regard to this was really as good as had been outlined.

Some members referred to the Horizon building as a "white elephant" and one member raised the issue of the potential for Local Government Reorganisation and questioned whether this was a good time to move.

A number of members suggested that Thorpe Lodge was a more efficient space to heat, with reference being made to the high ceilings in the Horizon building, and one member raised the issue of lighting, suggesting that each desk at the Horizon office required its own lamp and fan, which was not energy efficient. Views were expressed over the size of the building with some members suggesting that it was far too big for both Councils' needs.

Referring to carbon neutrality, one member stressed that, although the site was carbon neutral, the Horizon Building was not carbon neutral without the further installation of solar panels to offset carbon emissions from the gas boiler and electricity usage from the grid. A further 1,540 panels would be required to do this, yet only 1000 would be required at Thorpe Lodge. The member believed that Thorpe Lodge offered more opportunity to be carbon neutral, using the latest technology, and at less cost.

Concerns were also expressed with regard to the air recirculation system and the risks associated with the spread of viruses. It was felt that this had not been addressed, yet was important to protect staff, councillors and visitors. Reference

was also made to the Acoustic report and the associated costs in addressing the issues it raised.

Discussion turned to the future of Thorpe Lodge, and some members felt there was a real risk that the Council would be unable to sell or redevelop it for some time and would be liable for the two buildings during this period. One member also mentioned that it might prove difficult to rent out any unused space at the Horizon Centre.

In response to a number of points, the Portfolio Holder for Transformation and Organisational Development reminded members that the Council was working in collaboration with South Norfolk, and this had enabled both Councils to make significant savings. Members needed to respect South Norfolk's view, that Thorpe Lodge was too small to accommodate both Councils, just as South Norfolk had accepted that Broadland was not prepared to relocate to Long Stratton.

The Portfolio Holder was surprised that the same members who had at previous meetings called for the Council to declare a climate emergency, were now not prepared to support a move that would reduce both Councils' carbon footprint by 84%.

He acknowledged that the Horizon building was not perfect, but no building would be, and it had potential to become what both Councils needed, had excellent environmental credentials, and was affordable. He stressed that a new build was not an affordable option.

Several members indicated their support for the proposals, referring to the savings that could be made in both revenue and capital, the lower running costs, and the reduced impact of future increases in energy prices. One member suggested that the savings would enable lower council tax increases going forward and also allow for the delivery of other projects that would benefit residents.

Regarding the Horizon building, some members praised its environmental credentials and the opportunities available to reduce further carbon emissions. It was noted that it had excellent transport links, was well served by public transport, had ample parking and was located near to good facilities.

A number of members also referred to the benefits to staff and the importance of having a good working environment within the one building. Members were informed that a recent survey had indicated that nearly 80% of staff were in favour of moving to a single building.

A member reminded Council that the benefits to the One Team of working from one office were not in doubt and stressed that the decision to be made that evening was whether or not the Horizon building was the right building.

The Chairman then proposed a move into private session so that more detailed discussion could take place with regard to the exempt appendices.

The press challenged the decision to move into private session, however the Monitoring Officer ruled that a mutual confidentiality agreement was in place, and it was in the public interest for any detailed discussions concerning the appendices to remain confidential.

It was then

RESOLVED

To exclude the press and public from the meeting because otherwise, information which was exempt information by virtue of Paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 would be disclosed to them.

(Cllrs Roper and Beadle requested that their votes against the move into private session be recorded.)
(The press then left the meeting.)

Cllr D Roper raised concerns regarding the possibility that the Council might need to purchase the Horizon building individually, should South Norfolk Council decide not to partake in the purchase. This would mean that costs would increase, any savings would be reduced and that Broadland Council would bear all the risks. He therefore proposed an amendment to the first recommendation of the report, to take out the words “either individually or”, so that the recommendation read:

“To purchase the Horizon Centre jointly with South Norfolk Council”

The amendment was seconded by Cllr Holland, who explained that she was not in favour of purchasing the Horizon building, but even less so without South Norfolk Council to share the costs and risks. This view was supported by several other members.

A member explained that back in 1999, the Council had looked at moving out of Thorpe Lodge, due to the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, however this had not proved to be necessary, and the move was never progressed. The Council had operated successfully from Thorpe Lodge ever since. He also referred to the annual lease costs of the Horizon building, which he felt to be unacceptable.

The Leader of the Council reminded members that Thorpe Lodge was not suitable for the Council’s needs going forward and stressed that it was not possible to adapt the building in a way which was suitable for the One Team. The Council had looked at moving on at least two occasions since 1999, but only now did the benefits outweigh the costs. It was affordable with or without South

Norfolk and he would not be supporting the amendment. He added that the proposal was to purchase the building freehold, not leasehold, as a member had suggested.

It was then proposed and duly seconded, that a recorded vote be taken on the amendment and it was

RESOLVED that a recorded vote be taken on the amendment.

A recorded vote was then conducted as follows:

For the Amendment

Cllrs Beadle, Britcher, Catchpole, Davis, Harpley, Holland, Karimi-Ghovanlou, Lawrence, Riley, Roper, Starling, D Thomas. .

Against the Amendment

Cllrs Brennan, Copplestone, Crotch, Emsell, Fisher, Foulger, Laming, J Leggett, K Leggett, Mancini-Boyle, Moncur, Murrell, Nurden, Peck, Potter, Prutton, Ryman-Tubb, J Thomas, K Vincent, S Vincent, Ward and Whymark.

No members abstained from the vote.

With 12 votes for, and 22 against, the amendment was lost.

A member explained that he had copies of the old surveys and reports relating to the proposals to move council offices back in 1999. He had passed these on to the Managing Director and had suggested that they be distributed to all members for information. He asked the Managing Director whether this had been actioned. In response, the Managing Director explained that the papers had instead been passed on to the consultants for information.

During further discussion, reference was made to an earlier query regarding whether the money to be invested in the Horizon building could be better spent on other projects that would directly benefit residents.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance reminded members that costs would be offset by the sale or redevelopment of Thorpe Lodge, should the Council choose to vacate it, and she referred to the significant savings to be made which could be reinvested in future projects to benefit residents. She stressed that the Council was already progressing and investing in a number of other areas, and she referred to recent investments in temporary accommodation, economic growth and Broadland Growth. Funds had also been placed in environmental reserves which could be used to enhance the environmental credentials of the Horizon building, if purchased by the Council.

Reference was made to the estimated savings to be made, and one member suggested that more could be saved by staying at Thorpe Lodge and renovating the building. He suggested that this move was a waste of taxpayers' money and

suggested that the estimated savings were not a fixed premise and depended on a number of unknown factors and costs.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance agreed that calculating the savings was not an exact science and that there were a number of “unknowns” but stressed that all the conclusions in the report were based upon advice received from a number of independent professionals who were experts in their fields.

A member queried the staff survey referred to earlier in the meeting and asked for some clarity around whether staff were actually voting on a move to the Horizon building. They drew attention to the fact that approximately 250 staff had participated in the survey, which equated to only 43% of all staff.

In response, the Managing Director explained that the following question had been put to officers attending a staff briefing: “Would you be in favour of a move to a single building?”

Turning to energy efficiency, the Leader of the Green Party, Cllr J Davis was disappointed that there had not been a more detailed analysis on how carbon emissions could be significantly reduced at Thorpe Lodge but did feel that time was of the essence, and he referred to the fact that the Horizon building was currently 84% more energy efficient than Thorpe Lodge and South Norfolk House. He stressed the importance of reducing carbon emissions further and wanted a commitment to deliver on the recommendations outlined in the Energy Reduction Feasibility Study report, should the purchase be progressed.

The Portfolio Holder for Environmental Excellence advised that the Horizon building had great environmental credentials and there were opportunities to make it even greener. She stressed that the Council was working towards a decarbonisation plan across all services.

Referring to the Energy Feasibility Study, a member suggested that the opportunities to make use of further renewable technologies and to reduce carbon emissions were limited and stressed that any options came with caveats.

Cllr J Thomas, Chairman of the Service Improvement and Efficiency Committee, explained that she had been hesitant to support a move to the Horizon building and had tried to robustly challenge all the proposals. Initially she had favoured a new build, however, she accepted that this option was more costly and would take more time. She did not believe that the Horizon building was perfect, and still had some doubts around the estimated costs, however, it did have benefits and she now believed it to be the right move for both staff and residents.

A number of members also stressed the importance of time and the urgency in reducing carbon emissions from the Council’s estate. The needs of the One Team had to be considered and it was felt important that all staff should work from the same office. No solution would be perfect, but this option allowed the Council to stay in its own district and to maintain its sovereignty.

In response to queries regarding the possible future use of Thorpe Lodge, should the Council decide to vacate it, the Leader of the Council explained that there were a number of possibilities. With regard to a specific suggestion regarding affordable housing, he explained that policies were in place regarding new development and the requirement for affordable homes and that the Council could go further in its commitment to deliver more than what was prescribed in the policy, if it was to redevelop the site itself. However, this would all require further consideration. Regarding the bunker currently in place at the Lodge, he did not believe that this would prohibit any sale.

The Leader of the Council then referred members to the recommendations before them. He referred to a number of suggestions that had arisen during the debate and wished to clarify that the Horizon building had been for sale on the open market since August 2021. He assured members that the Council was investing in other areas, and other projects were being progressed, for example, a sizable budget had been invested in temporary accommodation.

Regarding comments that had been made regarding canteen facilities, he clarified that the contractor at Thorpe Lodge had withdrawn its services as it was not viable for the number of users. The Horizon building currently had three restaurant areas and he hoped that it would be possible for some catering provision to be made available for staff, through a third party.

He respected the views of all councillors and he had noted that the debate had been heated and emotional at times. He acknowledged that the Horizon building was not perfect, but he felt now was the time to move forward and take advantage of the opportunities. It had been a long journey and he thanked Cllrs Riley, Brennan and Gurney on behalf of the Council for their work on the Member Working Group. He had noted that all the options had been thoroughly researched and due diligence had been carried out, over and above normal procedures.

Referring to the benefits of the proposals, he alluded to the estimated savings in both capital and revenue, and explained that the generation of electricity at the Horizon building would future proof the Council against rising costs in energy. He also referred to the decarbonisation agenda and the opportunity to reduce the carbon emission of the Councils' estates by 84%.

Turning to the One Team, he was proud of its achievements, but he stressed that office conditions were not great, the building was old and tired and did not facilitate modern working. He drew attention to the fact that the majority of staff were in favour of a move to one office, and he believed that this would ultimately lead to a better service for residents.

Finally, he stressed that the Horizon building was in Broadland, and then he commended the recommendations to members.

The Portfolio Holder for Transformation and Organisational Development, referred to the volume of work, the reports written by officers and consultants

and the number of questions asked during the process. He suggested that the answers to all questions were in the paperwork.

He could not understand some of the negativity that had been expressed, and he reminded Council of the cost savings to be made and that most staff were in favour of the proposals.

He wanted to be part of a Council that led by example and looked forward, not back, and strived to make savings whilst improving services. He then commended the recommendations to Council.

The Chairman thanked members for a lively and comprehensive debate and then proposed, and Council agreed that the meeting should move back into public session.

It was then proposed, duly seconded, that the recommendations in the report be supported.

A recorded vote was then conducted as follows:

For the recommendations

Cllrs Brennan, Copplestone, Crotch, Davis, Emsell, Fisher, Foulger, Laming, J Leggett, K Leggett, Mancini-Boyle, Moncur, Murrell, Nurden, Peck, Potter, Prutton, Ryman-Tubb, J Thomas, K Vincent, S Vincent, Ward and Whymark..

Against the recommendations

Cllrs Beadle, Britcher, Catchpole, Harpley, Holland, Karimi-Ghovanlou, Lawrence, Riley, Roper, Starling, D Thomas.

No members abstained from the vote.

With 23 votes for and 11 against, it was

RESOLVED

To:

1. Agree to purchase the Horizon Centre either individually or jointly with South Norfolk Council;
2. Share any future capital costs on an equal basis between both Broadland Council and South Norfolk Council if jointly owned;
3. Share the revenue expenditure related to the Horizon Centre in accordance with the agreed apportionment model in place for that financial year.
4. Share any net income from third party occupancy or rental of the Horizon Building on an equal basis between both Broadland Council and South Norfolk Council if jointly owned

120 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

To exclude the press and public from the meeting for the remaining item of business because otherwise, information which was exempt information by virtue of Paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 would be disclosed to them.

121 ACCOMMODATION REVIEW FINANCE

Members considered the exempt report of the Assistant Director Finance which set out a review of the Council's earmarked reserves as part of the accommodation review.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance referred members to the recommendations and outlined the proposals to move funds into the Future Accommodation Requirement earmarked reserve, and to close some reserves that were no longer required. She proposed that the recommendations in the report be supported and this was duly seconded by the Leader of the Council.

With 23 voting for, and 11 against (Cllr S Beadle requested that his vote against be recorded), it was

RESOLVED

To agree the changes to the Council's earmarked reserves as recommended by Cabinet and outlined within paragraph 4 of the report (and updated in the addendum).

Chairman

(Meeting closed at 9:15 pm)