

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of Broadland District Council, held at Thorpe Lodge, 1 Yarmouth Road, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich on Tuesday 7 June 2022 at 10.00 am when there were present:

Committee Members Present:	Councillors: M Murrell (Chairman), S Riley (Vice-Chairman), N Brennan, S Catchpole, N Harpley, S Holland, C Karimi-Ghovanlou, K Kelly, K Leggett MBE, G Nurden and S Prutton.
Apologies:	Councillors: Cllr Bulman, Cllr Potter, Cllr Davis and Cllr Shaw
Substitutes:	Councillor: S Clancy (for P Bulman)
Other Members in Attendance:	Councillors: T Mancini-Boyle, J Leggett, J Emsell and F Whymark.
Officers in Attendance:	The Chief of Staff (Monitoring Officer), the Assistant Director for Finance, the Assistant Director for Planning, the Assistant Director for ICT/Digital and Transformation, the Assistant Director of Individuals and Families, the Assistant Director Economic Growth, the Assistant Director for Regulatory, the Strategy and Intelligence Manager, the Food Safety and Licensing Team Manager, the Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager, the Housing and Benefits Manager, the Programme Manager – Economic Growth, the National Management Trainee and the Democratic Services Officer.

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Bulman (with S Clancy appointed substitute), Cllr Potter, Cllr Davis and Cllr Shaw

3 MINUTES

The public minutes of the meeting held on 3 May 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

4 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

No announcements made.

5 PUBLIC SPEAKING

There was no public speaking.

CABINET REPORTS

6 STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE REPORT FOR QUARTER 4 2021/22

The report provided an overview of the performance of the Council in Quarter 4 against the key outcomes set out in the Delivery Plan for 2021/22.

The Strategy and Intelligence Manager introduced the Performance section of the report. Members noted that 15 areas were currently at a green status having met the performance measure criteria for 2021/22. Nine were at an amber status, including Council tax collection, where it was noted that improvement had been seen from the previous review and was forecast to continue. Lastly, there were two areas currently at a red status. Members were advised that these related to the Planning service area with a focus on the timeframe decisions were made. It was noted that an improvement had been seen from Q3 to Q4 with the service level currently sitting at 91 percent.

In response to a query on why there were fewer audit days scheduled for the Chief of Staff Directorate, members were advised that due to the timing of the budget approval, the Audit Plan was still in its draft form.

Following several questions on the red status of the planning service area, the Assistant Director for Planning explained that concerns were being addressed and that this was the subject of an item later in agenda. In relation to a question regarding to whether there were any applications awaiting decisions, members were advised that there were ongoing conversations with some applicants to address the issues.

It was also confirmed that following the recent guidance received from Natural England on nutrient neutrality, the planning department had requested a six-month extension on major applications and a two-month extension on minor applications.

In response to a query regarding the Risk Register, officers explained that the register was being reviewed by Cabinet and would be part of the next reporting cycle.

A member expressed concern about the recovery rate for Housing Benefits overpayments and asked officers for clarification on how overpayments occurred and what the Council could do to reduce them. The Assistant Director for Finance explained that overpayments occurred due to a range of circumstances relating to the individual, and members further noted that the recovery of overpayments had become more difficult since individuals had moved over to the Universal Credit system.

Referring to the staff satisfaction survey, a member raised concerns over the 18 percent of staff members who did not feel that Senior Management encouraged them to look after their mental health. The Chief of Staff explained that the Council had invested in training mental health first aiders within teams to provide further support and that further training was being provided for managers. A further question was asked concerning the parameters of the survey itself and whether staff could feed back anonymously. It was confirmed that the surveys were anonymous to a degree but with a breakdown to director level in order to address any issues.

The Assistant Director for Finance introduced the Finance section of the report and stressed that the figures listed in the report were only provisional due to the final accounts not being signed off. Members noted that overall, the Council was in a strong position going forward.

In response to a question on the salary underspend in the Resource directorate, members noted that the figures were detailed in Appendix one of the report. A further question was raised on the breakdown of how much favourable variance was due to pay. The Assistant Director for Finance explained that he did not have the information to hand but would circulate the information to members after the meeting.

Following a question raised on the local concerns regarding the Bure Valley Railway crossing, officers confirmed that a further update would be provided outside the meeting by the lead officer involved. A further question was asked regarding the collaborative work with Norfolk Constabulary on anti-social behaviours and it was confirmed that the Assistant Director for the area would provide members with a briefing outside the meeting.

In response to a query on the transitional cost associated with implementing the OneTeam, members noted that although policies, processes and procedures were being (jointly) reviewed as part of the One Team, it is good practice to review policies, processes and procedures regularly and thus each council would have reviewed these separately. It was also noted it would have

been difficult to monitor transitional costs without a complex recording system, as it is difficult to separate time spend on One Team implementation from Business as Usual activities.

A final question was raised regarding emergency planning training for members, and officers confirmed that the Member Development Panel would be reviewing members' training requirements in the near future.

Following a show of hands, it was

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

1. Receive the revenue and capital position for Quarter 4 (variance details in Appendix 1)
2. To agree to add the IT and waste revenue budget underspends to the existing IT / Waste reserves (as detailed in para 3.15)
3. To agree to recommend to Full Council the slippage requests for capital (as detailed in para 3.16).
4. Receive the 2021/22 performance for Quarter 4 and the year end position (detail in Appendix 2).
5. Receive the year end update of the 21/22 Delivery Plan (detail in appendix 3).

7 LICENSING SERVICES – SERVICE ENHANCEMENT OPTIONS

The Assistant Director of Regulatory presented the report which outlined the options for the introduction of paid for licensing related advice and support to businesses. Support and advice were currently offered to businesses, mainly via the new Business Regulatory Support Hub which offered free advice to businesses.

The proposed full cost recovery basis for discretionary advice and support reflected the Commercialisation Strategy and enabled support to be offered more widely to businesses in the district to grow and this proposal, if agreed by members, would deliver the concept of commercial licensing services as agreed in the Delivery Plan.

The Food, Safety and Licensing Manager reminded members that the existing availability of free advice would not be eroded; this was a way to provide value added services that businesses might wish to pay for. All the fees would be reinvested in the service to support the regulatory function.

Members noted that since the report had been debated at the Service Improvement and Efficiency Committee, the proposed levels of fee charges had been reviewed and lowered under the advice of the Assistant Director of Finance.

After several members of the Committee raised concerns over charging businesses for advice in the current economic climate, officers reassured members that the report proposals would provide additional advice to that what was currently on offer and that this additional help would be provided at the business' discretion. The proposed services were enhanced and would act as another level of advice and information for the service area.

Discussion turned to Appendix two of the report and whether the fees and charges for the service would be reviewed regularly. The Chief of Staff confirmed that these would be looked at through the annual reviews of all fees and charges set by the Council.

Officers explained that free advice has been provided on an ad hoc basis, but it was noted that officers would not be able to sustain this offer for all businesses under the current provisions and resources.

In response to a question on whether the new proposals would require additional staff, officers explained that whilst there was a service review for the area built into the current Delivery Plan, the impact of the proposed enhanced services was neutral due to the full cost recovery and reinvestment in additional staffing hours so that statutory service levels would be unaffected.

After several members reiterated concerns over businesses' access to advice and information, an additional recommendation was proposed, seconded and agreed, which stressed the need for the current free advice to be maintained alongside the new proposals. It was then resolved:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

- 1 To authorise the piloting of enhancements to Licensing services at full cost recovery, for a 12-month period starting in 2022/23.
- 2 The reinvestment of income generated from service enhancements to licensing activity into the Council's regulatory licensing service, so as not to impact on regulatory service capacity
- 3 Cabinet to ensure that the current free advice is maintained alongside the new proposals.

The Committee adjourned at 11.05 am and reconvened at 11.15am, when all the Committee members listed above were present.

8 FOOD SAFETY SERVICES – SERVICE ENHANCEMENT OPTIONS

The Food, Safety and Licensing Manager introduced the report which mirrored the licencing report members had earlier discussed, but related specifically to food safety.

In answer to a question on whether the Economic Development team could assist and help new start-up businesses through these proposals, officers explained that there were no current start-up grants available. However, the team could offer advice and support to new business if requested.

In response to a query on why the hourly rate was higher than the proposed Licensing charges, members noted that this was due differences in the salary bands between the two areas.

During discussion, members were advised of the benefits of the proposals for new and existing businesses. If a food business received a low food hygiene rating score, through the proposals, they could choose to pay for an immediate re-visit (one that is not permitted under the national scheme unless a business elects to pay for it). However, some businesses may prefer to take up the option of a 'pre-inspection' visit, to receive advice on how to 'gain or retain' a higher rating beforehand, rather than be reactive to a drop in their rating after a regulatory food inspection. This would help businesses and lessen the potential risk of trade being blighted by a poor rating, alongside protecting the customers in relation to food safety.

Following a concern raised over staffing levels in the department, officers explained that the proposed service charges were at a cost recovery level and any income would be fed back into the service area. Members noted that the cost recovery finance additional hours for current staff to prevent impact on existing service levels.

Several members expressed concerns over the potential impact on new businesses and how the proposals could dissuade new businesses starting up. A member expressed the need for the Business Regulatory Support Hub to be maintained to allow businesses to have access to information and advice required to start up. Several members agreed and an amendment was proposed, seconded and agreed to add at the end of recommendation 1: *This to be operated and reviewed in conjunction with the Business Regulatory Support service to ensure that quality advice is available free at the first point of contact.*

Following a further vote, it was resolved:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

1. To authorise the piloting of enhancements to Food Safety services at full cost recovery, for a 12-month period starting in 2022/23. This to be operated and reviewed in conjunction with the Business Regulatory Support service to ensure that quality advice is available free at the first point of contact.

2. The reinvestment of income generated from service enhancements to food safety activity into the Council's regulatory food safety service, so as not to impact on regulatory service capacity.

9 ENERGY REBATE SCHEME

The Housing and Benefits Manager presented the report which outlined the details of the £150 Energy Rebate Scheme which was to be administered by Council Tax billing authorities and sought approval for the Discretionary Payment Scheme.

Members were reminded that on 3 February 2022 the Government announced a package of support for the rising energy costs, which included a £150 non-repayable rebate to all households who permanently resided in a property in Council Tax bands A-D. A discretionary fund was also available for households who were either ineligible under the main scheme or who required additional support.

Officers explained that the Council was working with an external company to make the process easy and quick when sending out payments to residents. In terms of how the payment would be made, members were advised that customers who paid their Council Tax bill by Direct Debit would receive a payment directly into their bank account once verification checks had been made. Where bank account details were not held, the customer would be contacted by letter and advised how to apply for the payment.

Following the recent announcement from Government, it was likely that further grants would be available to residents, and officers were seeking delegated permission for future schemes in order to efficiently organise further payments. Officers confirmed that the delegated permission would be reviewed in the future.

In response to a question about whether there was further grant support available to individuals who had been forced out of their homes, officers confirmed that further support could be offered to individuals under the wider schemes offered by the Council.

In answer to a query on the progress of the payments, it was confirmed that the process was going well with letters being sent out to all non-direct debit customers. Members noted that over half of these customers had now been paid, and that officers were looking through cases where there had been delays to resolve issues quickly.

A concern was raised over the payslip evidence needed for grants listed under category two in the report. Officers confirmed that it was the resident's responsibility to provide correct details. However, there were measures in place to review any evidence received.

In response to a question regarding call wait time for residents calling in, officers explained that additional resources were added to the team to help combat the high number of calls.

Members also noted that a wide range of support was available for residents through the Community Connectors and other services, if required.

Following a question on how the delegated powers would be reviewed over time, the Chief of Staff suggested that this could be added to the work programme through the “Topic” process, should members feel it to be necessary.

Following a show of hands, it was unanimously resolved:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

To delegate permission for future discretionary schemes to be determined by the appropriate Assistant Director and the Section 151 officer in collaboration with the appropriate Portfolio Holder.

10 PLANNING BUSINESS CASE – APPOINTMENT TO NEW VACANCIES AND UPDATES TO STRUCTURE

The Assistant Director of Planning introduced the report and outlined the results of the recent full review of the Development Management service. The review saw that more resources were needed in order to create additional capacity and be able to adequately deal with large-scale developments.

The Council had received a number of large developments at present alongside the large, proposed development at Rackheath in which more resources would be needed to effectively and properly consult with the parishes, the members and public. In addition, the next iteration of the Local Plan would be coming soon, planning applications were on the increase, as well as Development Consent Orders, Nutrient Neutrality and many other issues.

The proposal was to create eight new posts, which would be the equivalent of an additional 6.4 FTE at a total extra cost of £146,491, but that would be split between the two Councils. Some existing posts would be deleted to assist in the funding of the new posts and the remainder would be funded by an increase in income.

The key changes would be the creation of a Strategic Growth Team to focus on this key area across the district, and the creation of more capacity to address the workloads and deliver against new workstreams. Members noted that there were three apprentices currently in post and there would be opportunities for promotion.

A Member raised concerns over the lack of guaranteed funding from potential larger developments in the future. The Assistant Director for Planning explained that the positions would be monitored continually going forward. The posts would also not form part of the main planning structure and would be monitored alongside predicted income.

In response to a question regarding the staff requirements for the future, the Chief of Staff confirmed that all service areas were monitored to review future circumstances so departments could plan accordingly. The Assistant Director of Planning added that the Planning department was looking ahead with the potential opportunity to provide training for current members of staff to develop into higher roles.

In response to further questions on the risks involved with the new posts within the team structure, the Assistant Director for Planning reassured members that the positions would be reviewed over time and balanced with the projected income.

Discussion turned to the potential need for a restructure in the department to incorporate the new positions within the report. Members noted that the positions were flexible and could be moved around to suit demands, therefore a restructure would not be required. Members also noted that the current vacant posts within the planning structure were being reviewed and adapted to address the existing work demand.

Following a show of hands, it was resolved:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

To approve the proposed changes to the Planning team and the intention to fill the current and new vacancies.

11 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining items of business because otherwise, information which is exempt information by virtue of Paragraph 3 of Part 1 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.

12 REVIEW OF TRAINING SERVICES & CARROWBRECK HOUSE

The Committee considered the exempt report regarding a review of training services at Carrowbreck House, which set out potential options for generating additional income to offset running costs, proposed a commitment to

continuous review of the Council's training offering and proposed a revised fee structure for 22/23.

The Programme Manager – Economic Growth stated that the facility had been running since 2015 and she gave details of the running costs and income generated. She explained that as part of the review of training services offered, the opportunity was taken to engage a commercial agent to undertake a valuation of the facilities to understand the opportunities for the site.

Officers responded to a number of questions, during which it was confirmed that the building was running as efficiently as possible with regard to energy use, with solar panels installed on the building.

Following a question regarding the current management of the site, members noted that this was currently incorporated within the Economic Development team, with one member of the team working from the site during office hours.

Following a show of hands, it was unanimously resolved:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

To agree the recommendations laid out in the exempt report.

13 EXEMPT MINUTES OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD 3 MAY 2022

The exempt minutes of the meeting held on 3 May 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

(The meeting concluded at 12.30pm)

Chairman