

Agenda Item: 4

COUNCIL

Minutes of meeting of South Norfolk District Council, held on Monday 16 May 2022 at 7.30pm.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: Ellis (Chairman), Bendle, Bernard, Bills, Blundell, Brown, Burrill, Dearnley, Dewsbury, Easter, Edney, Elliott, Elmer, Francis, Fuller, Glover, Halls, Hardy, Holden, Hornby, Hudson, Hurn, Kemp, Kiddie, Knight, Laidlaw, Mason Billig, Minshull, Neal, Nuri-Nixon, Overton, Ridley, J Savage, R Savage, Spratt, Spruce, Thomas, Thomson, M Wilby and Worley

Apologies Councillors: B Duffin, N Legg and J Wilby

Officers in Attendance: The Managing Director (T Holden), the Director of People and Communities (J Sutterby), the Director of Resources (D Lorimer), the Assistant Director Chief of Staff (E Hodds), the Assistant Director of Finance (R Fincham) and the Democratic Services Manager (C White)

3630 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs B Duffin, N Legg and J Wilby.

3631 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed Cllr I Spratt, the newly elected district member for the Mulbarton and Stoke Holy Cross ward, to the Council. Cllr Spratt thanked the Chairman and also took the opportunity to wish Ms V Clifford Jackson, whom he had replaced on the Council, a speedy recovery, following her recent illness.

The Chairman also announced to Council, that following resignations from the Conservative Group, Cllrs Edney, Hudson and Worley, would continue to represent their district wards as "independent" councillors.

3632 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr J Halls declared an “other” interest as a member of the Future Office Accommodation Project Joint Member Working Group. Cllr T Laidlaw also declared an interest as he had sat on the same Working Group as a substitute member.

Both Cllrs T Laidlaw and T Spruce declared “other” interests as members of the Commercial, Trading and Customer Focus Policy Committee.

3633 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 jointly with Broadland District Council.

Before the debate commenced, the Chairman reminded Council that a mutual confidentiality agreement was in place and the details contained within the appendices to the report were exempt. She stressed that should members want to refer to information in the appendices, the meeting would need to move into private session.

Cllr D Burrill proposed, seconded by the Chairman, that standing orders be suspended to allow members to speak once in the public session, and also again in the private session, if necessary. This was agreed by Council.

Cllr K Mason Billig then presented the recommendations from Cabinet (tabled at the meeting), which proposed that that Council agreed to purchase the Horizon Centre jointly with Broadland District Council.

Cllr Mason Billig stressed the significance and importance of the decision to be made and reminded members that they were custodians of taxpayers’ money, the provider of services, and an employer to a large workforce, for which they had responsibility. She believed that when coming to a decision, environmental concerns needed to be a major consideration, and she referred to the Council’s current office, which was environmentally inefficient and expensive to run.

Members noted that staff were overwhelmingly in favour of working from one joint office, and Cllr Mason Billig stressed that if the Council wanted to remain an employer of choice, it needed to provide them with an appropriate working environment.

She explained that all the options had been thoroughly researched and due diligence had been carried out, over and above normal procedures. She felt

this had been necessary for a decision of this importance and she thanked the Joint Member Working Group and the Commercial, Trading and Customer Focus Policy Committee for all their work and deliberations.

She suggested that if the Council wanted to retain services and the ambition to improve them, it had to make further savings, and she believed that a move to the Horizon building was an opportunity to do just that. She advised Cabinet that it was very fortunate that the Horizon building had become available as it did fit with the future needs of the Council. She acknowledged that it was not perfect, but it did have potential to become what both Councils needed, had excellent environmental credentials, and was affordable.

Turning to the financing of the project, she explained the payback period was attractive and the revenue savings to be significant and should not be ignored.

She then proposed that the final decision be taken as a recorded vote, and this was duly seconded and agreed by Council.

Cllr C Brown acknowledged that this was a huge decision for the Council and explained that the Liberal Democrat Group had been given a free vote on the matter. He had given the matter his full consideration and he respected all views as he accepted that there were both pros and cons in moving to the Horizon building. He thanked the Joint Member Working Group and the Commercial, Trading and Customer Focus Policy Committee for their work and deliberations.

Turning to the environmental credentials of the building, he explained that although he supported a reduction in carbon emissions, he did doubt whether overall the situation was as good as had been outlined, and he reminded members that moving would have no impact on global emissions, if the House and Thorpe Lodge were still in use. He felt that no consideration had been given to the increased car travel for those staff who lived nearer to South Norfolk's current office.

He questioned whether this was the right time to be moving, making reference to Local Government Reorganisation and the risks associated with the purchasing and renovation costs of the building, with officer time and effort needing to be factored in.

He also had concerns regarding accessibility for residents living in the Waveney Valley area of the district, and whilst he was pleased to hear that plans were proposed for both a satellite and mobile office, he was disappointed that there was no firm commitment in the report and no costed plans.

Cllr Brown acknowledged that staff were supportive of a move to one single building, and he believed that this would bring many benefits. However, he

stressed that staff had not been surveyed on location, or a move to the Horizon building, which was a different question all together.

He believed that such a major decision and commitment from both Councils required support from the majority of members, and he referred to Broadland District Council's vote on the matter, where less than half of its members had voted in favour.

On balance, due to the doubts and risks associated with the move, Cllr Brown explained that he would be voting against the recommendations.

Speaking as local member for Long Stratton, Cllr A Thomas explained that she could not support the recommendations due to the impact on the local community and businesses, and she firmly believed that the residents of South Norfolk should be served from an office in its own district. She stressed the need to engage with the local community and the Town Council on the outcome of the decision made. She reminded Council that many staff had worked at South Norfolk House for some time and used the town's services, for example, shops, schools, hairdressers and dentists. She understood the desire to be in one building, but she could not see why this could not be achieved in the current office at Long Stratton and she urged members to think carefully about the impact on the town when voting on the recommendations.

Cllr J Worley, also a local member for Long Stratton, concurred with the views of Cllr Thomas. He could not support the recommendations because of the impact on Long Stratton and he felt the report was based upon too many assumptions and appeared to only highlight the negatives of staying at the House, and the positives of moving to the Horizon Centre. He feared that the move would leave Long Stratton with a colossal financial burden.

Cllr M Edney also endorsed the views of Cllr Thomas, and explained that he had recently resigned from the Conservative Group, as unlike the Liberal Democrat Group, its members had not been given a free vote. He was concerned that the costs of the new building would spiral out of control, and with the current cost of living crisis, and with the possibility of Local Government Reorganisation, he feared that it was a waste of taxpayers' money. He could see no justification for the move out of South Norfolk House and considered the Horizon Building to be little more than a "white elephant". He stressed that he would be voting against the recommendations.

One member expressed his disappointment that Conservative members had not been given a free vote on such an important issue and explained that he understood that they had been threatened with suspension from the Group, should they not vote in favour of the recommendations. He felt uncomfortable that some members of the Commercial, Trading and Customer Focus Policy Committee may have voted to instruction, rather than forming their own view.

In response, Cllr J Fuller stressed that all political parties worked to a set of rules and that by being part of a Group, members took collective responsibility for the majority view. The Group had held its own vote, with the majority of members supporting the recommendations, and he strongly objected to any claims of impropriety.

Cllr C Hudson wished to clarify that he had indeed resigned from the Conservative Group, because he was not permitted to vote against the recommendations of the report, and this was also why he had decided not to attend the Commercial Trading and Customer Focus Policy Committee on 25 April. He knew from previous experience that voting against the party line would result in suspension from the Group. As Chairman of the Commercial, Trading and Customer Focus Policy Committee he had been extremely disappointed that a unanimous decision by the Committee back in November, recommending a public consultation on the move to Horizon, had been completely ignored. He felt that since the pandemic, businesses and local authorities had needed to work differently and this would continue, therefore a large open plan call centre was not what the Council needed. He was not against change and had no particular desire to stay in the current offices; however, he would have been more supportive of sharing space with other public sector organisations such as the NHS or County Council. He believed the move to the Horizon Centre would be a disastrous decision, which would cost taxpayers millions.

During further debate, numerous members indicted their support for the proposals with mention being given to the reduction in carbon emissions, the need for staff to work from one office, and the suitability of the Horizon Centre due to its location and modern office. It was suggested that the Council needed to take risks if it was to grow, and one member reminded Council that Local Government Organisation had been a real possibility on numerous occasions over the years, and that the Council would never have achieved anything if it had halted plans “just in case”.

Cllr W Kemp, as Chairman of the Joint Member Working Group, explained that it had been a hard and arduous process, but he was satisfied that due diligence had been done. The move would not only save the Council money but would allow officers to work from one office in a modern environment. He believed that the move would be the best result for both staff and residents and he stressed that members of the Working Group had not been “whipped” in coming to their conclusions.

Reference was also made to the success of the collaboration with Broadland District Council, and how this had already saved the Council £1.2 million per year. The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Cllr A Dearnley, drew attention to the additional £400k per annum that could be saved should both Councils move to the Horizon Centre. He assured members that he was comfortable

with the financial predictions, and felt that to “do nothing”, posed more of a risk.

The Portfolio Holder for the Clean and Safe Environment, Cllr G Minshull, also commented on the positives the move would bring to staff and residents and drew attention to the benefits to the environment. Referring to proposals to provide a local service to residents, outlined at paragraph 7 of the report, he was satisfied that this was actually bringing services closer to the southern area of the district. He hoped that those staff not wanting to travel into Norwich every day would take advantage of being able to work from home. He accepted that purchasing the building was a risk, but he felt the risk was only short-term and would reap long-term gain.

In response to a request for clarity, the Managing Director explained that approximately 250 staff had been asked during a staff briefing whether they would prefer to work from one office, and 79% of staff had responded positively. Members noted that staff had not been specifically asked about the Horizon building.

Some members were disappointed that staff had not been consulted more specifically and more widely on the proposals. One member stressed that the decision facing members today was not about the need for one joint office, but whether the Horizon Centre was the correct building.

Some members explained that they could not support the recommendations when staff had not been adequately consulted, and residents not consulted at all.

Cllr K Hurn drew attention to the need to keep local residents updated and engaged. He suggested that hubs be placed in local towns and that a mobile office be created to provide services in the more rural areas of the district. He proposed the following additional recommendation, which was duly seconded by Cllr R Savage:

“To further the work referred to in paragraphs 7.3 and 7.4 of the report in terms of locality and mobile working, and that this be reviewed in 18 months’ time”

Cllr J Fuller indicated his support for the amendment, and following a vote by way of a show of hands, the amendment was carried.

The Chairman then proposed that the public and press be excluded from the meeting.

It was **RESOLVED** to exclude the public and press from the meeting under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that

discussion would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act (as amended)

During the debate in the closed session of the meeting, members discussed the financial envelope with which the Council would be prepared to purchase the Horizon building, and the share of costs and income with Broadland Council. The Managing Director assured members that negotiations would be carried out within the parameters set out within the exempt sections of the report.

The Chairman then proposed, and Council agreed that the meeting should move back into public session.

Cllr J Fuller agreed that the Horizon building was not perfect, that moving would be stressful and that this was a huge decision for the Council. He understood that each councillor had their own views, however, he stressed the need for compromise, and he urged members to consider the facts. He referred to the 15 reports undertaken by professionally qualified experts detailed within the appendices, and also made reference to the savings to be made. He drew attention to the 84% reduction in carbon footprint, and the benefits of a new building to staff. With regard to the location of the Horizon building, he reminded Council that it was in fact closer for two thirds of South Norfolk residents and staff.

He drew attention to claims made by some Broadland members, that South Norfolk members had been too unwilling to move to Thorpe Lodge. He stressed that South Norfolk had dismissed this option, purely because the building and carpark were not big enough to accommodate staff working more than 2.5 days each week, and this he felt would only hinder staff and the One Team in moving forward

Turning to the opportunities for redevelopment of the site in Long Stratton following a move, he referred members to the options outlined in the report and made particular reference to the potential provision of Active Retirement Living accommodation, of which there was currently a shortfall.

Summing up, he stressed that this was a real opportunity to show leadership to staff and put residents first. He explained that by moving to a structurally lower cost base, the Council would be in a position to be able to freeze its Council Tax levels for 2023/24 (this would be subject to full Council approval the following February). He then commended the report to members.

A recorded vote regarding recommendations 1-4 was then conducted as follows:

Cllrs Bendle, Bernard, Bills, Dearnley, Dewsbury, Easter, Elliott, Ellis, Elmer, Francis, Fuller, Glover, Halls, Hardy, Holden, Hornby, Hurn, Kemp, Kiddie, Knight, Laidlaw, Mason Billig, Minshull, Neal, Overton, Ridley, J Savage, R Savage, Spratt, Spruce, Thomson and M Wilby voted in favour.

Cllrs Blundell, Brown, Burrill, Edney, Hudson, Nuri-Nixon, Thomas and Worley voted against.

No members abstained from the vote.

With 32 votes for and 8 against, it was

RESOLVED

1. To agree to purchase the Horizon Centre jointly.
2. To share any future capital costs on an equal basis between both Broadland Council and South Norfolk Council if jointly owned.
3. To share the revenue expenditure related to the Horizon Centre in accordance with the agreed apportionment model in place for that financial year.
4. To 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.

A further recorded vote was then conducted regarding additional recommendation 5 (agreed at the meeting).

Cllrs Bendle, Bernard, Bills, Blundell, Brown, Burrill, Dearnley, Dewsbury, Easter, Edney, Elliott, Ellis, Elmer, Francis, Fuller, Glover, Halls, Hardy, Holden, Hornby, Hudson Hurn, Kemp, Kiddie, Knight, Laidlaw, Mason Billig, Minshull, Neal, Overton, Nuri-Nixon, Ridley, J Savage, R Savage, Spratt, Spruce, Thomas, Thomson M Wilby and Worley voted in favour.

No members voted against or abstained from the vote.

It was unanimously

RESOLVED

5. To further the work referred to in paragraphs 7.3 and 7.4 of the report in terms of locality and mobile working, and that this be reviewed in 18 months' time.

(The meeting concluded at 9.16 pm)

Chairman