

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 18 January 2022 at 10.00 am when there were present:

Committee Members Present:	Councillor: S Riley (Chairman), M L Murrell (Vice-Chairman), T Adams, N J Brennan, P E Bulman, S J Catchpole, J Davis, N J Harpley, S I Holland, C Karimi-Ghovanlou, K G Leggett MBE, G K Nurden and S M Prutton.
Cabinet Members in Attendance:	Councillors: J Copplestone, J Emsell, J Leggett, T Mancini-Boyle, S Vincent and F Whymark.
Officers in Attendance:	The Chief of Staff (Monitoring Officer), Assistant Director Finance, Assistant Director of Individuals and Families, Development Manager, Senior Community Planning Officer and Democratic Services Officers (LA, JO)

97 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Kelly and Cllr Shaw.

98 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

The Vice-Chairman informed the meeting of the 21 December 2021 Cabinet decisions which varied from the recommendations made by the Committee. These were:

Item 12 - Introduction of District Wide Kerb Side Food Waste Collection Service.

An additional recommendation: 1a. That a District-wide food waste collection service commence in October 2022.

Item 13 - Housing Allocation Policy Review

Recommendation amended to:

To approve the proposed changes to the Housing Allocation Policy, as set out in Appendix 2 *and to review the Policy on an annual basis.*

Item 17 - Street Naming and Numbering Policy and Introduction of Charges

Cabinet agreed the recommendations as set out in the report and did not consider it appropriate to give an exemption from the charge to existing home owners who wanted to change the name of their property.

Item 22 - Planning, Regulatory, Housing Standards and Waste Team Services IT Migration

The Committee recommended option 4. Cabinet agreed with the recommendation in the report and approved option 2.

99 BUDGET QUESTIONS FOR CABINET

The Chairman and the Vice-Chairman went through the budget questions and Cabinet responded and answered any further questions from the Committee as set out below.

1. We are aware that the Planning Team is under pressure and that there would be some significant planning applications over the coming year (e.g. Rackheath). How was Cabinet ensuring that the planning function was sufficiently resourced to deal with these demands?

It was envisaged that additional resources would be required in the planning team to help them deal with the unprecedented large scale strategic applications such as Rackheath and Beeston Park.

A separate business case was being prepared for members to consider the resources that were needed to deal with this workload.

Officers were working in consultation with Portfolio Holders to assess the increased demand on the service and the business case would shortly be brought forward with a bid for additional resources above those set aside for the Planning Team in the 2022/23 budget.

2. A key project would be to review the Planning IT System, and potentially implement a joint system with South Norfolk Council.

What is the progress with this project?

And how will this be resourced to ensure it is successful?

The Planning IT Business Case was considered by the Service Improvement and Efficiency Committee on 7 December, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 14 December and approved by Cabinet on the 21 December 2021.

The Business Case outlined the resources required to undertake this project.

3. Cabinet on 15 June 2021 agreed to create a new Environmental Projects Reserve of £750,000. What was the vision, intentions, and timeframe for using this reserve?

The Council had a track record of working hard to meet the needs of the local communities, taking positive action to secure ongoing environmental improvement, and improving the efficiency, performance and sustainability of the Council's own activities.

Cabinet resolved in June 2021 to recommend to Council the creation of a new Environmental Projects Reserve in view of potential changes required arising from the recent Waste Government White Paper, along with other potential environmental needs. Council agreed in July 2021 to create this Reserve.

The environmental projects reserve would facilitate:

- 1. Making future changes as required in the Council's Waste Services.*
- 2. Delivering the Council's Environmental Strategy and Action Plan, containing, as it does, new areas of focus and substantial opportunities to progress the Council's aims and its ambitious environmental agenda.*
- 3. Enabling the Council to address new and emerging opportunities and needs for environmental action arising, for example, in relation to the decarbonisation of the Council's activities and facilities and in relation to potential Green Bond community projects.*

A carbon audit of the Council was also taking place, which would inform the Action Plan. This was being funded from a corporate contingency fund, not from the reserve.

It was emphasised that the Action Plan was a dynamic document that would evolve as required to meet new initiatives such as those proposed in the Government White Paper on waste.

4. The Council had significant funds in Reserves. What was the current reserve position and what plans were in place to utilise these reserves?

The 'Medium-Term Financial Plan and Reserves Update' report presented to Cabinet on 23 November 2021 (Overview and Scrutiny 16 November 2021) provided details of the current Usable Reserves, along with the expected use of these reserves over the next few years.

The Committee was informed that new projects were being considered on a regular basis. An example of this was a proposal to purchase Temporary Accommodation to address homelessness and a business case for this would be brought forward for this in due course. Other projects such as the proposal for a second building at the Food Enterprise Park had been rejected, as the scheme had not been considered viable.

5. The Council had put Council tax up in recent years whilst at the same time reserves had increased. Did this indicate that there was scope to not increase Council Tax next year?

Reserves were one off in nature, and were therefore not a sustainable way to fund the Council long term.

In recent years, a number of favourable variances, many of which had been one off in nature, had allowed the Council to add monies to reserves, primarily to meet known future spending pressures.

The 'Medium-Term Financial Plan and Reserves Update' report presented to Cabinet on 23 November 2021 (Overview and Scrutiny 16 November 2021) set out the Medium-Term Financial Position, which demonstrated the medium term funding gap.

The Budget Setting process began from the assumption that Council Tax would not be increased unless it was necessary. Members were aware of residents views regarding Council Tax and the responses to the public consultation would be taken into account.

Decisions about the level of Council Tax needed to take into account the income of the Council and the level of service it could provide, as well as recognising that drawing on reserves to fund services was not sustainable. Members were reminded that the level of Council Tax in Broadland was at the lower end of that across Norfolk.

The need to raise Council Tax, or not, would be addressed in the main Budget Setting Report for 2022/23 in February 2022.

It was explained that the Medium Term Funding Gap was due to central Government only allocating funding one year in advance, which made it prudent to be cautious when making assumptions about future funding.

6. The aspiration should be to set a balanced budget, with no need to impact service levels, draw on reserves or increase Council Tax. Did Cabinet believe this would be feasible for 2022/23?

Broadland Council had historically set a low Council Tax charge, and this was still an aspiration.

However, until we get clarity on the long term funding position for local authorities (at individual council level) it was very difficult to predict whether Council Tax rises would be necessary.

The need to raise Council Tax, or not, would be addressed in the main Budget Setting Report for 22/23 in February 2022.

7. The Covid pandemic had put additional demands on services, particularly the Help Hub and the Benefits Team. The Council had been able to increase resources in these areas in the short term by utilising Covid grant monies. However, what plans were in place to ensure there were sufficient resources once the Covid grant monies end?

The proposed budgets for 2022/23 (including Covid funding) were considered sufficient, and the Teams were working through future modelling to understand how long demand continued and what measures could be put in place to reduce demand in the future.

Some services, such as Community Connectors had been initiated with Covid funding and were now being taken forward with funding from the NHS. Many initiatives that had been introduced in response to Covid would continue and be incorporated into the Council's regular services.

It was emphasised that although the Help Hub was a discretionary service it could make a huge impact on the lives of vulnerable residents and it was intended to enhance the service further in the future.

8. At present nationally it was reported that there were plenty of job opportunities, but a lack of appropriately skilled candidates to fill key roles.
 - a. Was this the situation in Norfolk and specifically was this an issue for the One Team recruitment?
 - b. Would the Delivery Plan / budget include any specific measures to address the skills gap?
- a. *The Norfolk workforce had comparatively lower levels of qualifications than the national average – certainly at NVQ level 4 and above. There was partner-wide recognition that whilst addressing the attainment issue was crucial, parallel efforts to attract and support businesses that offer higher-skilled and higher remuneration opportunities were crucial in closing the apparent wage and qualification gaps. >40% of residents of Norwich had an NVQ level 4 or above, >15% of residents around Thetford had an NVQ level 4 or above.*

For some of the Council's senior planning roles (requiring some experience and or professional qualifications - Degree level education in planning/relevant chartered membership) there were >50% less applicants than lower- level positions within the same Team in which professional qualifications were not required.

*Senior Planning Officer- 2 applicants
Surveyor Team Leader- 1 applicant
Planning Policy Assistant- 4 applicants
Planning Officer- 5 applicants
Planning Policy Post Graduate Apprentice- 11 applicants*

Where training was provided as part of the job opportunity, e.g. planning post grad apprentice the vacancy had at least 200 percent more applicants than the Planning Officer post that once the apprenticeship was complete the individual would be eligible to apply.

- b. *Some of the work being undertaken with apprentice's addressed the skills gap – i.e. Environmental Health Officer at undergraduate level and Planning as post graduate level to assist with these hard to recruit roles.*

Apprenticeship Strategy included three strategic strands that the Council was working to including future skills and skill gaps etc.

The Delivery Plan for next year included talent, management, future skills and attraction and retention.

The Council were also working on the Future Focus project, so linking with schools / HE on a couple of longer terms projects to attract students into the public sector – projects were future focus (work experience) and careers ambassadors (Council ambassadors going into schools to promote careers).

Training Needs Assessment would look at internal skills and talent management.

Members were informed that the Economic Success Panel had supported an approach to tailor support to specific cohorts of residents and start-up businesses. The initial cohort of 16-24 year olds had recently finished the Kickstart scheme and seven out of eight had been taken on by the business after completing their work experience. A further cohort of over 35 young people were undertaking a second Kickstart scheme, which would conclude in March 2022. Some within the scheme had also been taken on by the Council, as part of the One Team.

The Choices scheme was aimed at older people who had been out of work for some time and might have low self-esteem as a result.

9. The Covid pandemic had put pressure on the Housing Team. At present the Council mainly relied on leased properties to meet urgent housing caseloads. Would the Council be exploring alternative options? And if so when would this be done?

The Team were preparing a business case to look at other funding options for housing including releasing capital to purchase properties for temporary accommodation. The initial findings were positive and a business case would be brought forward in the summer of 2022.

Purchasing further temporary accommodation had been suggested at the member workshop and would be in addition to the £250,000 that the Council already spent annually on temporary accommodation.

10. The draft budget papers for 2022/23 did not include any income and expenditure relating to Covid. Was this correct, as it was expected that Covid support would need to continue during 2022/23?

At present no additional Government funding was expected for Covid in 2022/23, and many Covid support schemes would end by March 2022.

Where there was a need to continue with Covid support programmes in 22/23, it was expected that these would be funded by the earmarked Covid reserves or Covid budget underspends (that would need to be carried forward). As such these budgets would be added as and when these are known.

A Covid Funding Update would be brought to Cabinet in the new financial year.

11. The Delivery Plan set out the Council's aspirations and these were quite wide ranging, as the Council provides numerous services. However, had Cabinet got any key areas that it specifically aimed to divert additional budgetary resources to in 22/23?

As 2022/23 was likely to be a challenging budget year, as significant reductions in Government funding were expected. Therefore, efforts were being made to minimise additional spending pressures.

The main Revenue Budget report to be presented to Cabinet (and Overview and Scrutiny) in February 2022) would include details of all significant cost pressures factored into the 2022/23 budget.

However, the Council would still be introducing a host of initiatives over the coming year, including the following key areas:

- The Council would be rolling out a District wide food waste collection from October 2022.*
- The Council would be moving to using Hydrogenated Vegetable Oil (HVO) fuel in its refuse vehicles. This would make a significant contribution to cutting the Council's carbon footprint by more than 90 percent.*
- As noted above, Cabinet on 15 June 21 agreed to create a new Environmental Projects Reserve of £750,000. A number of projects calling on this reserve would be delivered in 22/23.*
- The Council had accessed considerable funding for Broadland Country Park from the Greater Norwich Growth Board. Further investment in green infrastructure in the District was anticipated as part of the growth agenda.*
- The Delivery of the Food Innovation Centre.*

The Committee was also asked to note the numerous IT systems that were being rolled out across both councils that would drive forward efficiencies; as well as how well the One Team had worked during very difficult times.

It was confirmed that budgets were in place for the projects set out in the Delivery Plan.

In response to an observation that green infrastructure was only seeking to compensate for housing growth and the loss of open countryside, the Leader

advised the meeting that people needed homes and that there was a requirement for 50,000 new homes in Greater Norwich to 2038. He emphasised that the Council was in a good position to both protect and enhance the environment, whilst also housing residents.

12. Had the Cabinet considered further outsourcing of services as part of developing the forthcoming Delivery Plan (for instance utilising the Anglia Revenues Partnership more)?

Cabinet was open minded to all potential delivery mechanisms, for instance:

- *It considered setting up a Local Authority Trading Company (LATC) for waste services.*
- *It recently agreed to enter into a Procurement Consortium with Breckland*
- *It contracted with NPLaw for legal advice.*
- *It was currently in discussion with Anglia Revenues Partnership with regard to assisting with specific areas of specialist support.*

There were no plans for further wide scale outsourcing, as the focus was currently on delivering additional value from the joint working with South Norfolk Council.

13. The Council's budget included sponsorship income. Was there a sponsorship policy underpinning this?

With the Council facing funding gaps, proactive income generation streams were required. With this in mind a Sponsorship and Advertising Sales Manager post was temporarily recruited to see how successful this role could be. In three months just under £35,000 income was received and a Sponsorship Policy was drafted. This was now to be reviewed with the ambition of this gaining approval and the role recruited to again.

Additional question asked at Overview & Scrutiny 30 Nov 21

14. As part of setting the 2022/23 budget, were Cabinet considering aligning the value of member ward grants with South Norfolk Council (i.e. increasing the Broadland District Council grant to £1,000)?

No. Broadland and South Norfolk were separate sovereign councils, and there is no need to align the value of member ward grants.

100 REVIEW OF PUBLIC CONSULTATION PROCESSES

The Chief of Staff introduced the report, which had been drafted as a result of the Committee's request to review the way in which the Council engaged its residents in public consultations. Members wished to understand the current processes for engaging the public in consultations and to explore how these processes could be improved to maximise response rates. The Committee felt that by reaching and engaging with the widest possible audience, results would be more likely to demonstrate the wide-ranging views of the community rather than be skewed by limited responses from a small section of residents.

Appendix A to the report detailed how public consultations were currently undertaken for Planning, the Annual Budget Consultation and Council Tax Assistance.

A member observed that the report set out how statutory consultations were conducted, but did not consider how the Council engaged with the public over general matters.

In response the Chief of Staff drew members' attention to paragraphs 2.4 - 2.6 in the report, which explained that with the appointment of the Customer Insight and Experience Lead the One Team had made significant progress in starting to collect and embed processes that enabled the Council to better understand its customers and ensure the continued delivery of services that met their expectations.

A customer satisfaction survey had been live on the Council website for six months and the initial set of results were being used to set a target for customer satisfaction, which would be reported as part of the Council's strategic delivery measures commencing 2022/23.

The development of a Customer Panel had also begun outlining its purpose and Terms of Reference with recruitment to the Panel scheduled to begin shortly. An element of the Panel's remit would be to engage with both individuals and groups of residents that could be hard to reach

A more detailed update on the progress made since the appointment of the Customer Insight and Experience Lead was due for consideration by the Committee in June 2022.

The Assistant Director Individuals and Families advised the meeting that establishing an initial dialogue with communities, groups and individuals was an important means of building better engagement and this would be a key element of the Customer and Insight and Experience Lead role. This approach was intended to engage with people who would not normally respond to consultations. Members also had a useful role in this by encouraging residents to have their voices heard.

The Chairman noted that some time ago a Time and Task Panel had identified that 80 percent of residents were unaware of Council consultations and it had been agreed that the better communication was needed.

In response the Chief of Staff informed members that she had discussed this matter with the Communications Team, who had confirmed that the most successful consultation had offered a prize of a year's free Council Tax and the second most popular had offered an iPad as a prize. This highlighted the fact that people would engage with the Council, if they were given sufficient incentive.

The Committee was also informed that for statutory consultations relating to plan-making, a wide range of methods to publicise the consultations were used. These included: emails/letters to the consultation database, information on the Council website and offices, social media, *Broadland News*, press releases, posters in parish notice boards and libraries and articles for parish magazines.

It was proposed that the Customer Strategy Update report (to be brought to the Committee in June) should incorporate details of how to better publicise and raise awareness of consultations. This proposal was seconded and duly:

AGREED

1. To note the current practices and processes for administering public consultations and review these to explore and offer suggestions on how improvements can be made to enable outcomes from consultations to demonstrate the wide-ranging views of the community; and
2. That the Customer Strategy Update report (to be brought to the Committee in June) incorporate details of how to better publicise and raise awareness of public consultations

101 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Chief of Staff took the Committee through the Work Programme.

The Housing Allocations Policy would next be reviewed at the December 2022 meeting.

The Norse Environmental Waste Services had been deferred to 29 March 2022 meeting, when the financial information required would be available. The March meeting would also receive the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report.

The June meeting of the Committee would receive the Customer Strategy Update, which would include the information requested by the Committee in respect of public consultations. Also at that meeting would be the Review of Empty Homes Policy.

There were no updates to report on apprenticeships, broadband coverage and water supply and management.

In respect of the additional work requested by the Committee for the Staff Turnover investigation; discussions had taken place with the Data Protection Officer and this had then been referred to NPlaw, as it was not clear if data held by the Council could be used to question former employees. The Chairman would be informed of this, as soon as a response was received and a letter would be drafted if the information could be used.

(The meeting concluded at 12.28pm)

Chairman