



OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of Broadland District Council, held on Tuesday 9 March 2021 at 10.00am.

Committee Members Present: Councillor: S Riley (Chairman), A D Adams (Vice-Chairman), N J Brennan, P E Bulman, S J Catchpole, N J Harpley, S I Holland, C Karimi-Ghovanlou, K S Kelly, D King, M L Murrell, G K Nurden, S M Prutton and N C Shaw.

Other Members in Attendance: Councillors: J Emsell, J Leggett, and T Mancini-Boyle.

Officers in Attendance: The Director of Resources, Director of Place, Director of People and Communities, Assistant Director Governance and Business Support (Monitoring Officer) Assistant Director of Individuals and Families, Assistant Director Finance, Chief of Staff, Senior Finance Business Partner, Strategy and Programmes Manager, Senior Governance Officer (SW), Housing Enabling Officer and Democratic Services Officers (LA, JO)

236 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr J Leggett declared a non-pecuniary interest as a trustee of Leeway Domestic Violence and Abuse Services. .

237 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

Minute No: 223 - Apology for Absence

Cllr King thanked members for their kind thoughts during his recent illness.

238 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman advised members that Scrutiny Training had been arranged for Monday 15 March at 2.00pm. The session, which would last for around 90 minutes, would provide members with a refresher on the background of scrutiny and would concentrate mainly on developing the effective questioning skills, which were vital for members of the Committee.

The Chairman also advised the meeting that item 12 on the Cabinet Agenda, Social Prescribing, was being deferred to the 20 April 2021 meeting of Cabinet.

CABINET REPORTS

239 STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE REPORT FOR QUARTER 3

The report provided a summary of the Council's performance and finance positions for Quarter 3 and was aligned to the key outcomes set out in the Delivery Plan for 2020/21.

The Strategy and Programme Manager advised the meeting that 11 performance measures were on target to meet the year end success criteria; six measures were at risk of not meeting the target and two measures were not on target to meet the year end success criteria. Nine further measures were being baselined to determine their target.

The following performance measures in the report were drawn to the Committee's attention:

- The percentage of vacant retail space in market towns had remained relatively stable over the last two quarters, however it was likely that the pandemic would have a delayed effect on market towns. Therefore, the Council was working on a suite of proposals to support the economic recovery of the market town high streets.
- Due to the pandemic the collection of Business Rates was below the performance in Q3 in 2019/20 and it was not expected that the 99 percent collection target by year-end would be achieved. The Business Rates Team had worked proactively with businesses to offer extended and deferred payments where appropriate.
- Performance for the number of working days taken to process new claims for Housing/Council Tax Benefit was an excellent five working days, two days less than the target of seven days.
- Successful interventions to prevent or relieve homelessness stood at 62 percent, which was below the target of 80 percent. This was mainly Covid-19 related, as with each lockdown more people were finding

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

themselves homeless. The Team were currently recruiting and providing training to improve performance in the coming weeks and months.

- The number of affordable homes delivered had improved during Quarter 3 with a total of 65 new build homes for rent and affordable home ownership being delivered, almost double that of the previous two quarters. The Council had a cumulative total of 101 new affordable homes in Quarter 3 which exceeded the yearly Strategic Housing Market Assessment requirement of 96 new affordable homes.
- Staff absence levels for short term sickness was a very positive 2.83 days. The target was no more than 4.5 days.
- The collection rate of Council Tax would be lower this year than in previous years due to the impact of the coronavirus. Whilst the collection rate had been impacted, the proactive action taken by the Council to engage and continue to issue notices had helped maintain performance above the national trend.

In respect of the Council's finance revenue position for Quarter 3, the Senior Finance Business Partner advised the meeting that it was currently estimated that the Council would have an underspend this year of £860,000.

The main driver for the underspend was the People and Communities directorate, which was forecasting an underspend of £444,000. This was primarily due to increased income from recycling credits; a favourable variance on Housing Benefit payments; a delay in the full rollout of the clinical waste collection and a saving on money set aside for waste procurement of £68,000.

The Place directorate was forecasting an underspend of £79,000. This was mainly a result of salary savings due to vacancies and additional land charges fee income generated by the stamp duty fees exemption.

Non-Pay budgets were expected to underspend by £4.1m, because Housing Benefit expenditure was down by £4.0m, as more claimants migrated over to Universal Credit. This was, however, offset by a compensating reduction in the Housing Benefit Grant of £3.9m from Government.

Overall, pay budgets were expected to underspend by £82,000, as a result of vacancies.

The Capital budget spend was £1.2m against an approved total of £4.5m and an overall total budget of £10.4m.

In response to a number of queries the Committee was advised the following:

- The stamp duty 'holiday' introduced by the Government had stimulated the housing market, which had led to a greater number of land searches and an increase in income for the Council.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- Around £15,000 had been spent on maintenance to Reedham Quay to date.
- The refurbishment work on Thorpe Lodge was predicated by a stock condition survey, which could not be carried out during the pandemic. It was, therefore, proposed that the budget be carried forward to 2021/22.

Members noted that a more detailed breakdown of how the savings predicted to be made from collaboration with South Norfolk were being made would be reported to a joint informal Cabinet meeting. However, members requested that this information also be reported to the Committee. Officers confirmed that they would make the information available to members after the meeting and that they would also provide details of working days lost due to long-term staff sickness.

In response to a number of further queries the Committee was informed the following:

- The Council was doing a lot of work to improve its homelessness intervention performance, which was facing an increased demand and also a change in the profile of people needing help due to the pandemic.

The recently agreed joint allocations policy for both Councils would also assist officers in improving performance.

- Council Tax collection rates at the end of February were 95.13 percent, which was only 0.44 percent below target. This recovery action for this, which equated to a sum of £400,000, would commence in the next financial year. If additional resources for recovery were required, a report would be brought to members.
- There was a mix of reasons for the reduction in the collection of Business Rates and officers were proactively working with businesses to offer extended and deferred payments where appropriate. Although some businesses might eventually require the threat of court action in order to prompt payment. However, despite the reduction it was likely that the final collection rate would still be around 97-98 percent.
- One of the reasons that the percentage of householder planning decisions made within statutory timescales had reduced was the need to pre-arrange site inspections, due to the pandemic.
- The Council did not hold specific lists of residents in receipt of Universal Credit and at risk of having their benefit reduced when the additional £20 payment came to an end. However, a great deal of work was undertaken to ensure that residents in need were aware of the help that the Council could provide.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- Anecdotally, second homes in Broadland were not causing the pressure on the housing market that had been seen in neighbouring authorities.

In response to a request it was confirmed that empty homes data for the District would be forwarded to the Committee, following the meeting.

The Chairman advised the Committee that the Chief of Staff, Hannah Ralph, was leaving the Council to take up a post elsewhere. The Committee wished Hannah all the very best for the future.

Following a show of hands it was unanimously:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

Options (1 and 2)

To

- (1) Note the revenue and capital position (variance details in Appendix 1); and
- (2) Note the 2020/21 performance for Quarter 3 (detail in Appendix 2).

240 COVID-19 HARDSHIP FUND POLICY 2021/22

The Assistant Director Individuals and Families introduced the report, which recommended that Cabinet approved the adoption of the Covid-19 Hardship Fund Policy for the year 2021/22 to provide short term stability for residents suffering financial hardship.

This was a continuation of an assistance fund that had been established in 2020 by the Council to help residents who were experiencing severe financial hardship due to the Coronavirus pandemic

The demand on the Housing and Benefit service had increased significantly due to the impact of the pandemic on the local economy, reflecting the increase in hardship within the District due to unemployment, welfare assessment periods, furlough and loss of income for those required to self-isolate.

The Council had been allocated a Covid-19 support fund from central Government of £117,302. It was proposed that £25,000 of this be apportioned for the Hardship Fund.

The amount applicants could receive was limited to £500 and would be for daily living essentials such as food and heating. This policy would only be utilised where all other support and welfare systems had been explored.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Applications were to be made online and were designed to be as simple as possible. Officers could also complete applications, if residents did not have internet access or lacked literacy skills.

Officers would be using the Joseph Rowntree minimum income standard as guidance when calculating an application for the hardship fund. It was emphasised that staff who assessed the applications were highly qualified and experienced and used their professional discretion to assess claimants.

A member pointed out that the policy should refer to the amount of the fund for Broadland only at paragraph 3.2.

In response to a query, it was confirmed that the Covid-19 Hardship Fund was in addition to the existing Hardship Fund that the Council had in place. The Portfolio Holder for Finance added that the Covid-19 fund for last year had spent £15,000. It was felt that increasing this to £25,000 for 2021/22 would be adequate for the next financial year, although this sum could be looked at again it was felt that the fund needed to be increased.

Members were also advised that the Leeway worker, funded by the Council, could refer victims of domestic abuse to the fund. The Council also had links with Children's Services, who could refer applicants to this support as well.

Members were asked to note that the Fund was distinct from, and in addition to, the £500 Test and Trace Support payments, for people who were required to self-isolate.

Following a show of hands it was unanimously:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

Option (1)

That Cabinet approves the adoption of the Covid-19 hardship policy for the financial year 2021/22.

241 AFFORDABLE HOME OWNERSHIP

The Housing Enabling Officer introduced the report, which proposed the expansion of the local connection criteria for Affordable Home Ownership to include current residents of South Norfolk and Norwich City, via a reciprocal agreement for a trial period of two years.

The pilot scheme proposed that current residents living in any of the three districts could apply for a new build Shared Equity or Discounted Market Sale product within the district that they wished to live. Applications would then be assessed by officers to confirm that they met the local connection criteria and the sale could then proceed. Assessments would be carried out from within existing resources.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

It was emphasised that the scheme was purely for home ownership and would probably be for around 15 to 20 properties a year in Broadland.

It was suggested that as a number of new affordable home ownership products were being proposed by the Government, that it might be better to wait until there was more clarity on this before changing the local connection policy.

In response, the Director of Place suggested that as it was a reciprocal arrangement it would give residents a wider choice across the whole of Greater Norwich. He noted that all three councils worked very closely on developing infrastructure and planning growth across this area and it seemed a natural progression to trial an expansion of the local connection criteria. He also suggested that housing was a constantly changing issue and that the Council would need to take this into account as central Government determined, so there would be little to be gained by a delay.

The Chairman noted that the trial was only for two years and would be subject to any changes to affordable housing products that were determined by Government.

Following a show of hands it was unanimously:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

Options (1 and 2)

- (1) For Affordable Home Ownership products provided through negotiation with developers:
 - There will be a local connection priority for Greater Norwich
- (2) The new criteria will be applied as a pilot scheme via a reciprocal agreement for a trial period of 2 years.

The Committee adjourned at 11.33am and reconvened at 11.40am, when all the Committee members listed above were present.

242 NEW HOMES BONUS CONSULTATION

The Director for Resources introduced her report, which explained that officers had commenced with a proposed response to the Future of the New Homes Bonus Consultation. The timescales for submission of the consultation would prevent a finalised version of the responses being made available to Cabinet and it was, therefore, proposed that the final sign-off be delegated to the Portfolio Holders for Finance and Planning, in consultation with the Director Resources and the Director Place

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The consultation questions covered not only the financial element of the New Homes Bonus, but housing delivery as well as the possible introduction of a modern methods of construction premium.

A member suggested that the recommendation needed clarification and it was agreed that reference to the response to the future of the New Homes Bonus Consultation, be added to the recommendation.

There was some discussion about whether the consultation could be completed and signed off by the Portfolio Holders to allow it to complete the call-in period ahead of submission on 7 April 2021. The Assistant Director Governance and Business Support (Monitoring Officer) confirmed that she would clarify this point after the meeting.

Following a show of hands it was unanimously.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

Option (1, as amended)

To delegate *the response to the future of the New Homes Bonus Consultation* to the Portfolio Holders for Finance and Planning in consultation with the Director Resources and the Director Place.

243 EXCLUSION OF 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.

244 EXEMPT MINUTES

The exempt minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2021 were confirmed as a correct record.

(The meeting concluded at 12.01pm)

Chairman