

EMERGENCY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting of the Emergency Committee of South Norfolk Council held on Friday 24 April 2020 at 10.00am.

Committee Members Present:	Councillors: J Fuller (Chairman), C Brown, M Edney, R Elliott, K Kiddie and K Mason Billig
Other Members in Attendance:	Councillors: J Amis, Y Bendle, V Clifford-Jackson, B Duffin, J Easter, L Glover, C Hudson, K Hurn, T Laidlaw, N Legg, L Neal, J Savage, R Savage, A Thomas, V Thomson and J Worley
Officers in Attendance:	The Managing Director (T Holden), the Assistant Director Finance (R Fincham), and the Assistant Director Governance & Business Support (E Hodds)

2 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 1 April were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3. GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS – COVID-19

The Assistant Director Governance and Business Support presented her report, which set out proposed governance arrangements for the Council during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Chairman referred to the reduction in the membership of the Development Management Committee (DMC) from 9 to 5, which he felt would make the meetings more manageable and efficient. He explained that members “calling in” applications to the Committee, would need to ensure that there were material planning grounds for doing so, and this would be scrutinised by the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee to ensure that this rule was being adhered to. In response to a query, he added that this was not a change to the current scheme of delegation, it was just a case of current rules being applied more vigorously.

Referring to paragraph 3.7, regarding the scheduling of DMC meetings, the Chairman explained that he would prefer meetings to be scheduled every fortnight, and for these dates to be published, as this would add more certainty for applicants, developers and other relevant parties. He accepted that not all these extra meetings would be required.

Cllr V Thomson, the Chairman of the DMC, explained that plans for the first remote meeting of the Committee were progressing well, and that a practice session for members was due to be held next week.

During discussion, the Managing Director explained when he would consider it appropriate to stand down the Emergency Committee, adding that it needed to relinquish its powers as soon as it was able to do so. He explained that this decision would be very much influenced by Government policy, and the Council's ability to conduct normal business, albeit in a different way. He referred to any decisions relating to the lockdown, testing regimes, social distancing, which would all impact on how quickly there would be shift from an emergency setting.

Cllr C Brown stressed the importance of ensuring that business as usual was carried out as much as possible, and that the decision-making process remained open and democratic and fully accessible to the public. Referring to the reduction in the number of members on the DMC, he agreed that this was appropriate, but for a temporary period only. He understood why everyone wanted shorter meetings but stressed that the quality of decisions was of upmost importance, regardless of how long meetings lasted.

In response to questions, the Assistant Director explained that officers had the ability to share any presentations during remote meetings. Regarding live streaming, she explained that this was possible, and easier through the Zoom application. However, there was a need for IT to consider this further, to ensure that this did not interfere with the functionality of the meeting.

The Chairman, and Cllr C Brown (as the leader of the opposition Group), then confirmed the membership of DMC as follows:

Vic Thomson (Chairman)
Lisa Neal (Vice Chairman)
David Bills
Terry Laidlaw
Graham Minshull

The first-choice substitute for the Conservative Group was Florence Ellis; the first-choice substitute for the Liberal Democrat Group was Vivienne Clifford-Jackson.

Voting was then carried out by way of a roll call, and it was unanimously

RESOLVED: To agree:

1. That the Emergency Committee takes on the powers of Cabinet and Council during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Managing Director to determine when arrangements are reverted;
2. The interim arrangements for the Development Management Committee during the COVID-19 pandemic, as outlined in paragraphs 3.5 – 3.8, with meetings being held fortnightly if required and the membership of the Committee as outlined above. The Managing Director to determine when arrangements are reverted;
3. That the arrangements for the Licensing Committees remain as per the Constitution;
4. To authorise the Monitoring Officer to produce additional Standing Orders relating to virtual meetings, to form part of the Council's constitution. The Managing Director to determine when arrangements are reverted.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

Members considered the report of the Assistant Director Finance, which provided information on the financial implications of COVID-19 on South Norfolk Council.

The Chairman referred to the significant reduction in income for the Council, giving mention to leisure centres, car parking charges, planning applications and building control. He was very proud that the whole Council had pulled together in response to the pandemic, and this approach had seen staff from the leisure centres and the wider Council being redeployed in areas of need, such as refuse collection, the Help Hub and Economic Development. He stressed the need to carefully consider the financial impact on the Council and he suggested that a new in-year budget was a necessity.

The Assistant Director, Finance, outlined the salient points of the report to the Committee. He made reference to the £50k already received from the Government to assist with the impact of COVID-19, and he advised that a further £1.6bn had recently been announced, with a greater share being anticipated for district councils. Members noted that the Council had already incurred expenditure of £140k, and it was anticipated that this would increase at a rate of approximately £100k per month.

Referring to the Grants for Businesses, the Assistant Director updated members on the figures, explaining that 1,910 grants had been awarded to date, totalling approximately £2m, and making up 70% of those that could be eligible in the District. Officers were currently actively trying to contact the other 30% (approximately 800 businesses), that were yet to make contact or apply for a grant. In response to queries, the Managing Director explained that this was a good position to be in and staff were very focussed on delivering the level of support available to businesses.

Turning to the Hardship Fund, members noted that its primary use was to reduce council tax bills by £150, and this was awarded on a case by case basis. Funds had also been set aside for real hardship payments, and currently 19 payments had been made, totalling £7k.

The Assistant Director stressed the need to consider the immediate financial issues, and also the long-term financial impacts on the Council. He estimated that costs for the Council would total anywhere between £4 and £8 million, and that the majority of this was from lost income from leisure centres and planning. He advised that the Council did have significant reserves, however, he felt it prudent to review the Council's budgets in the near future.

In response to questions, the Assistant Director explained that income on council tax was holding up well, with only a slight reduction on the collection figures for the same period last year. He assured members that the cashflow position remained healthy, with significant funds being available to meet current expenditure. Members noted that the Council had invested over £30m in instant access accounts.

Regarding a query concerning the use of capital to fund revenue costs, the Assistant Director explained that this was not a significant issue for the Council, as the majority of its current funds were classified as revenue.

Members noted that preliminary discussions had taken place with Broadland District Council about the possibility of mothballing either South Norfolk House, or Thorpe Lodge. The Chairman stressed that this was only in its early stages, but now that both Leaders were keen to pursue the idea, officers would look to progress the options.

Cllr K Mason Billig explained that the Joint Lead Members Group was not currently planning to hold meetings, however, both she, and Broadland Councillor, Jonathan Emsell, were being updated on issues, and they would be carefully monitoring progress regarding the options for a one office location.

Cllr C Brown agreed that it was necessary to formally consider a new budget, and to consider all options. He thanked officers at the Council for their excellent updates and communication with members regarding COVID-19, and the Chairman echoed these comments.

Summing up, the Chairman stressed the need for a new in-year budget from 1 July and suggested that officers looked at all options, and that these be reported to the Emergency Committee's formal meeting scheduled for 5 June.

Voting was then carried out by way of a roll call, and it was unanimously

RESOLVED: To:

1. Retrospectively authorise officers to incur any additional expenditure necessary, to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Note the contents of the report, and the need for a formal report on budget options at the meeting scheduled to take place on 5 June 2020.

The meeting concluded at 11.00 am.



Chairman