

EMERGENCY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting of the Emergency Committee of South Norfolk Council held on Thursday 7 May 2020 at 10.00am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: J Fuller (Chairman), C Brown, R Elliott, K Kiddie and K Mason Billig

Apologies: Councillor: M Edney

Other Members in Attendance: Councillors: J Amis, Y Bendle, B Bernard, D Bills, V Clifford-Jackson, A Dearnley, B Duffin, J Easter, L Glover, C Hudson, K Hurn, W Kemp, J Knight, T Laidlaw, N Legg, L Neal, S Nuri, J Savage, R Savage, A Thomas, V Thomson and J Worley

Officers in Attendance: The Managing Director (T Holden), the Director of Resources (D Lorimer), the Director of People and Communities (J Sutterby), the Director of Place (P Courtier), the Assistant Director Governance & Business Support (E Hodds), the Assistant Director of Individuals and Families (M Pursehouse), and the Acting Assistant Director Economic Growth (T Armstrong)

5 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 24 April were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

6. HARSHIP FUND

The Assistant Director Individuals and Families presented his paper to the Committee, which updated members on the work of the Help Hub, and Hardship funding.

The Assistant Director informed the Committee that there had been a slight reduction in calls to the Help Hub in the previous week, and that the nature of the calls had also changed, with more cases of hardship and families struggling to make ends meet. This had come at a time when monthly pay packets had reduced by 80%, or in some cases nil. Currently, £16,480 of the discretionary hardship fund had been paid out across both South Norfolk and Broadland and was being used to plug the gap until claims for Universal Credit came through.

He went on to explain that officers continued to work closely with Adult Social Services, the Police and Children's Services, to identify those that might need help. He added

that most of those on the shielded / vulnerable list had not required additional assistance, and it was therefore the “hidden vulnerable” who required more focus.

Members noted that currently there were 58 families in temporary accommodation, whereas typically this figure would be on average, 32. The Hub had been assisting with a number of issues, for example domestic violence, and those struggling to pay rent, and officers continued to work closely with Housing Associations, to identify those needing support, and future issues that might arise. In response to a query regarding homelessness, he explained that those who had been temporarily housed due to the pandemic, were likely to be transferred to suitable housing, once the lockdown had been lifted.

With regard to food parcels, the Assistant Director explained that a considerable number of recipients of food parcels from the Government, had no need for them, and these were often being passed back to the Help Hub for redistribution, to those more in need.

Turning to the volunteers, the Assistant Director advised that it was apparent that volunteers within local communities had been the most efficient way in ensuring that those most in need were in receipt of assistance.

The Chairman thanked the Assistant Director for an informative briefing and wished to thank him and his team for all their hard work during this difficult period. He stressed that there were further challenging times ahead, with the prospect of an end to furlough payments, and more job losses.

7. BUSINESS GRANTS AND RECOVERY

The Acting Assistant Director delivered a presentation to members regarding business grants, and economic recovery.

Members were advised that as of 4 May 2020, 81% of business grants had been paid, and officers were now proactively attempting to contact those businesses who were yet to make a claim. The Assistant Director made reference to the newly announced discretionary grant scheme, explaining that little information was yet known on how this scheme would work, although it was clear that the Government wanted this scheme to provide support in particular to Bed and Breakfasts, and those sharing office space. He believed that it would need to be funded through any excess funds, once all the business grants had been paid. Officers would be working with others across the area to try to establish some consistency with regards to the scheme's guidance and criteria. In response to a query, he explained that a member steer on the criteria might be required once an analysis of the current guidance from Government had been done.

Turning to the economic recovery, the Assistant Director informed members that the Centre for Progressive Policy had ranked all Local Authorities against the potential decline in GVA (Gross Value Added), and South Norfolk had been identified as the fourth least affected in England, with Broadland not far behind. Although this indicated that both Broadland and South Norfolk would be less affected than other areas, members still recognised this to be a massive impact on some parts of the economy for both districts.

Looking at national statistics, members noted that some industries such as food, accommodation, arts and entertainment, had furloughed a high percentage of employees, with more losses than others. Figures also suggested that young people would be most affected by the pandemic in terms of employment, with the availability of apprenticeships, likely to suffer. It was clear that to mitigate the negative impact on both the South Norfolk and Broadland districts, it would be helpful to focus support on particular areas such as construction, wholesale and retail, amongst others.

In response to queries, the Assistant Director agreed that there were both immediate and more long-term actions that could be taken to help stabilise businesses, and members agreed that this needed a “whole council” approach, referring to policies in the areas of licensing and planning.

The Managing Director explained that some work on recovery was being driven county wide, however, because of the broad canvas of industries across the county, local work driven by the districts was more helpful in providing focus for local areas. He stressed the need for districts to take the initiative and work constructively with others, including colleagues in the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and at Norfolk County Council. The Chairman agreed and also suggested that both South Norfolk and Broadland should look to work with Breckland Council, to achieve a common approach, particularly in relation to the A11 Corridor.

During discussion, Cllr C Brown raised the issue of encouraging green growth and suggested that the Council could look at facilitating green projects, utilising the capacity in the construction sector, that might otherwise be lost. The Chairman supported this suggestion but stressed that the immediate priority needed to be on stabilising the economy.

Turning to the impending Government announcement regarding lockdown (the following Sunday), the Chairman suggested that there would be no big changes, however, he expected that the Government would lay down some principles for local authorities to follow, with regard to for example social distancing in public places. The Managing Director confirmed that the Tactical Co-ordination Group (TCG) would be examining the outcomes of Sunday’s announcement carefully, adding that Nick Howard, the Council’s Assistant Director for Regulatory Services, was the leading officer on this Group for social distancing. The Assistant Director of Governance and Business Support added that management would be providing reassurances to staff ahead of the announcement on Sunday. Staff were to continue to work at home where possible, and the health and safety of staff remained paramount.

In response to a query regarding leisure facilities, the Managing Director explained that officers were already looking at how equipment could be repositioned to allow for social distancing, and whether activities could take place outside. Opportunities to grow the Council’s on-line offer were also being investigated.

The Chairman thanked officers for their updates.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 - UPDATE

Members considered the report of the Assistant Director Finance, which updated the Committee on the financial implications of Covid-19, on the Council.

The Director of Resources presented the report the Committee. She made reference to the potential suspension of business rates and the implications this could have on the Council, and also advised that the Secretary of State had recently written to town and parish councils, suggesting that they contact their local district councils with regard to any issues around funding. Members noted that any requests from town and parish councils would be considered on a case by case basis and any help with funding was likely to be in the form of loans.

Turning to cashflow, the Director explained that there were currently no issues for the Council, with precept payments to Norfolk County Council, the Police and parishes, made in full on 30 April. Income from council taxpayers and business rates was also holding up well.

It was

RESOLVED: To note the contents of the report.

9. STANDING ORDERS FOR VIRTUAL MEETINGS

The Chairman referred members to the Standing Orders for Virtual Meetings, that had been attached for information and would be duly incorporated within the Council's Constitution. It was noted that these standing orders were valid until 7 May 2021.

10. URGENT ITEM – HOUSEHOLD WASTE AND RECYCLING CENTERS

The Chairman referred to the recently circulated letter from the Local Government Minister and the Environment Minister, regarding the need to reopen household waste and recycling centres. Members noted that this would affect the recycling centre at Ketteringham.

The Managing Director explained that he was disappointed that councils had not been formally advised of this request earlier. However, he assured members that Norfolk County Council was confident that appropriate preparations had been made to manage the reopening of the centre, along with others in the county.

11. URGENT ITEM – COMMUNITY GRANTS

Cllr K Mason Billig presented the report of the Assistant Director (Individuals and Families), and the Communities Manager, regarding member ward grants and the need to ensure that all decision notices fell within the ground rules.

Members noted that whilst most member grants paid were within the ground rules, there were a limited number of applications that had been paid, despite breaching the rules. It had therefore been agreed, that in future, officers would veto inappropriate grants. This did not require any changes constitutionally; it was just a matter of enforcing financial controls already in place.

Regarding the Community Action Fund, Cllr Mason Billig informed the Committee that four applications that had been deferred from the meeting in February, had now been approved. Details of these grants would be forwarded to all members. It was noted that a budget of over £50k was still currently available to fund further projects later in the year.

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

RESOLVED: To agree that member ward grants be subject to the same financial process, as all other financial processes.

12. WORK PROGRAMME AND CABINET CORE AGENDA

Members noted the Emergency Committee Work Programme and the latest version of the Cabinet Core Agenda

The meeting concluded at 11.17 am.

Chairman