

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 Tuesday 16 November 2021 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, N J Harpley, L H Hempsall, S I Holland, C Karimi-Ghovanlou, D King, K G Leggett MBE, G K Nurden, S M Prutton and N C Shaw.

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor: J Leggett and T Mancini-Boyle.

Officers in Attendance: The Director of Resources, Director of Place, Director of People and Communities, Chief of Staff (Monitoring Officer), Assistant Director IT/Digital and Transformation, Senior Finance Business Partner, Strategy and Programmes Manager, Capital and Treasury Accountant, Community Assets Manager, Growth Delivery Manager and Democratic Services Officers (LA, JO)

The Chief of Staff informed members that following the meeting of the Service Improvement and Efficiency Committee on Friday 12 November 2021 it had been concluded that further work had to be done on the Accommodation Review and that therefore a decision had been made by the Leader and the Managing Director to withdraw the report from the November Cabinet agenda.

Members were advised that at their 12 November 2021 meeting the Service Improvement and Efficiency Committee had generally agreed with the recommendations of the Future Office Accommodation Project Joint Member Working Group and had recommended the following:

1. That there was no decision in principle at this stage regarding the purchase of the Horizon Building on Broadland Business Park, due to further information being required; and

2. That the option to occupy Thorpe Lodge be investigated further, looking at the potential renovation of the building to make it carbon neutral, and to address the car parking issues; and
3. That the Future Office Project Joint Member Working Group should consider all the options for office accommodation and be provided with adequate officer support to complete their investigation within three months, or upon receipt of the relevant information and then to report their recommendations to the Service Improvement and Efficiency Committee and Commercial, Trading and Customer Focus Policy Committee and then on to their respective Cabinets.

57. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr G Nurden declared a disclosable pecuniary interest in respect of item 69 - Proposal for a Second Building at the Food Enterprise Park, as he acted as an accountant for one of the company's referred to in the report. Cllr Nurden would leave the meeting when this item was considered.

58. APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Kelly.

59. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 October 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

60. MATTERS ARISING

Minute No: 50 – Independent Living Assistance Policy

The Chairman advised the meeting that Cabinet had thanked the Committee for highlighting the removal of the cap on the Care and Repair service as an area of concern and that he had been assured by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Wellbeing that there were other elements in the Policy that would ensure that no residents were disadvantaged by the removal of the cap.

61. SCRUTINY OF BUDGET QUESTIONS

The questions for Cabinet were agreed, subject to the following amendment:

6. The aspiration should be to set a balanced budget, *with no need to impact on service levels*, draw on reserves or increase Council Tax. Does Cabinet believe this will be feasible for 22/23?

There was a discussion around linking question 8 to the Household Support Fund and it was decided that this issue would be raised when this item was considered.

CABINET REPORTS

62. TREASURY MANAGEMENT QUARTER 2 REPORT 2021/22

The Capital and Treasury Accountant introduced the report, which set out the Treasury Management activities for the first six months of the financial year 2021/22 and reported on financial indicators.

During the period investments totalled £57,005 million, with interest received on external cash investments during the financial year forecast to be around £380,000.

There had been no need to borrow externally so far this financial year and there had been no breaches of the Council's Prudential Indicators.

The Committee was advised that the Council had a proportion of its investments in ethical and green funds and that this figure was increasing, although it also had to be balanced against achieving a fair return on investment for the District.

The Portfolio Holder for Environmental Excellence informed the meeting that the Environmental Strategy Review, which would be brought to the 30 November 2021 meeting of the Committee would include an update on the Council's approach to environmental procurement.

A member also suggested that the Council should have a robust policy to ensure that the Council did not invest in countries with a record of human rights abuses. In response, the Director for Resources confirmed that the list of countries approved for investment was an element of the Treasury Management Strategy and could be reviewed as part of the budget setting process when it was considered in February 2022.

Following further discussion on investments it was generally felt that the Council should seek to develop a more green and ethical Treasury Management Policy.

This was duly seconded and following a show of hands it was:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

Options (1, 2 and 3)

To

1. Endorse the treasury activity for the first half of the year and that it complies with the agreed strategy; and
2. Note the 2021/22 prudential indicators for the first six months of the year; and

3. *That the Council adopts a commissioning policy that encapsulates a green and ethical approach to treasury management.*

63. HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND

The Director of People and Communities introduced the report, which sought approval to spend Household Support Funding provided by central Government on supporting those households who needed additional financial help this winter.

Members were informed that Norfolk County Council had been awarded £6,696,806 from the fund and had allocated £128,000 to Broadland. The allocation had been assessed on the level of benefits claimants per district.

The Council aimed to take a proactive approach to help vulnerable individuals and families who were most in need of support.

In answer to a suggestion that the funding should also be used to support training to address skills shortages the meeting was informed that the funding criteria had been set by Government and was limited to support with the costs of:

- Food.
- Energy and water.
- Essentials linked to energy and water.
- Wider essentials. These may include, but were not limited to, support with other bills including broadband or phone bills, clothing, and essential transport-related costs such as repairing a car, buying a bicycle or paying for fuel.

However, the Director for People and Communities confirmed that funds for training could be allocated from other Covid-19 funding sources.

A member commended the support fund and noted that it was for the immediate needs of food and heating, rather than for longer term issues such as training.

The Committee was informed that receipt of support through this fund would not adversely affect Universal Credit claimants.

In response to concerns expressed that people on legacy benefits (i.e. benefits not yet replaced by Universal Credit) could be excluded, the Director for People and Communities reassured members that the funding was based upon need, not benefit criteria. He also confirmed that the Assistant Director for Individuals and Families would provide a briefing for members on the funding and support the scheme provided for vulnerable residents, which was part of a range of measures in place for those in need in the District.

Following a show of hands it was unanimously:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

(Option 1)

To delegate the spend of the Household Support Fund to the Assistant Director of Individuals and Families in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Wellbeing.

64. STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE REPORT FOR QUARTER 1 AND QUARTER 2

The Strategy and Programmes Manager introduced the report, which provided an overview of the performance of the Council against the key outcomes set out in the Delivery Plan for 2021/22.

Members were informed that 17 measures were currently meeting the year-end success criteria. Four measures were currently not meeting the year-end target or had missed the target by a narrow margin and had light touch monitoring in place. Three measures had not met the year-end target by a significant amount and close monitoring had been put in place. Three other measures were being baselined to determine a target.

Areas highlighted were:

- Over 1,360 vulnerable residents had been supported by a range of discretionary prevention services during Quarters 1 and 2, well over half of the year-end target of 2,000 for both Broadland and South Norfolk combined.
- In Quarter 1, over £5.7m had been secured from the European Regional Development Fund to deliver the Broadland Food Innovation Centre. In Quarter 2, £675,000 was secured as Broadland's allocation from the Norfolk Business Rates Pool.
- The collection of Business Rates, which was rated red in Quarter 4 20/21 was now amber. However, collection rates were still lower than the historical average pre-pandemic. The Economic Development Team continued to provide ongoing support to businesses in the District.
- Council Tax collection rates were also amber but were slightly ahead of this time last year (Q2 55.36% compared 55.19% 20/21). However, collection continued to be challenging in the aftermath of a very difficult 2020/21.
- The percentage of planning decisions made within statutory timescales – minors/others and householders was red, with 76 percent

of planning application decisions in the first two quarters of the year made within statutory timescales. This was below the target of 90 percent and had resulted from a surge in the number of applications being submitted. The Planning Department had appointed additional resources to address this issue.

In answer to a query about the planning decisions performance the Director of Place informed members that it was below target due to the particular circumstances of the pandemic. He confirmed that sanctions were only implemented by the Government if performance was poor over a two year period and that the Council's performance had only dipped for a brief period under exceptional circumstances. He also confirmed that there was no compensation payable for delays and that officers worked closely with applicants to advise them if extensions to the process were required. Members were also informed that recent most vacancies in the Planning Department had now been filled and that further discussion about increasing resources to meet the anticipated level of growth in the District was ongoing.

In answer to a query about recycling, the Portfolio Holder for Environmental Excellence informed the meeting that the results of the campaign to reduce contamination had not been analysed yet. She also confirmed that residents were not encouraged to leave additional recycling in cardboard boxes beside their bins, as if the boxes got wet they could not be recycled.

In response to a question about the proposal to allocate £500,000 to a new accommodation reserve, the Director for Resources informed members that this sum was proposed to be set aside for any due diligence work that needed to be carried out as part of the accommodation review.

A budget of £45,000 was also proposed for the Queen's Jubilee celebrations. A report on this would be taken to Cabinet in due course.

In answer to a question about progress towards delivery of £8.6m savings through collaboration it was confirmed that both costs and savings were split 45/55 (BDC/SNC). It was currently forecast that by year 5 of collaboration, savings would be £8,294m, as some savings had been delayed due to the pandemic.

A member noted that some of the collaboration savings were predicted, rather than actual and he was requested that members be provided with a breakdown of actual savings achieved, as well as the transitional costs, which should be separated from the One Team transitional staff costs.

It was confirmed that the Director for Resources would provide the Committee with the information, as requested.

The Committee adjourned at 11.43am and reconvened at 11.56am, when all the Committee members listed above were present, except

for Cllr Harpley and Cllr Hempsall.

The Senior Finance Business Partner provided the Committee with an overview of the Council's finances over Quarter 2.

The Resources Directorate was forecasting a favourable variance against a budget of £199,000. The reasons for this underspend was due to savings from the corporate contingency budget, the ceasing of the catering service and two IT posts supporting infrastructure work being attributed to the Covid-19 spend.

The Place Directorate was forecasting to achieve a favourable variance against budget of £162,000.

The main reasons for this underspend were:

- A change in contractor for street lighting maintenance.
- Increased income received from land charges.
- Favourable variance against budget due to vacancies across a number of services in the first half of the year which had now being recruited to.

The People and Communities directorate was forecasting to achieve a favourable variance of £528,000.

The reasons for this underspend were primarily:

- Waste Procurement fees had not utilised the full budget.
- Recurring savings from the delivery of the Clinical Waste service currently procured through a contract with the County Council's service provider.
- Increased income through the bulky waste service, due to the pandemic.

The actual spend against budget in the Capital Programme was £3,669,000, with an estimated outturn of £14,737,000.

In response to a query the Director for Resources confirmed that the spending proposals were to utilise £583,000 of the savings already achieved, rather than waiting until year-end.

The Committee was also informed that suggestions put forward by members at their Budget Workshop for using the underspend had been collated and shared with Portfolio Holders and would be brought forward in due course

A member suggested that the Accommodation Reserve seemed a large sum to be put aside for this purpose. However, another member noted that the size of the reserve could be adjusted as necessary.

Generally the Committee considered that it was premature to allocate £500,000 to an Accommodation Reserve and following a show of hands it was:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

Options (1, 2 and 3)

1. Note the revenue and capital position (variance details in Appendix 1).

1a. To *not* agree proposals for the usage of this year's potential underspends (the Committee viewed the proposal to set aside £500,000 in a new Accommodation Reserve as premature in the light of the recommendations of the Joint Working Group and the subsequent recommendations by the Service Improvement and Efficiency Committee).
2. Note the 2021/22 performance for Quarters 1 and 2 combined (detail in Appendix 2).
3. Note the update of the Delivery Plan for 2021/22 (detailed in Appendix 3).

65. UPDATE ON MEMBER IT

The Chief of Staff introduced the report, which provided the Committee with an update on the progress to date with the Member IT project, as well as the outcomes from the recent survey. The report also included information about a new electronic committee system and the plan for trialling options for member IT ahead of the May 2023 elections.

During the summer a survey of members was conducted to understand their use of iPads and to identify if any issues remained. Unfortunately only 11 responses were received.

Members were asked to note that Cabinet had agreed that a trial would commence in spring 2022 to look at the best option that could be adopted from May 2023 and that the new electronic committee system would bring further benefits for Members.

Following a show of hands it was unanimously.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

(Option 1)

To accept the report on current IT provision for Members and note the plans for the trial period.

66. FORWARD PLAN

The Committee noted the Council's Forward Plan.

New items included a report on the introduction of a District Wide Food Waste Collection Service that would be considered at the 8 February 2022 Cabinet.

67. 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.

68. AWARD OF CONTRACT – BURE VALLEY RAILWAY FENCING

The Community Assets Manager introduced the exempt report, which sought approval for the award of a contract for the replacement of a boundary fence along the Bure Valley Railway (BVR).

The Chairman commended the tender evaluation process, which had been undertaken with the cost element removed in order to review them from a technical perspective only.

It was also noted that there was currently no high priority work to be carried out on BVR bridges during 2021/22.

Following a show of hands it was:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

(Options 1 and 2)

1. Cabinet to agree to award the contract for replacement of the boundary fence.
2. Cabinet to approve the use of funding allocated capital improvements on the Bure Valley Railway for the purpose of installing a boundary fence.

Cllr Nurden left the meeting at 12.38am.

69. PROPOSAL FOR A SECOND BUILDING AT THE FOOD ENTERPRISE PARK

The Growth Delivery Manager introduced the exempt report, which proposed building a second building at the Food Enterprise Park.

During discussion the local member informed the meeting that he would not support the proposal.

Members considered and discussed the risks involved in the development, as well as the benefits for developing and encouraging business growth and job creation in the District

The Chairman proposed an additional recommendation to ensure that the next steps of the project were closely monitored by the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development.

This was duly seconded and following a show of hands it was:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

Options (1, 2 and 3)

1. That Cabinet recommend to Council that £200,000 is added to the Capital Programme for 2021/2022 in order to progress the design aspects of this scheme. The intention is that this sum will be split 50/50 with the New Anglia LEP, in the event that the Investment Agreement identified in item 2.2 can be formalized; and
2. That Cabinet agree for officers to enter into discussions with New Anglia LEP in relation to a 50:50 joint venture to deliver a second building at the Food Enterprise Park, comprising 4 commercial units. These discussions will be based upon the assumptions made in item 2.2. This project will further support the growth of the Food Enterprise Park's agri-food and tech cluster by providing much needed grow on space; and
3. *That the proposed next steps for the project, to be brought to Cabinet in early 2022, be closely monitored by the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development on an ongoing basis.*

(The meeting concluded at 1.16pm)

Chairman

