

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council, held on Wednesday 9 September 2020 at 9.30am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: G Minshull, V Clifford-Jackson, B Duffin, S Nuri-Nixon, J Rowe, R Savage and J Wilby

Apologies for Absence: Councillors: B Bernard, J Hornby and T Spruce
Cabinet Member Present: Councillor: Y Bendle

Officers in Attendance: Assistant Director Governance and Business Support (Monitoring Officer) (E Hodds), Chief of Staff (H Ralph), Assistant Director Finance (R Fincham), Assistant Director Individuals and Families, (M Pursehouse), Democratic Services Manager (C White) and the Senior Governance Officer (S Utting)

1271 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Cllr V Clifford-Jackson declared that she was a trustee of Voluntary Norfolk.

1272 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 5 August 2020 were confirmed as a correct record.

Minute No: 1269 – Review of Market Towns Confidence Campaign

The Chairman advised the meeting that officers would be reporting back on the Committee's suggestions regarding the Market Towns Confidence Campaign, at the next meeting on 19 November 2020.

The Chairman drew Members' attention to the following recommendation made by the Committee at the last meeting:

That Cabinet considers future free parking in the Council's car parks during the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to encourage continued local support of the Market Towns.

He asked the Committee to note that charges had been re-introduced on 7 August 2020 and that he had been advised by officers that one of Wymondham car parks had been extremely busy and that having discussed this matter with the Portfolio Holder, and without any supporting evidence to the contrary, he doubted that Cabinet would consider going back to free parking at this point.

In the light of this the Chairman, therefore, recommended withdrawing the recommendation.

A Member noted that the pandemic was a very fluid and fast moving situation and that Cabinet should ensure that it could be flexible and make decisions on matters such as this outside of the normal cycle of meetings, if necessary.

The Portfolio Holder for Better Lives confirmed that with the increase in coronavirus cases and the possibilities of further lockdowns Cabinet would keep this issue under review.

AGREED

To withdraw the following recommendation to Cabinet:

That Cabinet considers future free parking in the Council's car parks during the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to encourage continued local support of the Market Towns.

1273 REVIEW OF COVID 19 RESPONSE

The Chief of Staff introduced the report, which covered three key areas of the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic:

1. the governance arrangements put in place to support the Council's response;
2. the support provided to residents and businesses; and
3. the financial implications of the coronavirus.

The Council had been a key member of the County-wide response to Covid-19 through the Norfolk Resilience Forum (NRF), which was the overarching body for a whole range strategic and operational response groups.

A number of Council officers heavily supported this work, including the Managing Director who chaired the Tactical Coordination Group and the Director for People and Communities who co-chaired the Community Response Delivery Group. The leadership role that officers took on during the response meant that the Council was well-placed to influence and lead the County response, as well as respond to local needs. A key lesson from this, however, was the need to consider resource options and substitutes to ensure the long-term resilience of officers to both support the County and direct the Council response.

Internally, at the start of March an officer Pandemic Strategic Group was set up, which initially met on a daily basis to update on progress, review government policy changes and NRF directives and which in turn oversaw the activities of three Working Group cells covering Governance, Community Response and Business and the Economy.

Overall, it was considered that the Council had been quick to set an organisational governance framework to coordinate its operational response to the pandemic.

The Assistant Director – Governance and Business Support (Monitoring Officer) informed the meeting that the Leader and the Managing Director had discussed standing up the Emergency Committee in mid-March and following the announcement of the Prime Minister on the 23 March 2020, the Managing Director decided to convene the Committee, with its first item of business being to review its Terms of Reference.

A review of the Terms of Reference was important, as previously it had been envisaged that the Emergency Committee would be convened in the recovery phase following a disaster. Covid-19 pandemic brought a different challenge and it was key that the Committee continued to allow officer delegations to be in place to enable operational continuity, whilst drawing to itself the powers of Full Council and Cabinet. The decision to stand down the Emergency Committee would be at the discretion of the Managing Director, in consultation with the Monitoring Officer and the Leader. Licensing and Development Management (with a smaller membership) would be convened if required, but all other Committee meetings, were suspended.

The first two meetings of the Emergency Committee were held via Skype for Business, but it soon became more appropriate to use Zoom, which allowed meetings to be live streamed via YouTube.

Key items considered by the Emergency Committee were:

- Financial Implications of COVID
- Business Grants and Hardship Fund
- Economic Recovery Plan
- Leisure Services Recovery Plan
- Review of Portfolio Holder Responsibilities and Policy Committee's

Members were asked to note that the Council rapidly went back to the normal Committee timetable, which was much quicker than many Councils across the country. It was suggested that if the Emergency Committee were to be reconvened the frequency and demands of these meetings, both formal and informal might need to be reviewed.

When lockdown formally commenced the senior management team were split between the House, the Lodge and working from home, to maintain cover at each site and build an element of resilience through home workers should either site be badly affected by the virus. All office-based staff were allocated a primary site and would no longer be travelling between sites.

The Council moved almost overnight from 71 percent of staff working in the office, to about 12 percent, with the remainder being provided with the equipment to work from home. Display Screen Equipment assessments were also encouraged to ensure that staff working from home had a suitable environment.

Zoom had been rolled out to all staff, which allowed team, as well as the committee, meetings to be held in the virtual environment. This new way of working had already begun to be embedded in the organisation and real benefits were being seen for both for staff, customers and Members.

As the pandemic continued staff welfare had been a key focus; with a number of staff wellbeing surveys conducted, the launch of the A to Z wellbeing campaign and a mental health first aider scheme.

A Member noted the excellent response by the Council to the pandemic and commended officers on their work. She noted that working from home could have major benefits for the work/life balance of staff and also that Zoom meetings could make Council meetings more accessible and create a better understanding of the work of the Council and Members.

A Member suggested that in future these reports should contain a timeline in order to give a better understanding of the actions taken. He also noted that there were a confusing number of groups under the NRF and he questioned how coordinated the response through so many different bodies had been.

It was also suggested that the Emergency Committee had been set up to make a rapid local response to a disaster, not a long term pandemic and it was questioned if this had been the appropriate response to the situation and that Cabinet should have instead taken on these additional powers. It was also questioned if the decision to stand down the Emergency Committee should have been given to the Managing Director.

The Portfolio Holder for Better Lives confirmed that Cabinet had been kept fully informed of the decisions taken and activities being overseen by the Emergency Committee. She also wished to place on record her thanks to staff and Members for their commendable response to the pandemic.

The Assistant Director Governance and Business Support (Monitoring Officer) advised Members that drawing the powers to Cabinet had been considered, but it was decided that the Emergency Committee, with a revised Terms of Reference, was a more suitable body to respond to the crisis as it enabled cross party working and the ability to draw into the Committee the right skills and experience. The only area that might be looked at again was how swiftly the Council had returned to a full Committee programme, which had placed a strain on officer resources at a time when the recovery phase was still active.

The Chairman noted that whilst there had been considerable suffering during the pandemic that had also been benefits, in areas such as housing the homeless and identifying people who were suffering loneliness, who might never have come to the Council's attention.

A Member noted that since staff were working from home phone response time had improved at the Council. She also noted that a small group like the Emergency Committee was the right sort of body to respond to fast moving Government directives and suggested that Members should be surveyed on whether they had found the Emergency Committee to be the right body to deal with the crisis.

A Member noted that the Council's response showed the vital importance of local government, in terms of local knowledge and expertise, but noted that it had been

resource intensive both physically and financially and she wondered if there would ever be any recompense for Council Tax payers.

In response, the Assistant Director Governance and Business Support (Monitoring Officer) emphasised that the response to the pandemic had shown the calibre of staff and the benefit of engaging with partners and that the learning derived from this working had far outweighed the financial costs.

The Portfolio Holder for Better Lives added that a major benefit of engaging with partners was the amount of invaluable first hand data that was made available directly to the Council.

The Assistant Director – Individuals and Families took the Committee through the Community Response section of the report.

The community response approach had been to focus on older and more vulnerable, residents by utilising the Help Hub and over 4,000 volunteers to identify and help those people in need.

The Help Hub team was currently dealing with a 25 percent increase in workload in supporting residents affected by Covid-19 and housing and benefits staff were dealing with a 50 percent increase in demand. Staff were also watching out for the possibility of an increase in evictions due to the coronavirus. One of the main lessons learned from the pandemic was how effectively communities could respond to a crisis and staff would be taking this forward for the future.

The Committee wished to record their thanks to staff in the Help Hub and Community Teams for their hard work during these difficult times.

The Portfolio Holder for Better Lives noted that homelessness would be an ongoing problem, as the fallout from the pandemic unfolded.

In response to a query, it was confirmed that recruitment of staff for the Housing and Benefits Teams to cope with the increase in workload was being looked at and a Member briefing on housing and benefits related issues would be held at the end of the month.

Members were also advised that a new number had been set up for the Norfolk Vulnerability Hub that linked all the Help Hubs across the County, so that residents could be forwarded directly to their own district council for assistance.

A Member observed that leaflet distribution at the start of the pandemic had not been as quick as it should have been and that there had been a lack of consultation with local Members in respect of the rearrangement of streets in market towns to adapt to social distancing measures. He also asked if the Council was using the track and trace system to address the pandemic

In response the Committee was informed that a new track and trace scheme was being implemented tomorrow and Community Connectors had personally contacted all 67 staff at Banham Poultry who had contracted the coronavirus, which had contributed to a considerable amount of knowledge about the hardship some people were facing and how the Council could assist them.

The Assistant Director of Finance advised the Committee that Covid-19 had the potential to have a very significant financial impact on the Council and therefore was closely monitored.

Central Government had provided the Council with significant additional funding received in three tranches of £55,000, £1.3m and £200,000, to support services during the crisis.

However, a key risk was the potential loss of income of up to £2m from the closure of the leisure centres, although it should be noted that the Government had recently announced that it would be launching an Income Recovery Scheme, which would provide the Council with 75 percent of its lost income. A report would be taken to the November Cabinet to provide a further budget update.

Members were reminded, that the Council had been prudent and had significant reserves, so remained in a position to support residents through the pandemic.

In response to a query, the Assistant Director of Finance confirmed that the funding from Government was currently covering the Council's costs, however if there was a second wave and a further lockdown it would have a considerable further effect on the Council's income. Investment income had been low for some time and had not been affected by the pandemic. In respect of the local government pension scheme, there was a three yearly review of the pension scheme, which would look at contributions made by local authorities. It remained to be seen if the contribution from South Norfolk would increase.

The Assistant Director of Finance confirmed that despite the loss of income from the Leisure Centres the money from central Government meant that the Council should not need to use its reserves to fund services this year and would have a fully balanced budget.

In response to a suggestion that a cost/savings analysis of staff working from home be conducted; the Assistant Director of Finance advised Members that there had been clear examples of increased productivity from staff working from home. For example, the increase in the number of Housing Benefits claims being processed by staff in the benefits department.

The Assistant Director Governance and Business Support (Monitoring Officer) added that flexible and agile working were central to the ethos of One Team working for two Councils, outcomes and output are the key deliverables for staff and ensure that services are delivered in the most effective and efficient way.

The Assistant Director of Finance advised the meeting that on 24 March 2020 the full continuity response for Finance and Revenues had been invoked, which meant that officers could focus on the priority areas identified as essential.

In respect of debt collection, it was recognised that some residents were in financial difficulty, due to the pandemic, so it was decided to suspend recovery

action including in relation to overpaid Housing Benefit reminders, which also reduced the workload on the Housing Benefits Team.

An emphasis had also been placed on allowing staff to make a judgement on deferring Council Tax payments on a case by case basis, according to individual circumstances.

Debt collection had now restarted, although the court service had not yet started. It was stressed, however, legal action was only taken as a last resort.

Overall, there had been a slight reduction in collection rates for Council Tax and Business Rates, but they were holding up well in comparison with a number of other local authorities.

In response to a question, the Assistant Director Individuals and Families advised the meeting that although Member Grants allocation had a deadline of the end of the year there was an argument that this should be extended or rolled over due to the coronavirus. Members were also informed that were plans to hold two Zoom meetings for community groups in the autumn to identify further funding pots.

The Assistant Director of Finance advised the meeting that mandatory business grants had been very successful. Payments had been made quickly to those eligible businesses where the Council held the relevant bank details, other businesses were required to submit claims, so that the Council could obtain their bank details and assess their claims.

The Government had encouraged business grant payment to be carried out as quickly as possible, so there had been limited checks that the businesses qualified for the grants. There were now extensive post payment checks being undertaken to ensure that all of those in receipt of the grant were valid and to ensure that any money was returned, if not. Approximately ten such cases were currently being looked at in South Norfolk.

Discretionary Business Grants had proved more difficult to administer, as a criteria had to be decided upon before they were allocated. The Council had been given £1.5m for the Discretionary Grant Fund and had explored pooling the money for a Norfolk wide scheme, but it was decided by the end of May that this would not be the best approach.

In response to a query regarding newly formed businesses, who had not qualified for mandatory business grants, the Committee was informed that Cabinet had recently agreed to contribute £150,000 to the Covid-19 Fighting Fund, which would go towards a pot of around £7m that would also support businesses. There was no further money on top of this at that moment; however the Council would continue to lobby Government for more assistance.

The Chief of Staff advised the meeting that in July the Council had endorsed the Recovery Plan, which was based around a six point plan based on three key themes: the economy, communities, organisation and governance.

A report that captured an update of the Delivery Plan, as a result of the impact of Covid-19 on Council plans would be taken to the next meeting of Cabinet.

The Chairman noted that one of the key elements of the Recovery Plan was to support every business, which would include those recently started businesses that might not have qualified for mandatory grants.

The Committee confirmed its approval of the key learning from the Council's response to the Coronavirus pandemic and requested that the key point regarding home working be expanded to reflect Members' comments.

It was also requested that consideration should be given to the resource impact of the Emergency Committee and the most effective future governance mechanisms to support the Council response in the most efficient and impactful way.

RESOLVED

To

1. Note the response of the Council to support the District's communities and businesses during the Covid 19 pandemic; and
2. Endorse the key learning identified in the report.

1274 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND CABINET CORE AGENDA

The Committee noted the Work Programme and Cabinet Core Agenda.

(The meeting concluded at 10.50 am)

Chairman