

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council held on Thursday 4 August 2022 at 9.30am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: J Hornby (Chairman), Y Bendle, B Bernard, T Holden, J Halls, J Rowe and T Spruce

Apologies for Absence: Councillors: J Overton and J Worley

Portfolio Holder Present: Councillor: R Elliott

Officers in Attendance: The Assistant Director of Individuals and Families (M Pursehouse), the Leisure Business Development Manager (S Peet), the Senior Governance Officer (E Goddard) and the Committee Officer (J Hammond)

1313 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Overton and Cllr Worley.

1314 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interests were made.

1315 MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on Thursday 9 June 2022 and Thursday 30 June 2022, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

1316 LEISURE SERVICE RECOVERY PLAN UPDATE – END OF YEAR ONE POSITION – COVERING 1 APRIL 2021 – 31 MARCH 2022

The Leisure Business Development Manager presented his report which updated members on the progress regarding the Council's leisure service Covid Recovery Plan between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022.

He stressed the significant impact the Covid pandemic had had and was still having on the use and recovery of leisure services across the country. The hard work and commitment shown by the leisure staff was highlighted and the Leisure Business Development Manager explained that it was due to the staff's resilience and ability to react professionally in new and often fluid situations that had allowed the Council's leisure centres to remain open and accessible to residents and provide much needed social, physical and mental benefits to our communities.

Members were reminded that in July 2020, Cabinet approved the leisure service Covid recovery plan and had agreed to underwrite potential losses of up to £2.5M, for the period 2021/22 – 2023/24. Following this, three financial Covid recovery scenarios were produced:

- Scenario one (worst case) – would take the service back to pre-Covid position by April 2024 and cost neutral by end of March 2025.
- Scenario two (stretched target) – would take the service to cost neutrality by April 2024
- Scenario three (best case/maximum membership) – would make the service profitable by April 2024

The Leisure Business Development Manager explained that the end of year one financial position for the leisure service, was a total bottom-line cost to the Council of £1,049,147, which set the recovery ahead of both scenarios one and two and saw an underspend of the set budget for year one. He added that membership levels were now at 87% of pre-pandemic levels, whilst the average footfall was at 62% of pre-pandemic levels. It was noted that the limits on capacity as well as changes in customer habits during the Covid restrictions had had an effect on the level of recovery.

Member's attention was drawn to the potential risks which could affect the leisure services Covid recovery, which included: the current cost of living crisis and the consequent pressure on people's disposable income; local competitors and the opening of 'budget' 24-hour gyms near Norwich; and the very high increase in energy costs which impacted on the leisure service expenditure and budget. Members queried whether the increase in expenditure had been taken into account as part of the financial projections. The Leisure Business Development Manager explained that the Assistant Director of Finance had been involved in the budget work, it was noted that

with the leisure centres fixed term energy contracts coming to an end, a review of the financial projections would be required to taken into account the increased costs. The Portfolio Holder for Customer Focus advised the Committee that the Council had been investigating the installation of solar cells which would offset some of the energy increases.

Conversation turned to advertising the Council's leisure centres and the Leisure Business Development Manager explained that officers were working with TA6 to improve the digital presence, strengthen the South Norfolk Leisure brand and enhance messaging to reach a wider audience and drive traffic to the centres. One member suggested that officers include members in the online marketing schemes so that they could further circulate information to their parish councils and local community groups, which would allow the leisure service to reach a larger number of people.

One member queried whether the leisure centres were involved in GP referral schemes and provided free memberships. The Leisure Business Development Manager informed the Committee that the Council operated Broadly Active, which was a twelve-week exercise referral scheme which residents could be referred onto by a medical professional, he added that whilst not free, the scheme did offer subsidised activities and classes. The Assistant Director of Individuals and Families further added that residents who met the necessary criteria could apply for the South Norfolk Leisure Passport which cost £5 per year.

In response to a question the Leisure Business Development Manager advised members the recruitment and retention of staff had been an ongoing problem for the service, though it was noted that retention levels had improved in the last six months. Nationally there were shortages of swim instructors and lifeguards.

With regard to remaining Covid restrictions, members queried whether the stringent cleaning measures were still in place and if this incurred an extra cost to the service, the Leisure Business Development Manager advised that some of the additional cleaning measures were still in place at the Council operated leisure centres, however he would need to seek advice from the operations team on the exact costs.

One member queried the current opening times of the local leisure centres as they were concerned that centres, particularly Wymondham Leisure Centre, closed too early, especially at the weekend. The Leisure Business Development Manager explained that this decision had previously been made based on the recorded footfall and in order to cut costs. Members felt that the early close times put off customers who preferred to go to the gym in the evenings (after work) or at weekends. The Assistant Director of Individuals and Families advised the Committee that this decision could be reviewed.

Members noted that prior to the Covid pandemic the leisure service had the ambition to reach cost neutrality and queried whether this was still an achievable goal. The Leisure Business Development Manager confirmed that the intention was to reach cost neutrality by the end of the leisure service Covid recovery plan.

On behalf of the Committee the Chairman thanked all leisure service staff for the hard work and dedication shown during the Covid pandemic, special thanks were given to those staff who were seconded to the local hospitals at the height of the pandemic.

After further discussion, it was unanimously

RESOLVED

To endorse that officers continue:

1. To work with TA6 to help improve digital presence, strengthen the South Norfolk brand and enhance messaging to reach a wider audience and drive traffic to the centres
2. To work towards achieving the best leisure recovery scenario outcome
3. To work on the creation and implementation of a bespoke Leisure Service Strategic Delivery Plan. To include specific key performance indicators and actions for delivery over the next three years (aligned with the agreed Covid recovery plan)
4. To work on further commercial opportunities to improve provision for residents and increase income for the service (such as expansion / enhancement projects at Framlingham Earl Sports Centre and Ketts Park)

1317 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME, TRACKER AND CABINET CORE AGENDA

The Committee noted the Work Programme, Tracker and Cabinet Core Agenda.

Members requested that the Leisure Service Recovery Plan Update be brought back to the Committee at the end of years two, three and four.

The Chairman informed the Committee that the Assistant Director for Regulatory was due to bring two reports to the Committee regarding pilots that had been undertaken, but that no date had been confirmed.

One member queried whether the Environment Strategy should be considered earlier, in light of the new positions/appointments to the team and change in team structure. The Senior Governance Officer reminded members that the Scrutiny Committee would be reviewing the strategy itself and not how the team was operating. Members were informed that they could contact the Assistant Director for Regulatory if they wished to discuss the team structure or meet the new members of the team.

(The meeting concluded at 10.23 am)

Chairman