



Agenda Item: 4

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet of South Norfolk Council, held on Monday 13 June 2022 at 9.00 am.

Committee Members Present:	Councillors: J Fuller (Chairman), A Dearnley, K Mason Billig, L Neal and A Thomas
Apologies:	Councillor: R Elliott and G Minshull
Other Members in Attendance:	Councillors: D Bills, B Duffin, F Ellis, T Laidlaw and V Thomson.
Officers in Attendance:	The Director of People and Communities (J Sutterby), the Director of Place (P Courtier), the Director of Resources (D Lorimer), the Assistant Director Chief of Staff (E Hodds), the Assistant Director of Finance (R Fincham), the Assistant Director of Individuals and Families (M Pursehouse), the Assistant Director ICT/Digital and Transformation (C Lawrie), the Assistant Director for Regulatory (N Howard), the Assistant Director for Planning (H Mellors), the Strategy and Intelligence Manager (S Carey), the Food Safety and Licensing Team Manager (L Chant), the Housing Standards Senior Manager (K Philcox), the Housing and Benefits Manager (L Sayer) and the Democratic Services Manager (C White)

5 members of the public were also in attendance

3011 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors R Elliott and G Minshull.

3012 URGENT ITEM – EAST ANGLIA GREEN PROJECT

The Chairman explained that he had recently received a letter addressed to a number of Leaders, from six MPs, urging councils to object to proposals outlined in National Grid's East Anglia Green Energy Enablement (GREEN) project. This project was a proposal to build a new high voltage network reinforcement (a series of approximately 550, 50m high pylons) between Norwich, Bramford and Tilbury in Essex.

The Chairman felt it appropriate to discuss the matter as an urgent item, following receipt of this letter, dissatisfaction with National Grid's consultation process, strong objections from residents, and being mindful that the Council's response to the informal consultation was due on 16 June.

The Assistant Director of Planning explained that the consultation was a non-statutory informal public consultation and was an opportunity for the developer to provide an overview of the project to the public and explain the next steps. She advised that the Council's proposed response would object to the principles of the development, would advocate an offshore delivery, and support underground cables for the length of the route if onshore cables were required. The response would also highlight the constraints of the area, such as listed buildings, conservation areas, landscape sensitivities and environmental protection issues.

She advised that the project would be dealt with via the Development Consent Order Process with the decision being made by the Secretary of State and given the scale of the project it would be heard by way of a Public Examination. Members noted that the key stage for responses was the pre-application consultation which would take place between April and June 2023.

Mr B Spratt, resident of Tacolneston, explained that he had attended the consultation with National Grid held in Mulbarton Village Hall, and had been led to believe that the proposals were set in stone. He explained that National Grid had informed the meeting that an offshore solution was too expensive, although when looking at the figures, Mr Spratt had felt that the case for offshore was more marginal than what was being presented. He referred to the plans to bury the cables in areas in Essex and wondered why the areas of outstanding natural beauty in Norfolk were not similarly protected. He also made reference to the plateau farmland in the area and "Holford Rules", guidelines on overhead line routing, and he reminded members of the numerous historic and listed buildings throughout South Norfolk.

Mr G Lazell, resident of Bressingham, volunteer at the Bressingham Steam Museum and member of the Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk Say No to Pylons Campaign Group, addressed the meeting. He explained that some 18,000 people had signed the petition objecting to the proposal, and several Members of Parliament, Suffolk County Council and Mid Suffolk District Council had all publicly declared their opposition to the proposals. The Campaign Group had sought a QC's view, who had suggested that the current consultation process to be deficient, breached the Holford Rules and threatened the rural environment, amenities, property values, heritage assets, mental wellbeing, landscape and local wildlife. Mr Lazell urged councillors and residents to support the work of "OFFSET" (Off Shore Electricity Grid Task Force) chaired by Sir Bernard Jenkin MP and he reminded members that the project failed to deliver any economic supply benefits to Norfolk.

Members of the Cabinet expressed their support for the objectors to the scheme, referring to the cost to the community and impact on the landscape. They referred to the lack of opportunity to ask questions with a very limited consultation process in South Norfolk, and also queried plans to bury some cables in Essex, but not in Norfolk.

The Chairman referred back to Cllr Spratt's point and stressed that this was not a done deal. He expressed his dissatisfaction with National Grid's consultation process which had consisted of one public meeting at Mulbarton Village Hall during work hours and stressed that he had been disappointed to learn that it had declined offers from officers to provide them with a list of interested parties. He felt that insufficient thought had been given to a number of issues, including the constraints of the area, and with no economic impact analysis and the lack of detailed proposals, he felt that with no alternative options presented, the Council would need to object to the proposals.

He stressed that in the pre-application consultation process it was important that National Grid presented choice and detailed non-monetary impacts, including that on the landscape, wildlife and businesses. He felt it important that Cabinet did not solely support one option at this stage, until more details and facts were known.

Referring to the letter received from MPs calling on the Council to object to the proposals, Cllr Fuller suggested that he could assist in co-ordinating an integrated approach from those Councils concerned.

It was

RESOLVED

To respond to the informal consultation, objecting to the principles of the development.

The Reason for the Decision

Not enough details were presented, and no alternative options listed.

Other Options Considered

None.

3013 URGENT BUSINESS – MARKETING OF SOUTH NORFOLK HOUSE

Members considered the report of the Director of Resources, which sought agreement to begin the marketing of South Norfolk House, so as to reduce the length of time between the site becoming vacant and any future use going forward.

The Chairman explained that this was an urgent item due to the possible need for a change of use for the site, and the need to avoid unnecessary costs.

The Director of Resources presented her report and explained that there was a planning policy requirement that any change of use would require a period of a minimum of six months marketing to have taken place. As part of the work looking at future options for the site, it was suggested that the marketing commence as soon as possible, in order to keep all options open.

The local member for Long Stratton, Cllr A Thomas welcomed the proposals, and hoped that a buyer would come forward, that would offer high level jobs and career progression, similar to that at South Norfolk Council. She stressed that her key concern regarding the move to Horizon, had always been the loss of an employment zone for the community of Long Stratton. She requested that both she and Cllr J Worley as local members, be kept informed on progress so that they could update the Town Council accordingly.

The Chairman stressed that this would not preclude any discussions with the Town Council or other interested parties regarding the future use of the site.

It was

RESOLVED

To approve

1. The marketing of South Norfolk House in accordance with planning policy DM2.2 of the South Norfolk Local Plan
2. The delegation to the Director Resources, in consultation with the Leader of the Council to obtain an independent valuation to inform the valuation that has to be agreed with Planning Officers in advance of the marketing, as required by planning policy.

The Reason for the Decision

To ensure best value for the taxpayer and avoid unnecessary costs.

Other Options Considered

None.

3013 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received from members.

3014 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 19 April and 16 May 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

3015 STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE, RISK AND FINANCE REPORT FOR QUARTER 4 2021/22

Members considered the report of the Assistant Director of Finance and the Strategy and Intelligence Manager, which provided an overview of the performance of the Council for Quarter 4, against the key outcomes set out in the Delivery Plan.

The Portfolio Holder, Cllr A Dearnley, thanked officers for their lengthy and detailed report, which outlined the financial position for the Council at Quarter 4 , presented delivery measure performance, and provided an update on risks.

Cllr Dearnley drew members' attention to the Council's strong financial performance, referring to the exceptional one-off income received, and the significant revenue savings and efficiencies. Members noted that the revenue outturn figures were in line with the figures presented for Quarter 3, but with additional cost savings of £53k. It was also noted that a total of £9.447m had been spent on capital schemes, and attention was drawn to slippage requests detailed at paragraph 3 of the report.

The Assistant Director of Finance explained that the figures provided were provisional and would be finalised, once the Statement of Accounts had been approved at the Finance Resources Audit and Governance Committee.

During discussion, members referred to the knock-on effects of Covid and the impacts on businesses and building supplies which had impacted on the Council and resulted in some slippage. Members also noted the difficulties in recruiting staff which had left an underspend on salaries in most directorates. It was noted that this did lead to extra pressure on remaining staff and members acknowledged that despite this, performance had remained high.

Mention was given to the better-than-expected financial performance at the Council's leisure centres, and the Chairman referred to the revenue certainty over the next 3 years and the special reserve set up for that purpose.

Members also referred to the savings made as a result of the collaboration with Broadland District Council, currently totalling £8.5m. Despite performance being strong, Cabinet stressed that there was no room for complacency, and that savings and efficiencies would be continually sought.

Turning to performance measures, members noted that the percentage of planning decisions (majors) made within Statutory Timescales, was designated red, despite having very nearly hit 90% and the national tolerance being set at 60%. The Portfolio Holder, Cllr L Neal explained that this was due to the extremely high expectations set by the Council and suggested that with the impacts of Covid and the high number of staff vacancies, the target should be reduced. One member also suggested that unrealistic stretch targets were demoralising for staff.

The Chairman stressed the need to retain a sense of proportionality and suggested that a "red" was to be reserved for when there was a risk of failure and where urgent action was required.

The Portfolio Holder for Better Lives, Cllr A Thomas drew attention to the Council's excellent performance regarding the number of vulnerable residents supported by the Council's discretionary prevention services, with over 5,767

residents being supported over the last year. She stressed the need for this continuing support, especially during such challenging times.

Cllr Thomas also drew attention to the measure regarding the number of working days taken to process new claims for Housing and Council Tax Benefit, which had been designated as “amber”. She stressed that whilst the yearend performance had ended at 9.5 days, 2.5 days higher than target, the trajectory over the last 2 quarters had shown that performance was improving, with the average number of days in Quarter 4, dropping to only 4.

Attention was also drawn to the recycling targets and the Chairman was pleased to report that the dry recycling rate had increased by 2.7% and was one of the best rates in the country. Members also noted that for the first time in 10 years, the Council was receiving a financial return from the Materials Recycling Facility (MRF).

Referring to risks, members noted that several risks had been added to the strategic register, and the Chairman drew particular attention to the increasing risk of a cyber attack, and also Nutrient Neutrality. The Director of Resources added that the risks around infrastructure would be decreasing, as the new structure was nearly in place.

It was then unanimously

RESOLVED:

1. **TO RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL** the slippage requests for both revenue (detailed in para 3.16) and capital (details in para 3.19).
2. To note:
 - a) the revenue and capital position for Quarter 4 (variance details in Appendix 1).
 - b) the current position with respect to risks and agree the actions to support risk mitigation (detailed in Appendix 2).
 - c) the 2021/22 performance for Quarter 4 and the year end position (detail in Appendix 3).
 - d) the year end update of the 21/22 Delivery Plan (detail in appendix 4).

The Reason for the Decision

To ensure that processes are in place to improve performance and that budgets are managed effectively.

Other Options Considered

None.

3016 LICENSING SERVICES – SERVICE ENHANCEMENT OPTIONS

Members considered the report of the Food, Safety and Licensing Manager, which sought Cabinet approval for a service enhancement proposal and options for the provision of licensing-related advice and support to businesses, in connection with licensing products and their associated costs.

The Assistant Director of Regulatory, presented the report, and explained that the Council provided a good deal of free advice and support, but that this could not go beyond the Council's statutory services for every business at the same time. The Council was currently piloting a business regulatory support hub which would maximise all the free support to businesses, but in addition to that, the proposal was to introduce enhanced services that would add value to the existing statutory services. He explained that since the report had been considered at the Commercial Trading and Customer Focus Committee, the service enhancement fees and charges had been reduced slightly but would still cover the costs to the service.

In response to queries, officers explained that a need for an enhanced service had been demonstrated, and that the same proposals would be considered by Broadland District Council. Members noted that Breckland Council had in place a similar enhanced service, although via a more adhoc arrangement, based on working rates.

The Chairman felt that this was providing choice and certainty to businesses and welcomed the proposals.

It was

RESOLVED:

To

1. Authorise the piloting of enhancements to Licensing services at full cost recovery, for a 12-month period starting in 2022/23.
2. Agree the reinvestment of income generated from service enhancements to licensing activity into the Council's regulatory licensing service, so as not to impact on regulatory service capacity.

The Reason for the Decision

The proposals are in line with both the Strategic Plan and Delivery Plan 2022-2024, around growing the economy and protecting the public. It also supports the recovery of the hospitality and entertainment sector.

Other Options Considered

Do nothing – continue with the Council's existing provision and allow market forces to operate where licensees and prospective applicants wish to procure consultancy services (from the private sector).

3017 FOOD SAFETY SERVICES – SERVICE ENHANCEMENT OPTIONS

Members considered the report of the Food, Safety and Licensing Manager, which outlined the proposed service enhancement and options for the provision of food safety-related advice and support to businesses, in connection with food safety products and their associated costs.

Members indicated their support for the proposals, and it was

RESOLVED:

To:

1. Authorise the piloting of enhancements to Food Safety Services at full cost recovery, for a 12-month period starting in 2022/23.
2. Agree the reinvestment of income generated from service enhancements to food safety activity into the Council's regulatory food safety service, so as not to impact on regulatory service capacity

The Reason for the Decision

The proposals are in line with both the Strategic Plan and Delivery Plan 2022-2024, around growing the economy and protecting the public.

Other Options Considered

Do nothing – continue with the Council's existing provision and allow market forces to operate where Food Business Operators wish to procure 191 consultancy services (from the private sector).

3018 ENERGY REBATE SCHEME

Members considered the report of the Housing and Benefits Manager, which outlined details of the £150 Energy Rebate Scheme which was to be administered by Council tax billing authorities. The report also sought approval for the Discretionary Payment Scheme Policy.

The Portfolio Holder, Cllr A Thomas, introduced the report and explained that the Energy Rebate Scheme was very challenging to implement as the Council had a duty to ensure that payment went to the right person and the right account. It was relatively straight forward for those customers who already paid council tax by direct debit, but more work was required to obtain the correct account details, for those who did not. Members noted that letters had now gone out to all relevant non direct debit council tax customers.

The Housing and Benefits Manager explained that where details had not been obtained, relevant council tax accounts would receive a credit of £150.00.

She further explained that there was a discretionary element to the scheme which had already been implemented, and for which retrospective approval was sought. Members also noted that due to the number of different funds available, similar in nature to the Energy Rebate Scheme, Cabinet was requested to delegate such schemes to the appropriate Assistant Director and the Section 151 Officer, in consultation with the appropriate portfolio holder.

Officers responded to a number of queries and clarified that all payments in the main scheme needed to be made by 30 September, not November as had been stipulated in the Policy at Appendix 1.

The Monitoring Officer suggested a small tweak to the recommendations of the report, and it was

RESOLVED:

To agree to delegate permission for this and future discretionary schemes to be determined by the appropriate Assistant Director and the Section 151 officer in collaboration with the appropriate Portfolio Holder.

The Reason for the Decision

To provide assistance to residents at a time of increased Energy Costs. Delegated permission will allow funds for vulnerable residents to be administered in a timely manner.

Other Options Considered

Not to grant delegated permissions and request that all discretionary criteria go through Cabinet.

3019 CABINET CORE AGENDA

Members noted the latest version of the Cabinet Core Agenda.

The Chairman drew attention to the change in date of the next Cabinet meeting, to Monday 11 July 2022.

The Chairman also made reference to Nutrient Neutrality and members noted that there would be a series of relaxations over time, with many of the smaller proposals shortly being resolved. The Director of Place informed Cabinet that there would be a risk-based approach based on locational criteria and the drainage and water network. He suggested that the approach would not require Cabinet approval, although the Leader and relevant portfolio holder would be kept informed. In response to a query regarding the Long Stratton bypass, he explained that some developers were being proactive in finding their own solutions and he remained optimistic about the delivery of the bypass.

3020 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS

It was **RESOLVED** to exclude the public and press from the meeting under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 for the following item of business on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act (as amended)

3021 PROPOSED COMPULSORY PURCHASE ORDER ON AN EMPTY HOME

Members considered the *exempt* report of the Assistant Director of Individuals and Families, which sought Cabinet's agreement on the enforcement options considered in relation to a long-term empty property within the district.

The Assistant Director of Individuals and Families outlined the details of his report and the proposals to members.

Members expressed their support for the recommendations and suggested a back stop date to be communicated with the presumed owner.

It was

RESOLVED:

To agree the recommendations as outlined at paragraph 9 of the report.

The Reason for the Decision

To allow an unused property to be available to a family in need of housing.

Other Options Considered

To take no action.

(The meeting concluded 10.35 am)

Chairman