

ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT POLICY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Economy and Environment Policy Committee of South Norfolk District Council, held on Friday 22 April 2022 at 2pm.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: J Knight (Chairman), C Brown, D Elmer, K Hurn and R Savage

Apologies: Councillors: F Curson, G Francis, J Overton and S Nuri-Nixon

Substitute: Councillor: N Legg (for G Francis)

Officers in Attendance: The Assistant Director for Regulatory (N Howard), the Assistant Director of Economic Growth (G Denton), the Economic Growth Programme Manager (D Baillie-Murden), the National Management Trainee (E Howman) and the Democratic Services Officer (J Hammond)

32 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Curson, Cllr Francis (with Cllr Legg substituting), Cllr Overton and Cllr Nuri-Nixon.

33 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

34 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Economy and Environment Policy Committee held on 30 March 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

35 ECONOMIC GROWTH STRATEGIC PLAN

The Economic Growth Programme Manager introduced the report, which presented the South Norfolk Economic Growth Strategic Plan 2022-2027 and

summary document and sought the Committee to recommend to Cabinet that it approve and adopt the plan.

Members were advised that the Strategic Plan outlined the activities and projects which would be undertaken by the Economic Growth team to deliver against the priorities in the Council's Delivery Plan.

The Economic Growth Programme Manager explained that the long-term impacts of the pandemic as well as the emerging cost of living crisis had highlighted the need of an Economic Growth Strategic Plan. The proposed plan built upon local vision, whilst identifying the social and economic challenges, economic strengths and opportunities and detailed the actions and commitments needed to support clean, inclusive and productive growth. She further added that this would be achieved by focusing on four main priorities:

1. **Growth and Investment** – supporting businesses and breakout sectors and securing capital funding
2. **Quality Locations and Infrastructure** – quality and affordable housing, building community resilience, improving public transport and improving general infrastructure/connectivity
3. **Skills and Lifelong Learning** – addressing the skills shortage, creating high level employment and tackling long term unemployment while maintaining equality of opportunity and inclusive growth
4. **Enterprise** – encouraging the use of new technologies and developing networks

In delivering the plan, attention would be paid to the opportunities and potential which existed in key clusters selected.

Key clusters included:

- Manufacturing and Engineering
- Visitor Economy and Cultural Sectors
- Agri-food and Life Sciences

Emerging clusters included:

- Finance, Insurance and Professional Services
- Energy and Clean Technology

The Assistant Director of Economic Growth advised the Committee of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) which formed part of the Government's 'Levelling Up' agenda. He explained that the Council was required to submit a three-year Investment Plan by the end of June 2022 in order to bid for £1.75million in funding. Due to the fast-moving nature of the funding bid, the Assistant Director of Economic Growth proposed four additional recommendations to Cabinet. These additional recommendations proposed the use of the Economic Strategic Plan as a framework for the three-year Investment Plan, as well as delegated authority be given to the Assistant Director of Economic Growth, in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder:

1. For the creation, finalisation and submission of a three-year Investment Plan to meet the requirements of the UKSPF
2. To sign the contract and accept the terms of the UKSPF, subject to appropriate legal advice
3. For the allocation and expenditure of funding of the UKSPF, in line with the commitments set out in the Investment Plan and, by exception, lines of expenditure not included in the plan.

One member noted that at its last meeting the Committee recommended to Cabinet the post of a Community Infrastructure Officer, and queried whether this officer had had a role in creating the plan. The Assistant Director of Economic Growth explained that the role had not yet been filled, but once appointed, the officer would be involved in the implementation of the plan.

Discussion turned to the emerging Energy and Clean Technology cluster, and members highlighted the risk of public opposition to inland wind turbines, solar farms and battery storage as well as the feasibility of securing funding against more coastal districts. The Economic Growth Programme Manager explained that there was a large amount of inward investment surrounding clean energy and technology which South Norfolk District should take advantage of. One member believed that the current cost of living crisis and rising fuel and energy costs was likely to have shifted views on the acceptability of inland renewable energy generation in favour of energy security and stability.

One member supported the focus on Agri-food clusters and highlighted the need to support the farming sector, especially in light of recent food shortages and the cessation of EU and Government grants. It was also noted how this cluster could tie-in with Energy and Clean Technology.

A number of members stressed the importance of providing premises for businesses to upscale instead of solely focusing on start-up businesses, as there was already a large provision available for start-ups. Alongside this members highlighted the need to identify and support the growth of social enterprises.

Discussion moved to the key issue of Housing Affordability and the Council's aim of "increasing new and affordable homes for residents". Members felt that the Strategic Plan needed to be clearer in terms of the desired outcome, concern was also raised regarding the risk of further house price increases resulting from the promotion of higher skilled employment in the district.

In response to a query, the Assistant Director of Economic Growth explained that whilst the Council could not directly deliver energy network infrastructure across the district, it could build relationships with local Distribution Network Operators (DNO's) to lobby for better provision and influence the location of infrastructure inline with housing development and the development of new settlements. One member added that DNOs were seeking to engage with

local authorities whilst developing their five-year Business Plans in order to ascertain where to invest in future energy infrastructure.

With regard to the priority of Skills and lifelong Learning, one member felt that the Strategic Plan did not reflect the true scale of the issue, as there was already a severe skills shortage in South Norfolk prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was also felt that, whilst important, apprenticeships were not the sole route for removing inequalities which reduced social mobility. In response to a question, the Economic Growth Programme Manager confirmed that officers were liaising with the University of East Anglia to understand current graduate retention levels and how improvements could be made. Members also noted that graduate retention and addressing the skills gap in South Norfolk could only be successful if rural transport links and infrastructure were addressed.

After further discussion, a vote was taken, and it was unanimously

RESOLVED

TO RECOMMEND TO CABINET that it:

1. Approve and adopt the South Norfolk Economic Growth Strategic Plan 2022 – 2027 and use of the Summary as an externally facing document.
2. Agree to the use of the Economic Strategic Plan as a framework for the three-year investment plan required for accessing UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF).
3. Delegate to the Assistant Director for Economic Growth, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Stronger Economy and the Leader of the Council, for the creation, finalisation and submission of a three-year investment plan to meet the requirements of the UKSPF.
4. Delegate to the Assistant Director for Economic Growth, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Stronger Economy and the Leader of the Council, to sign the contract and accept the terms of the UKSPF, subject to appropriate legal advice.
5. Delegate to the Assistant Director for Economic Growth, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Stronger Economy, the Portfolio Holder for Finances & Resources and the Leader of the Council, for the allocation and expenditure of funding of the UKSPF. In line with the commitments set out in the investment plan and, by exception, lines of expenditure not included in the plan.

(The meeting concluded at 3.14pm)

Chairman