

## Agenda Item: 4

# CABINET

**Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet of South Norfolk Council, held on Monday 16 May 2022 at 4.00 pm.**

**Committee Members Present:** Councillors: J Fuller (Chairman), A Dearnley, R Elliott, K Mason Billig, G Minshull and L Neal

**Apologies:** Councillor: A Thomas

**Other Members in Attendance:** Councillors: F Ellis, C Hudson and T Laidlaw

**Officers in Attendance:** The Managing Director (T Holden), the Director of People and Communities (J Sutterby), the Director of Resources (D Lorimer), the Assistant Director Chief of Staff (E Hodds), the Assistant Director of Finance (R Fincham) and the Democratic Services Manager (C White)

### **3008 APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Cllr A Thomas.

### **3009 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were received from members.

### **3010 FUTURE OFFICE ACCOMMODATION PROJECT – APPRAISAL AND BUSINESS CASE**

Members considered the report of the Director of Resources, which sought Cabinet agreement to recommend to Council the purchase of the Horizon Centre as the Council's main offices, jointly with Broadland District Council.

Before the debate, the Chairman reminded members that the appendices to the report contained exempt information and should members want to refer to them in any detail, the meeting would need to go into private session.

The portfolio holder, Cllr K Mason Billig introduced the item, acknowledging the significance and importance of the decision to be made. She reminded members that they were custodians of taxpayers' money, the provider of

services, and employer to a large workforce, for which they had responsibility. She stressed that environmental concerns were at the forefront of everything the Council did and needed to be a consideration in making the decision today. Both the current offices were expensive to run and environmentally inefficient, with any environmental improvements being limited and expensive. The ongoing maintenance and running costs were high.

Members noted that staff were overwhelmingly in favour of working from one joint office. Cllr Mason Billig explained that all the options had been thoroughly researched and due diligence had been carried out, over and above normal procedures. She felt this had been necessary for a decision of this importance and she thanked the Joint Member Working Group and the Commercial, Trading and Customer Focus Policy Committee for all their work and deliberations.

Cllr Mason Billig referred to the importance of delivering quality services, with quality staff, and stressed that the Council needed the budget to deliver this. If the Council wanted to retain services and the ambition to improve them, it had to make further savings, and she felt that a move to the Horizon building was an opportunity to do that.

She advised Cabinet that she felt it very fortunate that the Horizon building had become available as it did fit with the future needs of the Council. She accepted that it was not perfect, but it did have potential to become what both Councils needed, had excellent environmental credentials, and was affordable.

Turning to the financing of the project, she explained the pay back period was attractive and the revenue savings to be significant. Members noted that the payback period would be below 5.1 years.

She then commended the report and its recommendations to Cabinet.

The Director of Resources then outlined each section of her report to members. During her presentation, she drew attention to the benefits of the Horizon building, including the lower running costs, reduction in capital costs going forward and the reduced impact of rising energy prices.

Turning to the environmental benefits, she referred to the 84% reduction in carbon footprint compared to the combined carbon footprint for South Norfolk House and Thorpe Lodge, and also explained that the building was substantially below the current decarbonisation pathways. Members also noted that Electrical Vehicle Charging Points would be available, with the ability to introduce more.

The Director of Resources then made reference to the One Officer Team and explained that one office would bring significant benefits through enabling a greater speed of delivery of cultural change and enhanced collaborative working both internally and externally, She also referred to the modern

working environment and increased public transport links, and the provision of a significant number of car parking spaces.

The reasons why a new build was not a recommended option, were also outlined, with reference being made to high costs, rising inflation, and time delays.

Discussion followed during which Cabinet expressed its support for the recommendations of the report. Members felt that the environmental issues, the potential for savings and the benefits to the One Team, outweighed any concerns. Members were satisfied that the project was affordable and felt that bringing the two offices together would accelerate cultural change and allow staff to work more productively and efficiently.

The Chairman raised the suggestion that had been made that South Norfolk members had been too unwilling to move to Thorpe Lodge. He stressed that South Norfolk had dismissed this option, purely because the building and carpark were not big enough to accommodate staff working more than 2.5 days each week, and this he felt would only hinder staff and the One Team in moving forward.

In response to a query, the Managing Director confirmed that following a survey during a virtual staff briefing, made up of approximately 250 staff, 78% of staff had indicated that it would like officers to be located at one site. He explained that it was important to find a site that would accommodate all staff at any one time and suggested that the Council needed to find a balance, in allowing staff flexibility to work at home, whilst also allowing teams to build and flourish. There had been a lot of new staff in recent months, and it was important that they were able to share their fresh ideas with other team members, and also learn from more experienced colleagues.

The issue of accessibility for all residents was raised and Cllr G Minshull, local member for Diss explained that the proposal for a local office in either Harleston or Diss, had negated his original concerns regarding this. Members also welcomed the addition of a mobile van to visit areas of the district.

Referring to the potential redevelopment of South Norfolk House, should a move be approved, the Chairman raised the option of the Town Council purchasing the site and developing it into a community hall. He also favoured the option of repurposing the site for the provision of active retirement/supported living accommodation, providing bungalows and single level living units with communal facilities, for the over 55s. He felt that Long Stratton was an appropriate settlement for such a development with shops and a main bus route, and that this would address the shortfall of that particular accommodation in South Norfolk.

The Chairman thanked officers for a very comprehensive piece of work, and also thanked all other members who had been involved in the process. He felt that due diligence had been carried out and stressed that it was unusual for so many surveys and additional reports to be produced at this stage of a building purchase, and before formal negotiations had taken place. He recognised that this was huge decision for the Council and that everyone had different concerns and opinions about moving. However, he felt that a compromise needed to be found, and on balance he considered that along with the savings and energy efficiencies to be made, the benefits to staff and the positive environmental impact that the move would bring, the Horizon building was a good option for all. He reminded members that the partnership with Broadland had already saved the Council £1.2m per annum, and that this would increase to at least £1.6m if the Council agreed to move. With these additional savings in mind, he suggested that the Council would be able to freeze Council Tax levels for 2023/24.

It was then unanimously

**RESOLVED:**

**1. TO RECOMMEND THAT COUNCIL** agrees to

- a) Purchase the Horizon Centre jointly
- b) Share any future capital costs on an equal basis between both Broadland Council and South Norfolk Council if jointly owned.
- c) Share the revenue expenditure related to the Horizon Centre in accordance with the agreed apportionment model in place for that financial year.
- d) Share any net income from third party occupancy or rental of the Horizon Building on an equal basis between both Broadland Council and South Norfolk Council if jointly owned.

**2. To agree to:**

- a) Establish a Facilities Management Agreement between the two Councils that incorporates the governance arrangements in relation to the Horizon Centre, this is to be delegated to the Leader in consultation with the Director Resources.
- b) Explore the options recommended by the Commercial, Trading and Customer Focus Committee for the future of the South Norfolk House site.

**The Reason for the Decision**

The purchase of the Horizon Centre would deliver significant benefits.

### **Other Options Considered**

That the Council offices remain at South Norfolk House.

(The meeting concluded 4.40 pm)

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Chairman