

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a remote meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council, held on Wednesday 5 August 2020 at 9.30am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: G Minshull, B Bernard, V Clifford-Jackson, B Duffin, T Spruce, J Wilby, J Rowe and R Savage

Apologies for Absence: Councillor: J Hornby

Cabinet Member Present: Councillor: J Fuller

Officers in Attendance: The Director of Place (P Courtier), the Acting Assistant Director of Economic Growth (T Armstrong) and the Senior Governance Officer (E Goddard)

1268 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 6 February 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

1269 REVIEW OF MARKET TOWNS CONFIDENCE CAMPAIGN

The Cabinet Member, Cllr J Fuller, introduced the report which invited the Committee to comment and make recommendations on work undertaken during the Confidence Campaign within the market towns. The Acting Assistant Director for Economic Growth highlighted key considerations which arose from the Campaign.

Members noted that work within the market towns commenced on 9 May 2020, in line with Government advice and guidelines, and the Committee was invited to make suggestions which could encourage visitors to the market towns and enhance the economy in light of the pandemic.

It was noted that residents were anxious about leaving their houses during the pandemic and the Council needed to create a safe environment for people to feel confident in going out. Members' attention was drawn to the collaborative work

between South Norfolk, Broadland and Breckland Councils which created the 'Confidence Campaign', allowing the councils to act quickly and in a unified manner.

Members thanked officers for their quick response in organising and implementing the Confidence Campaign, in order to reopen the market towns following lockdown. The Committee noted that the Council's overriding priority was to protect visitors and residents.

Members voiced concern over the abuse directed at Council officers when marshalling the market towns. Officers were praised for their contributions to the Confidence Campaign, with many going above and beyond to create safe and controlled environments in the market towns.

During discussion, a query was raised regarding the liaison between officers and the local members and some members of the Committee felt that this had been limited, however, the local member for Diss felt that there had been adequate communication between officers and members within his area. The Committee acknowledged that within the tight timescales, the Council did not have the capacity to liaise thoroughly with all interested parties, including all town and parish councils and businesses.

Members were pleased to note that officers had responded quickly to feedback received and had made amendments to traffic restrictions and changes to road layouts, when felt appropriate.

The Committee was informed that South Norfolk's approach to restrictions was different to that of Norfolk County Council's; the use of natural plant boxes was favoured as opposed to orange barriers, which made the market towns more attractive.

The Committee discussed how the Council could best involve local traders in the event of a second wave of COVID-19 and a suggestion was made that an online trader group could be established. Members welcomed this approach, noting that it had potential to create stronger relationships between the Council and traders. It was also suggested that a Task Group could be established to consider how the Council could effectively communicate with traders in the market towns.

A further suggestion was made regarding the possibility of tripartite meetings involving district councillors, county councillors and businesses, to set future strategies, whilst acknowledging lesson learnt. It was also felt that such a group could consider further support and training for businesses.

Officers agreed to consider all the above suggestions further.

In response to queries regarding how the campaign was financed, officers explained that the Government had allocated some funds that had been used for signage and implementation of traffic restrictions within the market towns. The Council's Emergency Committee had also allocated £100,00 to the Confidence Campaign from the Council's budgets, and monies from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) had been made available to support the safe reopening of high streets and other commercial areas. Members were made aware of the restrictions in place when spending this funding.

The Acting Assistant Director for Economic Growth explained that there were still some ongoing costs, relating to the traffic marshals in Harleston to assist in the closure of the Thoroughfare, and the watering of plant boxes. It was noted that the watering of plant boxes was due to end in September and costs had been minimal as watering had been undertaken by volunteers.

A member raised concerns over the implementation of the Test and Trace systems in the area. He noted that visitors would need to provide honest information for it to work and queried whether the Council could do more to promote it on its communication channels.

The conversation turned to Council-owned car parks in the market towns, and the decision to recommence charging. Several members felt that the removal of car parking fees would encourage more shoppers into the towns, boosting the local economy. A member suggested the potential introduction of two-hours of free parking during the COVID-19 pandemic, which they considered would encourage residents to regain confidence in going out and shopping local. Members were keen to propose that Cabinet reviewed the parking charges in the market towns.

A brief discussion followed where it was noted that the car parking charges did not provide profit to the Council, with any surplus being used for maintenance and the upkeep of the car parks. The Cabinet Member reminded members that charges were in place to encourage the churn of car parking spaces and that free parking could result in spaces being used by workers and commuters, making it harder for shoppers to have access to spaces.

The Cabinet Member advised that the largest shopping space in the District was the Longwater retail park in Costessey. Members noted that as the retail park was privately owned, the Council had not been involved in plans to ensure that it was operating in a Covid-safe environment.

He also advised Members that footfall in shops was generally down nationally by 20-30%. It was difficult to measure this in South Norfolk, however it was believed that the downturn within South Norfolk was generally less than the national average.

It was

RESOLVED:

1. To note the contents of the report; and
2. To recommend that:
 - a. Officers consider the suggestions put forward by the Committee and provide feedback at a future meeting in six months' time.
 - b. 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.

1270 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