

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet of South Norfolk Council, held on Monday 31 October 2022 at 9.00 am.

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

Other Members in Attendance: Councillors: D Bills and T Laidlaw

Officers in Attendance: The Managing Director (T Holden), the Director of People and Communities (J Sutterby) the Director of Place (P Courtier), the Assistant Director of Finance (R Fincham), the Chief of Staff and Monitoring Officer (E Hodds), the Assistant Director of ICT/Digital and Transformation (C Lawrie), the Assistant Director of Planning (H Mellors) the Strategy and Intelligence Manager (S Carey), the Senior Community Planning Officer (R Squires), the Strategic Growth Manager (N Cunningham), and the Democratic Services Manager (C White)

3050 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr R Elliott declared an “other” interest as a Wymondham Town Councillor and confirmed that he would not vote on item 5 - Wymondham Neighbourhood Plan Submission.

3051 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held on 17 October 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

3052 WYMONDHAM NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN SUBMISSION

The Chairman reminded Cabinet that it had considered the Wymondham Neighbourhood Plan back in April and had referred it back to the Town Council for further work, as it was not considered to have enough detail or to be robust enough to inform Planning Committee decisions. It had also been noted that at that stage, the Neighbourhood Plan had not been formally signed off by the Town Council. Members now had before them the resubmitted Plan that had been agreed by the Town Council.

Cabinet was advised that the Scrutiny Committee had considered the Neighbourhood Plan but had not suggested any amendments.

The Chairman suggested that the new document had been significantly improved in every respect. However, he did feel that there were still some areas where more detail would have been welcome.

He expressed his disappointment that the list of Neighbourhood Plan projects had not been more ambitious, and he reminded the meeting that the Town Council was in receipt of a considerable amount of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). He referred to the lack of reference to the adaptations required at Platform 2 at the town's railway station, suggesting that to identify it here, would help to strengthen ongoing discussions with Network Rail. The Chairman also cited the importance of Wymondham train station as a link to the University of East Anglia and Norwich Research Park and he felt that it had been an omission not to include this in the Plan.

Referring to the section on implementation and monitoring, he suggested that this area required expanding and that the Town Council should be encouraged to set out precisely how it would prioritise, implement, monitor and finance projects. He noted that further proposals for projects might come forward as part of the consultation process.

The Director of Place emphasised the importance of the Town Council addressing community and strategic infrastructure and explained that the projects currently listed in the Plan could be further developed with the help of South Norfolk Council, which had the resources available to help facilitate these schemes.

Cllr L Neal informed the meeting that she was pleased to see a much-improved Neighbourhood Plan that would help determine planning applications. She confirmed that she would support the Plan proceeding to the consultation stage.

The Senior Community Planning Officer drew members' attention to Appendix Two, which detailed the areas addressed by the Town Council, following the Council's consideration of the earlier iteration of the Plan. This included improvements to provide more detailed graphics and policy maps, as well as revisions for green infrastructure maps. He advised members that in general the Plan had been expanded upon in respect of economic and housing growth and now demonstrated a more holistic approach to the aspirations of the community.

Referring to Appendix Three, the proposed regulation 16 response from South Norfolk Council, the Senior Community Planning Officer explained that officers were suggesting further annotations of green infrastructure areas to be protected and the need to make the surface water policy more locally specific.

The Chairman suggested that Cabinet should agree the submission of the Neighbourhood Plan, including the Council's response, however, asked officers to challenge the Town Council and the Steering Group to bring forward more projects of a strategic nature.

It was

RESOLVED:

To agree

1. That the submitted Wymondham Neighbourhood Plan meets the requirements of Part 6 of Schedule 4B of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.
2. That the Neighbourhood Plan can therefore proceed to consultation, in accordance with Regulation 16 of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012, and subsequently to an independent examination.
3. That the proposed South Norfolk Council response, as detailed in Appendix 3, be formally submitted as part of the Regulation 16 consultation.

The Reason for the Decision

The Plan has met all the assessment criteria and in accordance with the regulations should proceed to consultation, as amended.

Other Options Considered

None.

3053 BUSINESS RATES POOL PROJECTS AND EXPENDITURE

The Portfolio Holder, Cllr L Neal introduced the report, which sought funding from South Norfolk Council's remaining allocation of the Norfolk Business Rates Pool (2020/2021) to support the following projects:

- £300,000 contribution towards infrastructure works to unlock the allocated Hethel employment land; and
- Up to £125,000 additional funding towards the Harleston public realm works scheme.

Cllr Neal advised the meeting that the works at Hethel was an exciting prospect that would unlock massive investment at the site, which when developed could deliver 870 new jobs. The £300,000 was requested as match funding towards the delivery of a roundabout and new access road for the employment site.

The scheme at Harleston was already underway and should be delivered by Christmas, but due to inflationary pressures build costs had been revised upwards and all stakeholders had been requested to contribute to the additional cost. Members noted that for South Norfolk Council, this was an additional £125,000.

The Strategic Growth Manager informed the meeting that the infrastructure works at Hethel would open up 20 hectares of employment land and a further 93 acres might come forward at a later date. She added that since the report was drafted legal advice had confirmed that the funding for the schemes was fully compliant with all relevant UK Subsidy Control requirements.

The Chairman informed the meeting that Lotus had attracted nearly £1bn in inward investment and had firm orders for 10,000 cars and was aiming to produce 7,000 cars per year. He noted that this was probably the most exciting inward investment opportunity in Norfolk for years and that the Council should do all it could to support it.

In respect of the Harleston project he reminded Cabinet that the Neighbourhood Plan had received 87 percent approval in the recent referendum and that the Council should ensure that the public realm met the modern expectations of residents.

Members emphasised the importance of supporting the Hethel scheme, which would lead to more skilled jobs and prosperity in the District. A member suggested that the works being undertaken at Harleston should, if possible, be rolled out to other market towns in South Norfolk to make the public realm more attractive and improve them as hubs in the wider community. Cllr A Thomas commented that she would like to see a similar scheme in Long Stratton, once the bypass was built, to make the area more attractive for the community.

Members noted that the work at Hethel, which was of huge value from an employment perspective, would also benefit Hethel Engineering, which had become a centre of excellence for small engineering businesses and could allow them to grow and expand on that site, rather than moving elsewhere.

The Chairman agreed with the opinions expressed above and stressed the importance of CIL co-investment between the Council and market towns to deliver infrastructure to support and improve the public realm.

It was

RESOLVED:

To agree

1. A financial commitment of £300,000 to support delivery of the Hethel Employment Land Infrastructure improvements from the Council's allocation of the Norfolk Business Rates Pool 20/21.
2. An additional financial commitment of up to £125,000 to support the delivery of the Harleston public realm works project, from the Council's allocation of the Norfolk Business Rates Pool 20/21.
3. To delegate to the Director of Place in consultation with the S.151 officer to finalise the funding arrangements for both projects, including the expenditure profiles and use of additional funding.
4. That subject to appropriate legal and procurement advice, to delegate to the Director of Place the signing of any required contracts and procurement requirements associated with these funding contributions.

The Reason for the Decision

To utilise the Council's allocation of the Norfolk Business Rate Pool for the delivery of infrastructure to support growth and economic development in the District.

Other Options Considered

None

3054 FIRST-CLASS CUSTOMER SERVICE – CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE PHASE ONE

Cabinet considered the report, which proposed initiating a discovery phase to explore the delivery of a first-class customer experience, via a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system.

The Chairman advised the meeting that a CRM system would automate the Council's services and free up staff to do more productive work. This would help address the increase in demand for Council services and effectively allow more to be done for less.

The Assistant Director ICT/Digital Transformation outlined the benefits a CRM system would bring the Council and she informed the meeting that the discovery phase would deliver a fully costed business case for a CRM, that would include the proposed technological solutions and programme of work that could deliver it. The discovery phase would use the £60,500 that had already been earmarked for this purpose by Cabinet in February 2022, for consultancy support.

The Chairman noted that a robust database was very important for delivering Council services and that people now expected a simpler access point to the full range of Council services. He added that the principle for a CRM had already been accepted and had been included in the budget.

Members agreed and considered this to be a logical progression that would improve customer services.

It was

RESOLVED:

To agree:

1. To initiate the discovery phase as the first phase towards establishing the current state, the future state and the underpinning technology to inform a fully costed business case for investment to delivering First-Class Customer Service.
2. To utilise £60,500 of South Norfolk Council's Earmarked Reserves for consultancy resource to support the One Team to produce a detailed business case for the delivery for First-Class Customer Service.

The Reason for the Decision

To identify and accurately quantify the benefits that could be achieved by a CRM prior to investment.

Other Options Considered

None.

3055 USING INTELLIGENCE TO ACHIEVE A FIRST-CLASS CUSTOMER SERVICE

The Chairman reminded the meeting that this item had been deferred at the 17 October 2022 meeting of Cabinet, as it was felt that more clarity regarding the benefits of the proposals was required.

He reminded members that the Council had a number of pressing priorities, and he felt that it was important that members understood what the Council was getting for the significant cost of this project.

Although the report had been expanded since it had been considered earlier that month, the Chairman felt that it failed to clearly state what the benefits would be and he stressed that members needed a greater level of understanding to assess what they wanted from the project.

The Portfolio Holder, Cllr Mason Billig noted that the scheme would bring the different databases across the Council together and that this would require three additional IT staff, at a time when staff were difficult to recruit and there were pressures on the base budget. She noted that this was an invest to save project but questioned if the Council currently had the available resources to bring it forward. She suggested that a joint Committee with Broadland might be the best way of investigating the proposals further.

The Chairman concurred with this view and reminded Cabinet that a commitment to re-establish the Commercial Trading and Customer Focus Policy Committee had been made at the last Council meeting. He proposed that the Committee should consider this matter possibly in collaboration with members at Broadland to identify what the proposals for a first-class customer service should look like and with tangible examples in order to get member buy-in for the project.

The Managing Director informed the meeting that the project was business critical for the organisation in order to have a better understanding of the various components of business delivery across both Councils. He welcomed member support for progressing the scheme and confirmed that a report would be brought back that would explicitly set out the delivery of savings and efficiencies from the project.

The Chairman emphasised that this could be a means to build a consensus between both councils on what success should look like, whilst being mindful of the recommendations made by the Peer Review Team to streamline and align strategic decision making between the Councils.

It was

RESOLVED:

1. That the proposals be deferred to a future meeting of the Cabinet.
2. That any future report demonstrates further the delivery of savings to be made, and that any proposals be considered first at a reconstituted Commercial Trading and Customer Focus Policy Committee meeting, preferably a joint meeting with Broadland District Council.

The Reason for the Decision

To progress the proposals through wider member participation in order to better determine the merits of the scheme and to balance its benefits with other Council priorities.

Other Options Considered

None

3056 PEER CHALLENGE FEEDBACK AND ACTION PLAN REPORT

Cabinet considered the report, which presented an overview of the Local Government Association Peer Challenge, which took place between the 11 and 15 July 2022.

The Peer Team had conducted a sector led review of the Council and provided pointers in areas where the Council could improve its performance.

As a result of the review, a report had been produced that provided a number of recommendations and from this feedback an Action Plan had been developed. Members noted that in accordance with the Local Government Association's guidance the Peer Challenge Report and associated Action Plan should be published within six weeks and the Peer Team should be invited to return in six months' time to review progress with the recommendations.

The Chairman noted that a key recommendation was for members to recognise the need to streamline processes and avoid duplication, which would save time and money and remove barriers to the delivery of services for residents and businesses. For example, by reducing the number of committees that reports went to before final determination. He suggested that the move to the Horizon building would also help in this process and help to build consensus between the two Councils.

The Chairman drew attention to the suggestion in the Peer Team's report, that the Council was not providing for principal repayments for loans to Big Sky. He stressed that this was an error of fact and that some very significant repayments had been made, adding that these funds might then be lent out again following a robust business case.

Cllr Mason Billig advised the meeting that she did not recognise the comments about behaviour in meetings at South Norfolk and she would encourage members and officers to speak up about any bad behaviour that they witnessed.

Members also noted the praise in the report for Council services and Cllr A Thomas observed that the Peer Team had identified that the Help Hub brought 'together a network of partners and services including the police, health, housing, benefits, voluntary sector, primary care networks and more to provide a bespoke "one stop shop" of support and advice to individuals or families in their times of need.' She agreed with the recommendation that services such as these should be celebrated more.

The Managing Director informed the meeting that the Peer Review was acting as a critical friend in pointing out areas for improvement and that the comments about behaviours aimed to improve the way the organisation worked together and that a number of these areas had already been brought forward as part of the Action Plan. He also noted that the Review had been held at a time of transition and the Peer Team had been very impressed by the partnership between the Council and the way that staff had moved seamlessly to the One Team. Overall, whilst some of the comments had been in the form of constructive criticism they should be borne in the context of a very high performing Council.

RESOLVED:

To:

1. Approve the publishing of the Peer Challenge Report; and
2. Adopt the Peer Challenge Action Plan.

The Reason for the Decision

To commit to the recommendations in the Action Plan in order to further develop, enhance and improve the performance of the Council.

Other Options Considered

None

3057 CABINET CORE AGENDA

Members noted the latest version of the Cabinet Core Agenda.

Cabinet was advised that their next meeting would be in the Council Chamber at Thorpe Lodge.

Members were informed that consideration of the Local Development Order for the Food Enterprise Park, scheduled for 20 March 2023, might need to be delayed.

(The meeting concluded 10.07 am)

Chairman