



EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL

Minutes of an extraordinary meeting of the Council of Broadland District Council, held on Thursday 2 March 2023 at 7pm at the Council Offices

Members Present: Councillors: J F Fisher (Chairman), A D Adams, S C Beadle, N J Brennan, D J Britcher, P E Bulman, S J Catchpole, J Davis, C Eden, J J Emsell, S C Gurney, N J Harpley, S I Holland, K S Kelly, S Lawn, J Leggett, K G Leggett, T M Mancini-Boyle, M L Murrell, G K Nurden, G Peck, D M Thomas, S A Vincent.

Officers in Attendance: The Managing Director (T Holden), the Director Resources (D Lorimer), the Director People & Communities (J Sutterby), the Chief of Staff (Monitoring Officer) (E Hodds), the Strategy and Intelligence Manager (S Carey), the Governance Manager (L Mockford) and the Democratic Services Officer (D Matthews).

194 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Monitoring Officer declared an interest on behalf of the following members who were also County Councillors: T Adams, J Fisher, S Gurney, G Peck.

195 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S M Clancy, J K Copplestone, A D Crotch, R R Foulger, D Harrison, L H Hemsall, N C Karimi-Ghovanlou, E C Laming, I J Mackie, I N Moncur, J A Neesam, R E Potter, S Riley, D Roper, L A Starling, J L Thomas, K A Vincent, J M Ward, F Whymark.

196 CONSULTATION RESPONSE TO THE PROPOSED NORFOLK COUNTY DEAL

Members considered the report which provided an overview of the contents of the in-principle County Deal for Norfolk and the proposed areas to consider as part of a consultation response.

The Leader stated that this was the only deal available for Norfolk and it needed to be the best deal that enabled investment and growth in Norfolk. The Leader

went on to draw attention to a number of amendments to the original draft response circulated to members. A summary of the changes had been circulated to members and were attached to these minutes. Many of the amendments related to references to the “principles of a Mayoral Combined Authority” which had now been removed as these focussed attention incorrectly on the MCA element rather than the intended focus being more collaborative and participative. The changes also sought to move the language used to a more positive “agree” rather than “do not disagree”.

The rating had altered in relation to two questions:

Question 3 had changed to “agree” that the Adult Education Budget should move from Government to Norfolk County Council – but the deal should go further by also seeking to include the development of Local Skills. With regard to question 6 - views on plans for an elected leader and cabinet system of governance - this had changed to “neither agree or disagree” as there was still much unknown information about how this role would function. This was a new model that was untried and untested and it was expected that more detail would come forward over coming months.

The Leader went on to state that it was important to allow all councils in Norfolk to work together collaboratively to deliver the devolved powers and functions, to drive investment and growth, and to develop the detail and understanding of how the directly elected leader model would work. There was a need to create the headroom for the Leader of Norfolk County Council, through negotiation with Government, to make the deal the best it could be.

The Leader then recommended Council to approve the draft consultation response, as amended, to the Norfolk County Council consultation on a County Deal for Norfolk, with any minor amendments delegated to the Leader in consultation with the Managing Director and Monitoring Officer.

A number of members raised questions about some of the proposals including:

- Were district council leaders still prepared to challenge in court the County Council’s autonomy in making the decision on the deal and if so how much would it cost? If the proposal had been retracted would an explanation be provided?
- In the absence of so much of the detail was the consultation too early?
- What had changed since the preparation of the Council’s response to the consultation that had caused changes to the proposed response?
- Was the elected leader role a paid position?
- Was there a “get out” clause should there be concerns about the new arrangements?

A member raised concerns that the proposals did not focus enough on local communities and there was no assessment of the effect of the deal on local communities and any benefits; this was a real gap. They also raised concerns that the new investment fund of £20m over 30 years was not sufficient and was not indexed linked. They also raised a question about the potential for opening up housing and employment sites and commented they felt there was already sufficient housing in the district and this would not be welcomed. With regard to investing in transport budgets, this included new road building which was not welcome. Re proposals for a directly elected leader, they had concerns that this did not enhance democratic accountability and representation and would concentrate power of decision making at the wrong level. The member supported the idea of devolution but felt this needed to be much more collaborative and they were therefore unable to support the deal.

A suggestion was made that the additional funding being allocated as part of the deal was not additional funding but was in fact replacing lost funding to the County Council over recent years and the deal could not be supported.

Another member commented that there were too many unknowns about the proposals to be able to support it and that the sum of money offered over 30 years was insufficient. Concern was also expressed that a proposal with so many unknowns was too much of a risk to take for Norfolk.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrats stated she wished to put forward an amendment to the proposed consultation response. She agreed with some of the concerns raised and felt the deal should be opposed as presented. She welcomed the concept of devolution but the deal being offered did not bring power and resources to the people of Norfolk. The deal had the potential to cause dispute and disconnect amongst the different layers of government in Norfolk and within the County Council itself. The sum of money on offer was derisory and would not support Norfolk's economy nor help meet the County Council's continued shortfall in funding from Central Government. The directly elected leader proposal was the only one of its kind nationally so it was not possible to see how it would work. It would add another layer of electoral process which would be out of sync with the district and county election cycle and could result in the elected leader being in control of a council of members primarily in various roles of opposition. Details of governance, structure and management were still vague. There had been many references to this being the only deal and one which could create lots of additional funding and responsibilities. Given that this deal was unique in structure with a directly elected leader, there were no guarantees it could be expanded or developed further.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrats stated the deal produced no benefits for communities and she urged members to reject it. She proposed an amendment that the Council's response to the consultation is that they strongly disagreed with all questions in the consultation.

A query was raised that a negative response to all the questions did not align with the concerns being raised as it would indicate that there was no desire to have more control of the money spent in Norfolk.

The Leader of the Council commented that the Council needed to provide a response to the consultation and to agree the basis of that response. There was an opportunity for any individual or group to submit its own response. The offer of “this deal” or “no deal” was not the Council’s choice and the ultimate decision as to whether to accept the deal rested with the County Council. The Council was being invited to respond to the consultation and the Leader stated he felt a blanket negative response to each question was not the right way to proceed. There was no option to have a mayoral combined authority and there was a need to examine the deal available mindful that there was still much detail to be confirmed. The proposed responses to the consultation including the narratives associated with each question had been drafted to enable the Council to continue to engage with the process whilst raising concerns with the aim of trying to help shape the deal in terms of the negotiations between the Government and County Council. It was envisaged that by the time the County Council was required to make its decision on the deal, the detailed information would be available.

In seconding the amendment, Cllr Beadle stated there was no comparable model to look to and the funding was insufficient. The Council could be locked into a deal with no real benefit; the deal was a smokescreen for cutting money for Norfolk.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrats stated that agreeing to some of the questions in the consultation sent the message that the Council was supporting the deal and as it stood she felt the Council could not support the deal.

Members then voted on Leader of the Liberal Democrat’s amendment and, with 7 members voting for, 14 against and 2 abstentions, the amendment was LOST.

The Leader of the Council then sought to respond to some of the questions raised earlier in the meeting. With regard to what happens next, he commented that the County Council would have the opportunity to consider the views raised as part of the consultation and hopefully use these to negotiate with the Government to make the deal better. The County Council would be voting on whether to accept the deal in December. With regard to the pre-action protocol, Broadland had withdrawn from the protocol as the original concern that the County Council would not be taking an appropriate vote at its council meeting had been alleviated as all county members had been given the opportunity to vote. It was unclear if other councils had also withdrawn. With regard to concerns about the need for more information and if it was too early to consider the deal, the Leader commented that the Council could only comment on what was currently in front of it at this time. The consultation would enable a wide range of views and opinions to be collected and used by the County Council as part of its decision making.

With regard to the directly elected leader, the Leader confirmed that this post would receive an allowance as was the case with other elected positions/leaders.

With regard to comments about the impact of the deal on communities, the Leader reiterated that individuals and communities were able to respond to the

consultation and share any concerns. With regard to a comment about housing need, the Leader refuted the claim that there was no housing need in Broadland stating that there was an extensive housing need in the district.

With regard to transport budgets, the Leader acknowledged the need for road improvements to be balanced with the need to protect the environment but referred to the huge benefits of recent new roads to local communities. The Council continued to support the need for the western link.

With regard to concerns about the accountability of the directly elected leader, the Leader commented that further information was needed before this could be fully assessed.

With regard to a “get out” clause, the Leader stated that this was not an issue for the district council as it would not be the decision maker. His understanding of the situation if the County Council decided to accept the deal was that there was no get out clause.

As far as the levels of funding were concerned, the Leader commented that the Norfolk deal arrangement for funding was above any other deal offered which was to be welcomed. He confirmed it was not index linked.

He did not believe the deal was about reducing funding as had been suggested, but instead was about giving additional funding and at a local level to support local decision making. All council's in Norfolk had received a 3% uplift in Government funding this year.

In seconding the proposed response to the consultation as amended, Cllr Peck stated that the County Council would not merely be rubber stamping the deal. A range of views and opinions currently existed amongst County members and the matter would be fully debated by the County Council, in the knowledge of the arrangements for the constitution and for scrutiny, before a decision was made. With reference to the level of funding available, he referred members to other devolution deals where additional money had subsequently been allocated. The current deal per capita was better financially than any other MCA deal. Other powers would follow, if the deal was agreed, together with more influence and more rewards. If the County Council was not satisfied with the deal in December it would not agree to the proposal and he felt it was important in the meantime to continue to contribute to the process. The County Council was one of 9 councils chosen to take part in a deal and if they did not proceed there would be a number of other councils keen to take their place. No other deal would be available. He felt the responses to the questions in the amended document generally reflected the views of those present and their reservations.

The Leader stated that this was a key issue for Norfolk and it was always difficult to make these decisions. The County Council had to make a judgement as to whether this would be a good thing for Norfolk and bring a stronger voice, more investment and more local decision making. The MCA was not an option and ministers had confirmed this could not be pursued. Evidence suggested that

those Councils who had agreed to deals had subsequently benefitted from additional deals and funding but there was no guarantee of this.

The Leader invited Council to support the amended proposal and, on being put to the vote, with 15 members voting for, 8 against, the amendment was agreed. Members then voted on the substantive motion to approve the draft consultation response, as amended, to the Norfolk County Council consultation on a County Deal for Norfolk, with any minor amendments delegated to the Leader in consultation with the Managing Director and Monitoring Officer. With 15 members voting for, 8 against it was

RESOLVED to

Approve the draft consultation response, as amended, to the Norfolk County Council consultation on a County Deal for Norfolk, with any minor amendments delegated to the Leader in consultation with the Managing Director and Monitoring Officer.

Chairman

(Meeting closed at 8:00 pm)