

BROADLAND OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Broadland Overview and Scrutiny Committee of Broadland District Council, held on Tuesday, 6 February 2024 at 6.30 pm.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: N Starling (Chairman), P Bulman (Vice-Chair), L Douglass, J Emsell, M Goodman, S Jones, C Karimi-Ghovanlou, E Laming, M Murrell, P Newstead, E Tovell, S Ward, F Whymark and T Yousefian

Cabinet Member in Attendance: Councillors: S Beadle, J Davis, N Harpley and D Roper

Officers in Attendance: T Holden (Managing Director), J Sutterby (Director of People and Communities), P Courtier (Director of Place), D Lorimer (Director of Resources), E Hodds (Chief of Staff), R Fincham (Assistant Director of Finance), H Mellors (Assistant Director of Planning), C Lawrie (Assistant Director of ICT/Digital and Transformation), J Nichols (Capital & Treasury Accountant), G Pell (Corporate Accountant), S Pontin (Planning Business Improvement Team Manager), S Carey (Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer) and J Overy (Democratic Services Officer)

85. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 9 January and 23 January 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

86. REVENUE BUDGET AND COUNCIL TAX 2024/25

The Assistant Director for Finance introduced the report, which presented the revenue budget for approval.

Members were advised that the budget being proposed in the report was a balanced budget with no need to draw on the General Fund Reserve.

The report proposed a £5 increase in Council Tax for band D properties to £134.91 for next year, an increase of 3.8 percent.

The Committee was informed that the final Government Finance Settlement had now been received and that this had not led to any significant change in the

provisional figures as set out in the report. Recommendation 1 could, therefore, be amended accordingly.

Overall, the Assistant Director for Finance confirmed that in his opinion budget was robust and the level of reserves was adequate for known and potential risks at this time.

With the Chairman using his casting vote it was,

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

That Cabinet recommends to Council:

1. The approval of the 2024/25 base budget.
2. That the Council's demand on the Collection Fund for 2024/25 for General Expenditure shall be £6,610,050, and for Special Expenditure shall be £98,931.
3. That the Band D level of Council Tax be increased by £5 to £134.91 for General Expenditure.
4. That the Band D level of Council Tax be £2.02 for Special Expenditure.
5. Changes to the proposed fees and charges as set out in section 6.

That Cabinet notes:

1. The advice of the Section 151 Officer with regard to section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003, contained in section 12 of this report.
2. The Medium-Term Financial Strategy projections.

87. CAPITAL STRATEGY AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2024/25 TO 2028/29

The Capital Accountant introduced the report, which set out the Council's approach to the use of its capital assets and resources for determining the Capital Programme.

The aim of the Capital Strategy was to help deliver the following key priorities of the Council:

- Empowering individuals and communities
- Cleaner, greener Broadland
- Providing the right homes in the right places
- Sustainable resilient local economy
- A modern caring Council safeguarding our future

The Capital Strategy focused investment to deliver these priorities whilst also contributing to the financial sustainability of the Council by supporting

opportunities to develop more efficient service delivery and to generate additional income.

The five-year Capital Programme came to a total of £21.044m. Expenditure for the Programme would be funded from reserves, grant funding and capital receipts. There would be no requirement to borrow to fund the Programme.

The Capital Programme included £5m for investment in Broadland Growth Limited that would enable the company to deliver housing development and generate an investment return to the Council.

The Programme was set out in detail in Appendix B to the report and included Disabled Facility Grants, as well as the refurbishment of the Waste Depot at Frettenham.

The funding analysis at paragraph 9.4 showed that £4.270m of General Revenue Reserves was required to fund the Programme and the S151 Officer advice that there was a need to review the Medium-Term Capital Programme during this forthcoming financial year in order to reduce the potential draw on the General Revenue Reserve.

Members were advised that Cabinet was fully aware of this issue and was committed to continually reviewing the Programme moving forward, to ensure that the Council obtains value for money and that the Programme was affordable.

In response to a query about Broadland Growth Limited, it was confirmed that the company was open to all development opportunities and that these would be looked at on a case-by-case basis. It was emphasised that there were a number of potential schemes that were being looked at.

In answer to a question about the maintenance works on railway bridges, the Assistant Director for Finance confirmed that these works were subject to ongoing review with the highest priority repairs being carried out as required.

It was also confirmed that the £3.2m budget provision was sufficient to cover the cost of the refurbishment of the Waste Depot.

The Assistant Director for Finance confirmed that, in his opinion as S151 Officer, the Capital Strategy represented a prudent and affordable approach to investment in the Council's assets to support service delivery and to contribute to the Council's financial sustainability over the next five years.

With the Chairman using his casting vote it was,

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

1. Cabinet to recommend to Council the Capital Strategy (Appendix A) and the Capital Programme for 2024/25 to 2028/29 (Appendix B).
2. Cabinet to note the advice of the Section 151 Officer in section 12 of the Capital Strategy.

88. TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY STATEMENT 2024/25

The Corporate Accountant introduced the report, which set out the Council's approach to the management of its investments and cash flows.

The Strategy adhered to the following three key treasury management principles:

1. Security – To ensure monies were not placed at undue risk, by ensuring all monies were invested in appropriate counterparties or instruments commensurate with the organisation's risk appetite.
2. Liquidity - To ensure that cash flow was adequately planned, with cash being available when it was needed, and that sufficient funding was available to finance the organisation's capital investment plans.
3. Yield - To maximise investment returns (commensurate with risk) and minimise borrowing costs to minimise the costs to the organisation.

It was emphasised that the security of the Council's funds was the most important of these considerations.

A member was pleased to note that the Council had an ethical investment policy.

The Committee was informed that the latest interest rate forecast from LINK, the Council's Treasury Management advisors, remained as set out in the report.

It was unanimously;

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

Cabinet is recommended to approve the following, and recommend these to Council

1. The Treasury Management Strategy Statement 2024/25
2. The Treasury Management Policy Statement 2024/25 (Appendix 1)
3. The Annual Investment Strategy 2024/25 (Appendix 2)
4. The Treasury Management Practice (TMP1) (Appendix 3)
5. The Treasury Management Scheme of Delegation (Appendix 4)
6. The Prudential Indicators (Appendix 5)
7. The Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Statement (Appendix 6).

89. COUNCIL PLAN 2024-2028 AND DELIVERY PLAN 2024-2026

The Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer introduced the report which presented the new Council Plan and accompanying Delivery Plan for the period covering 2024-2026.

The Council Plan was divided into the following four key priority areas, all of which specified the current challenges and opportunities facing the Council and the actions that it would be taking to meet these objectives.

- Empowering individuals and communities
- Cleaner, greener Broadland
- Providing the right homes in the right places
- Sustainable resilient local economy

The Delivery Plan supported this by setting out the work that would be undertaken to achieve these strategic priorities over the next two years and included the key performance indicators that were reported to Cabinet on a regular basis.

The Vice-Chairman informed the meeting that he was disappointed that there was no mention in the Foreword by the Leader of cost-effective services, which he suggested should be a priority.

In response, the Committee was informed that, although not stated in the Foreword, a key aim set out in the Plan was to ensure that the Council provide value for money services by making the best use of its resources for the benefit of its residents. It was also emphasised that the activities in the Delivery Plan were developed in tandem with the budget to ensure that they were achievable and viable.

In answer to a query about the Retrofit Accelerator Programme, the Assistant Director for Individuals and Families informed the meeting that work was being undertaken on the final details of a pilot project that would commence in April 2024 to support carbon reduction and improve the least energy efficient homes in the District. The Council was working to enhance its Warm Homes Programme with such pilot schemes, and this would place it in a good position to influence future funding opportunities when the current scheme came to an end in 2025.

The Portfolio Holder for Environmental Excellence added that the Council was anticipating future Government funding coming forward by developing this programme to reduce carbon emissions, improve the energy efficiency of homes and help with the cost of living. He emphasised that the Council's support of the Climate and Ecology Bill had demonstrated that the Council was ready and able to take advantage of further Government funding going forward.

This work also connected with a number of other initiatives, such as the green skill project to develop the skills required to implement a programme of retrofit, as well as the ongoing maintenance of new technology energy systems. This also linked in with the Norfolk Climate Change Partnership, which was helping to develop a scheme in Broadland to bring about behavioural changes to achieve net zero.

The Committee's attention was drawn to page 123 of the agenda, where it was pointed out that delivery of the Environmental Strategy was embedded in the work of the Council as business-as-usual activities that were budgeted for.

A member suggested reducing S106 contributions and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to help developers build more energy efficient homes

with bigger gardens to promote biodiversity,

In response, the Chairman suggested that developers could sell homes with bigger gardens for more in the first place, so would not need assistance from the Council.

In respect of CIL, the Director for Place reminded the Committee that much of this money was used for green infrastructure projects, and S106 money was generally used for affordable housing. CIL could not be reduced, as this was a regulatory levy on development that was set by Government. It was recognised, however that this was an ongoing problem for developers and that there was a tension between meeting environmental targets and building affordable housing going forward.

A member suggested that the Council Plan did not seem to be strategic enough and the Delivery Plan lack positive initiatives and the targets in it were not ambitious enough.

It was confirmed that the Food Innovation Centre was now classified as business as usual, rather than as a stand alone project.

With the Chairman using his casting vote it was,

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

To recommend that Council approves the adoption of the Council Plan 2024-2028 and Delivery Plan 2024-2026.

90. DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT - PRE-APPLICATION CHARGES

The Business Improvement Manager introduced the report which reviewed the charging structure for pre-application advice for planning applications.

Members were reminded that the Council introduced a charging structure for pre-application advice in 2021. When introduced it had been agreed that a number of categories would remain free of charge.

Following a recent update of national fees for planning applications and taking account of the recently agreed Joint Commercialisation Strategy and the current consideration of the Charging Policy, it was felt appropriate to review charges for pre-application advice.

The Committee was advised that the current charging structure did not recover the full cost of delivering the discretionary service.

It was proposed to continue providing initial high-level advice and permitted development advice to customers free of charge, but for a more comprehensive response that involved research or input from a range of officers / consultees, it was proposed to review the range of charges for the pre-application advice. The fee would include follow up discussions / meetings as appropriate, without a further fee.

The proposed increases were proportionate and were on a cost recovery basis and would result in being able to better meet demand and improve the service offered.

In answer to a query, members were informed that meetings would be arranged to meet the requirements of customers as required.

It was also noted that adaptations for disabled people would remain free of charge.

It was unanimously,

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET

Cabinet to recommend that Council:

Agree the revised charging structure, as set out in Appendix 3, from 1 April 2024.

91. LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING FUND: PURCHASE OF FURTHER PROPERTIES

The Director for People and Communities introduced the report, which sought pre-emptive agreement for the financing and purchase of further general use Temporary Accommodation properties under the Government's Local Authority Housing Fund (2) scheme. In accordance with the existing terms of the Fund the completion of properties purchased would need to take place by 29 March 2024.

Members were advised that Broadland had submitted an expression of interest to access this Fund on the 19 January 2024, subject to formal Council acceptance of any subsequent offer.

As of 31 January 2024, the Government had yet to respond with a formal allocation offer, however given the timescales for completion officers were seeking pre-emptive approval from Cabinet.

The Fund would subsidise the value of the properties by 40 percent and would also benefit the Council by reducing the significant cost of bed and breakfast accommodation.

The expression of interest had requested £240,000 of capital to purchase two homes with £40,000 for refurbishment.

Members noted that this was a very good opportunity for the Council.

RECOMMENDATION

Should an allocation of LAHF be made available to the Council:

1. Cabinet to delegate to the Director of People and Communities to accept the Government offer to the Council of LAHF funding for the purchase and refurbishment of further properties to be used as general needs temporary accommodation.

2. Cabinet to recommend to Council to delegate to the s151 officer the addition of up to £235,000 to the LAHF capital budget to enable the provision of matched funding, to be funded via Broadland Growth general reserves monies.

(The meeting concluded at 7.36 pm)

Chairman