



SOUTH NORFOLK CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the South Norfolk Cabinet of South Norfolk Council, held on Monday, 4 December 2023 at 9.00 am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: J Fuller (Chairman), D Elmer (Vice-Chair), K Carsok, R Elliott, K Kiddie, G Minshull and L Overton-Neal

Officers in Attendance: P Courtier (Director of Place), D Lorimer (Director of Resources), R Fincham (Assistant Director of Finance), E Hodds (Chief of Staff), M Pursehouse (Assistant Director of Individuals and Families), C Lawrie (Assistant Director of ICT/Digital and Transformation), H Mellors (Assistant Director of Planning), G Denton (Assistant Director of Economic Growth), D Baillie-Murden (Programme Manager - Economic Growth), S Carey (Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer), S Crook (Transformation and Innovation Lead Officer), R Dunsire (Strategic Housing and Independence Senior Manager), P Harris (Place Shaping Team Manager), L Sayer (Housing and Benefits Manager), S Marjoram (Principal Infrastructure and Planning Policy Officer), J Pailes (Community Infrastructure Officer) and L Arthurton (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in Attendance: Cllrs J Cook, K Cross, J Rowe, J Webber. Shaun Vincent and two members of the public.

3172. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

3173. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

All members declared that they had been lobbied by the Parish Council on minute 3176 South Norfolk Community Infrastructure Fund Application - Easton Community Centre.

3174. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 November 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

3175. NUTRIENT NEUTRALITY JOINT VENTURE UPDATE

The Chairman introduced the item noting that Anglian Water had withdrawn from the Norfolk Environmental Credits (NEC) joint venture. He further explained that approval of the Council's shareholder representative on the Member Board of NEC and the Director appointment to the Board would be included in the Monitoring Officer's report at the next Council meeting.

3176. SOUTH NORFOLK COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE FUND APPLICATION - EASTON COMMUNITY CENTRE

Members considered the report of the Growth Delivery Manager, which detailed Easton Parish Council's request to utilise the South Norfolk Community Infrastructure Fund and draw-down Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) receipts ahead of projected payment dates to a value of £500,000 in order to fund and complete the ongoing build of the Easton Community Centre.

The Chairman noted that the officer's recommendation was to reject the application as it did not meet the criteria. He further noted that Easton had previously put forward a proposal for joint funding with South Norfolk and the Greater Norwich Development Partnership (GNDP) and that £1m of the total £1.5m needed for the project had been met by South Norfolk Council and the GNDP, which left Easton Parish Council with a third of the liability. The cost of the project had subsequently increased since then and was now projected at £2.6m, with the Parish Council asking the Council to loan the projected CIL money from the Community Infrastructure Fund.

In summary, the Chairman explained that the Council and its partners had already committed a large amount to the project, and the Council's capital budget had been fully allocated. It was suggested that Easton Parish Council could go to the Public Works Loans Board themselves for the money.

Cllr Overton-Neal noted that it was a large sum of money that the Council had been asked to commit to the project, and that the relevant planning permission was not in place. She further explained that the request to use funding from the Community Infrastructure Fund was ineligible, as it did not meet the criteria for the scheme. The Assistant Director for Economic Growth explained that the money was only offered to developments, including relevant phases that had commenced work on site.

The Chairman then welcomed Mr Shaun Vincent to speak on behalf of Easton Parish Council. While addressing Cabinet, Mr Vincent noted that the build costs of the project had significantly increased since the COVID pandemic for a number of reasons. He further noted that the costs of the project were less than £2.6m, which had been previously stated and was budgeted to come in just under £2.5m. The Chairman clarified that the figure of £2.6m came from a document sent by Easton Parish Council, which detailed an estimated project cost of £2.597m.

Mr. Vincent informed the meeting that Easton was a village of 600 homes, which had been allocated housing growth of 150 percent, which equated to just under a thousand homes. He emphasised that there was an ambition for infrastructure to be in place before this growth but that this had not been possible. However,

Easton Parish Council had been proactive in accepting the growth and implementing a Neighbourhood Plan and was now looking to deliver some of the infrastructure including the Community Centre which would be a focal point for the new and existing communities. Members were informed that the site itself was progressing well with the help of South Norfolk Council and through the Greater Norwich Growth Board's grant.

Mr Vincent explained that, as part of the planning process, the Council had committed to delivering the Centre and he noted that the Council's community infrastructure scheme aimed to deliver infrastructure ahead of growth. He added that South Norfolk's criteria stated that the work must have commenced on site, and that Persimmon Homes was on site and would be until their work had been completed. With reference to the table in the report, he advised the meeting that the requested loan would be fully repaid through CIL receipts within five years, which was within the Council's own criteria.

Moving through his presentation, he further explained that a suggestion had been made to the Parish Council to increase the parish precept by 439 percent next year; this had rightly been ruled out by the Parish Council. However, with a 2.5 percent increase to the precept each year, they would receive an estimated £200,000 over the next 10 years, which would cover any interest payments.

Turning to the risks, Mr. Vincent noted that funds had been put aside by the District Council for this type of project and the Parish Council was prepared to underwrite the loan, so if full planning permission was not achieved within 18 months, the Parish Council would immediately pay the loan back.

In summing up, Mr. Vincent explained that the project was designed to support exactly this type of project. He reiterated that the project met all the criteria of the Community Infrastructure Fund and was a great opportunity for the district council to support one of its parishes and the community. The project would also provide facilities that could be utilised by a wide range of groups, including the local nursery, which was facing eviction from its existing site at the school due to increased numbers at the site. In summary he asked Cabinet to support the application, which aligned with many of the district council's objectives.

The Chairman explained that everyone understood the desirability of getting infrastructure in place in advance of growth. He noted that the Council and its partners at the GNDP had already contributed to 66 percent of the costs and he emphasised that the decision today was not on the merits of the project, but on its financing.

Turning to the different funding opportunities for the project, he noted there was the Co-investment Fund where a Parish Council would contribute on an equal basis with South Norfolk, and there was also a loan fund available for smaller projects for which the Parish Council was not eligible. In respect of Easton Parish Council, he noted that it would not be able to use both funding opportunities; it would however, be able to go to the Public Works Loan Board and apply for the funding independently.

In reference to the existing village hall, it was the Chairman's understanding that the Parish Council would sell the old one to reinvest and help finance the new

building. Regarding the point raised by Mr Vincent stating that the District Council had committed to building the hall, the Chairman reiterated that this was not the case and that the Council had committed to providing the finance to build one hall, which it did with the original funding agreement. In response, Mr. Vincent agreed that the Parish Council could go directly to the Public Works Loans Board for the money but had chosen to go to the District Council for help as part of the Community Infrastructure Fund through an agreed loan.

The Chairman reiterated that the Council had supported the Parish Council regarding the project, but it was not plausible or eligible for the project to utilise both funds after receiving a large sum of money from the first application. The Parish Council was better placed to apply to the Public Works Loans Board directly.

Cllr Overton-Neal added that there were other parishes interested in utilising the fund; and South Norfolk had a lot of parishes and only a limited amount of money.

The Community Infrastructure Officer emphasised that for the project to be eligible, the construction phases would have needed to have started or were just about to commence on site, which would provide assurance over when payments were going to be received.

The Chairman summarised the salient points raised in the discussion, noting the good case that the Easton Parish Council team had put forward, but on the basis of risk and income, the best way forward would be for the Parish Council to utilise the Public Works Loans Board themselves.

It was then;

RESOLVED

To reject the Easton Parish Council £500,000 application from the Community Infrastructure Loan Fund.

Reason for decision

The application did not meet the eligibility requirements of the scheme.

Other Options Considered

None

3177. SOUTH NORFOLK VILLAGE CLUSTERS HOUSING ALLOCATIONS PLAN (VCHAP) REGULATION 18 CONSULTATION ON ALTERNATIVE SITES AND FOCUSED CHANGES

Members considered the report of the Place Shaping Manager, which sought agreement to publish the South Norfolk Village Clusters Housing Allocations Plan (VCHAP) Regulation 18 Alternative Sites and Focused Changes document for consultation.

Cllr Overton-Neal, the Portfolio Holder for Stronger, Greener Economy,

introduced the report, noting that the VCHAP set out to allocate at least 1,200 dwellings across 48 village clusters in South Norfolk, in accordance with the requirements of the Greater Norwich Local Plan (GNLP). Over 500 sites have been assessed across the District, with consultations taking place at all selected locations. She further explained that the Rockland St. Mary site had been removed, as it could not be confirmed as deliverable, and the Tasburgh site had been reduced, which had taken the allocation in the VCHAP below the 1,200 requirement. The Council, therefore, needed to review new sites and introduced a buffer zone of reserve sites, which has required further consultation.

The Chairman endorsed the report, adding that the inclusion of the reserve sites would make the plan stronger and allow the Council to have a contingency in place if any other sites were to fall away. The Place Shaping Manager added that further consideration had taken place of sites that had just missed out as proposed sites, and additional new sites had come forward and all of these were included in the new consultation.

Cabinet noted that the Stronger, Greener Economy Policy Committee had reviewed and endorsed the report. It was further noted that due to the requirement for re-consultation, there would be a 12-month delay to the plan.

Cllr Cross, the local member covering Bawburgh, raised a concern regarding the housing allocation for the area, noting the Parish Council's concerns about flooding and affordable housing. The Chairman encouraged any local members or parish councils to make representations through the public consultation process. Officers confirmed that all documentation would be available online, at the Council offices, and at local libraries. Further to this, all parish councils had been invited to a workshop event to discuss the allocation plan.

In response to a query on the processes to determine if further changes were made to increase the overall number of houses in the allocation plan, it was noted that there were no proposals to increase the number of houses above the additional 50 required.

Cllr Elliott welcomed the report and commended the work that had gone into the process, however, he queried the rationale of seeking green field sites for the buffer zone. In response, officers explained that it was likely that there would be a push for a higher number of houses within the buffer zone from key stakeholders, but emphasised that the consultation also gave the wider public an opportunity to have their say and that these views could then be assessed to make an informed decision on preferred sites.

The Chairman summarised the salient points of the discussion, reiterating that there were a number of ways to access the consultation, which opened on 11 December 2023. It was then;

RESOLVED:

To agree:

1. That the Council publishes the attached Regulation 18 Alternative Sites and Focused Changes document (Appendix A) for a period of eight weeks

public consultation, between 11 December 2023 and 5pm on 5 February 2024.

2. To delegate authority to the Assistant Director for Planning, in consultation with the Portfolio Holders to make minor amendments to the document prior to consultation.

Reason for decision

To undertake a Regulation 18 consultation on alternative sites and focused changes to ensure that the VCHAP met the minimum requirements of the Greater Norwich Local Plan.

Other Options Considered

None

3178. STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE, RISK AND FINANCE REPORT FOR QUARTER 2 2023/24

Members considered the report of the Senior Finance Business Partner and the Assistant Director for Transformation, ICT, and Digital, which presented Cabinet with an overview of the performance of the Council against the key outcomes set out in the Delivery Plan for 2023–24.

Cllr Elliott, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources, introduced the report, noting that there was increased cost pressure of £665,000 on core Council services. However much of this had been offset by an increase in the Council's investment income, and officers were working hard to reduce the cost pressure further by year-end. He further reassured Cabinet that the situation would not result in an overspend at year-end.

The Chairman noted that the Council was anticipating a surplus at year-end, resulting from offsetting additional income as opposed to the significant extra cost of supporting residents and businesses. The Assistant Director of Finance confirmed that on the revenue budget there could be up to a million pounds through investment incomes, which has risen from 2 percent at the start of the year to 6 percent currently.

The Chairman further confirmed that the increased demands on the Council's services had been met and that there had been an additional £200,000 in legal costs, in respect of planning enforcement cases. He added that since the account date of 30 September 2023 in the report, the decision to dispose of the South Norfolk House site in Long Stratton had been made and as a result, the overspend noted in paragraph 3.7 of the report was now not likely to occur.

Turning to the Capital Budget, it was noted that the loan to Big Sky had decreased in line with the agreed repayment programme. Overall, the Chairman noted that there were some negatives but also a number of positives anticipated for the budget. Cllr Elliott added that the Council had spent seven million so far on capital projects, with another seven million anticipated to be spent by the end of the financial year. He drew Cabinet's attention to the dashboard within the report

noting that although there had been slippage within the programme, projects were now starting to be delivered.

In reference to paragraph 3.22 in the report, the Chairman noted that there had been four projects which had moved, which have impacted the figures. Since the last budget setting, there had been an election, which had seen new members join the Council who may want to form a view on them at the next budget setting process. Further clarification would also be needed on some existing proposed projects before the Council moved to its budget-setting cycle.

In response to a question on Bawburgh's Gipsy and Travellers site, Cllr Minshall, the Portfolio Holder for Supporting People, confirmed that the project would be completed early in the New Year. There had been some issues regarding power connections from Eastern Energy, and as soon as this was resolved, the Council would be ready to proceed.

Conversation turned to the Performance Management element of the report, where Cllr Elmer, Portfolio Holder for Governance, Technology, and Innovation, noted that the key red indicator was staff retention at the Council. He further noted that an exit interview strategy was in place, which would provide further information on staff leavers.

A question was raised about the disconnect between the positive staff survey results and the staff retention figure and whether leisure or depot services were included. In response, the Chief of Staff explained that the staff retention figure did include all areas of the Council's operations. She further explained that the last staff survey was completed over two years ago, and a new survey was currently being undertaken, and she had seen a higher response rate to date. Once the survey closed, officers would work through responses to understand how staff were feeling.

Cabinet noted that the Council was currently in the middle of implementing a new HR payroll system, and once this was done, it would enable the Council to understand the data more clearly. The Council was also in the process of introducing an improved pay progression in April 2024, which should aid with staff retention.

Cllr Elmer explained that there was a case to review the type of performance data measured from the Council's Help Hub as the current measure captured the number but not the full complexity of cases reviewed by the Hub. The Chairman noted that the performance figures for the Help Hub were impressive, with nearly 3,000 people helped, as opposed to the 3,500 target and questioned if the Council was dealing with fewer cases than anticipated but were far more complex.

The Assistant Director for Individuals and Families confirmed that there was a large demand for the service and that the cases were becoming more complex. There had been an increase in individuals not being able to afford the increases in private rent and food prices, with the Council looking at preventive ways to avoid cases becoming critical.

The Chairman suggested that the Scrutiny Committee review the measure to

replace the existing volumetric measure of people going to the Help Hub for assistance. The Assistant Director for Individuals and Families and Cllr Rowe, the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee, confirmed that they would take this matter to review the measure going forward.

In response to a question regarding the number of vacant retail spaces, the Assistant Director for Economic Growth explained that there were more than 500 retail spaces across the market towns in South Norfolk, with six vacancies in the last quarter. Three of these were banks, which has resulted from a national change in banking policy. The Council was in a better position than the national figures indicated; however, the Council was aware that there was more work to be done. The Chairman underlined the importance of investing in the market towns.

The Chairman noted the positive position of the leisure centres' memberships levels. Cllr Kiddie, the Portfolio Holder for Cleaner, Safer Environment, added that the waste recycling figure was also above the Council's target.

The Chairman drew the Cabinet's attention to the risks noted in the report, highlighting the cybercrime and waste recycling. The Assistant Director for Transformation, ICT, and Digital explained that the Cyber and Information Security Officer was working with staff to raise awareness about potential risks.

In response to a question on the rollout of EV charging points, officers confirmed that the Council was working with town and parish councils to roll out installation. Further clarification was given regarding the business grants, where it was confirmed that the business builder programme was operating well.

In concluded the item the Chairman by reaffirming that the Council was spending money to help its residents. it was then;

RESOLVED

1. To endorse the revenue and capital position for mid-year (variance details in Appendix 1).
3. To endorse the 2023/24 performance for Quarter 2 (detail in Appendix 2)
3. To endorse the current position with respect to risks and agree the actions to support risk mitigation (detailed in Appendix 3).
4. To endorse the updates to the Delivery Plan for mid-year (detailed in Appendix 4).

Reason for decision

The report was a factual account.

Other Options Considered

None

3179. COUNCIL TAX ASSISTANCE SCHEME 2024/25

Members considered the report of the Housing and Benefit Manager, which sought agreement to adopt the current Council Tax Assistance Scheme, with no changes, for the financial year 2023–24.

Members noted that the Council was continuing to achieve the desired outcomes for the Council Tax Assistance Scheme. In 2022 the Council made a number of changes to the scheme to ensure that it remained an efficient process and supported the residents who were most in need of the service.

The Housing and Benefit Manager explained that the scheme had been in place for a full financial year and that an analysis from an external company had concluded that the scheme was still running effectively, and based on these findings, there were no proposed changes to the scheme this financial year.

It was noted that a pot of £30,000 had been set aside to provide support to those who did not qualify for means-tested benefits but were nevertheless in exceptional need.

It was then;

RESOLVED

TO RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL the proposal and to approve the Council Tax Assistance scheme for the year 2024/25.

Reason for decision

To maintain a fair system of Council Tax Assistance for those residents most in need of support.

Other Options Considered

None

3180. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENT AND COUNCIL TAX DISCRETIONARY RELIEF POLICIES

Members considered the report of the Housing and Benefit Manager, which sought agreement to adopt the reviewed Discretionary Housing Payment and Council Tax Discretionary Relief policies for April 2024. Both schemes were discretionary and had seen an increase in demand due to the ongoing cost of living crisis, which meant that customers had less income whilst rents were increasing.

Cabinet noted that the Council Tax Discretionary Relief was formed from an internal budget and the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy was funded externally from the Department for Work and Pensions. These pots sat alongside

the Council's means-tested Housing Benefits and the Council Tax Assistance Scheme.

Officers explained that the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy needed revision to ensure the money was going to those most in need, as this externally funded pot was decreasing.

The Housing and Benefit Manager advised the meeting that a number of newer housing associations, some of which were backed by private equity funds, were demanding rent in advance from prospective tenants, which was placing increasing pressure on the funding pot. Therefore, the Policy had been amended to note that the Council would only use it for this purpose under exceptional circumstances.

Members were advised that Officers would use a decision matrix to determine payment on a case-by-case basis. All other options for assistance with rent in advance would also be explored before any award was made.

Cllr Minshull, the Portfolio Holder for Supporting People, added that the Council had currently spent £75,000 of the £116,000 budget and was on target to ensure the full amount was utilised before the end deadline.

The Chairman highlighted that the Policy offered a one-off sum to those in need and eligible to get their finances back on track. Officers explained that often it is a one-off payment that fixed an issue; however, there were cases where a monthly payment could be made for a short period of time to help residents. It was noted that this would also allow officers time to direct the resident to further help.

Cllr Webber noted that there had been some recent changes contained within the Government's Autumn Statement where housing benefit indexation was reintroduced and asked if this would make a material difference to the demand for next year. In response, officers explained that it would be difficult to review the changes or demand for the service as the figures of the Local Housing Allowance money had not been set.

The Chairman summarised the salient points raised, noting the importance of helping residents who were struggling. He further noted that there was also an opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to review the process and performance metrics of the policies. It was then;

RESOLVED

TO RECOMMEND THAT COUNCIL approves the revised DHP and CTDR policies for implementation in April 2024.

Reasons for Decision

To ensure that funds were allocated to those most in need and where it would be most effective.

Other Options Considered

None

3181. HYBRID MAIL

Members considered the report of the Senior Transformation and Innovation Business Partner, which set out the background and rationale for the award of a new hybrid mail contract for South Norfolk Council.

Cllr Elmer introduced the report noting that it was a replacement of an existing system and would be a collaborate project with Broadland District Council. He explained that the contract had not been awarded to lower costs but to ensure the quality of the service for the customers of the Council. The contact also would save the Council a £100,000 saving against the budget over five years. It was then;

RESOLVED

To agree to award a three-year contract, with the option to extend by two years, for the hybrid mail provision for South Norfolk Council to Supplier A.

Reasons for Decision

To send customer correspondence effectively, securely, and efficiently and to reduce the Council's production and print costs.

Other Options Considered

None

3182. UK SHARED PROSPERITY FUND - SKILLS PROGRAMME

Members considered the report of the Programme Manager – Economic Growth, which sought to finalise the People and Skills Work Programme, funded through the Council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) allocation. The programme sought to provide employment support and address the barriers to businesses taking on apprentices and work placements.

Cllr Overton-Neal introduced the report, noting that the Council was awarded over £1.5m from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund over a three-year period up to March 2025. The workstreams for the fund had come before Cabinet at a previous meeting, where the skills programme scheme had highlighted the need to help residents access training to help them get back into work.

Cabinet noted that the Plan now includes the aim of reducing the barriers for local small businesses to enable them to offer work placements and apprenticeships. It also included details focusing on key cluster groups, including clean growth retrofits and agri-food sectors. Members' attention was drawn to the funds that would be used within various schemes, which included getting people back into work through training, grants to small and medium businesses for apprenticeships, and larger grants for greener apprenticeships. Through this, the

Team would work closely with the Help Hub to identify residents who would benefit from these resources.

The Chairman noted that there were 200 skill providers in Norfolk, and the Council needed to make sure that the right people had access to help. He emphasised the need to make sure that people who utilised the fund had access to the physical tools needed for the job.

The Programme Manager – Economic Growth explained that there were three pots of money: one offering funding for the training qualifications for soft skills; the second pot was allocated to businesses for recruitment and mentoring; and the third pot contains the skills development grants, which would work with industries to better understand where funding was required.

In response to a question on how many apprentices were expected to come through the scheme, the officer explained that the Council estimated that they would be able to support 20 apprentices.

A concern was raised concerning the lack of clarity on what funding was available for businesses taking on apprentices, and officers confirmed that the offer would allow £500 to go to the apprentice themselves, with a further two grants going to the businesses. The first grant of £500 was to help with recruitment and early training; there would then be another £1000 after 12 weeks to help with retention. The ongoing costs of employing an apprentice would then fall under an apprenticeship levy, which the Council would help employers access.

The Assistant Director for Economic Growth noted that there was some confusion around the skills and training arena but explained that the Council would provide guidance and support to help businesses with this programme. He added that the Council would also help with paperwork with the aim of streamlining the process for businesses.

The Chairman suggested that officers work with small businesses to streamline the process to provide easier access and guidance for businesses wanting to take on apprentices. It was then:

RESOLVED

To:

1. Approve proposals for utilising UKSPF allocations under People & Skills interventions:
 - a) Design a bespoke apprenticeship incentivisation scheme for South Norfolk to be delivered by Apprenticeships Norfolk.
 - b) Providing grants of up to £25,000 for pilot employability and confidence building projects
2. Delegate to the Director of Place, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Stronger, Greener Economy, the signing of contracts, agreements and procurement requirements associated with delivery of this proposal,

subject to appropriate legal and procurement advice.

3. Delegate to the Assistant Director for Economic Growth, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Stronger, Greener Economy, to finalise a skills development grant scheme to tackle the barriers to employment.
4. Delegate to the Assistant Director for Economic Growth, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Stronger, Greener Economy, to make any non-substantive changes to the work programme to ensure delivery within the required timelines.

Reasons for Decision

To help reduce barriers for local small businesses to enable them to offer work placements and apprenticeships.

Other Options Considered

None

3183. FORWARD PLAN

Members noted the latest version of the Council's Forward Plan.

3184. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Committee passed a resolution under section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 to exclude the Press and Public from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that the consideration of the items is likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

3185. EXEMPT MINUTE

The exempt minutes of the meeting held on 6 November 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

(The meeting concluded at 11.04 am)

Chairman