



SOUTH NORFOLK CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the South Norfolk Cabinet of South Norfolk Council, held on Monday, 12 February 2024 at 9.00 am.

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

Apologies for Absence: Councillors: K Kiddie

Officers in Attendance: T Holden (Managing Director), P Courtier (Director of Place), D Lorimer (Director of Resources), J Sutterby (Director of People and Communities), E Hodds (Chief of Staff), R Fincham (Assistant Director of Finance), G Denton (Assistant Director of Economic Growth), N Howard (Assistant Director for Regulatory), C Lawrie (Assistant Director of ICT/Digital and Transformation), H Mellors (Assistant Director of Planning), S Phelan (Assistant Director of Community Services), M Pursehouse (Assistant Director of Individuals and Families), S Pontin (Planning Business Improvement Team Manager), S Carey (Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer), G Pell (Corporate Accountant) and L Arthurton (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in Attendance: Cllrs: C Brown, J Cook, T Laidlaw, M Rosen, J Rowe and J Webber

3199. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Cllr K Kiddie.

3200. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In reference to Minute no.3207 Cllr Elliott declared an 'Other Registrable Interest' as a Director of Big Sky.

3201. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

3202. ANNOUNCEMENTS

Cllr Elmer noted that the Council had taken another step forward in its journey to achieving Net Zero with the gas being turned off and the building now being heated fully by ground-source heat pumps. This had been made achievable by a £2.3 million grant from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund.

The Managing Director congratulated Cllr J Fuller on his elevation to the House of Lords, which had been endorsed by his Majesty the King. He presented Cllr Fuller with a gift on behalf of all officers at the Council. Cllr Fuller thanked the Managing Director and added that it was an honour to have been chosen for a seat in the Upper House.

3203. REVENUE BUDGET AND COUNCIL TAX 2024/25

Members considered the report of the Assistant Director of Finance, which provided information affecting the Council's revenue budget for 2024–25, in order for the Cabinet to make recommendations to Council on 21st February regarding the Council's budget and council tax for 2024–25.

The Chairman introduced the report, noting that members had the opportunity to have a full debate when the reports went to Full Council, with the meeting today giving members the chance to review the facts of the reports. He also noted that there was a Scrutiny meeting taking place later in the week, which would also review some of the reports.

Turning to the report, the Chairman noted that there had been a large number of variables, including the interest income being greater than expected. There was also a one-off VAT refund of £854,452 that could be allocated to different areas of the Council. He further explained that there would be some changes to the report between now and the Full Council meeting, and conversations with all group leaders would be taking place to review where the additional funds could be allocated.

The Chairman drew Cabinet's attention to the turnover of the Council, which was over £54 million and with staffing levels over 700 with the Council's collaborative working with Broadland Council. He also stressed the importance of the grants the Council receives, business rates, and commercial income, which were set out in the report. Members were also informed that the Band D level of Council Tax would be increased by £5 to £170.00.

Cllr Elliott noted that the report set out the various steps involved in setting the budget, which comprised the assessment of the cost of services, budgeting for other types of income and expenditure, and taking account of Government funding, which had seen an increase from the previous years. The report also assessed Business Rates income and identified the income that needed to be collected from Council taxpayers. The proposed increase of £5 for Council Tax equated to a below-inflation rate.

He further noted that, overall, the Council was looking to deliver a balanced budget with no need to draw on general reserves. With reference to paragraph

2.20, Cllr Elliott noted that a small typo had been made; with the figure being £2m, instead of £2.5m being transferred to a capital reserve. In summarising, he noted that when the report was written, the final Local Government settlement had not been published. The figures have now been received and reviewed, so there was no longer a need for the delegation as set out in recommendation one of the report.

The Assistant Director for Finance added that as the Section 151 Officer, his advice was that the budget was robust and the level of reserves was adequate.

The Chairman summarised the salient points of the report, noting the report would be reviewed by the Scrutiny Committee later in the week and at the Full Council meeting on 21 February 2024. He also noted that the Council could not rely solely on grants, and that the commercial income that the Council brought in was vital to its operations and would help keep Council Tax low. He further noted the risks included in the report, highlighting the cost of waste, recycling, processing and the possibility of reforms to the New Homes Bonus.

It was then;

RESOLVED

1. TO RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL

- (i) The approval of the 2024/25 base budget.
- (ii) That the Council's demand on the Collection Fund for 2024/25 for General Expenditure shall be £9,046,550, and for Special Expenditure shall be £7,511.

2. To Agree

- (i) Changes to the proposed fees and charges as set out in section 6.

3. To Note

- (i) 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.
- (ii) The Medium-Term Financial Strategy projections

Reasons for Decision

The report was a factual account.

Other Options Considered

None

3204. CAPITAL STRATEGY AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2024/25 TO 2028/29

Members considered the report of the Assistant Director of Finance, which presented the Capital Strategy and Capital Programme for 2024/25 to 2028/29.

The Chairman noted the importance of the programme and producing deliverable objectives within the district, including an improved depot site, a new GP surgery at Hethersett, and other investments in Market Towns. These projects would be funded through the Council's own resources, judicious borrowing, and by taking advantage of grant funding. The proposed Strategy and Programme delivered an investment in the district which totalled £97 million, as set out on pages 55 to 57 in the agenda papers. He further noted the aims of keeping the Council up-to-date, which would reduce running costs and investing for income in capital assets, as well as discretionary investments such as the Long Stratton Bypass.

The Assistant Director for Finance explained that it was good practice to set out how the Capital Programme linked in with the overall business plan, and helped meet each of the Council's aims and priorities.

The Chairman noted that in total the Council was worth around £100m, which included a significant amount brought in through Big Sky. He further noted that the Capital Programme provided an appropriate balance of risk and reward.

Discussion turned to the need for investment in the Council's depot and the ongoing investment at Diss Leisure Centre and Cllr Minshull the Local Member for Diss added that the improvements to the centre were a great investment for the Town and would enhance the services at the facility. The Chairman added that the improvements to the pool would open up wider opportunities and broaden its public health benefits. Cllr Elmer noted as Local Member for Cringleford the ongoing investment in the Country Park, which would provide significant improvements for residents.

The Assistant Director for Finance noted that the report set out how the programme would be funded through multiple sources, and there would be no requirement for any additional borrowing.

Clarification was given regarding paragraph 6.1 in the report, which detailed Capital Liability, and it was noted that it referred to the depots and leisure centres as well as the Horizon building.

The Chairman reiterated that the proposed programme was ambitious and allowed for investment in health provisions and day to day operational needs, whilst also making sure that the Council was run efficiently. It was then;

RESOLVED

1. TO RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL

The Capital Strategy (Appendix A) and the Capital Programme for 2024/25 to 2028/29 (Appendix B).

2. To Note

The advice of the Section 151 Officer in section 12 of the Capital Strategy.

Reasons for Decision

The report was a factual account.

Other Options Considered

None

3205. TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY STATEMENT 2024/25

Members considered the report of the Corporate Accountant, which set out the authority's approach to the management of its borrowings, investments, and cash flows.

The Chairman introduced the report and noted that the Council subscribed to a number of different industry services, which helped the Council keep in touch with the markets and counterparty risk management.

Cllr Elliott noted that there was no significant change in the Strategy from last year and it continued to adhere to the three key treasury management principles of: security, liquidity, and yield.

The Corporate Accountant added that since putting the report together, LINK, the Council's financial advisors, had confirmed that their forecast projections remained unchanged.

The Chairman further highlighted that the evidence showed that the investments were appropriate and correctly undertaken with the right level of risk while making sure the right safety measures were in place.
It was then;

RESOLVED

TO RECOMMEND 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**).

Reasons for Decision

The report was a factual account.

Other Options Considered

None

3206. STRATEGIC PLAN 2024 - 2028 & DELIVERY PLAN 2024 - 2026

Members considered the report of the Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer, which sought approval and adoption of the new Strategic Plan 2024–2028 and Delivery Plan 2024–2026.

The Chairman introduced the report, noting that the Plans were set every four years, six months after the district elections, to allow all members the opportunity to help shape the plans. The Plans would be reviewed after two years to ensure they were on track and allow for any adjustment to be made.

The Strategic Advisor and Deputy Monitoring Officer advised Cabinet that in the process of drafting the Strategic Plan and Delivery Plan, there had been engagement with all elected members through workshops, with early drafts taken to the Scrutiny Committee. Members were reminded that the report set out the priorities and ambitions for the Council over the next four years. Cabinet's attention was drawn to the Delivery Plan which detailed the projects, activities and key performance indicators that would measure the Council's performance. Further work with the performance indicators would be undertaken by a Task and Finish Group, which had been convened by the Scrutiny Committee.

Cllr Rowe, the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee, confirmed that the Committee had had the opportunity to review the initial report, and the newly formed Task and Finish Group would be an important addition to the Committee's capacity.

The Chairman reiterated the amount of work that has gone into the Plans and the strong financial position the Council was in. He further explained that the budget surplus was not due to the Council not spending enough but as a result of additional income. He also noted the increased pressures on Council services, in particular social care, homelessness, and domestic abuse. The report acknowledged the day to day running of the Council and also set out how it could improve residents' lives further by looking after families, growing the economy, and protecting the environment. It was then;

RESOLVED

TO RECOMMEND THAT COUNCIL approves the adoption of the Strategic Plan 2024-2028 and Delivery Plan 2024-2026.

Reasons for Decision

To set out the overarching vision and priorities of the Council.

Other Options Considered

None

3207. REVIEW OF PRE-APPLICATION PLANNING FEES

Members considered the report of the Business Improvement Manager, which reviewed the charging structure for pre-application advice for planning applications following the introduction of charges in 2021.

In introducing the report Cllr Overton Neal advised the meeting that central Government had recently given permission for increases in planning fees. She noted that the provision of pre-application advice was a discretionary service, with the Council receiving approximately 680 inquiries per annum and that currently, the charge for this service, which was introduced in 2021, did not recover the full costs. The report proposed to increase the pre-application fee to reflect the national rate, which was 35 percent for major applications and 25 percent for all others. She reassured members that the Council would continue to provide initial advice to customers free of charge.

Cabinet's attention was drawn to a further proposal contained in the report, which looked at changing how the Council classed major applications. It was proposed that applications with 50 to 200 houses would be classified as major, and developments over that would be charged a bespoke fee.

In response to a question about the value of pre-application advice, the Assistant Director of Planning explained that the service helped applicants enormously, as it ensured they had advice on what they needed to submit in order for their application to be determined and provided a steer on what was likely to be acceptable in accordance with the Council's planning policies.

It was noted that following the Council's standard practice, the odd figures within appendix 3 of the report should be rounded up to the nearest £5. The Business Improvement Manager added that the report was also going through Broadland Council with the aim of aligning the service and the fees for both Councils. It was agreed that if Broadland Council was happy to follow the same approach, officers would go ahead with the proposed rounding up of the fees.

Further clarification was given regarding the projected income, where it was explained that the figures contained in the report include works on trees and listed buildings, which were categories that would continue to be provided free of charge. It was then;

RESOLVED

To agree the revised charging structure, as set out in Appendix 3, from 1 April 2024 with further consideration being given to rounding the agreed fees to the nearest five pounds.

Reasons for Decision

To review and increase pre -application charges in order to recover costs for the service.

Other Options Considered

None

3208. LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING FUND: PURCHASE OF FURTHER PROPERTIES

Members considered the report of the People from Abroad Programme Manager, which sought pre-emptive agreement for financing and purchasing of further general-use Temporary Accommodation properties under the Government's Local Authority Housing Fund (2) (LAHF) scheme.

Cllr Minshull introduced the report, noting that the Council had faced an increase in demand for temporary accommodation due to a range of issues. Members were advised that the Government was offering the opportunity to apply for funding to add to the Council's stock of temporary accommodation to meet this increasing demand.

The Director for People and Communities advised the meeting that the Council had submitted an expression of interest to access this Fund on the 19 January 2024, subject to formal Council acceptance of any subsequent offer. 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.

In response to a question on how the Government funding was determined, it was confirmed that the Council's bid was based on an informal discussion in advance of the bid along with what the Council could reasonably procure before the Government's deadlines for the end of the financial year.

Cllr Brown noted the importance of temporary accommodation, along with ensuring that the quality of housing was improved, as well as the longer-term need for more housing to be built.

During discussion, Cllr Rosen added that, this was a positive measure by the Council but reiterated the need for a backup option to be put in place if the bid was unsuccessful.

It was then;

RESOLVED

That should a further allocation of LAHF be made available to the Council:

1. To agree to acquire the maximum number of TA capacity possible up to 34 units, purchased using Government and matched LAHF funding.
2. To delegate to the Director of People and Communities to accept the Government offer of additional LAHF to be used as general needs temporary accommodation.

3. Subject to recommendation 2, to agree to transfer the required amount from the TA capital budget underspend to top up the existing capital LAHF budget in order to match the Government's contribution, subject to agreement from the S151 officer and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources.

Reasons for Decision

To increase the Council's stock of temporary accommodation and address urgent housing need.

Other Options Considered

None

3209. FORWARD PLAN

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

(The meeting concluded at 10.08 am)

Chairman