

24 JANUARY 2019

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel held in the Bradbury Room, Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Thursday, 24 January 2019

- * Cllr M A Steele (Chairman)
- * Cllr A K Penson (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

- * A R Alvey
- W G Andrews
- G C Beck
- * M J Kendal

Councillors:

- * Mrs A E McEvoy
- * A D O'Sullivan
- * D B Tipp
- C A Wise

*Present

In attendance:

Councillors:

M R Harris, Local Economic Development, Property & Innovation Portfolio Holder
B Rickman, Leader & Corporate Affairs Portfolio Holder

Also In Attendance:

Mr A Sherman, Department for Work and Pensions

Officers Attending:

A Bethune, Mrs M Sandhu and R Stevens

Apologies:

Cllrs Andrews, Beck and Wise.

39 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 November 2019 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

40 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Kendal declared an interest in minute 44.

41 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

No issues were raised during the public participation period.

42 UNIVERSAL CREDIT UPDATE

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Mr Andy Sherman of the Department for Work and Pensions.

Members received an update on the roll-out of Universal Credit which set out:

- Roll-out timetable
- Migration
- Impact so far
- Changes
- Relationship with DWP

The national Universal Credit roll-out for new claimants had gone live in December 2018, with Hythe, Ringwood and Lymington having commenced over the summer/autumn 2018. Stakeholder events were ongoing. A managed migration pilot of 10,000 claimants was planned for July 2019.

National migration will commence from November 2020 with an estimated timescale for NFDC of 2021 for existing Housing Benefit claimants.

In the New Forest, there were 4,113 working aged Housing Benefit claimants, of which 1,448 were Council tenants. The New Forest CAB will be assisting Universal Credit claimants from 1 April 2019, with Help to Claim, work funded by the DWP. A stakeholder event would be held on 6 March for stakeholders, including charity and voluntary sector representatives.

Mr Sherman, Senior Partnership Manager for Hampshire, Dorset and the Isle of Wight, explained that the move to Universal Credit was the most major change in welfare systems in the last 50 years.

The number of Universal Credit claimants was 1.3 million. Natural migrations from traditional benefit to Universal Credit would happen if triggered by a change of circumstances. The smoothness of the transition locally was dependant on good communication and members were pleased to note that NFDC/DWP enjoyed a very good working relationship. Mr Sherman thanked NFDC officers for their excellent support in the roll out of Universal Credit. The Job Centres used 'Work Coaches' to move people into employment and out of poverty. The system was digital by default though there were other channels available as required. A member asked how many Work Coaches there were in each centre in the District and officers undertook to provide this to Panel members in due course.

Members quoted recent press reports where claimants moving to Universal Credit had suffered a two month delay. In reply Mr Sherman explained that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Amber Rudd MP, had made a recent speech in which she her Department would be looking at transitional payments and regularity of those payments.

Minimal natural migration had been observed so far. Support would be given to the vulnerable to ensure they were not disadvantaged by the process.

In response to a question, Mr Sherman explained that employment had increased and unemployment figures were the lowest for nearly 50 years with the highest level of vacancies ever at 853,000. It was confirmed that the combined benefits under Universal Credit were easy to administer and it was a quality of agile system which worked well despite some negative public perceptions.

There was a disability gap – the need for encouraging employers to be more flexible and take people with health issues. NFDC was a Disability Confident Employer.

The Chairman thanked Mr Sherman for his attendance and, on behalf of the Panel, thanked him and his team and the Council's Benefits Team for helping to ensure the relationship between NFDC and the DWP was a positive and productive one.

43 PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' UPDATES

Cllr Rickman reported on the following issues:

- Further to the previous item, Cllr Rickman paid tribute to the Revenue and Benefits Team and their successful joint working with the DWP on Universal Credit.
- Meetings had been arranged to prepare for the UKs exit from the EU. There is involvement with HCC, particularly on transport.
- Smarter Working was going well and issues such as parking were being worked through.
- The intention to increase the minimum pay bands so that the Council's minimum wage was £9.00 from 1 April 2019. The proposals would be going to the Employee Engagement Panel and General Purposes & Licensing Committee.
- The Peer Review team were returning to the Council to check on progress since their last visit in 2017.

The Leader was asked about the current position with devolution/Local Government Reorganisation. In reply, he commented that this topic did not appear to be a current priority at Central Government level, but NFDC was still exploring partnering opportunities, particularly with Test Valley Borough Council and Winchester City Council and it was felt there was considerable potential.

Cllr Harris reported on the following issues:

- New Forest Business Partnership Board meetings being arranged around the Forest
- Progress with LEPs
- Resources needed to increase NFBP membership
- Broadband and telephony – working with Open Reach to identify local areas to develop
- Film New Forest Festival (including a drive-in cinema)

- High street fund – Central Government grant bid for New Milton
- Property investment would be monitored to review progress, and the Budget Task and Finish Group recommendations concerning the geographic area for identifying property would be reviewed. It was agreed that an annual update be added to the COSP work programme on property investment progress

Cllr Harris suggested that a Task and Finish Group be set up to investigate the feasibility of using HRA funds to provide social or affordable housing in town centres/high streets to promote sustainable growth in town centres. The Panel supported this and it was agreed that a report be made to the March meeting setting out the terms of reference and scope of the project.

44 CAPITAL STRATEGY

Cllr Kendal declared an interest as a member of Hampshire County Council, which managed this Council's Treasury Management Investments. However he had been granted a dispensation by the Monitoring Officer.

The Panel considered the Council's Capital Strategy 2019/20 including high level spending, investments, and financing plans and associated performance indicators. The report also included the Council's Minimum Revenue Provision statement for 2019/20.

RESOLVED:

That it be a recommendation to the Cabinet that the Capital Strategy 2019/20 be approved with effect from 1 April 2019, including the adoption of the minimum revenue provision statement.

45 ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY (PRESENTATION)

The Panel received a presentation outlining the major features to be included in the Accommodation Strategy, which included the following elements:

- Smarter Working
- Changes to member accommodation
- Audit/gap analysis
- Clear desk policy
- Refurbished open plan offices as a new corporate standard

In reference to the future of Lymington Town Hall, it was explained that the leases to the NPA, Police and a private firm would be due for renewal in 2026 with a lease for Pennington and Town Council due in 2027.

The following sites would also be reviewed in the medium term:

- Ringwood
- Hythe Information Office
- New Milton Town Hall
- Health and Leisure Centres
- Depots

The new Strategy would be developed to focus on the short to medium term with a view to placing less demand on the main offices and once completed, would be submitted to the Panel for consideration.

46 WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel considered its future work programme.

It was agreed that the March Panel meeting would receive an update on Commercial Property Investment, as well as residential property

The June meeting would receive:

- introductions to services for the benefit of newly elected members.
- a LEPs update and

The September meeting would include:

- an ICT update including progress on the Council website.
- an update on the pensions' deficit.

CHAIRMAN