

24 SEPTEMBER 2020

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on Thursday, 24 September 2020

- * Cllr Alexis McEvoy (Chairman)
- * Cllr Alan Alvey (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

- Fran Carpenter
- * Keith Craze
- * Sandra Delemare
- * Mahmoud Kangarani

Councillors:

- * Martyn Levitt
- * Alan O'Sullivan
- Beverley Thorne
- * Derek Tipp

*Present

In attendance:

Councillors:

- Jack Davies (for part of the meeting)
- Barry Dunning
- Michael Harris
- David Hawkins
- Jeremy Heron
- Christine Hopkins
- Barry Rickman

Officers Attending:

Grainne O'Rourke, Alan Bethune, Karen Grimes, Andy Rogers and Ryan Stevens

Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr Carpenter.

55 MINUTES

It was noted that that the minutes of the meetings held on 18 June and 28 July would be submitted to the next Panel meeting in November.

56 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made by any member in connection with any agenda item.

57 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

No issues were raised during the public participation period.

58 COUNCIL TAX EMPTY HOMES PREMIUM

The panel considered options for the Empty Homes Premium applicable from 1st April 2021.

The proposed measures were designed to incentivise bringing empty properties back into use.

It was also noted that under the Housing Strategy, the Council was bringing forward measures to implement the same objective of tackling empty properties, especially those empty for over 2 years.

RESOLVED:

That it be a recommendation to the Cabinet that the current empty homes premiums remain unchanged from 1st of April 2021 and that the Empty Homes premiums be considered by a task and finish group in 2021, with any changes to be effective from 1 April 2022.

59 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME 2021/22

The Panel considered the council tax Reduction Scheme for 2021/22.

No changes had been recommended to take effect from 1 April 2021, so that for the following year, an understanding could be gained of the effect of COVID-19 on those eligible under the scheme, and that the scheme could be aligned with developments in Universal Credit and the introduction of a banding scheme could be fully explored and considered.

It was noted that due to the end of furlough, there were likely to be a number of new claims for Council Tax Reduction.

Officers will seek to obtain details of how the District Council compared with other district councils in collection rates for those in receipt of Council Tax Reduction.

The council received a Hardship Fund to support those on a low income with help towards paying their council tax. The funding will be fully utilised by 31 March 2021.

RESOLVED:

That it be a recommendation to the Cabinet that the current scheme be maintained as set out in the report with no changes.

60 PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' UPDATES

The Panel received and noted a summary of the support given to businesses in the District via the Government's business support schemes, and the Council's role in this.

In response to COVID-19, the government provided funding to councils to administer the Small Business Support grant, the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure grant and a Discretionary Business Support grant.

The Panel were very pleased to note the Council's rapid response, for example, with the Business Grants, an eform went live on the Council's website on 2 April 2020, and by 9 April, the Council had received 2,214 responses, and had arranged payment of £26.3m to 2,126 businesses, more than any other council in Hampshire. A total of £43,335,000 has been paid out to 3,790 businesses in the district. Members praised officers for their quick and efficient response in ensuring 97.5% of those eligible received their grants promptly, in what was reported by businesses to be a simple application process, and the "substantial" assurance rating given by internal audit for the administration of the grants.

61 COMPLAINTS ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20

The panel received and noted the Complaints Annual Report for 2019/20.

This report provided an overview of complaints received, and dealt with, by the Council during the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. It included Local Government and the Housing Ombudsman complaints of which the Council was aware (the Council was not always advised of complaints made direct to the Ombudsman). Comparisons with the previous year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019) were also included.

The Executive Head of Governance and Housing emphasised the importance of the Council resolving complaints promptly, admitting when mistakes were made, and services learning from them going forward.

Officers undertook to provide a graph setting out trend data over the last few years in the next report.

Action: A Kinghorn / K Grimes

62 WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel noted its work programme, including the intention to bring an item on the employee efficiencies / innovations survey to the November Panel meeting.

63 PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' UPDATES

Councillor Rickman felt that the Council had performed well in disbursing Government grants so efficiently over recent months and reiterated his thanks to those officers involved.

He advised that Cabinet members would be giving Covid 19 briefings differently in future, in order to provide more up to date briefings to respond as developments arose.

The Leader referred to the ongoing Comprehensive Spending Review and also the recent letter of support sent to the Solent LEP for the work they do to help economic recovery in the Waterside and all areas.

Cllr Heron gave an update on the upgrade of the Council's telephone system, which despite some teething problems, was now implemented and had delivered significant savings.

Cllr Harris reiterated others' praise for the Council's efficient disbursement of grants to businesses. He also outlined Council involvement in a number of future business support initiatives. These included the Kickstart Scheme for employers which assisted 16-24 year olds getting into work, a Pop Up Business School initiative, and ongoing business mentoring.

64 DATES OF MEETINGS 2021/2022

RESOLVED:

That the following dates be agreed for meetings of the Panel in 2021/22:

(all Thursdays, at 9.30 a.m.)

24 June 2021
23 September 2021
18 November 2021
20 January 2022
24 March 2022

CHAIRMAN