

17 NOVEMBER 2022

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

**CORPORATE AFFAIRS AND LOCAL ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
PANEL**

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Affairs and Local Economy Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on Thursday, 17 November 2022

- * Cllr Alexis McEvoy (Chairman)
- * Cllr Derek Tipp (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

- * Alan Alvey
- * Keith Craze
- * Jack Davies
- Richard Frampton

Councillors:

- Alison Hoare
- * Mahmoud Kangarani
- Martyn Levitt
- * Alan O'Sullivan

*Present

In attendance:

Councillors:

Jill Cleary
Michael Harris

Councillors:

Jeremy Heron

Officers Attending:

Kate Ryan, Grainne O'Rourke, Alan Bethune, Claire Upton-Brown, Ryan Stevens, Paul Downton, Sally Igra, Andrew Smith, Amanda Wilson, Karen Grimes, Andy Rogers and Joe Tyler

Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllrs Frampton and Levitt.

16 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 June 2022 be confirmed and signed.

17 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

18 ASSET INVESTMENT STRATEGY

The Panel considered a proposed Asset Investment Strategy.

Since 2017, the Council had implemented an asset investment strategy to invest in commercial property in support of its stated priorities to help local businesses grow,

to boost the economic viability of the District and to identify opportunities to generate income to maintain services that are important to residents.

In response to a question, it was explained that the primary risks associated with the Strategy were dependence on economic growth, availability of attractive assets, risk of tenants falling into administration, and changing interest rates. Historically however, the Council had a full roster of tenants and had yet to have a tenant of a property bought under the strategy go into administration. To mitigate the risks, great care was taken in selecting and building good quality assets, to achieve a mixed portfolio across office, retail, and light industrial properties, as well as minimising risks with tenant selection.

The Strategy would be financed through the utilisation of internal borrowing, supplemented with short and long - term borrowing, dependent on other internal budget commitments and interest rates.

A member queried how decisions were being made with the current financial uncertainty. It was acknowledged that cautious and careful consideration was always given to investments, taking a long - term view.

In answer to a question on empty properties in Totton, it was explained that the Totton regeneration project would evolve with its own regeneration plan or strategy.

RESOLVED:

That the Asset Investment Strategy be noted.

19 HARDLEY DEPOT UPDATE

The Panel received an update on progress with the Hardley Depot Project. The slides from the presentation are part of the agenda pack.

The new operational depot at Hardley would comprise offices, storage, workshops and vehicle parking and an updated planning application was due to be submitted in December with a decision expected by March 2023. Overall authority for project implementation was to be sought in April 2023, with the contractor selection due shortly afterwards. Construction was due to be completed by the summer of 2024.

20 THE NEW FOREST ECONOMIC PROFILE 2022

The Panel received a summary of the recently commissioned New Forest Economic Profile, which covered policy areas / themes relating to: economy, business, population, labour market, skills and occupations. The information will be used to inform plans, strategies initiatives and priorities for the District.

The exercise had involved splitting the District into 5 areas, with Totton identified in its own right, rather than simply as part of the Waterside.

The profile was part of a series of data sets based on mid - year population estimates. Broader census information would be submitted to the Environment Panel in due course. Members were encouraged to look at the full profile as it offered a valuable snapshot of issues across the District which would inform future policy formulation.

Members emphasised the need to address pockets of high deprivation in the District. It was also pointed out that regeneration projects should be directed towards the other coastal towns and villages as well as Totton and the Waterside. Members also wished for a greater emphasis on opportunities for young people as well as homes for the elderly. The Local Plan would support the delivery of a range of developments to address housing need across the District.

On skills and occupations, in response to a question, it was explained that the Freeport initiative would address the skills gap in the New Forest, by upskilling and matching skills requirements to employers' requirements.

There was also employment growth and upskilling initiatives outside the Freeport area, future employment development in Ringwood and in North Totton, as well as other areas, which will generate further job opportunities.

Related discussions with Brockenhurst and Totton colleges were ongoing, and the Solent Freeport had approached the Council and partners to set up a skills forum specifically for the Waterside to deliver upskilling in the District. All areas of the Forest would be involved in growth and employment opportunities.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

21 ICT UPDATE

The Panel received an update on progress with the ICT Programme. The slides from the presentation are in the agenda pack.

The presentation covered the live projects within the overall ICT Strategic Programme, the 2022/25 project timelines and related budgets, together with detailed information outlining progress on each project.

Risks and issues associated with the Programme were also outlined, which included staff recruitment and retention difficulties, particularly technical staff, as well as project over-runs.

22 THE NEW FOREST START-UP CAMPAIGN

The Panel received a report on the New Forest Business Start Up Campaign.

The Campaign was to run between January and June 2023 and would encourage and support individuals within the District wishing to start a business or move into self - employment.

Processes were in place to ensure people were getting proper support and the project would be evaluated afterwards.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

23 COMPLAINTS ANNUAL REPORT

The Panel received an overview of complaints received and dealt with by the Council's Complaints Team during the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

The report concluded that the Council's corporate complaints procedure continued to provide a robust system for investigating and resolving complaints. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman had upheld only two complaints for the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, both regarding the Development Management Service. The report also included compliments and positive feedback from members of the public.

It was emphasised that the Complaints Team always ensured that learning was taken from each complaint upheld, issues were discussed with the relevant service manager, and measures were put in place to avoid re-occurrence.

Members emphasised the value of learning and best practice in other authorities. It was also suggested that the name of the Complaints Team be changed to take into account that it dealt with positive feedback from customers and this would be considered.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the report be noted, and that Service Managers and Executive Heads ensure that employees respond appropriately to customers who appear not to have received an expected standard of service from the Council;
- b) That Service Managers and Executive Heads be reminded to review complaints about their services regularly, and to implement any learning from them.
- c) That Service Managers and Executive Heads pass compliments / positive feedback from members of the public to the Information Governance and Complaints Team.

24 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT

The Panel considered the recommendations of the Council Tax Reduction Task and Finish Group.

Local authorities were responsible for setting up their own local Council Tax Reduction Scheme to support those of working age on low income with paying their council tax.

There were currently 7,904 claimants receiving Council Tax Reduction. Of these 4,151 are working age and 3,753 were of pensionable age.

The Group had considered various aspects of the existing scheme, but had only proposed one change, to extend the council tax reduction claims backdating period from 6 months to 12 months. The Group also suggested that next year's Task and Finish Group examine the feasibility of a banded scheme.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That it be a recommendation to Cabinet that the Council Tax Reduction claims backdate period be extended from 6 months to 12 months, as detailed in Section 6, from 1 April 2023.
- (b) That a Task and Finish Group review the feasibility of using a Banded scheme during 2023

25 COUNCIL TAX EMPTY HOMES PREMIUM, SECOND HOME PREMIUM, DISCOUNTS AND POLICIES

The Panel considered the recommendations of the Council Tax Reduction Task and Finish Group on the council tax empty homes premium, a premium on second homes, council tax discounts, and three revenue and benefits policy reviews.

Members discussed the discount applied to properties which were unoccupied and unfurnished and where major repair works or structural alterations were required or under way, often referred to as “uninhabitable”. Local authorities had discretion to set a discount of between 0 and 100% for a maximum period of 12 months. There was no local discretion on the duration, only on the amount of discount. After 12 months, the discount ended and the full council tax was payable. The current discount in the District was 50% for 12 months.

The Task and Finish Group had recommended reducing the discount from 50% to 0% to encourage properties to be brought back into use. The view was expressed that removal of the discount could have an adverse effect by dissuading people from buying such properties to bring them back into use. Accordingly, the Panel felt this matter was worthy of further discussion.

RESOLVED:

That it be a recommendation to the Cabinet that:

- a) That the empty homes premium as detailed in Section 3 remain unchanged
- b) That the extension of the Empty Homes Premium as detailed in Section 4 be approved
- c) That the introduction of a second homes premium of 100% as detailed in Section 4 be approved
- d) That the Panel note the proposal for the removal of the council tax discount for properties in Prescribed Class D as detailed in Section 5, but felt the matter was worthy of further discussion.
- e) That the updated policies as detailed in Section 6 be approved.

26 FINANCIAL STRATEGY TASK & FINISH GROUP - FINAL REPORT

The Panel considered the final report of the Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group.

There were 3 common themes raised by portfolio holders:

- Recruitment, retention and training, with the related service delivery pressures
- Pay award and the associated financial pressures
- ICT improvements and the important role in delivering service improvements

RESOLVED:

That the Panel note the contents of the report and endorse the follow up actions for carrying through to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

27 PENSION REVALUATION SUMMARY

The Panel received details of the Employee Pension Revaluation. A copy of the slides for the update is included in the agenda pack.

It was explained that valuation of the pension scheme was a 3 yearly review conducted by the pension scheme's actuary, overseen by Hampshire County Council as the administering authority.

The review considered the fund's assets and liabilities against the pension funding target.

Since the last review in 2019, a change in funding position had improved so that the Hampshire pensions scheme was 107.1% funded, meaning a surplus of £1.85m for NFDG. This meant that Council funds that had been reserved to meet a potential deficit were no longer required and could now be released to meet other budget pressures, for example on homelessness costs.

Members welcomed this news and requested that the Panel be provided with details of the areas where pension funds were invested.

28 PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S REPORTS

The Panel received reports from Portfolio holders on developments within their portfolio areas.

Cllr Harris was pleased that the Shop Doctor Programme would be repeated in 2023. Small Business Saturday was due on 3 December and free parking was available for the event. He emphasised the need for high street businesses to organise more events to attract customers into towns and spend less online and more in shops.

The Start Up campaign will assist, support and encourage individuals starting new businesses and small enterprises in the early stages of their development. Cllr Harris undertook to speak to HCC and other organisations to seek their assistance in encouraging people into town centres through free parking at Christmas. Members felt greater assistance with business support was requested for Holbury, Blackfield and Pennington.

Cllr Heron had nothing to add, as the discussions on many of the previous agenda items had involved major parts of his portfolio.

There were no Leader updates, as Cllr Cleary had only just taken over the role.

In response to a question relating to Voter ID, it was explained that Government guidance was still awaited and the AEA had expressed concerns about the tight timescale. The Council stood prepared to respond appropriately once guidance was received and ensure no one was disenfranchised.

29 WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel noted its future work programme. It was noted that an update on the Staff Efficiency Ideas Scheme would come forward to the March meeting.

30 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED:

That the following dates be agreed for Panel meetings in 2023/24:

(All Thursdays at 9.30am)

- 22 June 2023 (corrected from 26 June on the agenda)
- 21 September 2023
- 16 November 2023
- 18 January 2024
- 28 March 2024

CHAIRMAN