

19 JANUARY 2023

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, 19 January 2023

- * 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:

Michael Harris

Councillors:

Jeremy Heron

Officers Attending:

Alan Bethune, Sara Hamilton, Sheryl Parry, Andy Rogers and Kate Ryan

31 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 16 May and 17 November 2022 be confirmed and signed.

32 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made by any member on any agenda item.

33 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

34 TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Panel noted its Terms of Reference.

35 ASSET MAINTENANCE AND REPLACEMENT PROGRAMME AND GENERAL FUND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2023/24

The Panel received details of the Asset Maintenance and Replacement Programme, and General Fund Capital Programme.

Members asked to be kept informed of the costs for the scheme to repair the undercroft wall and beams at Eling Tide Mill.

Reference was made to page 13 of the pack, which showed a list of capital projects requiring financing.

The Panel supported both of the proposed programmes, subject to the following:

- Calshot - A specific request from the Chairman to see Calshot included in the list of Public Conveniences for renovation (which officers would raise with the relevant Task and Finish Group),
- Lymington Chapel Building - consider including improvements to entrance way / gates, into the scheme (officers would investigate),
- Eling Tide Mill (noting NFDC responsibility for new works (estimated £50-60K)), Panel to be kept informed of costs and study results).

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet be informed that the Panel supports the Asset Maintenance and Replacement Programme, and General Fund Capital Programme, subject to the detailed comments above.

36 CAPITAL STRATEGY 2023/24

The Panel received details of the proposed Capital Strategy for 2023/24.

The Capital Strategy indicated planned expenditure covering all Capital activity over the medium term and how it intended to finance this expenditure.

Over the period covered by 2023/24 to 2025/26, total capital expenditure was forecast at around £139 million.

The Council would supplement internal resources, when necessary, with external borrowing and in accordance with advice received from its contracted Treasury Management experts.

Based on the current set of prudential indicators, external borrowing will be required each year from 2023/24 if capital programmes were to be fully delivered.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet be advised that the Panel support the Capital Strategy as set out in the report, including the MRP Statement.

37 RESIDENT INSIGHT

The Panel noted key findings from the recent resident insight survey.

The results had been shared in detail with members at a separate briefing earlier in the week, and several Panel members had found it very interesting and informative.

Due to the number of respondents interviewed, there was a good degree of confidence that the survey results were accurate, representative and robust.

The survey showed that reputationally, the NFDC score exceeded the local Government Association benchmark scores. It was noted that 93% of respondents had indicated their satisfaction with the New Forest as a place to live, an exceptionally high score. Many of the Council's services had received 'Excellent' satisfaction scores. The Council also scored highly with ease of contact with the Council, as well as easy access to its customer payments systems. The report also revealed significant public concern over protecting the environment.

The survey information put the Council in a good position to start shaping future service design, delivery and strategic objectives, details of which were set out in the report.

The results were being disseminated internally and externally through a variety of channels.

Some members queried the quoted 93% of residents using the internet, particularly with older residents, as this differed markedly from personal experience. It was acknowledged that some residents were assisted by younger family members. This illustrated the importance of obtaining further information in this regard and on other topics. It was emphasised that the Council was committed to ensuring that no one was disenfranchised, and services would continue to be available to all residents through a number of channels.

It was suggested that some questions may be loaded to elicit a positive response, though it was noted that the wording of the questions within the survey was different from the summaries provided in the report. The point was made that the follow-up driver analysis questions attempted to ascertain reasons for responses, to clarify the context of answers given.

Members felt that voter turnout and involvement in Council decision making could be improved. These points were kept under review.

The Panel highlighted that there was an opportunity to undertake further engagement with council tenants, including understanding their views on main Council functions and frontline services.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted and that the recommended next steps as outlined in the report be agreed, including the 2 - yearly resident survey and the sharing of anonymised data with NFDC partners.

38 COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITY

The Panel received an update on communications activities following additional investment in this area.

This report covered the resource in the corporate communications team, and highlighted work undertaken in the past six months. This included work with the media, social media activity, and longer-term projects supported by the team.

In addition to the significant activity detailed in the report, a strategic approach was being implemented, focusing on key campaigns that align with council priorities and support outcomes such as cost of living, safe communities and clean streets.

It was noted that early results from the resident insight survey show that two thirds of our residents feel informed about the services and benefits NFDC provides.

It was confirmed that the Council’s e-newsletter circulation numbered 15,000 (8.4%) and that benchmarking ranged between 6-12% nationally. It was noted that the Council also worked to reach the non-digital audience through various means.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

39 CONSULTATION WITH RATE PAYING BUSINESSES IN THE DISTRICT ON THE COUNCIL'S FINANCIAL STRATEGY: SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

The Panel considered the responses to the Business Ratepayer Budget Consultation.

Only 20 responses to this consultation were received, a response rate of 0.2%. Given this, the consultation did not therefore provide statistically significant data and as such, no credible conclusions could be drawn.

This low response rate was in spite of the consultation being widely promoted through the Council’s dedicated business communication channels. Other district councils had also been consulted on the ways in which they undertook this exercise, but the response had been minimal.

The 2024/25 ratepayer budget consultation, to be carried out later in 2023, will consider alternative methods for conducting the consultation, and will include guidance for respondents as to the services that are the responsibility of the Council as well as providing a summary of Council budget priorities. It was hoped this would achieve a larger response rate than that achieved for the 2023/24 budget consultation.

Members suggested a number of other means of increasing engagement, including contact with the chambers of commerce. It was also suggested that businesses be invited to a financial briefing event in order to engage with them.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

40 PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S REPORTS AND PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD

The Panel received updates from Portfolio Holders:

Portfolio Holder for Finance, Investment and Corporate Services

It was reported that the Platinum Jubilee Business Park in Ringwood was coming close to completion, with lots of serious interest from prospective leaseholders. Some minor issues with the windows and electricity supply had arisen but these would shortly be resolved. There were some aspects in the Performance Dashboards which reflected concerns due to current financial uncertainties, though overall he felt the Council was in a comfortable position.

Reference was made to the Dashboards in relation to the availability of suitable investment opportunities within the New Forest. It was reported that the Council was becoming well known in the agents' network, with contacts being made about off market assets, and the Portfolio Holder (PH) was pleased with the way Officers were operating with this aspect.

In response to a question on Hybrid Working, it was explained this issue was still under review, as employee / employer preferences requirements and working patterns continued to evolve. It was felt the current balance between office / home working at NFDC was a good one, and attractive to many sectors in terms of recruitment. It was reported that practice across and within private and public sectors varied widely. The Council as an employer was aware of the benefits of maintaining social contact, and had arranged various events (eg the recent staff Christmas quiz) to promote this, as well as encouraging Team Days and following up with an employee survey to understand the effects on staff. Contact with teams was especially important with new starters.

In answer to a question, it was explained that Energy Rebate Scheme payments had been completed within the timescales required and a similar scheme was imminent. The Portfolio Holder emphasised that NFDC was a high performer in Hampshire and nationally, in administering grants to the community speedily and effectively. Members paid tribute to Ryan Stevens and the Revenue and Benefits team in this regard.

A member gave positive feedback in respect of the Parade at Totton, as a tenant felt things had improved since NFDC had become involved in its management. It was further explained that in relation to another property in Totton acquired by the Council, the flats were managed by Housing, but the PH undertook to provide an update on the commercial property.

It was reported that the financial settlement was slightly better than expected, though it was not yet clear whether this was a 1-year settlement. The figure stated was £699k (3% funding guarantee grant), and the council looked to have a balanced budget for the forthcoming year.

In answer to a question on the projected Council Tax level for 2023/24, the Portfolio Holder indicated that currently he was of the view that the Council would need to continue to apply the annual allowable uprating, in order to keep up with inflationary pressures including pay awards.

Portfolio Holder for Business, Tourism and High Streets

The e - letter to 4k businesses was very valuable. The Shop Doctor programme would continue in 6 areas over the forthcoming year and the Council's continuing Business Startup initiative offered guidance.

The PH referred to the Enterprise Centre which was an interesting project and suggested that its future operation might be the subject of a Task and Finish Group review.

It was suggested that a magazine be created for distribution to businesses at meetings with chambers of commerce.

A number of members expressed concern about the loss of high street retail premises to housing, and the Portfolio Holder was asked whether there were any measures planned to mitigate this. It was explained that this was to some extent in the control of the landlord, though were some planning constraints. In this connection, Members were encouraged to attend the Workshop later that day to feed into the next Local Plan.

41 WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel noted the work programme.

CHAIRMAN