

23 MARCH 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, 23 March 2023

\* 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, Alan Bethune, Heleana Aylett, Ryan Stevens, Rich Bird, Kim Gray, Sally Igra and Andy Rogers

**Apologies**

There were no apologies for absence.

**42 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN OF THE PANEL**

**RESOLVED:**

That Cllr Tipp be elected Chairman of the Panel for the remainder of the municipal year.

**43 APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIRMAN**

**RESOLVED:**

That Cllr O'Sullivan be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Panel for the remainder of the municipal year.

**44 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2023 were confirmed and signed.

**45 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**46 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

**47 SUPPORT TO BUSINESSES, HOUSEHOLDS AND THE COMMUNITY**

The Panel received an update on the range of support given to businesses, households and communities in 2022/23, together with support being administered from 1 April 2023.

In the 2022/23 financial year to date the Council had administered and distributed various grants, payments and funds totalling £18,552,930 as well as undertaking various initiatives to support residents with the cost of living, such as the community hubs.

A member referred to the 99 exceptional housing costs awards, from 187 applications, and it was queried why this appeared to be relatively low compared to other schemes, and whether there were any concerns with the application process. In response, it was explained that no concerns had been raised with the process, applicants were offered assistance with completing forms where required, and awards had been targeted at households in exceptional financial hardship, given the £45,000 funding available.

In answer to the question about Waterside food bank, it was explained that the Council was working with a range of partners, including Waterside Foodbank and the intention was to actively promote local support for residents across the Forest, including food banks.

It was noted that most of the financial assistance outlined was government – funded, and whilst this might help address local poverty and deprivation through this short term funding, it was queried whether the proposed task and finish group would examine and consider how to alleviate or deal with the symptoms in the long term. It was confirmed that the task and finish group would consider this.

Members commended the considerable work undertaken by the team, both in promptly distributing grants and payments, but also in networking and joint collaboration with partners to maximise local support where it was needed and communicating the support available.

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) That officers continue to work with Council partners to identify emerging issues and explore further opportunities for joint working to support our communities and the most vulnerable residents across the District.
- (b) That the Panel support the recommended use of £20,000 from the residual Council Tax Hardship fund, to be used for work with partners supporting the Community Hubs, and to contribute towards the employment of a Financial Inclusion officer as set out in the report.
- (c) That the intent to establish a Task and Finish Group, to report back to the

Community, Partnerships and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Panel, on the development of our strategic response to supporting our communities, be supported.

#### **48 ICT UPDATE (PRESENTATION)**

The Panel received and noted a presentation on progress with the delivery of the ICT strategy, the slides from which were with the agenda pack.

A staff restructure had been undertaken to facilitate the delivery of the digital strategy. A new Assistant Director had been appointed to oversee the service.

The presentation covered staffing, strategy, operational and delivery aspects. It also outlined the work programme and operational updates including service desk, infrastructure and security and solutions. Other work included work on a data strategy, and adoption of Microsoft 365. Members noted the completed website upgrade.

In answer to a question, it was confirmed that the Council Chamber upgrade was due to be completed on 5 April.

Members noted that the ICT training modules for staff and councillors were being reviewed.

Members thanked officers for their hard work in maintaining service provision and a very informative presentation.

#### **49 STAFF SUGGESTION SCHEME (PRESENTATION)**

The Panel received and noted a summary of staff efficiency ideas submitted in 2022/23, a copy of the slides is with the agenda pack.

The Scheme had been launched in March 2021 and was regularly promoted within the organisation.

Many of the ideas coming forward were general suggestions, rather than efficiency saving ideas. A summary of the ideas and responses to them was given. The results were made available to staff.

#### **50 PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S REPORTS AND PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD**

The Panel received an oral update from the portfolio holders on developments within their portfolio areas, including performance dashboards.

##### **Cllr Cleary, Leader**

The Waterside Steering group had been restarted and as chair the Leader was pleased with both the attendance at these meetings and the focus on collaboration to bring together and communicate the next steps in delivering the vision for the Waterside.

Through the HR Committee, work was underway to support NFDC being an employer of choice as well as a range of initiatives to improve recruitment processes.

In relation to the priority around democratic engagement and the preparations underway for the May 2023 District and Parish elections, it was noted that the new Voter ID requirements coming on top of the boundary review made for a challenging time. The Chief executive was chairing fortnightly project meetings, in the context of a cross - Council commitment to deliver a successful polling day and count.

On the KPI for 'Vacancies filled first time', it was confirmed the HR Committee had recently received details on this issue and recent performance was showing improvement. Work was also being done on branding and communications, and improvements to the applications process.

On the 'Number of subscribers to the Resident's email', improvement would require a step change in approach, which could be considered by the new Council. Private sector websites sometimes boosted subscriptions by requiring sign – up before the website could be fully used, although this could be off-putting for customers. There was a balance to be struck and officers would consider what more could be done to reach the target of 14%.

The Council was well prepared across its information offices to assist persons with the need to provide Voter ID for elections, and it was noted that a relatively small number of residents had applied for voter authentication certificates. The last figure was under 100 and it was important to step up communication on the issue and support the Government's wider campaign around voter ID, and target likely areas where fewer residents would have the traditional forms of ID. Polling station staffing would be adjusted to take account of Voter ID, for which government funding was being made available.

A query was raised about the relative benefits of hybrid working, and it was explained that this way of working was part of the Council's efforts to be an Employer of Choice, and employees valued both working from home and meeting fellow team members. It was anticipated that the new council administration would consider the future use of office accommodation. It was explained that productivity of staff was managed through performance interviews, regular contact and focussing on targeted outcomes.

#### **Cllr J Heron, Portfolio Holder, Finance, Investment and Corporate Services**

The portfolio holder referred to the two KPI's having a red status, namely General Fund and HRA budget variations, and explained that both external factors out of the control of the council and internal factors had again caused budget variations.

He paid tribute to the Revenue and Benefits team not only for dealing with their normal workload, but also being able to deliver grants administration reported earlier in the agenda.

Councillor Heron also praised the Council's ICT service, which although not high profile, played a crucial role in the operational management of the Authority.

In answer to a question, it was explained that the latest government financial settlement, although originally expected to be a multi-year grant, was for one year only. It was felt unlikely there would be a comprehensive government spending review before the expected 2024 general election. Any new review was likely to be for the 2026/27 financial year.

In response to a query on the High Risk area on 'lack of suitable commercial property investment opportunities in the District', it was explained that currently there were few properties available in the District, exacerbated by changes in interest rates.

The portfolio holder undertook to provide a future update on the use of the shop below the Council - owned housing accommodation in Junction Road, Totton.

It was noted that plans for the Hardley depot site had been revised to ensure the best return for the money invested and the best option for the future.

It was noted that James Carpenter, the new Strategic Director for Place, Operations and Sustainability would assume responsibility for town centre regeneration, overseeing a new assistant director post, whose duties would include a focus on regeneration, supported by the economic development team.

### **Cllr Michael Harris, Portfolio holder for Business, Tourism and High Streets**

The New Forest Shop Doctor programme had recently been relaunched, with 78 participants signed up across 6 areas within the District. Participating businesses will receive their feedback from the 'Mystery Shopper' exercise imminently. The start-up business support initiative, delivered by Incuhive, recently had over 30 New Forest businesses and residents sign up for 121 support.

The Business Boost programme, funded by EU ERDF monies and delivered by Portsmouth University Business School, has allocated all its places to local businesses. A 'Get Inspired' careers event was planned for May in collaboration with EBP South and other sponsors. It enables local pupils to meet with local businesses to find out about the range of careers on offer in the area. The Council's HR team are attending as a prospective employer.

The Film New Forest project continues to support film and TV productions to use the districts wide range of locations. Local spend by these productions for 2022/23 is estimated to be £238k.

Cllr Harris had recently met with the chief executive and chairman of the New Forest Enterprise Centre. The Centre began as a project initiated by NFDC in the 1980s, and provided space for new businesses. The portfolio holder suggested that representatives of the Centre be invited to a future Panel meeting to receive a progress update.

It was suggested that business births and deaths statistics should be included in the KPIs. This would be considered though there were some questions over definitions and categories in this regard.

A question was raised on how the Council could help increase the availability of skilled labour. It was explained that this was a significant national and regional issue, and the Council's remit and resources were limited in what is a non-statutory function. However, members were reminded that the Council has a key role in planning for the future through the local plan.

It was also highlighted that whilst it was not the Council's role to provide skills training directly, the Authority would be working with Solent Freeport to influence their strategy on skills, ensuring the involvement of local colleges to support appropriate skills provision in the Waterside and across the Forest for the future.

The outcome of government consultation at strategic level was awaited and the Council would work to build capacity with partners to tackle the issue. In response to a related question, it was highlighted that whilst it was not the Council's role to provide skills training directly, the Authority would be working with Solent Freeport to influence their strategy on skills. Waterside Skills Forum was also working to ensure involvement of local colleges and to ensure adequate skills provision in the Waterside and across the Forest. Upskilling was high on the agenda in local forums.

**51 WORK PROGRAMME**

The Panel reviewed and noted its future work programme.

It was agreed to accept Cllr Harris' suggestion of inviting representatives from the New Forest Enterprise Centre to a future Panel meeting to receive a progress update.

CHAIRMAN