

16 NOVEMBER 2023

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

RESOURCES AND TRANSFORMATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of a meeting of the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on Thursday, 16 November 2023

- * Cllr Alan O'Sullivan (Chairman)
- * Cllr Barry Dunning (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

- * Alan Alvey
- * Jack Davies
- Jacqui England
- * David Millar

Councillors:

- * Barry Rickman
- * Alex Wade
- * Christine Ward

*Present

In attendance:

Councillors:

Jill Cleary
Jeremy Heron

Councillors:

John Sleep

Officers Attending:

Alan Bethune, Rebecca Drummond, Karen Grimes, Grainne O'Rourke,
Andy Rogers, Kate Ryan, Ryan Stevens, Amanda Wilson, Saqib Yasin and
Richard Knott

Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr England.

27 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

28 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

29 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest.

30 COMPLAINTS ANNUAL REPORT

The Panel received an overview of complaints and compliments received and recorded by the Council's Information Governance and Complaints Team.

It was important that all services of the Council accurately recorded complaints received and notify the Information Governance and Complaints Team so that proper records are maintained, and actions monitored.

It was noted that a total of 96 complaints were received and logged in 2022/23, compared with 89 in 2021/22, 73 in 2020/21, 78 in 2019/20 and 97 in 2018/19.

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman had upheld two complaints for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. Both were regarding the Housing Options Service. There had been no complaints upheld by the Housing Ombudsman during this period, despite a number of complaints being escalated there by complainants.

It was confirmed that any compensation payments were agreed by senior managers or directors.

Reference was made to Appendix 3 to the report, which summarised the complaints received and outcomes. In response to a question, it was explained that learning and improvements to services were routinely pursued with services, although not normally detailed in reports.

Details were given of updated processes and procedures as a result of experience with housing repair services. Over the past year, a Disrepair Team had been put in place to deal with complaints, with the objective of minimising disrepair and moving to a more preventative approach, by monitoring and analysing repair calls. The Team had, in the interests of ruling out hidden disrepair, begun inspecting properties that had not reported any defects in the last 3 years, to ensure there were no unforeseen problems.

Officers undertook to provide more narrative in future reports on lessons learned. It was felt the report demonstrated a high degree of transparency within this Council, and evidenced the robust willingness to learn from complaints and review procedures in the light of them.

RESOLVED:

- (a) The contents of the report including the trends and total number of complaints be noted;
- (b) That officers respond appropriately to customers who have not received the expected level of service and implement learning that has been identified.

31 DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION

The Panel considered the draft Corporate Plan for public consultation.

The Plan was organised into the thematic areas of People, Place and Prosperity, with an underpinning theme, with the overarching corporate values of Empathy, Honesty, Learning and Ambition.

Once the 6 week public consultation period had ended in January 2024, the final version of the Plan would be submitted to the scrutiny panels in March and then to Cabinet in April.

Members made a number of detailed comments which are summarised below.

Following recent events on the Waterside, members were pleased to note the inclusion of emergency preparedness exercises, though they would like to see more emphasis on collaborative working with towns and parishes in this regard.

It was felt that the Plan should make more reference to youth and recreation facilities.

Members welcomed the reference to the A326, which was important for the Waterside.

It was suggested Future New Forest be brought forward into one of the themes. As it stood, Future New Forest was an underpinning theme to support delivery of the plan, though officers would consider this in line with consultation feedback.

Under People, it was suggested that the document should include measures for the reduction of deprivation and poverty together with a related action plan.

On page 38 under Prosperity, it was queried whether the proposed priority of 'Ensuring the investment in our District enhances rather than diminishes our special natural environment' appeared to conflict with the related performance measurement of 'hectares of industrial employment land developed'. It was also queried how the benefits of the Freeport were measured across the District.

Members were pleased to see references to town centre prosperity and targeted regeneration approaches, especially in respect of Fordingbridge. Under Place, it was also suggested that more emphasis be given to infrastructure in relation to the strategic sites at Fordingbridge.

It was suggested that greater prominence be given to partnership working in a wide range of areas, including open spaces, with HCC and town and parish councils. It was also queried whether reference could be made to working in support of the County Council given the current challenges it faced.

It was also felt there should be targets relating to affordable housing provision.

RESOLVED:

That subject to consideration of members' comments as set out above, the Corporate Plan 2024-2028 Consultation Draft be recommended for approval by Cabinet.

32 TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY UPDATE (PRESENTATION)

The Panel received and noted a presentation update on progress with the Transformation Strategy. The presentation slides are available with the minutes.

The Strategy included a high-level plan for delivery, highlighting key phases of change and milestones around each of the programme themes, supplemented by a work programme detailing specific projects for delivery in year one.

The Strategy was centred around increasing income and reducing spend, with transformation themes of:

- Customer and Digital Services
- People and Capabilities
- Assets and Accommodation
- Finances and Delivery

The October 2023 Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2023 – 2027 provided for a cumulative targeted savings of £1.25m general fund and £500k housing revenue account arising from the transformation programme. Budget provision of £750k had already been approved over the three years to 2025/26 to provide for resources and support for programme delivery.

The Transformation Strategy sets out how the Council needed to change to respond to future challenges to create a more sustainable organisation. It was noted that there would be a member briefing session on 30 November to receive the strategy in more detail. The strategy had been informed by benchmarking, workshops, data analysis, customer research and financial and corporate plans.

Key challenges were detailed and included:

- Modernising services
- Financial constraints
- Climate and sustainability
- Capacity and capability

The presentation also outlined the themes and objectives, with related action plans, with details of the programme roadmap until 2028.

In response to a question on recruitment, it was noted that the Council was doing what it could to compete with neighbouring authorities and address skills gaps. Graduate pathways, and apprenticeships in areas such as planning were being developed to grow expertise through internal career building programmes.

It was confirmed that public consultation would be undertaken when decisions were being made on future use of large-scale community buildings.

33 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEMES TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT

The Panel considered the recommendations of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Task and Finish Group on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, the disregard of war pension income in the assessment of Housing Benefit, and the review of the Council's National Non-Domestic Rate Relief Policy.

In respect of the earnings disregard, whilst supporting the objective to make the process and ongoing administration more streamlined for officers and claimants, members noted it would lead to a reduction in support by up to £74 per annum for 701 claimants. It was queried how this would be mitigated and it was explained that an impact assessment had been undertaken and an Exceptional Hardship Payment Scheme was available which claimants could apply for if any reduction in support caused financial hardship.

RESOLVED:

That it be a recommendation to the Cabinet:

- a) To increase the standard earnings disregard and remove the additional earnings disregard, as detailed in Section 7, from 1 April 2024.
- b) That a Task and Finish Group review a Banded scheme during 2024.
- c) That the full disregard of war pension income in the assessment of Housing Benefit, as detailed in Section 9, be approved.
- d) That the updated National Non-Domestic Rate Relief policy as detailed in Section 10 of the report be approved.

34 FINANCIAL STRATEGY TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT

The Panel received a report setting out the work of the Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group and its conclusions.

The report dealt with the Medium Term Financial Plan overview and assumptions, consideration of an alternative budget format and a review of reserve balances.

It was noted that portfolio holder interviews had not been undertaken this year, given the new administration new cabinet, and the corporate plan still being under development. The Group looked forward to the restoration of the portfolio themed approach next year.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be noted and the Group conclusions set out in paragraph 7.1 be endorsed.

35 PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' UPDATES

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

Councillor Jill Cleary, Leader

In answer to a question on concerns regarding recent issues relating to Southern Water, it was explained that the Council would be feeding into the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) debrief, and NFDC would meet with Southern Water to discuss these matters, including the need to ensure the most vulnerable were protected. It was also noted that the Government had asked LRFs to consider joint work on community resilience measures for various incidents. A further update would be given at a future meeting. Members hoped parish and town councils would be involved in future discussions.

Councillor Jeremy Heron, Finance and Corporate

On ICT it was noted that a number of major projects were underway.

The budget process had commenced, focussing on ensuring the Council's limited resources were properly directed towards delivering priorities. The Council offices were now being run in a more energy efficient way as part of a winter plan.

The portfolio holder was pleased to report the Hardley Depot project had now started.

Reference was also made to youth community working at Calshot and the Eling toll bridge and mill project.

A member commented on difficulties some local residents had experienced in use in contacting the council via telephone and negotiating the call handling system. The portfolio holder undertook to look into this and discuss further.

A question was raised concerning the level of investment by Freedom leisure at the Lymington leisure centre. In answer it was reported that Freedom leisure had invested £3.5m (gross value) in leisure centres within the District. Given that Lymington leisure centre was relatively modern, a relatively smaller percentage of this funding had been needed to bring about necessary improvements.

In response to a question it was reported that the government had indicated that councils would receive a two year funding settlement in future, though no further details were available at this time.

36 WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel received and noted its Work Programme.

RESOLVED:

That the Work Programme be approved.

CHAIRMAN