

COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on Wednesday, 22 June 2022 in the Council Chamber - Council Offices at 6.00 pm

Members Present:

Mr T Adams	Ms P Bevan Jones
Mr D Birch	Mr H Blathwayt
Mrs S Bütikofer	Mr C Cushing
Mr N Dixon	Mr P Fisher
Mrs A Fitch-Tillett	Mr T FitzPatrick
Mr V FitzPatrick	Mrs W Fredericks
Ms V Gay	Mrs P Grove-Jones
Mr G Hayman	Mr C Heinink
Dr V Holliday	Mr N Housden
Mr R Kershaw	Mr N Lloyd
Mr N Pearce	Mr S Penfold
Mr J Rest	Mr E Seward
Miss L Shires	Mrs J Stenton
Mr M Taylor	Mr E Vardy
Mr A Varley	Ms L Withington

Also in attendance:

18 PRESENTATION BY THE PRISCILLA BACON HOSPICE

Hugo Stevenson gave a presentation on the work of the Priscilla Bacon Hospice. He spoke about the ongoing construction of the new Priscilla Bacon Lodge and outlined the additional facilities that would be available. Members were shown visual images of the site, including floor plans and an artist's impression of the finished lodge. Mr Stevenson concluded by thanking the Chairman for choosing Priscilla Bacon Hospice as one of her charities for the year.

19 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllrs A Brown, Dr P Butikofer, P Heinrich, G Mancini-Boyle, G Perry-Warnes, J Punchard, Dr C Stockton, J Toye and A Yiasimi.

20 MINUTES

The minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Council, held on 18th May 2022, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

21 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None received.

22 TO RECEIVE DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS FROM MEMBERS

None received.

23 CHAIRMAN'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Chairman spoke about the civic events that herself and the Vice-Chairman had attended since the last meeting:

- 19th May – Launch of Norfolk Community Foundation ‘Nourishing Norfolk’ campaign
- 21st May – Falklands Commemoration Service, Stalham Parish Church
- 26th May – Jubilee event at Wells Community Hospital
- 27th May – Jubilee Family Picnic at Antingham & Southrepps Primary School
- 28th May – Shrek the Musical, Sheringham & Cromer Light Opera Society
- 2nd June – Jubilee commemorative slate unveiling at Holt
- 3rd June – Inauguration of the Mayoress of Kings Lynn
- 3rd June – Jubilee Civic Service, Great Yarmouth Minster
- 12th June – Lord Mayor of Norwich & Sheriff of Norwich Civic Service, Norwich Cathedral
- 19th June – VE Day 75th Anniversary presentation of commemorative poppies, Cromer Parish church

24 LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Leader began by speaking about the approaching anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia, when 8000 men and boys were massacred. He reminded members that their memory was honoured on 11th July every year and it should never be forgotten that hatred and intolerance could flourish if left unchallenged.

He then spoke about how the Council was addressing rising living costs for residents and staff through various schemes including the creation of two discretionary hardship funds for vulnerable residents, an increase to staff mileage rates and excellent performance in the rapid processing of energy rebates. He referred to the Norfolk Community Foundation’s launch of Flourishing Norfolk, which he had attended with the Chairman and thanked all members who were involved with similar initiatives in their communities. He also thanked staff in the Housing Team who were working hard to reduce the number of rough sleepers in the District.

The Leader thanked the Council’s Communications Team for their hard work in producing ‘Outlook’ magazine which would be distributed to all households in the District shortly.

He then spoke about concerns that had been raised with him regarding rising energy costs and whether the new Reef Leisure centre would be affected. He said he wished to reassure residents and members that the Council was in a more resilient position than most as it was a very modern and efficient facility.

The Leader concluded by informing members that there would be a special meeting of Cabinet at 1pm on 4th July to share information on the Council’s bids to the Levelling Up fund, ahead of the submission deadline of 6th July.

25 PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS

None received.

26 PORTFOLIO REPORTS

The Chairman asked if any Cabinet members wished to provide an update to their written report. Cllr E Seward, Portfolio Holder for Finance & Assets, referred to the figure in his report for council tax collection for 2021/2022 which was 98.10%. He clarified that this put NNDC in the top 15% of all local authorities for collection rates.

The Chairman invited members to ask questions:

Cllr J Rest referred to Cllr Seward's report and the reference to a lease at the Fakenham Connect building. He said this was another example of local members not being kept informed of matters in their ward. He asked for more information on the lease arrangements. Cllr Seward apologised that local members had not been informed and said that he would provide a written response.

Cllr N Dixon referred to the recent 'no notice' resignation of the Director of Resources. He asked the Leader why it happened the way that it did and whether there was any connection to the many criticisms of NNDC and the events of May 2019 made by the Council's external auditor, Ernst & Young, in their Annual Report for 2019/20. The Monitoring Officer advised Cllr Dixon that his question may have to be rejected as it was not possible to provide an answer without the disclosure of confidential exempt information. The Leader confirmed that as the questions concerned matters about staffing it could not be discussed in public session.

Cllr C Cushing asked the Leader to what extent he was involved in the discussions resulting in the 'no notice' resignation of the Director of Resources and whether there was any extraordinary departure deal agreed to enable this to happen, and whether the Leader had any involvement in such a deal. The Monitoring Officer advised that the question could not be answered without the disclosure of confidential exempt information and must therefore be rejected. The Leader referred Cllr Cushing to his previous response.

Cllr J Stenton asked the Leader whether the residents of North Norfolk would be told the details of any departure deal and any disciplinary action that had been taken. The Leader reiterated his previous response and said that such matters would not be discussed at any local authority and he did not intend to discuss them now.

Cllr M Taylor asked the Leader whether members, who had a collective responsibility for the governance of the Council, would ever be told the contents of any extraordinary departure deal and if it was a confidential agreement, would there be a provision for members to be told confidentially. The Leader referred Cllr Taylor to his previous response.

Cllr G Hayman asked for a point of clarification. He said that the Leader had declined to answer a range of questions, some of which didn't ask for any confidential information to be disclosed. He asked whether the Leader could confirm whether he was involved in any discussion regarding a departure deal as that was not confidential information. He said that he was concerned that the Leader was trying to avoid responding to a straightforward question. The Monitoring Officer said that if Cllr Hayman was raising a point of order then the Constitution required that he state the council procedure rule which was being breached. Cllr Hayman replied that he would expect the Monitoring Officer to have knowledge of the constitution and assist him with this but he would hope that requirements around responses to questions would be set out in the Constitution. The Chairman suggested that Cllr Hayman received a written response to his query. Cllr Hayman agreed to this.

Cllr S Penfold commented that Cllr Hayman had raised a question rather than a point of order and it should have been treated as such and dealt with in sequence as there were other members waiting to speak. He referred to Cllr Gay's report and the reference to the North Walsham street feast in May and said that he wanted to encourage all members to attend the next one in July.

Cllr T FitzPatrick said that he would not put a question to the Leader as he believed it would not receive a response and that this in itself demonstrated a lack of compliance with the Nolan principles. He asked Cllr R Kershaw, Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Growth, about a leaflet that all members had received outlining the benefits of Equinor. He said as local member for Walsingham, it 'rubbed salt in the wounds' to hear about all of the opportunities being created by a new UK hub and operations centre being established in Great Yarmouth, when over 100 jobs had been lost in his ward due to inaction by NNDC. He said that he was concerned about the wider impact of the loss of good jobs for young people and in the hospitality sector. He said that he wanted to ask again what was being done to replace those 100 jobs in Fakenham and Walsingham. Cllr R Kershaw commented on the length of Cllr FitzPatrick's question and Cllr FitzPatrick replied that he had asked it politely and wanted a simple, straightforward response. Cllr Kershaw said that a lot of the jobs referred to by Cllr FitzPatrick had gone over a period of time not just in the last year. He added that the folly of creating a hub in a place which had just 3 hours of high water a day, meant that it was not suitable for serving large vessels. The industry had moved to Great Yarmouth because the larger fields were being serviced by hotel ships. He went on to say that he had visited Walsingham on several occasions but there had not been any interest in the site but that, as Local Member, Cllr FitzPatrick was advised of any new jobs in his ward. Cllr FitzPatrick said that he had not been notified of any.

Cllr V FitzPatrick asked Cllr Fitch-Tillett, Portfolio Holder for Coast, about the suspension of the demolition of a property close to the cliff edge in Happisburgh. He sought reassurance that a full risk assessment had been carried out and that there was no risk to the public and that the building would be monitored over the coming months to ensure there was no danger to the public whilst it remained in a precarious, semi-demolished state. Cllr Fitch-Tillett replied that it would be demolished in due course following a delay due to sand martins nesting in the cliffs. Work would continue once they had flown in the Autumn. She asked whether Cllr FitzPatrick had visited the site, he replied that he had not and that was not relevant to the question he was raising regarding public safety. Cllr Fitch-Tillett said that she could assure him that the site would be monitored and the final demolition would be undertaken following full health and safety checks. She referred to the demolition of 11 houses in Happisburgh 12 years ago, which had been done with full checks throughout the entire process. The Council's record was excellent regarding such work. Cllr FitzPatrick replied that he had not received a response to his initial question which was an outline of the steps that had been taken to ensure public safety at the current site in Happisburgh. He said he would be content to receive a written response if the Portfolio Holder could not reply now. Cllr Fitch-Tillett said she did not need to provide a written response. She confirmed that the site was fully fenced in and was satisfied that it was safe.

Cllr T FitzPatrick said that members' behaviour during portfolio holder reports was unacceptable and did not reflect the Nolan Principles.

Cllr N Pearce said that he wished to ask Cllr Shires, Portfolio Holder for Organisational Resources a question regarding customer service. He read out a letter that he had received from a resident which set out, in detail, their recent experience of trying to speak to an adviser regarding a financial matter. It had taken a lengthy period of time and a lot of questions to reach the right department. At this point he had been advised it would take a further 15 minutes to speak to someone. Eventually he was told that there would be a further wait and advised to call back the following day. Cllr Pearce went on to say that the correspondent had approached him

for assistance, asking when the Council would provide an efficient and caring service for those that could not use the internet. The experience had been frustrating to the point that he had given up. He concluded by asking Cllr Shires how she intended to address such problems – especially as he had raised a similar issue at the previous meeting of Full Council.

Cllr Shires thanked Cllr Pearce for raising the matter with her. She said that the call he had outlined could be traced forensically as it seemed an unusually long time to take to get through the options menu. Cllr Pearce said he did not feel it would be appropriate to ask for more detail from the caller and that the matter should be taken at face value. The Chief Executive said that the customer services team would investigate the matter and provide a response.

Cllr Dr V Holliday said she wished to ask Cllr Shires a question. She referred to the Council's performance management database, InPhase, and said that it provided information on the average customer services call queue time. However, based on her recent experience of a 21 minute wait for switchboard, she said that she would like to see the median call queue time and the outlier data. She then asked that having looked at the service level percentage and calls resolved whether would it be possible to also chart the number of calls unanswered or unresolved. In conclusion, she said that the charts on webforms and online queries only plotted volume, not processing time and she wondered whether it would be possible to chart the latter. Cllr Shires confirmed that the data was available and she would look into it and provide a written response to Cllr Dr Holliday.

27 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CABINET 06 JUNE 2022

The Chairman invited Cllr L Shires, Portfolio Holder for Organisational Resources to introduce the first recommendation:

Cabinet Agenda 06 June 2022 – Agenda Item 14: Cromer Pier Infrastructure Works

Cllr Shires proposed the recommendations. She queried the inclusion of exempt papers in the agenda as there had been an agreement at the Cabinet meeting that some of the financial information should be shared in the public domain. The Chief Executive replied that the capital budget amount was specified in the recommendation which was included in the public papers.

Cllr C Cushing said that £1.134m was a huge sum of money to come out of the Council's purse and he had queried the bulk of the financial information being included in exempt papers at the Cabinet meeting. He said that he had concerns that this seemed to be yet another large amount of money being requested for the Pier. He added that for many residents of the District, the Pier was not always seen as a huge asset but more of a financial 'black hole'. He asked what other options had been considered for maintaining the pier in the future to prevent further requests to release substantial amounts of money and why, despite previous assurances that the Council would not need to continue to keep paying out for the maintenance of the pier, were members being asked yet again to support such a request.

Cllr Shires replied that this was the third and final phase of the project. She said that the work was necessary to ensure that the pier was a safe structure for the public to access. The alternative would be to dismantle the pier and she did not think that this was a feasible option. Cllr Cushing said that he felt there was more work to be

undertaken regarding how much money had been spent in recent years on maintaining the pier and what guarantee was there to assure members that this large tranche of money would be enough. The Chief Executive said that advice had always been sought regarding any works to the pier. It was a Grade II listed structure and the Council had a duty to maintain it. He said that alternative models of funding had been explored including sponsorship and the establishment of a trust but they were not considered appropriate at the time. He concluded by saying that many local authorities had responsibilities and obligations to preserve and maintain historic assets. Cllr Cushing commented that there should be a further discussion at some point to review the options available.

Cllr T FitzPatrick said that he was baffled why there were exempt papers for this item. He said that he understood that the contract had been awarded for both the capital project and the insurance contract (the second recommendation). He said that the cost to residents was over £10 a head. He asked about the tender process and that there was only one tender received. The Chief Executive replied that there had been an open tender process but only one tender had been received. Cllr FitzPatrick asked whether he could ask questions about the tender process given that the information was included in an exempt appendix. He referred to both of the Cabinet recommendations that were presented to Full Council for approval. Both related to tenders for large sums and in each case only one tender had been received. He said that this was concerning and he asked whether the tender process had been undertaken properly. He then asked about the valuation for insurance purposes and asked whether that was for the reconstruction of the pier. The Chief Executive replied that this was the next agenda item. There were two recommendations. Both related to the pier but they were separate recommendations. He said that he was at a total loss to understand why the residents of North Norfolk could not have the full financial details of the proposals shared with them. He asked the Monitoring Officer to state which paragraphs within the documents indicated that the information should be exempt. The Monitoring Officer referred Cllr FitzPatrick to the relevant paragraph of the legislation which was provided at the top of the exempt document. Cllr FitzPatrick said that he was not satisfied with the Monitoring Officer's response. The Monitoring Officer explained that both exempt appendices related to contracts that had not yet been awarded and outlined ongoing negotiations and were therefore not suitable for publication in the public domain.

Cllr Shires suggested that the two recommendations were dealt with separately as there seemed to be some confusion. Cllr FitzPatrick said that his main query was regarding why the information in the appendices for both recommendations was exempt. As far as he could see, only the name of the winning bidder needed to be kept confidential and he could not understand the justification for keeping the rest of the information confidential, unless the Council was in the standstill period for either contract. Cllr Shires replied that the insurance contract had not yet been awarded and that was why it was fully exempt. The Chief Executive clarified that there were two recommendations. The first item was to establish a capital budget for the works on the pier, following a tender process. The second item related to the awarding of the insurance contract for the pier. For the latter, a series of options had been presented to Cabinet and their preferred option was presented to Full Council. He explained that there was a significant increase in the insurance for the pier specifically with the Council's insurance premium renewal. He said that additional budget provision was therefore required for the insurance of the pier and Cabinet had recommended to Council the amount of excess in the event of catastrophic loss of the pier. With reference to Cllr FitzPatrick's question regarding the valuation of the pier, the Chief Executive said in terms of the discussions and learning from the

capital budget recommendation, the construction cost issues and the specialist marine environment, the valuation for a total rebuild needed to reflect these and the related insurance risk. Cllr FitzPatrick commented that he had deliberately not mentioned the name of the insurer so as not to breach confidentiality, yet the Chief Executive had now disclosed this information, he reiterated his request to have an explanation as to why the financial details for both recommendations were in exempt appendices.

Cllr N Housden said that he agreed with Cllr T FitzPatrick as the capital sum was included in the public papers and he too did not therefore understand why the rest of the information was in exempt appendices.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their comments and said that she would now put the recommendations to the vote in turn.

Cllr T Adams requested a recorded vote.

It was proposed by Cllr T Adams, seconded by Cllr L Shires and

RESOLVED with 19 votes in favour and 11 against

That a capital budget of £1,134,000 is approved to enable the works to be completed, to be funded from capital receipts

It was proposed by Cllr E Seward, seconded by Cllr L Shires and

RESOLVED

That additional budget provision is made the insurance contract for Cromer Pier for 2022/23 of £81.2k to be funded from the Delivery Plan Reserve if required at year end.

12 members abstained.

28 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 15 JUNE 2022 - O&S ANNUAL REPORT 2021/2022

The Chairman of Overview & Scrutiny Committee, Cllr N Dixon, introduced this item. He explained that this was a statutory report which provided the Council with an outline of the role of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and a summary of the work undertaken throughout 2021 – 2022. He commended the work of the committee and highlighted its many achievements, however, he said that he wanted to draw members' attention to three recommendations, which had been raised in previous years. They were a constraint and a restriction to the extent to which the committee could grow and add value.

The first, related to an insufficient number of substitutes. He said that on many occasions when apologies were given, there was not a substitute member in place and this meant that the committee was not operating at its full capacity.

The second recommendation highlighted the continued late submission of reports. This caused volatility in the committee's work programme. At pre-agenda meetings in particular, draft reports were often not available and there was no opportunity to comment or request additional information ahead of agenda publication.

The last recommendation highlighted concerns around 'last minute' requests to include items under 'urgent business'. Again, this degraded the quality of scrutiny and limited the opportunity to add maximum value to the process.

It was proposed by Cllr C Cushing, seconded by Cllr N Pearce and

RESOLVED

To note the report, affirm the work of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and consider the following concerns raised within the report:

- Additional Committee substitutes required to adequately address the number of apologies given.
- Late submission of reports continues to cause volatility in the Work Programme.
- Too many 'last minute' requests to include items under Urgent Business which degrades both the quality of scrutiny and the opportunity to add maximum value to the process

29 EXTENSION OF THE TEMPORARY INCREASE TO MILEAGE RATES, DUE TO THE SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN FUEL COSTS.

The Chairman invited the HR Manager to introduce the report. He explained that the report provided members with information to consider a medium-term increase in mileage rates for staff due to the ongoing situation with respect to increased fuel costs. If supported, the increase would remain in place to the end of the 2022/2023 financial year.

Cllr T FitzPatrick said that he knew how hard staff worked and acknowledged that fuel costs were high, however, he could not support the proposals during a time of an unprecedented rise in the cost of living. Inflation was rising sharply and mortgages were being pushed up. People were struggling to pay for food and it was the wrong message to give to the hard pressed people of North Norfolk at this time. He requested a recorded vote.

Cllr G Hayman said that he agreed with Cllr FitzPatrick's comments regarding the timing and optics of the proposal. He added that there could be an issue with expenses that if they were higher, then it encouraged and increased use of them, whereas if they were lowered it could encourage a reduction in the use of vehicles. He said that the Portfolio Holder for the Environment should have concerns around such proposals as it the Council should be taking the opportunity to cut the number of journeys being undertaken by staff. He then asked if the mileage rate increase would apply to members. The HR Manager confirmed that these proposals just applied to officers. Members' allowances were dealt with under a different process.

Cllr Hayman then asked if it was possible to have a list of officers and the mileage that they claimed for over the period of a year. He suggested that Overview & Scrutiny Committee could review this. The HR manager replied that he could provide this information on service basis rather than by individual.

Cllr V FitzPatrick said that this was a difficult matter. He reminded members that the Council was not always held in the highest regard by the public and he felt that awarding such a sizeable increase in mileage rates could cause significant reputational damage. He added that many people were really struggling with rapidly

increasing costs and proposals such as this just added to the public's perception of a 'them and us' culture within local authorities. He concluded by saying that it was a terrible message to send out during such a difficult time and he could not support it. All alternatives to car usage should be considered instead.

Cllr N Pearce agreed with the previous comments. He acknowledged the challenges that everyone faced, including high fuel costs. He reminded members that during the pandemic staff had adapted quickly to working from home and modern technology should be utilised fully. He said that the focus should be on essential journeys only. He said it was the wrong message at the wrong time and it also went against the Council's ambition of achieving net zero status.

The Leader, Cllr T Adams clarified that the proposals related to business travel. Journeys had reduced significantly during the pandemic but there was still a requirement for key staff to make some necessary journeys across the District. He said that he was fully supportive of them. He urged the Government to address the issue of rising full costs. He concluded by saying that it was a temporary increase and it would be reviewed regularly.

Cllr N Housden said that he agreed that the proposals were totally inappropriate for this time. He referred to section 2.6 of the report which mentioned the 'Green Book' and asked if members were to reject the proposals, if the Council would be in contravention of the green book or whether it could take its own decisions in the context of the fuel increases. The HR Manager said that this was a local agreement between the Council and Unison. It had been agreed initially on a temporary basis but was coming forwards to members to be formally ratified. Cllr Housden asked for clarification on the review period. The HR Manager confirmed that it was monthly and would be undertaken by the Chief Executive. Cllr Housden asked whether, if fuel costs were to drop, the mileage amount would be pro-rata or if it would revert automatically to 45 pence per mile. The HR Manager replied that this had not been considered, adding that it was a volatile environment. In response to a further question from Cllr Housden, the HR Manager confirmed that the temporary increase would not go up beyond 60 pence in the next 12 months.

Cllr N Lloyd, Portfolio Holder for the Environment, said that he wished to clarify some of the issues that had been raised regarding the environmental impact of the proposals. He said that the Council was moving over to electric vehicle fleets as leases expired. In addition, HR was working on a salary sacrifice scheme to enable staff to switch to electric cars. He said it was important to remember that some officers had to travel right across the District, often to react to incidents that had been reported by the public. It was necessary part of their job that they had to fulfil.

Cllr H Blathwayt said that it was a difficult decision to support but it must be acknowledged that staff were living and working in a rural area and it was challenging to attract staff. If the Council wanted to attract good quality officers then it must compensate them.

Cllr E Vardy referred to the proposals being locally negotiated between the Council and Unison. He asked whether they had been shared with other local authorities in the region or had the Council acted alone. The HR Manager replied that this was just a local agreement between NNDC and Unison. He said that any discussions outside of the Council would be for Unison to progress. Cllr Vardy expressed his disappointment.

Cllr S Butikofer said that some very good points had been made. She acknowledged

that it was a difficult decision but she agreed with Cllr Blathwayt that it was important to compensate staff for the excellent work that they did. In some parts of the country, Council staff were having to go to food banks as they were struggling with increased living costs.

Cllr L Shires said that it was not clear which procedures had been followed to come to this decision. The report did not include any details regarding this. She asked whether it would be possible to make a decision pending confirmation to Cabinet regarding the procedures that had taken place. The HR Manager replied that there had been discussions between himself and Unison representatives and a delegated decision had been taken to implement an initial temporary increase for 3 months. He said that the Monitoring Officer would have to provide a response regarding the full governance process.

Cllr Hayman said that he wished to make the following amendment:

The report should be sent back to the relevant committees for comment and review before coming back to Full Council for consideration

Cllr N Housden seconded the proposal.

Cllr T FitzPatrick sought clarification regarding the process as there was already a proposal on the table that had been seconded. Cllr T Adams said that he did not wish to withdraw his proposal. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that Cllr Hayman's proposal would be treated as an amendment to the original proposal and would be taken first.

The amendment as proposed by Cllr Hayman and seconded by Cllr Housden was put to the vote. 12 members voted in favour, 16 against and 2 members abstained. It was therefore not supported.

The Chairman advised members that she would now move to a recorded vote on the substantive motion.

It was proposed by Cllr T Adams, seconded by Cllr H Blathwayt and

RESOLVED

To agree Option 2 – to support the increased mileage rates for the remainder of the 2022/23 financial year, subject to monthly review by the Chief Executive, with the increased rates being removed if there is a significant reduction in fuel prices over that period.

17 members voted in favour, 12 against and 1 member abstained.

30 INTERIM SECTION 151 OFFICER ARRANGEMENTS

The Chairman invited the Chief Executive to introduce this item. He explained that Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 required the Council to designate a Chief Finance (Section 151) Officer. The Chief Finance Officer had a number of statutory duties and responsibilities relating to the proper administration of the Council's finances, assets and resources and be responsible for those arrangements including managing the relationship with the Council's Internal and External Audit functions, submission of Government returns.

Following the recent resignation of the officer who had fulfilled this role for the Council since September 2016, it was necessary to designate a new officer to fulfil the Chief Finance Officer role for the authority on an interim basis until a permanent appointment of a new Director of Resources was made. He said that he had begun conversations with neighbouring local authorities and the East of England Local Government Association (EELGA) about filling the vacancy on an interim basis to provide the necessary support for the Council to fulfil its section 151 obligations in the intervening period whilst recruitment took place for the Director of Resources role. He had not been able to conclude discussions with a neighbouring authority but they had been positive and he was hopeful of reaching an outcome soon. He therefore sought delegated authority, in consultation with the Group Leaders, to make the interim appointment.

Cllr N Dixon asked who had held the responsibilities of Section 151 Officer from 1st June until now. The Chief Executive replied that there was a deputy S151 Officer but they were currently absent from work due to sickness. The matter had been discussed with the Council's external auditors and had brought forward this report to members at the first opportunity.

Cllr G Hayman asked about the level of risk that the Council was exposed to in the absence of both the S151 officer and the deputy 151 officer. The Chief Executive replied that the risks were identified in section 2.5 of the report, adding that it would be possible for the S151 Officer to be absent on leave and the deputy to be absent through sickness and at present the Council's position had not varied from that.

Cllr N Housden asked what level of indemnity was the Council covered for in the absence of a S151 Officer. The Chief Executive replied that he would have to come back to Cllr Housden with a response on this. He said that he had advised the Council's external and internal audit partners of the situation and they had indicated that on the basis that a report was taken to Full Council as soon as possible, they were satisfied with the current situation.

Cllr N Pearce asked what arrangements had been in place to oversee the responsibilities of the Director of Resources. The Chief Executive replied that there were processes in place to cover the line management responsibilities of the Director of Resources and these currently shared between the Council's two other directors. The appointment of an interim S151 Officer would cover those areas where the Council was exposed to some risk.

It was proposed by Cllr T Adams, seconded by Cllr R Kershaw and

RESOLVED

- 1) Provide delegated authority to the Chief Executive in consultation with the three Group Leaders and Finance portfolio holder to make an interim appointment of a Chief Finance (Section 151) Officer with immediate effect pending recruitment of a new Director of Resources.**
- 2) Note the need to establish an Employment and Appeals Panel to support the process of recruiting and appointing a new Director of Resources**

31 QUESTIONS RECEIVED FROM MEMBERS

32 OPPOSITION BUSINESS

The Leader of the Opposition, Cllr Cushing introduced the motion. He said that it had been brought forward to highlight the financial support provided by the Government to North Norfolk during the pandemic. Examples of some of the grants provided were listed in the motion and he drew members' attention to the following – £130m of business grants paid out to businesses across the District, the furlough scheme which provided vital support to many residents and the Universal Credit uplift. He then said, that almost as soon as the pandemic began to ease, there was a global surge in fuel costs which was exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine, stoking inflation and creating a cost of living crisis. The Government had responded quickly to help the most financially vulnerable. Again, he highlighted key programmes of support such as the energy rebate scheme, for which so far almost £6m had been paid out to North Norfolk residents. He then spoke about the Council Tax Hardship Fund for 2020/21 where the Government provided £723,834 of funding for NNDC to allocate to applicants to help with the payment of their Council Tax during the pandemic. As at 31st March 2021, the council had paid out £543,737 of this funding, leaving an under-spend of £180,097. He explained that the Government had allowed Councils to retain the under-spend for allocation to residents during 2021/22. NNDC had opted to use the £180,034 to create a Discretionary Hardship & Support Grant which was being used to help Council Tax payers in need.

Cllr Cushing then read out a letter, written by the Leader, Cllr T Adams, that had recently been published on the North Norfolk Liberal Democrat Group's website. He said that the letter clearly indicated that the Administration of the Council had chosen to provide funding to support vulnerable residents, when in fact it was Government money that had been allocated for that specific purpose. He said that this was not the only example of the Administration trying to claim credit for Government funding – highlighting another leaflet issued earlier in the year relating to Covid grants. He read out the text of the leaflet and said, yet again it was a clear misconception that was being presented.

He concluded by saying that it was disappointing that an item of Opposition Business had to be brought forward to highlight that it was the Government which had provided substantial funding not the Administration.

Cllr T Adams responded by quoting former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher who had said 'it is your money, there is no such thing as public money, only taxpayers' money'. He said that he could therefore not see why the residents of North Norfolk should be grateful to the Government. In fact there had a considerable reduction in funding support to Councils in recent years and, as a rural area, the spend per capita was much lower than in urban areas. Now, with the cost of living crisis escalating fast, the Government was being ineffectual regarding support for fuel and energy costs. He said that the grant funds that were being used to support vulnerable residents were being carved out of limited resources. Many of the grants had to be applied for and the process could be challenging with punishing timescales. He referred to the Heritage Action Zone in North Walsham which the Council had been successful in receiving funding for but it was down to the hard work and dedication of officers that the project was progressing so well. He concluded by saying that hardship funds were created out of acts of necessity not generosity. He would write to the Government but not to thank them, instead he would ask them to do more regarding fuel, food and travel costs. He asked the group leaders to join him in writing to staff to thank them for delivering so well on all of the programmes of support that were needed by residents. It was down to their efforts that the Council had been amongst the fastest in rolling funding and support out and this had been recognised by the Government.

Cllr J Rest, Leader of the Independent Group began by referring to the list of Government support that Cllr Cushing had listed in his motion. He said he wondered why, to achieve a sense of balance, other Government funding streams had not been mentioned such as the overspend of £10bn on PPE, the offer of £10k to MPs to cover staff working from home during the pandemic in addition to the £26k already claimed to cover office costs and the failed 'track & trace' scheme which had cost £37bn but did not achieve its goal. He spoke about the £530m spent on the creation of seven Nightingale hospitals, which could not be operated due to insufficient staff. In conclusion, he said that no monetary cost could be put on the lives lost due to the decision to discharge elderly, Covid-infected patients from hospital into care homes.

Cllr E Vardy referred to funding of £7.7m package of hardship support introduced by Norfolk County Council such as the cost of living support fund was offering £3.6m to support families with cost of living vouchers, there was also £1m allocated for the Norfolk Assistance scheme to support families in hardship not eligible for free schools meals and £2.2m to support those aged over 65 by providing vouchers and awards through the voluntary sector. Finally, there was £840k of funding set aside to help other bodies, including district councils, to support those facing housing need. He said, that perhaps the District Council should therefore also consider thanking the County Council in addition to central Government.

Cllr M Taylor said that he wished to add his support to the motion. He said that the least couple of years had been one of the most testing times in recent history and the list of funding and support schemes set out in the motion demonstrated the huge effort that the Government had made to support people. Without these support packages, even more damage and suffering would have been inflicted on North Norfolk residents during the pandemic and it was therefore right that the Leader should write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, thanking the Government for its considerable support, on behalf of the residents of North Norfolk.

Cllr T FitzPatrick said that it was important to bring forward this motion as it highlighted the level of support provided by the Government. He acknowledged Cllr Rest's comments about Nightingale hospitals but said he was glad that they were put in place but relieved that they didn't need to be used. He said it was normal practice for councils to bid for funding and it was important to be transparent about how support packages were funded and delivered. He referred to earlier in the meeting when the Leader had declined to answer questions and said that there was no need for confidentiality during this debate and that the Leader could acknowledge the level of Government support during the last two years, even begrudgingly.

Cllr S Penfold said that he disagreed with Cllr Cushing's statement that no-one could have envisaged the challenges and trials that the Government had had to face in the last two years. He said that this was not true as Brexit was entirely of the Government's own making. Cllr Penfold concluded by saying if any letter should be written it should be to staff thanking them for their efforts in distributing support and grants to residents so quickly.

Cllr A Fitch-Tillett said that she wanted to acknowledge the allocation of funds from central Government to support the Coastal Transition Accelerator Programme (CTAP). However, a lot of hard work had been done to access this funding via various coastal groups. She said that she could not support the motion otherwise though.

Cllr L Shires said that NNDC was not the only council to get the Household Support

Fund but it was important to look at how the money was used to benefit local residents. She referred to the fight at the County Council regarding the provision of free school meals over Easter and the fact that it took 6 weeks to achieve an outcome. She said that she was devastated that the first option that the opposition asked the Council to write about was gratitude. She said that a thank you would not feed the families of North Norfolk or keep them warm. She said that she was appalled on behalf of the residents of North Norfolk.

Cllr V FitzPatrick said that he wanted to express his thanks to staff for the way in which government funds had been distributed. He said it was important to acknowledge the difference that the grants had made, with many lives being saved and local businesses being kept afloat.

Cllr E Withington concurred with the points raised about the hard work of the staff and said that it was due to the persistence of officers that so much funding had been allocated for coastal management. She then read out a news release issued by the Rural Services Network which stated that if England's rural communities were a distinct region, their need for levelling up would be greater than that of any other part of the country. Pressures faced by small towns and villages were not reflected in the Government's metrics and as a result 12m people were effectively side-lined. She said that the funding that the Government allocated across the country during the Covid pandemic was still not sufficient to 'level up' North Norfolk as a rural community and she was therefore did not feel able to send a letter of thanks.

Cllr N Pearce said that the Government had provided funds to help many people during a very difficult time and this should be acknowledged. He said that it wasn't necessarily gratitude that was needed but a recognition that the Government did something.

Cllr W Fredericks commented on the furlough support scheme. She said that the self-employed had begged the Government to provide financial support and it taken a long time for anything to come through and whilst they waited many community groups had had to step in and assist with the provision of food and basics.

The Chairman invited Cllr N Dixon to speak as seconder of the motion. He began by saying that it was easy to be wise after the event. He said that he wished to present another perspective. The underlying issues of the motion were about openness, accountability, honesty and selflessness and these were four of the seven Nolan Principles which guided everyone holding public office. He referred to a previous motion proposed by the Administration extolling the virtues of the Nolan Principles and calling for more training on them. At the time he had pointed out that training didn't matter if members didn't comply with them in every day council and public facing party business, then members would fail them and that was where the training need was greatest. He said that if there had not been deception in the Liberal Democrat statement on their website, there would not be this item of Opposition Business coming forwards. He said it was about compliance with reasonable codes of behaviour and if anyone did not agree with the Nolan Principles then he would not expect them to support the motion.

The Chairman asked Cllr Cushing as proposer of the motion to speak last. Cllr Cushing said that he felt the Leader's response was churlish. The Administration was happy to take credit for money that had been given by the Government. £400bn had been spent on support for Covid and so far £47bn had been allocated to support the cost of living crisis. This should be acknowledged and the Government should be thanked for their support.

It was proposed by Cllr C Cushing, seconded by Cllr N Dixon

- 1) That the Leader of the Council writes to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on behalf of the residents of North Norfolk to thank the Government for the considerable support it has given and continues to give the people and businesses of the District.
- 2) That a copy of the letter is sent to Duncan Baker, the Member of Parliament for North Norfolk, and Jerome Mayhew, the Member of Parliament for Broadland, so that they understand the gratitude of this Council.

When put to the vote, 10 members voted in favour, 19 against and 1 abstained. The motion was therefore not supported.

33 NOTICE(S) OF MOTION

34 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

35 PRIVATE BUSINESS

The meeting ended at 9.10 pm.

Chairman