

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 22 July 2020 in the remotely via Zoom at 9.30 am

Committee Members Present:

Mr N Dixon (Chairman)	Mr H Blathwayt
Mr P Heinrich	Mr N Housden
Mr G Mancini-Boyle	Mr N Pearce
Miss L Shires	Mrs E Spagnola
Mr J Toye	Mr A Varley
Mr S Penfold	

Members also attending:

Mrs A Fitch-Tillett (Observer)	Ms V Gay (Observer)
Mrs P Grove-Jones (Observer)	Mr R Kershaw (Observer)
Mr J Rest (Observer)	Ms L Withington (Observer)
Mr C Cushing (Observer)	

Officers in Attendance: Democratic Services and Governance Officer (Scrutiny) (DS&GOS), Chief Executive (CE), Head of Legal & Monitoring Officer (HLS), Head of Finance and Asset Management/Section 151 Officer (HFAM), Head of Business Transformation & IT (HIT), Head of Planning (HP), Customer Services Manager (CSM), Head of Economic and Community Development (HECD) and Democratic Services Manager (DSM)

Also in attendance: Member of the Press

18 TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr W Fredericks and Cllr T Adams.

19 SUBSTITUTES

Cllr S Penfold substituted for Cllr W Fredericks.

20 PUBLIC QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS

None received .

21 MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 27th May 2020 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

22 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None received.

23 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

24 PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None received.

25 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE BY A MEMBER

None received.

26 RESPONSES OF THE COUNCIL OR THE CABINET TO THE COMMITTEE'S REPORTS OR RECOMMENDATIONS

None received.

27 NORTH NORFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL'S TRANSITION FROM RESPONSE TO RECOVERY IN RESPONDING TO THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

The CE introduced the Report and informed Members that it covered the period from May to the middle of June, when the Council moved from its immediate response of support for vulnerable residents, to begin to consider how to reopen services, assets and facilities. The details of support offered via the small business grant and discretionary grants was also included in the report. The CE noted that North Norfolk had a relatively low incidence of Coronavirus infection, and thankfully a low level of mortality with respect to the overall number of infections.

Questions and Discussion

- i. Cllr N Housden asked whether any additional funding available to support local areas should local lockdowns be implemented. The CE replied that local authorities had been provided with additional funding, held by upper tier authorities for local outbreak control plans and controlled by each County's director of public health. He added that an outbreak control plan that had been signed off by Norfolk leaders in June, which focused on data management and monitoring, but also included a contact advisory centre for local outbreaks. The plan sought to control outbreaks in specific settings such as hospitals, care homes, schools, workplaces, pubs and restaurants, and was based on the track and trace model. Total funding for the plan was reported to be approximately £3m, however the CE was not aware of any additional funding to cover local lockdown losses.
- ii. Cllr L Shires asked if a breakdown of data was available by ward on the support provided by the Council's LCCs during lockdown, to better understand which wards would have the highest need should a second spike in the coming months. The CE replied that there was data available on the number of shielding individuals in each ward, and data was also gathered from each LCC on the number of enquiries and the level of support provided from each centre. He added that the data could be circulated after the meeting.
- iii. Cllr S Penfold asked whether the Council was preparing for a curtailed

summer season or an increase in visitor numbers in light of lockdown easing over the summer holiday period. The CE replied that the Council was preparing and already responding to larger visitor numbers than usual, and constrained it was expected that this trend would continue due to international travel restrictions. He added that North Norfolk was generally full during the summer season, so capacity to increase these numbers would be limited. It was noted that consideration was being given to extend the season into September and October, in addition to Christmas and winter offers for short breaks and the 2021 season, to account for any reluctant for international travel.

- iv. Cllr N Pearce asked what the response to the 'You Are Welcome' campaign had been, and how it was being received. The CE replied that large numbers of visitors to coastal areas had placed pressure on the Council, requiring a swift response on the staged reopening of public conveniences. In terms of the 'You are Welcome' campaign, it was suggested that the advice and assistance given to businesses had been well received, and that it placed the District in a good position for increased visitor numbers. The CE reported that approximately two thirds of the £93k received from Central Government for the Reopening of the High Street fund had been spent on measures to encourage social distancing and personal safety. It was expected that remaining funds would support these efforts until March 2021, with support given for a 'shop local and buy local at Christmas' campaign. Additional funding had been sourced from a Norfolk tourism sector support grant, which would assist the Council in meeting the demands on cleansing of public toilets, litter-picking and emptying of public bins, brought on by the increased use of public spaces.
- v. Cllr S Penfold asked whether the CE was confident that NNDC could ensure public safety during a busier summer season, under the current circumstances. The CE replied that he was hopeful that in partnership with other public bodies, that this would be possible. It was noted that members of the public were still required to take personal responsibility for safety. The CE stated that the Council would also support and actively promote the use of facemasks in addition to social distancing and regular hand washing.
- vi. Cllr L Shires referred to the additional recommendation to participate in the Norfolk Strategic Fund with a £150k contribution, and asked how the Council would ensure that North Norfolk was fairly represented in the funding allocations. She added that North Norfolk often appeared to be forgotten in these negotiations. The CE replied that he had discussed this issue with County partners and the LEP, and reassured Members that the Council would continue to lobby hard to ensure that North Norfolk received its fair share of funding.
- vii. Cllr H Blathwayt referred to the extended season, and asked if there would be any additional support to account for the cancellation of Thursford Christmas events that could have an adverse effect on off-season full-time jobs. The CE replied that the cancellation would cause a significant fall in demand throughout the off-season, but it was hoped that extending the season would help to mitigate this loss. He added that Thursford were still hosting a winter walkthrough experience, and amongst other events, it was hoped this might

alleviate losses.

- viii. Cllr N Pearce asked whether any information was available on the return to work programme. The CE replied that in terms of the wider economy, Look East had undertaken a study of the County, in which North Norfolk was reported to have the highest level of furloughed employees within the region. It was noted that there were not many large employers in the District, and whilst tourism was the largest sector, national expectations of increased unemployment and financial hardship remained.
- ix. Cllr G Mancini-Boyle thanked Environmental Services officers for their work on helping to reopen high streets. The CE noted that the majority of feedback had been very positive and he would pass on the comments to the Team. The Chairman reiterated the thanks, and noted that individuals still had to take personal responsibility for public safety. He added that some residents' concerns around reopening the District remained, and that the Council was evidently doing its best to accommodate these.
- x. The Chairman referred to the Bittern Line and noted that whilst concerns had been raised in relation to performance at the end of 2019, he asked whether any update available on the performance of the service, given its importance as a public transport option. The CE replied that upon the introduction of new trains in the latter months of 2019, there had been significant issues with signaling and electronic barriers between Norwich and Sheringham. It was reported that from January onwards the service had returned to its normal high standard, as well as continuing to provide a service for key workers throughout the lockdown period. The CE added that with Government advice on non-essential travel now being relaxed, it was expected that the public would soon return to using the service as normal. The Chairman thanked the CE for the update and asked that he pass on thanks to the relevant officers.

RESOLVED

To note the report.

28 BRIEFING ON CUSTOMER SERVICES: COVID-19 CONTACT HANDLING AND CORPORATE COMPLAINTS POLICY

The CSM introduced the report and informed Members that the aim was to provide an insight into the frontline service provided to customers, whilst also considering the impact of Covid-19 and the Team's response to the crisis.

Questions and Discussion

- i. Cllr N Housden asked for clarification on the planning complaints. The CSM replied that the planning complaints generally referred to the manner in which planning applications were handled, which could refer to applications being processed too quickly, too slowly, or applicants not receiving adequate communication throughout the process. He suggested that it would be better to request service specific information from the Head of Planning, who would have a better understanding of the complaints. The CSM stated that the Customer Service role was to receive complaints and pass them on to the

relevant service, which meant they often did not see the full details. Cllr N Housden suggested that it might be useful to have a further breakdown of planning complaints.

- ii. Cllr G Mancini-Boyle referred complaints data on p29, and asked why there had been no reduction in complaints from stages two to three. The CSM replied that whilst he did not have the full breakdown of complaints available, some may have been resolved within the timeframe of reporting and others not. He added that it was coincidental that stage two and three complaints were the same number, but this did not necessarily mean these were the same complaints. The Chairman noted that figures taken from a different period did show a small reduction between each stage, and asked for clarification on whether this was the aim of the policy. The CSM replied that complainants were asked whether they were satisfied that their complaint had been resolved at each stage, and they would often choose to progress complaints. He added that LGA guidance on the matter had recently changed, and it was now suggested that complaints should be dealt with in a two stage process. The HIT stated that in the current process, complainants were asked whether they would like to progress their complaint, which gave little disincentive, that might further explain the minimal reduction in numbers between each stage.
- iii. Cllr L Shires stated that the number of interactions handled during the lockdown period had been vast and the Customer Services Team's response to this demand had been flawless. She referred to the breakdown of complaints on p30, and suggested that it would be useful to have more detail to learn from mistakes and see the impact that Covid-19 on complaints.
- iv. Cllr C Cushing stated that it was important to learn from the report to improve the Council's complaints procedure and ensure the same issues did not reoccur. The HIT agreed and stated that improving the service for customers was a key objective of the Corporate Plan. He added that the Council completed approximately 100k transactions per year, which in relation to 148 complaints was a relatively good picture, though there was always room for improvements.
- v. Cllr N Pearce reiterated that the number of complaints was extremely low in relation to total transactions. He referred to benefits complaints on p30 and stated that more detail was required to fully understand the issues. The CSM replied that the 56 complaints for council tax, benefits and business rates covered a broad spectrum of issues, and having only five for complaints for benefits was a positive sign. He added that whilst Covid-19 would affect resident's incomes, he was confident that the team would continue to handle incoming requests for assistance effectively.
- vi. In response to a question from Cllr G Mancini-Boyle, it was confirmed that the complaints policy required all complainants to progress through every step of the process.

Customer Centred Services - Digital by Design Presentation

The HLS gave a presentation on potential changes to the customer services approach and informed Members that the Corporate Plan aspired to make the

Council's services easy to access through a number of channels. It was reported that current pressures on the service included increased demand, funding pressures, and delivering the aims of the Corporate Plan. It was stated that it would be difficult to increase staffing levels to cope with the increased demand, hence alternatives had to be considered. The HLS stated that Covid-19 had caused a number of changes to the way Customer Services worked already, with members of the public no longer visiting the office to access services, and most enquiries being handled by staff working remotely. It was noted that the Council must ensure that the right service was available to residents as and when required to improve their experience, whilst also improving efficiency. It was suggested that the proposals would make some services available 24/7 via the NNDC website. It was noted that both telephone and face to face services would remain in place for those unable to access the internet.

The HLS informed Members that there were four key actions behind the digital by design proposal, which included obtaining customer insight into how customers interacted with the Council, continuing to develop the Council's website, changing access arrangement to encourage digital channels, and redesigning services to be digital where possible. In summary, the proposals sought to implement more effective targeted services, remove duplication and waste, allow customers to choose how to access services in a convenient way, and enable a transfer of resources to where they were most needed.

Questions and Discussion

- i. The Chairman thanked the HLS for the presentation, but raised concerns around the limited opportunity for Member input prior to implementation of the proposals. He asked for clarification of how Members would be involved in the process. The HLS replied that whilst the implementation of the proposal would be an operational matter, progress could be reported to the Committee on a regular basis for Member feedback. She added that a more detailed strategy paper could also be reviewed by Members, in addition to commenting on the existing action plan. The Chairman agreed that implementation was an operational matter, but suggested that Members needed time to develop their understanding of the proposals and contribute to the process. He sought assurances that the proposals would not go forward without further Member engagement. The HLS replied that the Corporate Plan panels would monitor the outcomes of the project, and if necessary, Members could scrutinize any issues that arose. The Chairman stated that he was not convinced that reviewing outcomes would provide Members with adequate opportunity to offer input into the process. The HLS replied that the strategy had been set by Cabinet in the Corporate Plan, and at this stage it was now the officers' role to identify and implement that strategy. She added that a demand management approach was common place amongst Councils, and it would not go ahead without careful planning. It was suggested that the Council would struggle to meet future demand if the approach was not adopted.
- ii. The Chairman suggested that it would be useful to have a workshop or briefing session in which the presentation could be repeated with more time for discussions and input. The HLS replied that it was the intention of SLT to provide a zoom briefing on the proposals, though the opportunity was taken to present it to Members at Committee as soon as possible. The HIT added that whilst the proposals were part of an overarching policy, no actions would take

place outside of normal the portfolio holder interaction and reporting processes. He reiterated that the proposals were merely a guide for delivering the step change in how the Council delivered its customer services. The HLS confirmed that she would provide the same presentation as a standalone zoom briefing.

- iii. Cllr R Kershaw spoke on behalf of the portfolio holder who was unable to attend the meeting and stated that the lead should come from what the customers' wanted. He added that the implementation process could come back to Scrutiny, though any software design must avoid being overcomplicated with too much input.
- iv. The Chairman suggested that it would be prudent to leave further questions to a standalone presentation. He referred back to the main report, and suggested that it would be helpful to see a future report on how the complaints identified would be resolved by the digital by design model. Cllr N Housden reiterated concerns around a lack of specific detail on complaints, and suggested that it would be required to learn from past mistakes. Cllr L Shires stated that she was fully supportive of a digital approach, but raised concerns that accessibility might suffer for those unable to access digital channels. She welcomed the opportunity for a zoom briefing to gain greater insight and provide input to the strategy.
- v. Cllr N Housden stated that whilst Covid-19 had forced many to use digital options, once life returned to normal, he expected there would be a desire amongst the public to return to previous access channels, and this had to be monitored closely.
- vi. Cllr J Toye stated that he supported the officers' proposals, and noted that whilst it was the Members role to set requirements, he was comfortable for officers to proceed. Cllr N Pearce stated that he was supportive of a further briefing and an additional report on how the proposals would address lessons learned. He proposed that an all Member briefing session take place on the proposals, and further reports be produced to look in detail at the nature of complaints, and how the proposals would address these issues. Cllr L Shires seconded the proposals.

RESOLVED

- 1. To note the report.**
- 2. To request that an all Member briefing take place on the Digital by Design customer service proposals.**
- 3. To request an additional report from SLT with greater detail on the nature of complaints received.**
- 4. To request an additional report from SLT on how the Digital by Design approach would address issues raised in complaints.**

The DSM introduced the report and informed Members that it was a statutory report that had special significance during the lockdown period due to the number of delegated decisions required. She added that a rolling list was available on the Council's website in chronological order. It was noted that some decisions reversed previous decisions, such as reopening facilities, and that all decisions were taken by senior or statutory officers. A more detailed form was available for each decision that was available to view on request.

Questions & Discussion

- i. The Chairman referred to the decision to provide financial support to the leisure contractor on p49, and asked for the total of this support. The HECD replied that the Council had agreed to support the contractor on a monthly basis from April, with further payments made in May and June. The monthly payments were reported to be approximately £36k, and the Council was in the process of negotiating with the contractor on payments that would cover up to the reopening of facilities. Due to contractual arrangements the HECD was not able to share any further cost estimates going forward. It was confirmed that the total amount was three separate payments of £36k, and these were outlined in the Covid-19 financial impact report from the Section 151 Officer.
- ii. Cllr P Heinrich asked for confirmation that leisure centre staff had been furloughed, and that the remaining payments were for amounts not covered by the furlough scheme. The HECD replied that the majority of staff were furloughed, though two were retained on normal contracts to maintain the facilities and work on remobilization.
- iii. Cllr G Mancini-Boyle asked if the funding provided to support the leisure contractor had come from Central Government or the Council's own budget, to which the HECD replied that it had been funded directly by NNDC as a contractual requirement.
- iv. Cllr L Shires asked for the number of staff supported via the payments and what the implications would have been, should the support not have been provided. The HECD replied that whilst this was a hypothetical situation, the Government had advised local authorities to support their contractors to avoid redundancies or insolvency. He added that most local authorities had supported their contractors where possible, and NNDC had taken this approach to avoid adverse consequences. Cllr V Gay stated for Members' reassurance that this was a national issue, and other Council's had also supported their contractors.

RESOLVED

To receive and note the report and the register of officer decisions taken under delegated powers.

30 SHERINGHAM LEISURE CENTRE: PROJECT UPDATE JULY 2020

Cllr V Gay – Portfolio Holder for Culture & Wellbeing introduced the report and expressed her gratitude to officers for preparing it. It was noted that answers had been provided to written questions in advance of the meeting, though annual

maintenance and running costs of the existing Splash facility would be provided once the information had been gathered. On cost overruns, Cllr V Gay stated that within the contingency funds, spending amounted to approximately £200k, and added that all individuals involved in the project had done their utmost to avoid further expenditure. On professional fees, it was reported that approximately £15k had been required at various stages throughout the project.

In response to Cllr J Rest's written question, which asked whether the existing Splash facility should be demolished to avoid further expenditure, Cllr V Gay stated that she did not yet feel there were grounds to make a decision on what was prudent, given the current circumstances. It was noted that there had been unexpected expenditure for repairs to the facility, but it was ready to reopen at the start of the lockdown period. It was expected that gyms would be allowed to reopen from 25th July, with swimming facilities from 22nd August. Cllr V Gay stated that though these dates were clear, an opening date for the Splash facility was not yet known. It was suggested that additional Government funding may be available to support gyms and leisure centers, though it was not yet known if Splash would be eligible.

Cllr V Gay reported that the cost of delays to the construction of the new facility was approximately £130k, though the original proposal relied on continued income from the existing facility until completion. On that basis, the Council had promised to maintain the old facility until that point. It was noted that there were also contractual obligations, and the Council had a duty to provide services for residents within the District. Cllr V Gay stated that despite concerns regarding the possibility of a local lockdown in the future, she hoped that all of the Council's leisure facilities would reopen shortly.

Questions and Discussion

- i. Cllr L Shires stated asked if she was missing any details that would bring her to the conclusion that closing the existing facility would be prudent.
- ii. Cllr L Withington stated that she was not expecting to see a suggestion to close the existing facility, and asked for clarification of Cllr Rest's suggestion to the Committee. The Chairman replied that whilst Cllr J Rest was not a Committee Member, he had suggested that analysis of closing the existing Splash facility should be undertaken, to determine whether it would aid the development of the new facility.
- iii. Cllr N Housden stated that had sought to determine the viability of the existing Splash facility, given the current restrictions. He then proposed that an investigation should be undertaken to determine the viability of maintaining the existing Splash facility until the new site had opened, with the inclusion of a cost-benefit analysis.
- iv. Cllr P Heinrich stated that it would be very difficult to deny residents the use of the existing facility, and whilst there would be costs involved in maintaining that facility, there would also be costs incurred from an early closure, as a result of contractual obligations. He added that demolishing the existing facility early could take up to twelve months to arrange, and urged the Committee to consider the intangible impact of closing the facility on residents.

- v. Cllr N Pearce stated that he was supportive of requesting a study to determine the viability of maintaining the existing facility. The Chairman clarified that ultimately the decision would fall to Cabinet, but O&S would be able to make a recommendation one way or another.
- vi. Cllr G Mancini-Boyle noted that Central Government was in the process of arranging additional funding for gyms and leisure centers, and this would need to be taken into account if a viability study was undertaken.
- vii. Cllr E Spagnola stated that support for the new facility was already strained, and many residents of Sheringham and surrounding areas were dependent on the existing facility for exercise and support, therefore she could not support closing the facility early. The Chairman reminded Members that the Committee was discussing a potential viability study and would not be making any recommendations on closure for the time being. Cllr L Shires suggested that any analysis should include a comparison between Splash and the Council's other leisure facilities.
- viii. The HECD shared photos and a time lapse video of progress on the new leisure centre.
- ix. Cllr J Rest reiterated that he hoped the Committee would recommend that a viability study is undertaken, as continuing to fund the existing facility could delay the opening of the new site. Cllr A Varley stated that he welcomed a financial viability study, but suggested that it should also include consideration of the physical and mental wellbeing of residents.
- x. Cllr H Blathwayt asked whether the demolition of the existing Splash would hinder the building of the new facility, and added that he was supportive of undertaking a viability study.
- xi. Cllr N Pearce seconded Cllr N Housden's proposal to recommend to Cabinet that a viability study including a cost-benefit analysis be undertaken to determine the viability of maintaining the existing Splash facility until the new site is completed.

RESOLVED

- 1. To note the report.**
- 2. To recommend to Cabinet that a viability study including a cost-benefit analysis be undertaken to determine the viability of maintaining the existing Splash facility, and its impact on building the new facility.**

31 MARKET TOWN INITIATIVE - INTERIM UPDATE

The DS&GOS introduced the report and informed Members that the report was intended to update the Committee on the ongoing MTI projects with reference to the impact that Covid-19 had on their implementation. It was noted that many projects had been placed on hold throughout the lockdown, and as a result, several projects were expected to be delayed beyond the one year timeframe. The DS&GOS informed Members that the original completion deadline for round 2 projects was in

September, depending on when applicants had received funding. He added that some applicants had also received funding for public events that could not be expected to go ahead under the current restrictions. As a result, the standing recommendation was to offer a blanket six month extension to applicants, to allow time to implement projects safely. In addition, whilst it was deemed inappropriate to review each active project at Committee, it would be possible to do this at Working Group level, if the Committee were minded to do so.

Questions and Discussion

- i. Cllr R Kershaw stated that the MTI project was still being monitored carefully, and he did not see any reason why offering a blanket extension would be detrimental in any way. Cllr N Housden stated he would be happy to support the offer of a blanket six month extension where required.
- ii. Committee Members were satisfied that the MTI Working Group were not yet required to convene a meeting to review each project in detail.
- iii. The recommendation to offer a blanket six month extension to active MTI projects was proposed by Cllr J Toye and seconded by Cllr P Heinrich.

RESOLVED

To recommend to Cabinet that a blanket extension of six months is offered to the completion deadlines of MTI projects from rounds two and three, to account for the impact and delays caused by the Coronavirus Pandemic.

32 THE CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The DS&GOS informed Members that there was a Cabinet meeting set to take place on 3rd August, as a significant number of statutory financial reports were due for review. As a result, it was expected that an August meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee would be required. It was expected that this meeting would take place on Wednesday 12th August.

33 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND UPDATE

The DS&GOS suggested that from September the Committee would need to consider setting a work programme for the rest of the year, having not set one at the normal time due to the impact of Covid-19. It was noted that several outstanding items could be brought forward.

34 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

35 TO CONSIDER ANY EXEMPT MATTERS ARISING FROM CONSIDERATION OF THE PUBLIC BUSINESS OF THE AGENDA

The meeting ended at 12.45 pm.

Chairman