

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of Policy Development Committee held at Virtual - Online meeting on Thursday, 19th November, 2020 at 10.00 am

PRESENT: Members:

Councillor D. Spear (Chair)

Councillors Jenkins, Mack, Walker and York

Officers:

Chief Executive and Head of Resources

Also Present:

Councillors L. Spear

63. VIRTUAL MEETINGS PROCEDURE - BRIEFING AND ETIQUETTE

The Corporate and Community Services Officer advised the Committee of the rules and etiquette for remote meetings.

64. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Luggar.

65. TO APPROVE AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 10TH SEPTEMBER 2020.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2020 (circulated previously) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

66. ITEMS BROUGHT FORWARD WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR SHOULD BE CONSIDERED BY THE MEETING AS A MATTER OF URGENCY.

There were no items to be brought forward as a matter of urgency.

67. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

There were no Declarations of Interest announced.

68. MID YEAR TREASURY MANAGEMENT REPORT 2020-21

The Committee considered a report to the Strategy and Resources Committee on 2nd November 2020 by the Head of Resources together with a minute extract (circulated previously) regarding the Mid-Year Treasury Report 2020-21.

The Head of Resources advised that the report had already been subject to consideration by the Strategy and Resources Committee on 2nd November 2020.

He highlighted the following points to the Committee:

- The updated Treasury Management Strategy Statement and Annual Investment Strategy Update confirmed a reduction in the proposed borrowing requirement of £1.6m.
- The Revised Prudential Indicator figure of £7.169m was lower than the original estimate due to a number of capital projects, including the Leisure Centre, moving to the 2021-22 financial year. The spend had been re-profiled to the next 2021-22 financial year. This was an improvement of the forecasted figures which were now not expected to exceed £2.25m on external debt.
- The forecasted borrowing was below the allowed limits and were operated within the Treasury Strategy.
- The Authority may need to take on a low level of capital borrowing. Internal borrowing would be achieved from the Authority's own cash reserves in order to delay any requirement for external borrowing for as long as possible in order to reduce costs.
- The Council's capital financing requirement (CFR) for 2020-21 was £7.2m. The forecast for 2021-22 showed this increasing by £9.9m (with the bulk of the Leisure Centre spend in the year) giving a total CFR of £17m.
- The rate of Business Rate Collections may reduce over the next financial year due to the impact from the pandemic
- Bank rates were currently low (0.1%) and expected to remain so for some time. This resulted in limited investment returns. The Authority had earned £0.041m interest on investments in 2020-21 however the majority of this had been earned within the first two financial quarters of the year.

In response to questions, the Head of Resources advised;

- Where some banking institutions were currently offering negative interest rates, this did mean that the investors were being charged on such investments. North Devon Council did not have any investments with products with negative interest rates. The situation was being monitored and investments could be moved to alternative products if required.
- There were opportunities to borrow funds while the borrowing rates were low. These funds could be used to fund commercial projects.

RESOLVED, that the decisions and recommendations of the Strategy and Resources Committee be endorsed.

**69. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT REPORT:
QUARTER 2 OF 2020/21**

The Committee considered a report to the Strategy and Resources Committee on 2nd November 2020 by the Head of Resources together with a minute extract (circulated previously) regarding the Performance and Financial Management Report: Quarter 2 of 2020-21.

The Head of Resources advised that the report had already been subject to consideration by the Strategy and Resources Committee on 2nd November 2020.

He highlighted the following points to the Committee:

- The Authority had received three tranches of additional funding which totalled £1.189m for North Devon.
- A further £0.160m in respect of the Job Retention Scheme and £0.170m New Burdens Grants.
- A further £0.385m Government funding had just been announced. This would be incorporated into the figures on the quarter three report.
- Central Government had announced they would provide further support to Authorities for lost income. Authorities were expected to incur the first 5% variance on budget; income losses would then be reimbursed at 75% level with Councils incurring the remaining budgetary impact.
- This funding to assist with reimbursement of losses had only been confirmed for this financial year at present. Local Government had been lobbying for Central Government to confirm if this was expected to extend past March 2021.
- There had been lower than expected reductions in the Council Tax and Business Rates collection but this could be more prominent later on the year once the Furlough scheme ends.
- There was a general fund balance and reserves which could be used in the short term but this was clearly not a longer term budgetary solution.
- The Strategic Contingency Reserve was shown on appendix. A projected spend of £117,240 was expected.
- The Capital Programme in the report covered the three financial years up to 2022-23.
- Capital Funding bids were received for the replacement of the roof at the Queen's Theatre, and ICT software for the Works and Recycling unit.
- Half of the £30m capital programme for the next three financial years would be met by capital receipts and external borrowing.

In response to questions, the Head of Resources confirmed;

- The cost of repairs to Fremington Quay would be provided from Section 106 fund allocation. Any shortfall would be provided by the Authority and was not the responsibility of the Fremington Parish Council.
- The provision of free parking from 4-6pm had been welcomed by traders who had found it assisted those using click and collect services. The scheme had not been devised to increase footfall into the town centre.

RESOLVED, that the decisions and recommendations of the Strategy and Resources Committee be endorsed.

70. COMMERCIALISATION STRATEGY

The Committee considered a report to the Strategy and Resources Committee on 2nd November 2020 by the Head of Resources together with a minute extract and additional appendix (circulated previously) regarding the Commercialisation Strategy.

The Head of Resources advised that the report had already been subject to consideration by the Strategy and Resources Committee on 2nd November 2020.

He highlighted the following points to the Committee:

- The Authority had forecast large budget gaps likely in the near future.
- The aim was to look internally and externally for opportunities to potentially create revenue streams for the Council and to look to maximise any assets currently held. A good example was the letting of a parcel of land on Seven Brethren to the Police force on a commercial lease.
- The report set out the forecast budget gaps, alongside an amended version which identified the period should the expected Government funding not be forthcoming.
- The Government Spending Review was due to be announced shortly. This would provide a more accurate picture of the funding settlement but the Authority could not rely on funding alone.
- The Authority was looking to become more commercially-minded.
- This was not an exercise in budget cost-cutting. Improvements in efficiency and additional revenue generation were what was being sought.
- The targets set were aspirational – to deliver a minimum of £0.500m of new revenue income by 31st March 2023 and to reduce back-office costs by 5% by 31st March 2024.
- The Capital Spending Decisions should focus on at least one of the following main drivers:
 - Revenue generation / Invest to Earn
 - Invest to Save
 - Social Value
 - Improving the environment or increasing natural capital.

In response to questions submitted by Councillor Luggar (not present) the Chief Executive advised that there was no direct budget to support the strategy and that the budgets for the schemes would be presented as Business Cases to Members via Strategy and Resources Committee, then to Full Council, on a case by case basis as they would normally. The £0.5m was aspirational but could be met by savings and/or revenue streams which would be the result of a number of separate projects.

In response to questions from the Committee, the Head of Resources advised that;

- The target of £0.5m was a realistic and achievable one. At that time it was the preferred option rather than aim too high and struggle initially. Targets could be reviewed as time progressed.

- Central Government was monitoring the commercial activities being undertaken by Local Authorities and there were concerns over some types of investments and borrowing being made.
- Government reimbursement of charges and fees would not be affected by any revenue received from commercial projects. It was noted that the Government had not provided reimbursement to Authorities for commercial income losses.

In response to questions, the Chief Executive advised that;

- Some Authorities had been criticised over their commercial strategies where, for example, huge investments had been made into retail properties. These investments could be compromised as the retailers faced financial difficulties during the pandemic. The Council's auditors would be concerned with any investments they felt were 'cavalier'. It was for the Members to set the tone for Council's Commercialisation Strategy and steer away from investments made purely to generate income.
- The Council would not be insured against business losses as result from pandemics such as Covid-19. Many policies contained exclusion clauses which would prevent claims being paid.

The Chair advised that he felt the Council had been fortunate in that they had been slightly 'behind the curve' in relation to commercial investments to date as the pandemic took hold.

The Head of Resources advised that the Authority was now carefully looking at each parcel of land owned. Where, twelve months ago, it had been looking to sell surplus assets it was now reviewing them with view to the commercial options available. The Authority held a substantial asset base for which every opportunity would be explored.

In response to a question from Cllr L Spear, the Head of Resources confirmed that the Authority was looking at locations of current land owned which were adjacent to residential areas to explore the opportunity to provide housing, possibly working alongside local social landlords/ housing associations.

The Chief Executive advised that the Authority was also considering the options available in connection to the North Devon Biosphere. This may provide opportunities which work with the greener recovery plan. The Biosphere organisation had plans which they would be looking to develop.

RESOLVED, that the decisions and recommendations of the Strategy and Resources Committee be endorsed.

71. NOTICE OF MOTION - COUNCIL PAVEMENT PARKING

The Committee considered a Notice of Motion: Pavement Parking (circulated previously) which had already been referred to the Committee by Council on 7 October 2020.

The Chief Executive advised the Committee that the issue of Pavement Parking was a County Council matter but that the Authority could present their comments to the current Devon County Council consultation which had opened in August 2020 and would close on 22nd November 2020.

Councillor Walker addressed the Committee as the proposer of the motion and advised of the reasons for her proposal and the effects of pavement parking on her as a wheelchair user.

The Committee discussed the issues faced and the feedback options available to the Authority on the consultation.

RESOLVED that the Local Authority respond to the Devon County Council consultation on pavement parking and confirm its preferred option as being that of option 3 which was a full ban on pavement parking and add the additional comment that the Local Authority would request reimbursement for any expenses incurred by the Local Authority in its implementation.

72. WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21

The Committee considered the Work Programme for 2020-21 (circulated previously).

RESOLVED that;

- an update on Farming and Agriculture in North Devon be added to the work programme for the meeting of 18th March 2021,
- Housing and Homelessness Strategy be added to the list of agenda items, and
- the work programme be noted.

Chair

The meeting ended at 11.46 am

NOTE: These minutes will be confirmed as a correct record at the next meeting of the Committee.