

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of Policy Development Committee held at Barum Room - Brynsworthy on Thursday, 9th September, 2021 at 6.30 pm

PRESENT: Members:

Councillor D. Spear (Chair)

Councillors Campbell, Jenkins, Mackie, Roome, Walker and York

Officers:

Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive, Head of Planning, Housing and Health and Service Manager (Development Management)

Also Present:

Councillors Pearson and L. Spear.

18. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hunt and Luggar.

19. TO APPROVE AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 15TH JULY 2021 (ATTACHED).

RESOLVED, that the minutes of the meeting held on 15th July 2021 (circulated previously) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

There were no declarations of interest announced.

21. HOUSING SERVICE.

The Chair welcomed the Head of Planning Housing and Health and the Service Manager (Development Management) to the meeting.

The Head of Planning, Housing and Health and the Service Manager (Development Management) explained the Council's role as the strategic authority for North Devon, which was displayed in the visual format of a jigsaw to illustrate the various elements of the service. The Head of Planning, Housing and Health added that in order for the Council to deliver as a good strategic housing authority it had to perform well in each section of the jigsaw.

The Head of Planning Housing and Health and the Service Manager (Development Management) outlined each of the various elements, which were as follows:

- Making best use of existing housing.

This area focussed on the administration of Devon Home Choice, which provided around 300 household lets per year together with the management of social housing. As part of this area, the Council was also working to try and bring empty homes back into use and encouraging under occupied households to downsize to make the best use of existing housing.

- Enabling new housing.

This area included a focus on the national requirement for the Council to meet the five year land supply. To address this requirement, the Council would be looking at the delivery times associated with any new build permissions together with ensuring that developers cannot retract on their viability assessments with regards to the requirement for affordable housing for applications of more than five dwellings. Officers were concerned by the number of five unit proposals that were coming forward and would look carefully as to whether it was an efficient use of land or whether it was being done to avoid affordable housing contributions.

- Understanding the housing Market and the scale and nature of imbalance.

This area was underpinned by a lot of survey work, with the current local plan identifying a significant requirement for two and three bedroomed housing. There was a requirement for affordable housing with 30% provision being identified as a realistic figure to achieve. Predictions in migration to the North Devon area were reviewed on a regular basis. Work in relation to the new Local Plan was a fundamental element to the review of in migration.

- Private sector housing.

This area focussed on the private and private rented sector together with the promotion of energy efficiency. There are currently relatively low levels of sup social housing and this displaces more people into the private rented sector, which is now accommodating more families with young children.

- Supporting vulnerable people.

Within the previous 12 month period, the Council had accommodated 50+ people who had previously been rough sleeping within the district.

- Preventing homelessness.

To prevent homelessness, the Council provides commonly advice, assistance with rent and deposits and temporary accommodation. The number of

homelessness presentations for the first three months of 2021 was 307 with an overwhelming body of people presenting for housing need one in the North Devon community. The Council's safety net was to continue to support the provision of temporary accommodation, which was currently supporting 40 households per night at a cost in excess of £65K.

- Unbalanced housing market:

This was largely from a loss of rented accommodation together with an increase in holiday lets. In migration from retirees to the area coupled with the flexibility of many businesses to allow home working meant that people were moving out of the cities and choosing to settle in North Devon.

- Viability challenges on new developments:

The forthcoming planning white paper enforces the Council's ability to uphold the findings of viability assessments to ensure that developers honour the terms of the planning permission and build the agreed allocation of affordable housing.

- Prevalence of second homes:

Changes in national legislation would seek to address the prevalence of second homes together with local planning policy and neighbourhood plans to ensure that all new builds must be local, which might eventually be adopted at district level.

- What this means for the community:

- Addressing housing need is an even greater challenge.
- The economic impact, concern re the potential for businesses to relocate outside of the North Devon area.
- Public health and the importance of mental health support together with understanding the significant impact that losing a property can have on your mental health.
- The sustainability of key public services.
- Managing the changes to the social characteristics of the community through the loss of schools and shops within a local area.

- Our action plan:

- To maintain the "safety net"
- To establish new programmes/interventions to increase supply and reduce demand.
- Stakeholder engagement through a Member-led housing enquiry, which would look to bring empty properties back into use together with working alongside the Environment Agency to review areas where there was land available to build housing but the area was located in a flood risk area.

- Lobbying the government for change.

In response to a number of questions, the Head of Planning, Housing and Health and the Service Manager (Development Management) advised the following:

- The Tenant Fees Act was established to regulate the behaviour of private sector landlords and letting agents.
- Vulnerable people in supported living was a bit more complex as the care element was supported by Devon County Council and whilst the housing element was provided by North Devon Council.
- The Homelessness Reduction Act 2018, required Councils to provide meaningful assistance to meet the housing needs of an individual on the day of demand.
- The Housing service was funded by core funding from government and dedicated grants, for example there is a Rough Sleepers Initiative Fund to support this area.
- The importance of refreshing the Council's knowledge and understanding of the North Devon area in terms of wage levels together with the appreciation of affordability and the significant volumes of property available.
- The Council collected data from a variety of sources to obtain information from need intelligence to ensure that the correct policy decisions were taken.
- The Council must not lose sight of the critical role it played during the pandemic, with many individual officers and teams expanding their roles and responsibilities to meet the needs of the community, which was awe inspiring to witness.
- The Service Manager (Development Management) the demand for certain types of property depended on the location. However, the largest demand was for 2/3 bedroomed houses and bungalows.

The Committee discussed the developments with five properties or less where no affordable housing was required in accordance with current regulations. Members expressed their concerns regarding the ways in which some developers try to extricate themselves from the agreements within the viability assessments and not build the affordable dwellings that had been agreed. The Service Manager (Development Management) advised that any issues with developers at a local level need to be evidence based for the Council to be able to take action.

The Members agreed that that the current system for the consideration of planning applications was not working effectively because of the Council's lack of a five year land supply. The impact of this meant that when applications were approved the Members were under pressure from the local communities.

The Head of Planning, Housing and Health advised that following a positive meeting of the Strategy and Resources Committee, the Committee agreed to convene a North Devon Housing enquiry and engage with stakeholders to review best practice.

The meeting would take place sometime in October 2021 with the intended outcome being a set of actions and recommendations for consideration by the District Council together with agreed points on which government assistance was required. He added that he was optimistic about the process and that the Council should be applauded for its role in Community leadership.

In response to a question, the Service Manager (Development Management) advised that there was a clawback opportunity for the Council in the event that a developer sold a development of properties for more than specified in the viability assessment and this would be incorporated into legal agreements.

She advised that the neighbourhood plans would need to be considered by the Council's Planning team to assess the priorities together with other mechanisms currently used. For any developments of 10 properties or above, the Council was implementing the Homes for life Standard.

The Head of Planning, Health and Housing advised that there were areas in Ilfracombe with a lot of empty properties and there were plans to bring approximately 50 homes per year back into use. The Service Manager (Development Management) advised that there was potential for a large gain from bringing empty homes back into use.

The Head of Planning, Housing and Health advised that there were various tools at the Council's disposal to bring empty homes back into use. In the past there had been reluctance with different administrations to enforce such measures. However, there was now an overriding social imperative to bring forward a supply of housing to meet the demand in whichever mechanism was required. He added that any increase in net supply of empty/new properties would deliver a financial gain in New Homes Bonus to the Council.

The Committee members thanked the officers for their attendance at the meeting and were encouraged by their pro-active approach towards developers and owners of empty properties.

The Committee discussed the possibility of the Council building its own housing. The Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive advised that officers had explored a few small parcels of Council owned land and had held initial discussions with North Devon Homes to ascertain what could be provided. Further discussions would be included with the discussions with stakeholders at the informal meeting of the Policy Development Committee in October 2021.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance at the meeting and extended an invitation for their attendance at a future meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED, that the presentation be noted.

Councillor Spear declared a personal interest as an owner of rental property.

22. ADJOURNMENT OF MEETING

RESOLVED, that the meeting be adjourned to enable a five minute comfort break.

RESOLVED, that the meeting be reconvened to allow for the remaining business to be transacted.

23. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT QUARTER 1 2021/22.

The Committee considered a report by the Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive to the Strategy and Resources Committee of 6th September 2021 together with minute extract (to follow) regarding Performance and Financial Management Quarter 1 2021/22.

The Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive outlined the report and drew the Committee's attention to the following points:

- As at 30th June 2021, the latest forecast net budget position was £13,630,000, which produced a forecast budget surplus of £9,000.
- Included within the approved budget the Council factored in a government grant in relation to Covid-19 pressures of £536,710 and also budgeted for £375,000 of additional costs and reduced income, these were already incorporated into appendix A together with the latest forecast for each service area.
- Income from Council owned car parks was still down on budget but slowly recovering.
- The Council had not had to call upon the Covid-19 budget management fund. However, this would be closely monitored through to the quarter 2 report in November 2021.
- At the end of 2020/21, the Council placed £375,000 in a Covid budget management reserve to help mitigate any further adverse variances due to the pandemic in 2021/22, that future protection was still available if required.
- Appendix A of the report detailed the variations within the Revenue budget.
- Appendix B of the report detailed the earmarked reserves together with the projected balances.
- Section 4.4 of the report detailed the 2021/22 Capital Programme, which was attached as appendix D to the report.
- The revised Capital Programme for 2021/22 was £24.7m.
- Overall variations of £99,978 were proposed to the 2021/22 Capital Programme were detailed in section 4.4.3 of the report.
- The overall Capital Programme for 2021/22 to 2024/25 was £37.1m.
- The return earned on the Council's investments was 0.05%.
- The average seven day LIBID (inter-bank bid rate) for the Council's benchmark rate at 30th June 2021 was -0.08%.

- Appendix E of the report detailed the service plan action and key performance indicators (KPIs).

In response to a question regarding whether the Council's acquisition of a strategic asset was on track, the Director of Resources/Deputy Chief Executive advised that in terms of the timeline completion was due for the end of the month

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

The Chair and Committee members congratulated the Head of Resources/Deputy Chief Executive and all Council employees for their continued hard work and dedication.

24. STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE LITTER AND DOG BIN STRATEGY

The Committee welcomed the Lead Member for the Environment to the meeting.

The Lead Member for the Environment gave an overview of the current work of the Litter Working Group together with their aspirations going forward. She advised that a formal meeting of the group took place once a month together with an informal meeting, which met on a fortnightly basis. She added that due to technical issues, the minutes were not currently available on Modern Gov.

She explained some of the initiatives that the group were currently engaging in:

- The production of a community litter pick pack, which had generated a lot of community interest.
- Working alongside the Enforcement team to engage and educate with Petroc.
- Assisting with Barnstaple in Bloom.
- Cigarette ends were one of the biggest contributions to plastic waste and the Council were looking to involve themselves with a new initiative to launch stencilling on drains with the slogan "The sea starts here" to discourage people from discarding their cigarette ends into the drainage system.
- The review of bins would enable the Council to ascertain which bins were district owned and which were parish owned and after shadowing one of the employees within the service it was clear that some bins were not fit for purpose and this would be reviewed as part of the "Right bin, right place" initiative.
- A mapping process of where the bins were located within the district/parishes would also be produced in partnership with the Parish Forum.
- All areas within the district would be surveyed as soon as possible.
- When parishes were purchasing new bins the option of colour coding would be explored.
- The aspirations for the purchase of mobile CCTV to enable monitoring in problem areas.

The Committee discussed the following areas of concern:

- The vandalism of some bins in the local area together with arson and drug misuse.
- The requirement to upgrade the website to make the reporting process for bins more user friendly.
- The non-reporting of issues to the Police meant that there were no statistics for them to act upon.
- That any mobile CCTV system that was purchased would require good quality cameras to capture footage and enable to Police to use as evidence.

The Lead Member for the Environment advised that there would be a concerted effort to share the output of the working group and involve the parishes. She added that the work of the “Right bin, right place” campaign would assist with those communications together with the record of bin locations, which would be presented at the Parish Forum.

In response to a question, she advised whilst there wasn't a regular report submitted to the Strategy and Resources Committee a verbal update was provided at each meeting.

RESOLVED, that the update from the Lead Member for the Environment be noted.

25. WORK PROGRAMME - 2021/2022.

The Committee considered the Work Programme for 2021/22 (circulated previously).

The Committee discussed the difficulties in arranging the panel meeting with the National Health Service (NHS) and were advised by the Chair/Clerk that the various representatives had been invited to attend the formal meeting of the Committee on 18th November 2021.

The Committee agreed the importance of involving the social care service as part of the discussions.

The Lead Member for the Environment advised that there was a requirement for a green paper in relation to social care.

In response to a question, the Head of Resources/Deputy Chief Executive advised that the work programme contained a rolling process of all the main financial reporting documents together with other areas of interest that the Committee had indicated that they wished to explore further.

The work programme remained a fluid programme for the Committee to amend as they wished.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the work programme be noted; and

- (b) That road network infrastructure, transport and sustainability be added to the agenda for the meeting in December 2021.

Councillor Roome declared an interest as an employee of the NHS.

Chair

The meeting ended at 8.35 pm

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