

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of Policy Development Committee held at Barum Room - Brynsworthy on Thursday, 5th January, 2023 at 6.30 pm

PRESENT: Members:

Councillor D. Spear (Chair)

Councillors Bulled, Jenkins, Mackie, Walker and York

Officers:

Chief Executive, Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive, Head of Planning, Housing and Health, Head of Programme Management and Performance, Head of Governance, Head of Customer Focus, Head of Environmental Enhancement and Head of Organisational Development.

Also Present in person:

Councillor L. Spear.

82. APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and wished the Committee and officers a Happy New Year.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Roome.

83. TO APPROVE AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 8TH DECEMBER 2022 (TO FOLLOW).

The Chair advised that the minutes of the previous meeting, which was held on 8th December 2022 were not yet ready for publication owing to the sickness absence of the Clerk who supported the meeting.

He added that the minutes would be published at the earliest convenience following her return to work.

84. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

There were no declarations of interest announced.

85. CORPORATE PLAN DELIVERY HIGHLIGHT REPORT - REPORT BY HEAD OF PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT & PERFORMANCE

The Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive addressed the Committee and advised that the members of the Senior Management Team were also in attendance at the meeting should they wish to ask any questions.

The Committee considered a report by the Head of Programme Management and Performance (circulated previously) regarding the Corporate Plan delivery highlight report.

The Head of Programme Management and Performance advised that this was the first time that a report of this type had been produced and that it followed on from the restructure of the Senior Management Team in September 2021. The newly appointed Heads of Service with the support of from the new Programme Management Office (PMO) were tasked with establishing five programmes within each of their portfolio areas to support the delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan objectives, which were as follows:

- We achieve Financial Security (FS).
- We become focussed on delivering the best for our citizens (CF).
- Our Environment is cherished and protected (E).
- We plan for North Devon's Future (NDF).

She outlined the overarching theme of Financial Security together with the associated Medium Term Financial Strategy and the Commercialisation Strategy, which sat above the five programmes and was assigned to the Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive. There were four Key Performance Indicators under Financial Security, where were:

- A balanced budget.
- Council Tax collected as a percentage of budgeted collectable debt.
- Financial return on Commercialisation Activity.
- Decreasing financial debt (old aged debt).

The five emerging programmes were each assigned to a Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) and were as follows:

1. Customer Focus/Digital by Design – Head of Customer Focus.
2. Environmental Enhancement – Head of Environmental Enhancement.
3. Housing and Community Safety – Head of Planning, Housing and Health.
4. Regeneration and Economic Growth – Head of Place, Property and Regeneration.
5. Organisational Development – Head of Organisational Development.

She went on to explain the progress of the programmes and those 44 projects sitting under those programme umbrellas highlighting the detailed information, which was set out in section four of the report. The operational service plans sat below those

programmes and each Head of Service was in attendance at the meeting to present any new actions within their services plans to the Committee.

The Committee thanked the Head of Programme Management for her clear and informative report.

In response to questions, the Head of Programme Management advised the following:

- In terms of the frequency of reporting on the progress of the plan, officers were in the process of developing a Performance Management Strategy, which would be considered by the Strategy and Resources Committee and it would be for the Policy Development Committee to decide on the frequency of the report.
- Officers were currently in the process of inputting the information onto the Pentana system and once this had been completed reports could be generated from the system.
- Officers were also exploring how the information could be uploaded onto insite to make it more interactive and ensure greater transparency and openness in terms of the objectives being met.

In response to a question regarding the provision of a single webform to ensure that all relevant information was being captured at the first point of contact, the Head of Customer Focus advised that currently the Customer Service team currently received hundreds of emails per month, which covered a variety of services and subjects. The current process was very time consuming for the team and frustrating for the customer as it meant the involvement of more than one person. A single webform would therefore ensure that all of the relevant information was captured within one place and also build a database of the types of enquiries that the Council was receiving to allow lessons to be learnt and identify root cause issues.

In response to a further question regarding any restrictions to the options within the form, she advised that the form would be developed and improved over time.

RESOLVED, that the progress made to date in the delivery of the programmes be noted.

The Chair thanked the Head of Programme Management for her clear and informative report.

86. SERVICE PLANS (ATTACHED)

The Committee discussed the Service Plans (as previously circulated).

The Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive advised that the service plans sat beneath the five programmes with operational areas under each service plan. He added that the plans had recently been reviewed and reformatted to make them more accessible and user friendly.

He explained that each Head of Service would report their new actions to the Committee, there were historical actions which would either have updates, extension date requests or notes to explain their transferral to the overarching programmes.

He added that all service plans had been subject to consultation with Senior Management Team prior to their consideration by the Committee and they would then go to Full Council to be considered as part of the budgetary discussions at its February meeting.

a) **Governance**

The Committee discussed the Service Plan for Governance (as previously circulated).

The Head of Governance addressed the Committee and provided an update on the following:

- **Recommendation G 2023/24 01:** New Member induction and training – There was an additional training cost of £5K for 2023/24 in addition to the £3K within the base budget. A report was due to be considered at Full Council on 11th January 2023 to agree the training and induction programme following the elections.
- **Recommendation G 2023/24 02:** Document retention on Civica Financial core systems – The core final systems of Creditors, Debtors and General Ledger should only hold the data required in line with the Councils data retention policy. As per the previous service plan item for Civica Consultation at a cost of £4K to allow archive set up. There was a potential additional £14K to implement the GDRP module, which would be funded from the Digital Transformation Finance System reserve.
- **Recommendation G 2023/24 03:** District and Parish Elections – A reserve contribution of £25K was made each financial year towards the four yearly cost of the District Council elections. The total reserve contribution towards costs was 100,000.00, with projected costs for 2023/24 estimated at £140,000.
- **Recommendation G 2023/24 04:** Review and update the Procurement Strategy – The current strategy was up to and including 2022. There was therefore a requirement for the strategy to be revised and updated to reflect sustainability and social value changes.

In response to a question from the Committee, the Head of Governance advised that the requirement for photographic identification when voting in elections was a separate item on the service plan, which would be addressed outside of the election costs above.

b) **Customer Focus**

The Committee discussed the Service Plan for Customer Focus (as previously circulated).

The Head of Customer Focus addressed the Committee and advised of the following:

- **Recommendation CF 2023/24 01:** Replace Customer Service emails with a Webform - Customer Services currently received hundreds of emails per month covering a variety of services and subjects. This was time consuming for staff and frustrating for customers as it often resulted in an ongoing two-way conversation to reach a resolution. By designing a single webform the Council could ensure that they were capturing all relevant information at first point of contact.
- **Recommendation CF 2023/24 02:** Introduction of quarterly feedback reports – Reports would be created by the feedback team and distributed to Senior Management Team prior to being uploaded to website. The costs to the Council would be a one-off fee of £1,045.50 for Pentana training.
- **Recommendation CF 2023/24 03:** Upgrade all Windows 2012 servers to new operating system – The ICT team would be able to upgrade the majority of the physical and virtual servers. However, some suppliers such as Civica prefer to manage their own updates but this came at an estimated cost to the Council of £50k, which had been identified under the re-profiled PAG bid in cost code 4027.
- **Recommendation CF 2023/24 04:** Introduction of a new Service Desk system – This included a self-service portal, contract management and assets system. The new system would enable issues to be resolved based on their priority and they would be automatically logged onto the system. The costs associated with the implementation of the new system were as follows:
 - £8000 initial environment development cost.
 - Licences were £7500 per year for 12 users.
 - £1500 per annum would be saved via the decommissioning of the Bank –Rec, Mortgages and Assets system.
 - There would be a saving of £3700 per would from the decommissioning of the current Service Desk system.
 - Costs had been factored into existing revenue budget and no additional funding was required.
- **Recommendation CF 2023/24 05:** Review of Single Occupier Discounts – Working in partnership with Devon Audit Partnership (DAP), the Council would be reviewing all households who claimed single person discount. The Devon Audit Partnership would be procuring software to support all Devon district councils to ensure

that the council tax database was accurate and that households were billed correctly.

c) **Environmental Enhancement**

The Committee discussed the Service Plan for Environmental Enhancement (as previously circulated).

The Head of Environmental Enhancement addressed the Committee and advised of the following:

- **Recommendation EE 2020/21 01:** Environment – Plant 23,500 deciduous and coniferous tree whips at the Yeo Valley woodland extension between October 2021 and March 2022. An extension to time request had been requested until March 2024 for completion of the project. This extension was requested because delays in the Forestry Commission’s Funding stalled the project and it wasn’t feasible to plant all of the new trees by winter 2022.
- **Recommendation EE 2022/23 04:** Assets - Make infrastructure changes to process hall/yard to enable efficient service provision in Works and Recycling - **Transfer request:** The major project now fell under the remit of the Environmental Enhancement programme, which negated the requirement for it to be managed at Service Plan level.

The Chair commended the tree planting project.

d) **Planning, Housing and Health**

The Committee discussed the Service Plan for Planning, Housing and Health (as previously circulated).

The Head of Planning, Housing and Health addressed the Committee and advised of the following:

- **Recommendation PH&H 2023/24 01:** Food Safety – Post BREXIT new guidance had been introduced as European regulations were no longer enforceable and the Food Standards Agency required regulations to be put in place to enable the execution and enforcement of food safety in accordance with the requirements of the national regulator.
- **Recommendation PH&H 2023/24 02:** Housing – To maximise the Councils support to disabled and older people to be independent to decrease the prevalence of poverty. There was a requirement to update the Council’s Regulatory Reform Order Policy in collaboration

with Health and Social Care together with the new allocation of capital resources for 2023/24.

- **Recommendation PH&H 2023/24 03:** Development Management – To increase the efficiency and robustness of decisions made by the Planning Committee. The Chief Executive had commissioned the Planning Advisory Service to provide guidance to the Council in 2022/23. Officers also wish to review the current procedures regarding site visits and the venue used for the Planning Committee.
- **Recommendation PH&H 2023/24 04:** Licensing – To deliver significant improvements in customer services and efficiencies through the implementation of new licensing software. The current provider of the Council's licensing system had indicated their intention to withdraw support for the current software within the next two years. The Council was therefore currently reviewing the market place to procure a new system and improve the customer experience and modernise the Councils processes.

In response to questions from the Committee, the Head of Planning, Housing and Health advised that:

- With regards to original due dates and extensions to deadlines, the Head of Planning, Housing and Health advised that there had been ongoing workforce issues within the service in terms of recruitment and capacity. However, additional resources had been allocated to the planning service together with improvements and development of ICT. However, these improvements were still a work in progress and recruitment was an issue for the service.
- There were two officers working within the Planning Enforcement team at the current time. However, there were a number of vacant posts, which needed to be addressed. There was significant additional allocation for new posts of over £110k but there was still work to be done to maximise capacity.
- There was a requirement to ensure that technology was used appropriately, for example drones had been used previously for planning site inspections and whilst not always the most appropriate method they did give the Committee access to sites that might not be possible on foot and also a birds eye view of the area surrounding an application.
- In regards to transferable skills in terms of qualifications required for advertised posts. The Planning team were looking develop their own Planning officers and had provision for apprentice/graduate Planning officers, which would ensure a supply chain moving forward. This gave the service opportunities to develop skills and competencies within the team.
- There were workforce deficits in various service areas across the board, whereby local government was no longer seen to hold the prospects or opportunities for career development that it once may have done.

- As part of growing the skills base to develop its own planning officers, the Council had put in place contractual obligations to ensure that they remained within the Councils employment after they had completed their qualification with a caveat that they would need to repay their fees to the Council if they did decide to move on.
- The Section 106 (S106) system, which enabled district and parish councils to work together was essential and viability assessments were undertaken to ensure that the community didn't lose out to any potential funding. The developers obligations as part of the S106 were closely monitored and regulated to ensure that the agreement is adhered to.

In response to questions from the Committee, the Chief Executive advised that:

- There had already been positive outcomes in terms of transferable skills within the authority and highlighted a planning officer who had previously been part of the Customer Service team and had brought great customer focus skills to their new role.
- There were challenges facing the Council in terms of recruiting and retaining staff, as local government was no longer seen as a career choice. He explained that it would continue to be an issue over the next 10 years or so if the Council did nothing to address the problem.
- Prior to the pandemic, potential employees would move to the area for lifestyle choice. However, the climate had changed considerably with many companies providing hybrid solutions for employees to work from home. So, people were now able to live in coastal or rural locations but still work for larger employers in Bristol or London, which enabled them to earn greater salaries.
- The government had issued a consultation prior to Christmas regarding planning and the requirement for a five year land supply. There were also amendments to the Levelling Up Bill, which meant that there had to be an agreement by parliament regarding the five year land supply.

The Head of Organisational Development added that the Council was working to develop the skills and opportunities that were available to employees to further their careers within the Council.

She explained that there were a significant number of apprentices developing up through the ranks and that the Council was also working with Petroc to enable work experience placements for students.

e) **Place, Property and Regeneration**

The Committee discussed the Service Plan for Place, Property and Regeneration (as previously circulated).

The Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive addressed the Committee on behalf of the Head of Place, Property and Regeneration, who

was unable to attend the Committee and advised of the following:

- **Recommendation PP&R 2023/24 01:** Delivery of an Asset Management System – The Asset Management System monitored the £90m of assets, land, property and vehicles, which were within the ownership of the Council. There was now a requirement to upgrade software that was used to manage the system.
- **Recommendation PP&R 2023/24 02:** Property Maintenance Programme – Building Assets – This involved the development of a planned maintenance schedule, which would inform budget setting for 2024/25. There was already a programme in place for the short term but this would be developed in terms of the next 10 years to develop a schedule of work required to maintain council owned assets.
- **Recommendation PP&R 2023/24 03:** Maintenance Programme – Engineering assets (excluding car parks) – Work was due to commence on a planned maintenance programme to inform budget setting 2024/25.
- **Recommendation PP&R 2023/24 04:** Maintenance Programme - Car Parks – A planned maintenance programme for council owned car parks would be prepared to inform budget setting for 2024/25.
- **Recommendation PP&R 2023/24 05:** Barnstaple Vision – Phase 2 – The development of an action plan for Barnstaple to include the Future High Street Fund and Green Lanes and car park.

He explained that there were a number of older recommendations that would be transferred to various programmes.

In response to questions from the Committee, the Chief Executive and Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive advised that:

- As part of the acquisition of the Green Lanes Shopping Centre, the Council appointed a nationally recognised firm of surveyors who undertook a full structural survey and were currently working with a property management company to assess the works required to the centre and explore options available.
- Officers were in the process of establishing a team to explore potential toleration sites for Gypsies and Travellers to ensure that there was an alternative when the site at Seven Brethren was no longer an option. As part of their review, the team would review assets currently within council ownership together with potential land which could be purchased.
- The Council was also in discussions with Devon County Council regarding the potential utilisation of sites within their ownership.
- The maintenance of council owned properties was financed through an approved budgetary framework. However, there would be issues if the Council were to borrow higher than the market value. The Council was forward thinking and by looking ahead and careful planning they only borrowed when absolutely necessary. However, the Council

maintained control via the 10-15 year financial plan and monitoring through the Treasury Management Plan.

f) **Organisational Development**

The Committee discussed the Service Plan for Organisational Development (as previously circulated).

The Head of Organisational Development addressed the Committee and advised of the following:

- **Recommendation OD 2023/24 01:** Review our current Occupational Health Arrangements – The current supplier was joining a larger consortium and there was a requirement to undertake a review to ascertain if their offer was still the most cost effective and appropriate for the Council. This was a new element of work and there was potential for increased cost implications if the Council were to move away from the current supplier. However, all options would be taken into consideration prior to any final decision being made.

RESOLVED:

- (a) that the Service plans be noted; and
- (b) that quarterly reports be provided to the Committee to ensure that Members were informed of service plan progress via regular updates.

87. WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23

The Committee considered the work programme for 2022/23 (circulated previously).

The Committee discuss the various actions within the work programme and the list of future items to be considered.

The Clerk to the Committee advised that the work programme would be reviewed at the first meeting of the Committee following the elections in May 2023.

There was an item in relation to South West Water for the meeting scheduled in March 2023. The Committee discussed the reason for the item on the work programme, as there had previously been a joint meeting with Torridge District Council to which South West Water were invited and was attended by members of the Licensing and Community Safety Committee.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the work programme be noted.

- (b) That the minutes of the joint meeting held with Torrington District Council be circulated to the Committee via email; and
- (c) That the Clerk to the Committee should make contact with South West Water to discuss their potential attendance at the meeting in March.

Chair

The meeting ended at 8.01 pm

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

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