

Unconfirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held in the Remote Meeting via Zoom, on **Thursday, 18 February 2021 at 6:30 pm**

Members of the Committee present:

Councillor Edward Back, Councillor David Beavan, Councillor Stuart Bird, Councillor Judy Cloke, Councillor Linda Coulam, Councillor Mike Deacon, Councillor Andree Gee, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Tracey Green, Councillor Geoff Lynch, Councillor Mark Newton, Councillor Keith Robinson, Councillor Caroline Topping

Other Members present:

Councillor Peter Byatt, Councillor Tony Cooper, Councillor Craig Rivett, Councillor Rachel Smith-Lyte, Councillor Steve Wiles

Officers present: Katherine Abbott (Democratic Services Officer), Sarah Carter (Democratic Services Officer), Andrew Jarvis (Strategic Director), Sue Meeken (Political Group Support Officer (Labour)), Paul Wood (Head of Economic Development and Regeneration)

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

There were no apologies for Absence.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

3 Review of the Economic Recovery and Regeneration of the District post Covid-19

The Scrutiny Committee received report **ES/0676** by the Cabinet Member for Economic Development. The report presented the extent to which the pandemic had impacted on the local economy, the Council's immediate response to this threat and the long-term, strategic economic growth plans to help ensure a strong recovery. In introducing the report, the Cabinet Member stated that the health of the economy was vital to ensure it could enable jobs and livelihoods, vibrant places and funding for vital services. 2020 and the beginning of 2021 had been, he said, like no other and this had had a major negative impact on the national and local economy. The Cabinet Member added that, as the lockdowns continued, it challenged the resilience of so many aspects of the economy. However, he was confident the Committee would see that the Council was well placed to recover strongly, and to build back better and greener from the downturn. As Economic Development, together with support from Cabinet, strong long term economic development and regeneration programmes based around existing strengths such as low carbon energy, ICT, port and logistics sectors, had been put in

place. The Cabinet Member introduced, Councillor Steve Wiles, Assistant Cabinet Member, and Paul Wood, the Head of Economic Development who provided a presentation in support of the written report.

The Chairman invited questions.

Councillor Deacon asked if the Council had considered making a case to the Government to permit a reduction in Business Rates. The Assistant Cabinet Member said that a possible opportunity to approach the Chancellor in this regard might be the modification of grant payments to those who pay Business Rates. Councillor Deacon referred to paragraph 3.3 of the report regarding the total of £84m of grant funding paid to the district's businesses since the beginning of the pandemic, and asked what information was available on the percentage return of such funds. The Cabinet Member said the Council had been prompt and efficient in getting mandatory and discretionary grant funds to as many eligible local businesses as possible, and had adopted a flexible approach so the vast majority of businesses qualified for this funding. The Head of Economic Development said that, from the original grant funds allocated, around 90% was anticipated to be paid to businesses. There had been, he said, miscalculation by the Government over the size of the district's business base, meaning that in reality, the percentage of funds allocated would be much higher than 90%. The Council compared favourably to neighbouring local authorities and, indeed, nationally in this regard. Councillor Deacon referred to paragraph 4.8 of the report which detailed the Towns Fund bid which, if successful, would enable significant economic growth in Lowestoft, and asked if an alternative source of funding had been identified in the event the bid was not successful. The Cabinet Member replied that if the bid was not successful the ambitions for Lowestoft would be retained and alternative sources of funding would be sought, as well as any other options which might arise. The Head of Economic Development added that other major funding opportunities were about to be launched but the Council had been invited to make a bid to the Towns Fund and so this had been the first route. Councillor Deacon asked if the Jubilee Terrace project was on schedule and the Cabinet Member said it was progressing well. Councillor Deacon asked what work had been undertaken to look at the Energy Bill proposed by Peter Aldous MP. The Head of Economic Development said the Council was committed to exploring and enabling all forms of clean energy growth in the district and, with regard to the Bill, east Suffolk was probably the only region in the UK that could meet its requirements and focus on low or zero carbon mainly. The Cabinet Member said a careful eye was being maintained on developments.

Councillor Robinson wished to state that he had heard nothing but praise from local businesses for the speed and efficiency of the allocation of grant funding. Councillor Robinson asked about the Council's aspirations for a Marine Science Park, issues with broadband in and around Lowestoft and when residents might be re-connected, and the perception of fishermen that they were being 'ignored' in preference for support of wind farms. The Cabinet Member thanked Councillor Robinson for his opening remarks and agreed that the team did fantastic work. In response to the questions, the Cabinet Member said that plans for the Marine Science Park were still being pursued with keenness; residential high speed broadband would be made available very shortly but more work was required on the broadband offer for larger businesses; and, lastly, the need for the fishing sector to see the potential benefits from the offshore industry were expected within the Master Plan.

Councillor Newton referred to the number of businesses who had maintained services because their staff could work from home; he asked how the Council was supporting this and enabling people to continue working from home. The Cabinet Member replied that digital transformation would be a key element in this regard as well as diversification of skills perhaps through grant funding; he added that a report on the roll-out of broadband would be received by Cabinet in March. The Head of Economic Development said that this ambition was implicit, if not explicit, within the written report.

Councillor Gooch wished to record her thanks for a detailed report, for the written responses to her advance questions and to the Council's Officers for their support to local businesses which, she said, had been hugely impressive. Councillor Gooch referred to the presentation of Lowestoft and the tidying of derelict shop fronts etc. in order to install civic pride and asked how this might be addressed. The Cabinet Member said Lowestoft had two Heritage Action Zones (HAZ). He agreed that some shop fronts did need to be addressed and that, within the northern HAZ some progress had been made in encouraging people to apply for funds to assist with renovations, if the property was historically appropriate. The Committee was informed that a regular line of communication with those in both the north and south HAZs was maintained. Councillor Gooch asked if the Council had the power to compel action. The Cabinet Member said compulsory purchase orders and planning enforcement measures were possible, but these were not the first step and cooperation would also be the preferred route. Councillor Gooch referred to the tourism offer in and around Lowestoft and, specifically, struggling large and small scale charities, and what actions were underway in this regard. The Cabinet Member said this was included within the grant funding that was available, including the discretionary scheme which the Council had implemented. He referred to strong relationships with museums and charities including routes for assistance. The Head of Economic Development said charities had received some funds to sustain them at a certain level. He added that the Council worked with a wide and diverse range of charities and the voluntary sector around direct delivery, that the Council lobbied in support of these bodies as well as offering practical advice about available funding streams. Councillor Gooch asked if there was more the Council could do with local media companies to showcase the district further and proactively. The Cabinet Member said that it was the aim to promote the district as much as possible; he referred to current initiatives such as the Lowestoft Place Board, Screen Suffolk's *The Dig*, the Burberry advertisement etc. He added that the Cabinet Member for Communities, Leisure and Tourism would be bringing a report to Cabinet on the Destination Management Organisation. Councillor Gooch asked if the Council's *Eat Out Eat Well* initiative could promote a vegan/vegetarian accreditation scheme and said this linked to the declared climate emergency and the Council's strategic themes. The Head of Economic Development said that artisan food and drink was promoted as part of the visitor economy offer of the district, but agreed that it would be good to include vegan/vegetarian food and drink; he undertook to look into this.

Councillor Lynch referred to paragraph 4.18 of the report which described the offshore wind energy sector's growth, he said this would create a lot of jobs locally, but asked if it was possible to negotiate more of the related manufacturing contracts to be local too. The Cabinet Member replied that the scale of the operation was enormous and there was a need to maximise the district's profile to attract investors. The Head of

Economic Development stated that it was important to ensure the district had the commercial space such companies would require through investment in assets, for example. He added that there were opportunities and these would be pursued.

Councillor Topping referred to paragraph 3.4 of the report which outlined the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund allocated to the Council (£222,000); she asked how successful this had been and how that success had been measured. Councillor Wiles, as Assistant Cabinet Member, replied that the Council had worked with the town councils of the district's principal towns and much of the funds had been used for signage, sanitisers, barriers etc. He added that whilst this had not been 100% successful in all locations, in total the allocation had been used in delivering measures to support trading in the towns in the difficult and unusual circumstances of the time. Councillor Topping referred to paragraph 3.7 of the report which outlined the £71,000 Business Association Development Fund and asked how the allocation of this support had been tracked and its success measured. The Head of Economic Development said the total allocation had not been spent and that tracking was achieved via promotion, digital support and the ability to have safe re-openings. He added that whilst the Business Association's membership may not have increased its engagement had and the funding had enabled it to better establish local networks. Councillor Topping asked how the Council could work to engage with the widest number of stakeholders possible. The Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration said that it was necessary to ensure sufficient people were involved, that the right support was in place, including digital support and to learn from the Smart Towns pilots. He added that, ultimately, the Council was only able to facilitate revitalisation and not impose it. The Strategic Director stated that towns with aspirations for improvement could work alongside the Council and private sector entrepreneurial businesses.

The Chairman welcomed the positivity of the report. He referred to the need for improved road connections and asked what lobbying or representations had been made regarding the upgrading of the A12. The Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration said the A12 was not of the standard needed for the modern age and that the Council's ambition, within its Strategic Plan, included the building of the right environment; in addition, representations had been made to the Government regarding a large scale investment and the commensurate level of infrastructure which was now required. The Strategic Director added that it was also crucial to push for ultra fast broadband in order to protect the Council's carbon neutrality ambitions.

There being no further questions or matters raised for debate, the Chairman proposed a recommendation which was seconded by Councillor Topping. It was

RESOLVED

That, having received and questioned the report, the Scrutiny Committee welcomed the wide-ranging and focussed economic growth programmes and endorsed plans to ensure economic recovery by enabling growth opportunities

Cabinet Member update

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration was invited to

provide his verbal update. In terms of his key priorities, the Cabinet Member said that it was imperative to create the right environment to encourage business start-ups and, in that regard, the Covid-19 pandemic had been both a catalyst and an obstruction. He added that the Council, through hope, positivity, great vision and aspirations, together with an inclusive approach it was felt that the ambitions would be achieved.

Councillor Deacon asked what the Cabinet Member hoped, in time, to be able to describe as his greatest achievement in the role. The Cabinet Member replied that if he had the opportunity he hoped to fully implement successful smart towns.

Councillor Gooch asked about the inclusion of a town park in the Lowestoft masterplan and if the compulsory purchase of uncolonized retail outlets might be being considered. The Cabinet Member said a pocket park was underway through seed funding. He added that the Council would not compulsorily purchase everything but would work with others to achieve success for Lowestoft. Councillor Gooch suggested that Lowestoft would benefit from a luxury hotel in the town centre and asked if this had been explored. The Cabinet Member agreed that such a facility would be a great addition to Lowestoft as well as other areas within the district; he added that the challenge was where to place it and if there was a landlord or freehold owner willing to facilitate it. He emphasised that the team worked hard to identify potential opportunities as they emerged.

Councillor Topping asked if it might be possible to have a University sited in Lowestoft. The Cabinet Member replied that, to attract such a facility to the district, it would be necessary to provide skills-based jobs and environment, inviting and dynamic high streets, as well as quality of life.

Councillor Deacon asked if there was positivity that high streets would recover from their current malaise. The Cabinet Member said recovery was possible but they would need to transform themselves to counter the impact of internet shopping. Therefore, he said, it would be necessary to create an offering that worked for the customer and attracted them to the high street as a convenient, transformed experience.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and the Head of Service.

4 Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme

The Scrutiny Committee received and reviewed its current Work Programme.

The Chairman thanked the Task and Finish Group on Integrated Care for its work so far. He added that the report of the Group's findings was not yet suitable for submission to and consideration by the Committee. The Chairman said that there was a wish not to lose the Group's work and asked those present (Cllr Beavan having left the meeting earlier) if they wished to have more time to undertake additional work to ensure the proposed recommendations were evidence based and data led. He stressed that, nevertheless, this work would need to be completed within the time limits specified in the protocol. This was agreed.

Two future items for review were suggested: long term empty properties and the standardising/consistency of leisure provision. It was agreed that draft scoping forms

would be provided.

The meeting concluded at 9:16 pm

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Chairman