

Confirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Cabinet** held via Zoom, on **Tuesday, 7 July 2020** at **6:30pm**

Members of the Cabinet present:

Councillor Norman Brooks, Councillor Stephen Burroughes, Councillor Maurice Cook, Councillor Steve Gallant, Councillor Richard Kerry, Councillor James Mallinder, Councillor David Ritchie, Councillor Craig Rivett, Councillor Mary Rudd, Councillor Letitia Smith

Other Members present:

Councillor Paul Ashdown, Councillor Jocelyn Bond, Councillor Peter Byatt, Councillor Alison Cackett, Councillor Tony Cooper, Councillor Linda Coulam, Councillor Graham Elliott, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor TJ Haworth-Culf, Councillor Ray Herring, Councillor Ed Thompson, Councillor Steve Wiles

Officers present:

Stephen Baker (Chief Executive), Liz Beighton (Planning Manager), Ann Carey (Head of ICT), Sarah Carter (Democratic Services Officer), Karen Cook (Democratic Services Manager), Cairistine Foster-Cannan (Head of Housing), Andrew Jarvis (Strategic Director), Nick Khan (Strategic Director), Bridget Law (Programme Manager), Matt Makin (Democratic Services Officer), Morag McInnes (Economic Development Officer), Sue Meeken (Political Group Support Officer (Labour)), Brian Mew (Interim Finance Manager), Lorraine Rogers (Deputy Chief Finance Officer), Hilary Slater (Head of Legal and Democratic Services), Simon Taylor (Chief Finance Officer & Section 151 Officer)

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Jepson.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Announcements

The Leader firstly announced that, an additional report, that was not included on the agenda, would be considered at the meeting. The report was in respect of the "Town Fund – Capital Projects 2020/21". The Prime Minister had recently announced that Government was bringing forward £5bn of capital investment projects, supporting jobs and economic recovery. East Suffolk Council (ESC) was being offered, for Lowestoft, a grant of £750,000 to fund capital projects that could be delivered this financial year. Because this was a key decision for Cabinet and, due to timing it had not been included within the Forward Plan, the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee had

authorised the report to come forward this evening. Cabinet would consider the report, which had been published earlier for all members to review, immediately after agenda item 5.

Moving to his second announcement, the Leader referred to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic had had a devastating effect on communities; the people of East Suffolk had been more fortunate than some in other parts of the country, who had directly suffered with the virus. However, there was no doubt that the pain of the economic downturn caused by COVID-19 had been felt just as fiercely in East Suffolk as elsewhere, businesses were struggling and high streets were desperate to return to some kind of normality. The Leader stated that he was proud of the efforts of the dedicated East Suffolk team, both officers and councillors, who had worked around the clock to support local businesses. East Suffolk would, he stressed, provide a wide range of financial support to help them through this period. However, the Leader stated he knew there was more that could be done to inject life into East Suffolk high streets; one of the ways East Suffolk could do this was to make it much easier for market towns to set up community events, with stalls, fayres and markets traders, quickly and safely. Some towns within East Suffolk were subject to street trading regulations; however, ESC would be taking the view that those community events, such as those described in market towns, would not need a street trading consent and they would fall outside of the East Suffolk policy. ESC wanted to encourage those outdoor events during the summer months and wanted to be sure that they could be organised with a lighter touch approach. For an event to take place all that would be needed would be for the organiser to complete an application form for a single event street trading licence which could then be used for multiple days. Food safety information would need to be provided on what each stall would be selling and organisers would need to be in possession of public liability insurance for the event. ESC would not need to consult with third parties and there would be no fee applicable. The ESC Licensing Team was committed to processing such applications within 24 hours. This would be on top of the decisions already taken to support local businesses, including waiving the payment of licence fees of up to £100 per premises to put stalls, tables and chairs on the highway adjacent to their premises, and not require a minor variation of premises licence which would normally have an £89 fee. As a council, the last thing that the Leader wanted to do was make it harder for events to take place. Hopefully, the Leader stressed, this would now give the green light to a range of activities over the summer to help breath life back into East Suffolk's fantastic market towns.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Services and Operational Partnerships announced that ESC was currently trialling digital devices, called grand pads, and the local ITV news was scheduled to cover this, this evening, interviewing the first recipient of a grand pad from ESC. The recipient, who lived in Lowestoft, was extremely pleased to receive it. The grand pad was similar to an ipad, but with larger keys, it already had 4G installed, and would be available to them 24 hours a day. Further grand pads would be distributed to ESC's more vulnerable residents.

4 Minutes

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 2 June 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

5 Smart Towns Project

Cabinet received report **ES/0411** by the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Services and Operational Partnerships, who reported that the Smart Towns Project sat within the Council's Strategic Plan twofold, by supporting East Suffolk market towns and by delivering the Council's digital transformation ambitions and enabling digital technologies more widely across East Suffolk. The report explained the background and described how it supported the Strategic Plan; it was presented to Cabinet to provide a further direction of travel and to seek additional funding to accelerate the project more widely across East Suffolk.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Services and Operational Partnerships explained that there were two key aims to the project, to strengthen the economic vitality and community cohesiveness of all East Suffolk market towns through the installation of new digital networks and compatible technology consisting of installation of footfall tracking, data capture technology as well as free to use town wi-fi networks. This would be delivered together with town digital platforms and a tailored support package. This was designed to encourage the best use of technology, eg to enable positive digital interventions such as digital marketing, and to monitor trends and visitor behaviour, including footfall traffic mapping. It was envisaged that this would help towns to understand their strengths, support community activities, help and aid small businesses and bring a fresh vibrancy to the high street. Also, it would deliver a digital business support programme, a digital spring board which would develop creative digital interventions, digitally upskilling and a responsive business support network made available across East Suffolk. Also added was a digital first paid package, a vital part of East Suffolk's COVID-19 response, to support business recovery. An initial first trial took place in Framlingham, with ESC initially investing £400k into the project, and securing £200k from the Local Enterprise Partnership.

Councillor Burroughes stated that he was now seeking approval for an additional £500k from the transformation reserve to support, expand and implement the project further. At this point, at the request of Councillor Burroughes, a presentation was given by officers which provided more detail in respect of all aspects of the project.

The Leader stated that he was hugely in favour of this project; the reality was, he said, that East Suffolk town centres had been hit by COVID-19 but, even before that, it was clear that nationally there was a general decline in town centres, the pandemic has exacerbated that situation. ESC now had, the Leader stressed, a real opportunity, through this project, to help to make East Suffolk market towns as attractive and accessible as it could.

Following a question by the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing, who enquired about approaches from other towns, it was confirmed that a number of approaches, both from small and large towns, had already been made to the Council. The towns had all expressed a wish to proceed next, and they all appeared to be in a state of readiness.

The Deputy Leader gave thanks for the report and expressed his delight at the project coming forward. He welcomed the scale of the digital opportunity for the high street and the data led decision making.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Planning and Coastal Management expressed his delight that this project would be delivered in the small population centres within East Suffolk; he wished it every success.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment welcomed the project stating that, environmentally, it would have a really strong impact; it would, he said, help communities and businesses to focus their energies to be more efficient. By digitally transforming and being responsive to the environment, this would mean the right action would be taken in respect of the environment.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Communities, Leisure and Tourism expressed her support for the project and commented on how it would allow East Suffolk market towns to work together, to keep the communication, which had been so effective during the pandemic. It would, she said, enable them to work together and grow stronger. It would mean that the market towns could create their own identities and would be good for tourism, drawing in visitors to the area, and making people aware of the leisure facilities.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Community Health felt that this project would assist licensed premises in the future; she gave thanks for this.

Councillor Thompson asked what made a particular town a market town; he added that Martlesham was talking about becoming a town. It was explained that it was a town that had a formal centre and a physical boundary. The Leader stated that this would be phase one of the project and it may be that the project would be extended to other areas in the future. Officers added that whilst the town technology may not be immediately rolled out to every village and settlement in East Suffolk at this point, the business support service was available for all businesses in East Suffolk.

The Assistant Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economic Development very much welcomed the project, commenting that, post COVID-19, a lot of businesses were very concerned about their futures. It would, he said, give businesses and retailers confidence to come to the area, to open businesses and to make the area prosperous.

Councillor Elliott welcomed the proposal, he referred to the project being scheduled to start in summer 2020, and to be complete by summer 2022, he asked if one town would be undertaken at a time. He also asked if staff would need to be recruited for this significant project or whether existing staff would be used. It was explained that work on the ground, after any necessary procurement, would start in approximately three months time. In respect of working with the towns, predominantly this would be undertaken one town at a time, but there may be instances whereby perhaps three smaller towns might work together. Beccles, Bungay and Halesworth was given as an example. It was confirmed that dedicated project management would be required and one member of staff would need to be recruited accordingly.

The Leader, referring to the recruitment of an additional member of staff, commented that the Council had many greatly talented members of staff who could manage this project; however, he wanted them to be involved in many other projects that were on the horizon too. This project was part of a much bigger plan for the regeneration and modernisation of East Suffolk he said.

Councillor Gooch made two points, firstly, she liked the fact that the project was being introduced as a package and a product, but there was also the educational element too in terms of enabling people she said. The flip side of that was that people would need to receive training for things going wrong within the IT systems. Secondly, Councillor Gooch referred to the cross promotion between the 12 towns; they would, she said, need to work together to signpost people to move from one town to another. The Leader very much endorsed this approach.

Councillor Byatt very much welcomed the project; he referred to the two year contract and commented that it would be very nice to see local contractors used. Councillor Byatt also referred to paragraph 8.1 of the report and the reference to the East Suffolk Smart Town Project Team also working on a social care pilot with British Telecom; he felt that this was significant and very welcome.

RESOLVED

1. That approval be given to fund up to £500k from the Transformation Reserve, depending on outcome of other external funding plans, and to commence work on the implementation of the East Suffolk Smart Towns Project.
2. That delegated authority be given to the Strategic Director, in consultation with the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Services and Operational Partnerships, to award contracts, expend the budget to deliver the project and investigate additional external funding sources which could replace or supplement existing internal funding.

6 Towns Fund - Capital Projects 2020/21

Cabinet received report **ES/0432** by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economic Development, who reported that on 1 July 2020, the Chief Executive was written to by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to offer Lowestoft a grant of £750,000 to fund capital projects that could be delivered this financial year (by March 2021), as part of a post COVID-19 recovery plan. As Lowestoft was one of 101 towns selected as part of the Town's Fund Programme, Government had chosen to provide capital funding to fast track delivery of projects, recognising that it was those areas that were likely to suffer significantly from the impacts of COVID 19. The level of grant funding per town had been allocated according to population size from the 2011 Census, using the Office for National Statistics' categorisation of small, medium and large towns.

The funding was for capital projects which were "shovel ready", meaning they were at an advanced stage and ready to deliver. Projects selected by the town were required to align with the Towns Fund Intervention Framework.

A number of capital projects within the draft Lowestoft Town Investment Plan (Towns Fund) had been looked at to identify those that could be deliverable within the timeframes set by Government. Three were felt to be deliverable. The first was to deliver phase 1 of the redevelopment of the East Point Pavilion (£720,000), the other projects were to erect hoarding and art work to screen the perimeter of the proposed new car park area (the former Burger King site) adjacent to the old Town Hall until this site came forward for development in 2021 and to support the refurbishment of a pocket park adjacent to the old Town Hall. This was currently the subject of discussions with Lowestoft Town Council and others regarding the possible future management of the site by the local community (£30,000 combined).

The next step in releasing the grant was for ESC to write to Government to confirm how the grant would be spent. This would need to include confirmation from ESC's S151 Officer that the spending was in line with the Towns Fund Intervention Framework, would achieve good value for money and that the project could be delivered this financial year. The deadline for submission to Government was by no later than the 14 August 2020.

In conclusion, the Deputy Leader stated that an equality impact assessment had been completed, with no adverse impact identified.

The Leader very much welcomed this funding from Central Government which, he commented, would go a huge way to delivering the projects and would also kick start the local economy and bring with it more security in respect of employment and the supply chain that would follow.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Communities, Leisure and Tourism referred to East Point Pavilion being a flagship iconic location, seen upon entering the centre of Lowestoft, she felt that it would be fantastic if this funding could be used for this project and the other two projects identified within the report.

Councillor Byatt gave thanks for the report; he very much welcomed the enhancement work to the pavilion which would, together with the improvements to the chalets further south, really bring a great improvement to the area.

RESOLVED

1. That the acceptance of the £750,000 grant from Government be approved.
2. That the use of the grant monies against the recommended priority projects detailed in the report be approved.
3. That the reallocation of the money committed previously to the refurbishment of the East Point Pavilion to a series of urgent regeneration works required by the Lowestoft Town Investment Plan be approved, subject to a report on these proposals being presented to Cabinet in September 2020.

7 Local Government Association (LGA) National Code of Conduct

Cabinet received report **ES/0422** by the Leader of the Council, who reported that the Local Government Association (LGA) had published a draft Model Code of Conduct for

Members. Details of the Model Code were included within Appendix A of the report. The LGA was consulting on it between 8 June and 17 August 2020. The Model Code aimed to be concise, understandable to members, officers and the public, and written in plain English. It was designed to help members in all tiers of local government to model the behaviours and high standards that anyone would expect from a person holding public office. Equally, it set out behaviour which fell below the standards expected of council members. It was designed to set a framework for public and councillor interaction, emphasising the importance of civility, and that councillors should be protected from bullying, intimidation and abuse.

The LGA had included in the Model Code some of the recommendations from the Committee on Standards in Public Life's report, published in January 2019, on Local Government Ethical Standards. That Committee recommended the introduction of sanctions for breaches of the Code. This would require a change to the Localism Act 2011, as would some of the other proposals in the Model Code.

The LGA would like to hear from Members, and it would use the views received to help finalise the Model Code. The Leader commented that ESC could submit a written response, and councillors and officers could put their own, individual views forward, too. All responses would be treated confidentially.

The Leader reported that the Audit and Governance Committee considered the consultation and this report at its meeting on 29 June 2010. It had a lengthy, detailed discussion about the Suffolk Code, and how it compared to the Model Code. The key points considered by the Audit and Governance Committee were that the Model Code gave consistency and certainty in terms of standards of behaviour for all councillors; gave clarity on when it applied, for example, to all forms of communications used by Councillors, including social media; focused on the concept of showing "civility" where criticising ideas and opinions was acceptable but making personal or abusive comment would not be; had a threshold for declaring the receipt of gifts and hospitality of £25. And it specified that councillors should not accept "significant" gifts or hospitality which they were offered from those looking to do business with the Council, or those submitting applications for licences, consents or permissions.

It was thought that some guidance might be necessary for councillors, as to what they should, or should not, accept; proposed that Members would need to declare their Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs) and those of "family members and associates" rather than just their own DPIs and those of their spouse/partner; proposed a sanction of suspending a councillor from office for up to six months for breach of the Code. Certainly, the Committee felt that stronger sanctions were required than were available now, and that stronger sanctions were required for those who did not complete a Register of Interests or completed it incorrectly.

The Committee noted that the Model Code had no requirement in it for training to be made compulsory for Councillors.

Overall, the Leader commented that the Audit and Governance Committee had a wide-ranging debate and gave this careful consideration. The Committee welcomed the changes in the Model Code and saw them as an improvement on the current Code, especially in terms of having stronger sanctions.

Cabinet gave its thanks to the Audit and Governance Committee for its work and supported its views.

RESOLVED

That the careful consideration given to the Model Code by the Audit and Governance Committee be noted and appreciated, and that the submission of the Audit and Governance Committee's findings to the Local Government Association be supported.

8 COVID-19 - Financial Implications

Cabinet received report **ES/0412** by the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance. Prior to presenting the report, the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance gave his thanks to officers for all of their hard work and the pace and flexibility they had demonstrated within the last seven days to produce the report. He referred to the fact that the situation with regard to the Council's finances had been changing extremely frequently and never had that been more true than in the last seven days, hence a supplementary paper to the report had been issued.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance stated that the report provided an overview of the current position regarding the financial implications for the Council of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing primarily on the estimated direct financial impact on the Council. The report also briefly covered the various relief measures introduced by the Government to support businesses and households which were being administered by the Council.

To date, the Government had provided direct support to the Council in excess of £2.6m for the COVID-19 Emergency Response and the emerging financial pressures on local authorities. The Council and other authorities were submitting monthly reports to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) regarding the impact of the pandemic on local authority finances. It was not known at this stage whether any further funding would be available other than some New Burdens funding, and whether any funding would be available in respect of impacts next year or the medium term.

The situation on local government and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was currently developing rapidly in the light of this monitoring and reporting. One change since the report was produced was that the consultation on New Homes Bonus this year was likely to be postponed and there may be another one-year only round of NHB. After taking Government funding into account, the net impacts on the Council's General Fund were currently estimated to be £8.6m this year, and £3.2m next year, with reduced and very uncertain impacts over the rest of the MTF period. These impacts were dependent on the scale and duration of the economic recession, and the speed and nature of economic recovery, and needed to be considered in addition to the budget gaps currently forecast in the MTF.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance reported that the financial impacts estimated in the current year primarily concerned the Council's own income sources,

especially car parking and planning, whereas next year's estimated impacts primarily concerned council tax as a key external income stream. There would inevitably be an impact on Council Tax income arising primarily from an increase in the number of Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS) claims related to increasing unemployment, but these forecasts were obviously very uncertain. These estimates did not take into account any impacts on business rates at this stage, other than potential loss of the pooling benefit from the Suffolk Business Rates Pool, and the deferral of changes to the business rates system until 2022/23. The position on Business Rates was very uncertain and would also be dependent on recession and recovery impacts, together with Government policy. Reforms to the local government finance system had been deferred until 2022/23 at the earliest and the planned national business rates revaluation exercise had also been postponed. The worst case scenario of the Council's business rates position reverting to a baseline position has now been shown from 2022/23 onwards.

The Council was in a position where its current level of reserves and balances, especially the availability of the business rates equalisation reserve, should enable it to largely absorb this shock to its income streams. However, a prolonged and sustained recession, combined with the need to close the already forecast budget gap, could put pressure on other earmarked reserves and council projects and services. There was a need for the Council to work up a savings plan to deliver a sustainable financial position and replenish reserves enabling key recovery projects to be undertaken.

The Council's Capital Programme has been affected to some extent and would need to be reviewed over the coming months. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was generally less exposed to the financial impacts of the pandemic than the General Fund, although rent income would be affected to a degree.

Early indications were that the Council could, through its reserves and balances position, withstand these impacts, but there was an extremely high level of uncertainty about the economic outlook, the local finance environment and ongoing Government policy. Ongoing review, monitoring, and forecasting for all aspects of the Council's financial position would be critical over the course of this year.

Before closing, the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance highlighted the significant changes that were included within the supplementary paper, he referred to the table in respect of the MTFs forecast, stating that, this year, there was now an estimated reduction of the deficit by some £4m. The figures for the following years remained the same but these may well be affected when it was known how much of the £500m announced last week, across the whole country, would be coming to ESC.

Secondly, in respect of business grants paid out, the figures were updated as follows, as of 3 July 2020, for the total of small businesses and retail hospitality grants, ESC had paid out to 5268 businesses a total of £60.36m and, in addition, in respect of discretionary business grants, it had paid out 123 claims totalling £1.63m. The final update, included within Appendix C, was a breakdown of the costs etc by service area.

Councillor Herring agreed that the financial situation would change over the next six to nine months, he also stated that this was a huge situation for everybody and he said,

whilst acknowledging the support from Central Government, that there would be a cost to local government. Councillor Herring referred to the Council's reserves, the unprecedented times, the unprecedented costs, and felt that now was the time to draw on the reserves. Councillor Herring referred to the local economy and the huge task ahead to get this back on track; it was, he said, not a time for stringent cuts to be made, but a time for investment, with a whole range of new ideas needed, putting the resources in the best places possible.

The Leader, in response to Councillor Herring's comments, agreed in respect of the use of reserves; he also stated the need to invest to promote growth and bring people into East Suffolk.

Councillor Byatt, and other members, referred to the current remote meetings that were taking place; it was suggested that perhaps some meetings could continue to take place remotely, in order to save time and money. It was stressed that the current situation should be used to review and re-engineer the service offer by ESC, in order to make improvements and efficiencies going forward.

RESOLVED

That the contents of the report be noted and that, having commented on the financial implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, East Suffolk Council continues forcibly to press Government for further funding.

9 Exempt/Confidential Items

RESOLVED

That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

10 Exempt Minutes

- Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

11 Offer to Purchase Affordable Rented Homes - Melton

- Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

The meeting concluded at 8:58 pm

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Chairman