

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

MINUTES OF CORPORATE POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING

Monday, 29th March, 2021

Present:- **Councillors** Paul Myers, Winston Duguid, Mark Elliott, Hal MacFie, Alastair Singleton, Shaun Hughes, Karen Warrington, Lucy Hodge and Dr Kumar (in place of Andrew Furse)

Apologies for absence: Councillor Furse

70 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

71 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Andy Furse sent his apologies and was substituted by Councillor Dr Kumar.

72 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Hughes declared an 'other' interest in item 9 'Invest in Bath' as his business has been in receipt of a grant.

73 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

74 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE DEPUTATIONS, STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING

There was none.

75 MINUTES

The Panel confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting of 8th February 2021 (not 1st February 2021 as shown on the agenda sheet) as a true record.

Note – the minutes of the 1st February 2021 meeting will be circulated with the papers for the next meeting of the Panel for confirmation of accuracy.

76 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

Councillor Richard Samuel, Cabinet Member for Resources, updated the Panel on the following:

Finance

- The peak of the workload and budget setting has passed. We are now turning to the 2022/23 financial year.
- We will be doing some work in Adult Social care, it is a complex area and a large proportion of the Council revenue budget. This work will take place April – September, terms of reference have not yet been agreed. There is an interim manager.
- Outturn – the February report showed that the Council is on track to balance the budget. A report on the outturn will be available June/July.
- The government has announced a further fund for non-essential retail. The Panel might like to look at our performance with business grants over the past year. There is no detail on other funds/assistance yet.
- The Department of Transport has unexpectedly cut the highways maintenance spending for all Councils. This will have an impact.

Property

- There is a new interim manager who will help to prepare the service for change. The Montagu Evans final report is due after Easter – I will come back to the Panel to report on this.
- Regeneration – we are in the process of appointing consultants regarding the masterplan for the north of the city, tenders are being evaluated. This will comment on the prospect of retail opportunities and regeneration regarding the north of the city. We need to evaluate the empty properties – we will know more about this post 12th April.
- I authorised the final transfer of Bathampton Meadows to the National Trust, we are talking to them about what to do with the land.
- There is an exciting new piece of work regarding a cycle route from Newbridge to the east of Bath.
- Council Tax discounts – a case has highlighted the need to deal with empty properties where the circumstances of being empty are completely reasonable. This will come to Council.

Questions from the Panel

Councillor Warrington asked about Council Tax Updates with regard to some cases in her ward. Councillor Samuel asked for the details of the case to be sent to him. He explained that the Government regulations had not allowed Council's to have power over exemptions.

Councillor Duguid asked if we could benchmark against neighbouring authorities with regard to business grants. Councillor Samuel explained that work had been done with neighbouring authorities in the development of the policy to ensure consistency across the area.

77 PARENTAL LEAVE POLICY – CASEWORK OPTIONS

The Democratic Services Manager, Jo Morrison, introduced the report.

Panel members raised the following issues and asked the following questions:

Councillor Myers agreed that this should be determined on a case by case basis and asked that there is a way to record the way cases are dealt with. He asked about the cover for the Councillor – same party or same ward. The officer agreed on the point regarding good record keeping and explained that it would be up to the Councillor themselves as to how their work would be covered. A flexible approach.

Councillor Singleton asked about the reference to a Councillor being able to employ a case worker. The officer explained that she had the impression that this had been a private arrangement and confirmed that Democratic Services would not usually get involved in members ward case work.

Councillor Warrington stated that there are two Councillors for some wards for a good reason and if this was cut down to one for an amount of time, this person could be overwhelmed. She also asked if there will be a procedure to provide proof of the circumstances (such as the MATB1 form in case of pregnancy) so that the process is transparent to the public – as this is public money. The officer agreed that, while Councillors are not employees, it would be good for the process to be clearly spelt out.

Councillor Hodge asked how the 9 months of work would be covered. The officer explained that this cannot be spelt out until it happens as it would depend on the Councillor and the HR advice given on that case. Councillor Myers stated that the process allows for a recognition and assessment of the level of work, the Group Leader may get involved in this. He asked what happens to Panel/Committee members – do they keep their allowance? The officer responded that this was covered in the policy that was agreed by Council in September last year.

The officer responded to a point raised by Councillor Myers acknowledging that a Councillor's work is not just ward work but Committee memberships and that this could be covered by several different people and that flexibility is the key.

Councillor Myers suggested that the Panel see this item again after the first year and review lessons learned and comment to Council at that stage. The officer agreed that this would be kept under review.

Councillor Warrington suggested a holistic approach in order to be part of a package to encourage people to stand as Councillors.

It was RESOLVED that the Chair and Vice Chair would draft feedback to Council based on the Panel's discussion.

(note Councillor Dr Kumar abstained from this vote)

78 INVEST IN BATH UPDATE

Rob Dawson, Enterprise Officer, introduced the report and gave a short presentation which covered the following:

- Invest in Bath Service
- Service Outline – Business & Skills team

- Covid Support
- Business Support
- Sites and Premises
- Employment and Skills
- Communications and Networks
- Invest in Bath website walk-through

Panel members raised the following issues and asked the following questions:

Councillor Myers explained that the reason for this item was to explore why only 'Bath' is in the title and not 'North East Somerset'.

Councillor MacFie stated that he could only find one business from North East Somerset and that he is often asked by residents why there is not an 'Invest in North East Somerset' website. The officer explained that this is something that could be taken on but the website is for North East Somerset, not just Bath. He explained that there is a new business engagement programme. He explained that the team are looking to refresh the website but a name change would have to be consulted on with Councillors and users. He further explained that 50% of website users come from outside of the UK and that Bath is a globally recognised name.

Councillor MacFie referred to the Enterprise Zone in the Somer Valley and stated that residents do not always feel that there is much encouragement and investment in this and would like to see more investment in North East Somerset.

Councillor Warrington added that there are lots of quality businesses in North East Somerset and some incredible heritage. She explained that people are increasingly aware of where their food comes from which benefits local businesses. She asked if the Chamber of Commerce could promote and invest in North East Somerset businesses. The officer stated that he had engaged with many businesses in North East Somerset and that the points raised are valid. He explained that there are dedicated engagement officers and added that they do engage with Chamber of Commerce (there had been a recent meeting with Chew Valley Chamber of Commerce).

Councillor Hodge asked the following questions (*officer response shown in italics*):

- How do 'Invest in Bristol and Bath' work with 'Invest in Bath' and is there any overlap? *The officer explained that the former focuses on more global campaigns and on leads from central Government. There are monthly meetings with their team. Both teams work with business aftercare – 90% of work is with existing businesses.*
- Are the 9 core funded posts full time? And are the 6 Future Bright posts externally funded? *The officer estimated that there are 6 full time equivalent employees. He confirmed that the Future Bright posts are funded by WECA.*
- When there is time to analyse the data, it would be useful to see the breakdown of the distribution of Covid grants (this had been added to the Panel future items list).

Councillor Duguid asked the following questions (*officer response shown in italics*):

- What is administered by WECA? *The officer explained that most budgets are administered by WECA, we are involved in shaping the funds and process. We also have a promotional focus.*
- Is there any involvement with the adult education budget? *The officer explained that his manager would lead with any involvement in this.*

Councillor Hughes asked what the primary focus was – inward investment or local business support. Also, there is no mention of Brexit which has had an effect on businesses. The officer explained that the main (90%) focus is on supporting local businesses. Brexit support activity was happening but the Covid situation took over. We will look at this again in the future.

Councillor Myers explained that he had raised this issue in 2015 but a name change to ‘Invest in Bath and North East Somerset’ was resisted. The officer explained that any name change would have to be considered and tested with the user base. Councillor MacFie stated that he would like a separate ‘Invest in North East Somerset’.

It was RESOLVED that officers be requested to carry out some research (including with users) and to report back to the Panel in 2-3 months with a proposal, taking into account the suggestions put forward regarding a separate ‘Invest in North East Somerset’ (possibly cross referenced with ‘Invest in Bath’).

79 UPDATE ON PARISH CHARTER

Dave Dixon, Community Engagement Manager gave a presentation which covered the following:

- Update on Parish Charter – including Local Engagement across Bath & North East Somerset;
- 2020 – An unprecedented year (a local response based on networks, relationships and collaboration)
- Parish Charter – the purpose of the Charter
- Parish Charter Activity in 2020
- Community Engagement in 2020

Panel members raised the following issues and asked the following questions:

Councillor Myers asked what amendments would need to be made to update the Parish Charter in view of the experiences of the last year to keep it relevant. The officer responded that he has worked closely with ALCA in making minor amendments in the past year and this will be considered again this year. We plan for a period of reflection each year but circumstances (lockdown) have delayed this at certain points. We now hope to survey Parish and Town Councils soon.

Councillor Myers asked if virtual meeting platforms (such as zoom) can be considered for non-statutory meetings. The officer responded that clerks are keen to continue virtual meetings and are writing to MP’s about this.

Councillor MacFie asked if there is a facility for when things go wrong. The officer responded that many issues are raised at the Parish Liaison meetings and there is also guidance from ALCA for parish clerks. It is done in a collaborative way. There is a formal avenue of the Parish Liaison Group.

Councillor Hodge commented that the Community Engagement officers have worked very hard during the Covid period and the Panel recognise this work.

It was RESOLVED that, after the next review, the item to brought back to the Panel who will then make recommendations to Council.

80 PANEL WORKPLAN

The Panel noted the future workplan and made the following suggestions for future meetings:

- Covid Grant Scheme
- Preparing for the Future – Corporate Strategy item (to include information on the parameters of the strategy eg. Staff survey results/the impact of the changes and numbers around the key justifications for this policy – compare metrics.
- Parish Charter – following the next review (once past the Covid response period) – item to come back, the Panel will make recommendations to Council at that stage.
- Exploration of a holistic way of managing future Councillor recruitment to ensure maximum representation.
- Update on Council Tax empty property charges.
- (linked to item above) Update on how the new Council Tax Contribution Scheme is going/view of the early take up.
- Consultation on empty shops

The meeting ended at 6.11 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services