

CABINET MEMBERS REPORT TO COUNCIL

25 APRIL 2022

COUNCILLOR STUART DARK – LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

For the period 24 February to 25 April 2022

1 Progress on Portfolio Matters.

The main focus of this report to Council is on two important areas of particular public concern.

Covid 19

Councillors will be aware that the UK government's 'living with Covid' plan brought in an easing of protective measures over the weeks since my last report to the extent that the vast majority of them, including travel restrictions, testing requirements, compulsory self-isolation following a 'positive' test, the vaccine passport requirement to enter certain larger events and premises, mask wearing etc (with the exception of certain healthcare/high risk settings) have been removed – ostensibly replaced with preventative advice and guidance to the public if they develop symptoms.

Whilst this is undoubtedly a welcome development, this council continues to monitor trends, infections and crucially hospitalisation rates with strategic partners across the County (including the NHS, Public Health England and NCC) and will act with them or give support to them if needed/requested (as we have done throughout the pandemic) as one would expect, if the situation deteriorates or if the guidance changes.

During this reporting period, the Government's 'Omicron support grant scheme' to help businesses impacted over the festive period 21/22 closed.

The Council's Revenues and Benefits Team paid out £1,712,120 to support 558 relevant local businesses from the funding available in this scheme. £1,580,118 (496 claims) went to hospitality businesses directly impacted and within the main scheme's guidelines and following helpful representations from businesses associated with the hospitality industry but not directly 'in scope' of the main scheme's guidance (such as Taxi Drivers, Hair dressers and nail salons etc) an additional local 'discretionary' scheme was established. This brought in an additional 62 businesses who each received £2000 of support for the relevant 3 week period (totalling £132,002).

Whilst the Omicron grants were the latest given out, they should be viewed in the context of the wider significant package of business support grants proactively administered by this Council since the start of the pandemic

totalling over £78M (broken down as follows);

Grant Type	Value
Small Business Retail, Hospitality & Leisure	38,750,000
Discretionary	950,500
LRSG	15,553,241
WetLed	45,000
CBLP	7,766,000
Restart	13,550,749
Omicron	1,712,120
Total	78,327,610

These schemes themselves being in addition to other significant support provided by central government such as the staff Furlough scheme and rounds of Business rate relief.

Having held the Council's pandemic response lead throughout the pandemic (initially as Portfolio Lead and latterly as Leader) I believe it is appropriate at this significant milestone point in the response to Covid, having been someone who has worked closely with Officers and seen first-hand the significant work done to adapt to maintain core services and deliver new priorities to protect the vulnerable and wider public, support our businesses and enable others to do their great work locally (such as the QEH and the NHS Vaccination programme) to say 'thank you' here to the Council's staff and the staff of it's associated companies and contractors who played a significant 'key worker' role for West Norfolk for such a protracted period of high demand. I was pleased to be able to attend the unveiling of the commemorative recognition 'Thank you' plaques at both Kings Ct and Town Hall, alongside the Deputy Lieutenant, staff representatives from Council teams, the Mayor and the Chief Executive and also attend the Deputy Lieutenant's and High Sheriff's service of remembrance and thanks at the Minster during this period.

I'd also like to say 'Thank you' to Councillors from all sides of this chamber who also played their part in getting key messages out in to our Communities and businesses and giving valuable feedback to help refine approaches throughout the last two years.

As restrictions ease, hopefully for good, I look forward to working with Officers and fellow Councillors from all sides of this chamber over the coming weeks and months on how the Council moves into this new post-pandemic restrictions era, bringing back in a systematic way processes and structures that worked previously but also looking at formally embedding and refining for the long-term new approaches for staff and Councillors proven to have worked during the last two years such as appropriate remote working, remote meeting attendance and live-streaming/recording (to name but three examples of areas for consideration).

Ukrainian conflict/refugee support

I hope it is understandable that a significant amount of my time as Leader over this relatively short reporting period has been devoted to promptly standing up an effective regional and local response with partners to support the arrival of refugees fleeing the awful, rapidly developing, conflict in Ukraine. Councillors will be aware we have already held a vigil, lit our buildings and passed a formal motion at our Extraordinary Meeting during this period, denouncing the illegal invasion and ensuing humanitarian crisis as a clear signal of our support to the Ukrainian people, but this is the vital, active and practical part we should and are best placed to play.

Councillors will be aware that our interim 'Refugee reception centre' has now opened on the ground floor at Kings Ct whilst the extended longer-term rooms nearby are being cleared and equipped to provide comfort and functionality (including private meeting rooms) for refugees, accompanying children and staff. We took a proactive decision to place it here at the Council's HQ for two reasons; firstly we can wrap around essential services already co-located here including DWP, Housing and our LILY Team (experienced in supporting the vulnerable throughout the pandemic) as a safe, welcoming 'one-stop' shop for accessing support and secondly placing this in the region's administrative HQ sends a clear signal of the import we attach to getting this right. This centre has already received its first visitors and has bookings already made for the coming days.

I am grateful for the prior input and assistance of the opposition group Leaders around the delegated decisions I took with the Chief Executive (under 'Emergency' provisions of the constitution) during this period to promptly allocate funds across to;

Provide additional local 'gap' funding support in West Norfolk for refugees with pressing needs that need meeting prior to any wider state funding kicking in (for example food, clothing, medication, household bills etc) – with a view to increasing this if necessary as needs and demand become better understood

And

Following proactive discussion with two experienced local migrant charities (The Hanseatic Union and Access) provide initial funding support of £10K for additional staff to cover anticipated increased demand. As a result of this close partnership the charities are now also providing a co-located service within the Council's 'Refugee reception centre' with access to interpreters to add the third sector to the state services already present.

Through the King's Lynn BID local businesses are coming forward to offer services at reduced or no cost and the good people at Radio West Norfolk have supplied eggs kindly donated by residents through their long-standing Easter egg appeal which are already being distributed.

Behind the scenes, now guidance has come out, we are working with County colleagues to support the various checks and visits necessary to ensure refugees are found suitable and safe housing or placements with families. Given West Norfolk's welcome and high, well-established, East European community (believed to be the second largest in Norfolk) and the amazing generosity of West Norfolk residents already coming forward with offers to help, the staff numbers involved are being regularly reviewed to ensure delivery. At the time of writing this update the current number of completed Housing inspections in West Norfolk for the Sponsorship scheme is 37 (up from 24) with a further 13 scheduled in, making 51. Clearly these inspections relate to properties and not refugee numbers so the numbers of people/refugees supported are likely to be higher.

Senior Council Officers and I am now in regular meetings with Central gov, NCC and District Leadership Teams re co-ordinating our response and I am mindful that reporting will become more precise as the emerging process is refined. I undertake to provide a further update to Councillors at my next briefing (or by exception if a significant development occurs in the interim) but hope this update demonstrates that locally we are moving quickly, collegiately and with the right amount of focus this grave, unprecedented, situation merits.

Other matters in brief:

Local Member Fund

The Local Member Fund – introduced last November to enable Councillors to directly support 'grass roots' good causes delivering in their wards – concluded on the 31st March during the period of this report. Despite this being a benchmark year, with all the inherent teething issues and it not being a full year (essentially applicants and Councillors only having five months to apply against a full year's funding allocation) I am pleased to report that to my knowledge this scheme was well-received by the public and Councillors and directly helped 84 varied local causes right across West Norfolk with £40,103 of funding. On this basis, the scheme will be continuing in FY 2022/3 with funding already allocated in this year's budget (and funding requests are already coming in). A report is being prepared for CPP and then on to Cabinet for consideration as part of a refinement process, to make the scheme the best it can be. This report also includes a proposal to move the remaining £14,896k not spent in the first year's (Nov. 21 to Apr 22) funding across to bolster the budget lines for the over-subscribed Queens Platinum Jubilee support scheme and the local Ukrainian Refugee support in case more is needed.

School of Nursing

I was very pleased to attend a visit to the completed School of Nursing at the College of West Anglia alongside our MP, Senior staff from the QEH, representatives of the Towns Board and others during this period. I am aware that by the time of our Full Council many fellow Councillors will have taken up one of the two visits extended to see this facility for themselves.

I hope others concur with my view, that the significant Towns Board funding that was expedited to make this long-desired project a reality (the first project to reach it's completion) demonstrates the transformational impact that these external funds can achieve for our region's principal town, in this instance providing the UK's newest and technologically up to date Nurse Training Facility not only providing local young people with aspirations of entering this laudable, essential, profession with a 'state of the art' local opportunity to further themselves and their career but importantly create a much needed 'grow your own' facility that will provide nurses to the QEH for years to come.

Hunstanton Town Advisory Board

I was pleased to join the preliminary facilitated meeting of the Hunstanton Advisory Board during this period and to hear the enthusiasm of those present, from many backgrounds, to establish a locally led forum to work alongside this council and look forward to this work developing.

Downham Market

During this period, I attended Downham Market and met with their incoming Chair and new Clerk. Without dwelling on recent well-documented difficulties, I was impressed with their desire to move the Council forwards on a stable footing and as one would expect, I will be working to build a constructive relationship over the coming weeks to deliver on shared priorities.

Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee

I am pleased to report significant plans are being finalised to deliver exciting events right across the upcoming 4 days of celebration. Details of these will be circulated separately. The Council's scheme offering financial support to local community celebrations has proved very popular and is over-subscribed (c£12,000 of bids vs. an initial allocated budget of £8K). It has been agreed to promptly increase the funding available to ensure all appropriate schemes that applied receive support. By the time of our Full Council meeting the first of over 13,000 special commemorative coins purchased by the Borough Council will have started to be distributed to local school children by the Mayor. Arrangements are being made to present the majority of these out in schools via a combination of the Mayor, Deputy Mayor and relevant local ward Councillors (if they are willing) and details will follow.

2 Forthcoming Activities and Developments.

I will continue to update on the Refugee response as this progresses.

I am pleased to report the Council has just been awarded an additional £1.8M under the government's 'shared prosperity' funding – the largest amount awarded in Norfolk. Work will now commence with officers to examine the detail of how this can be used and to bring forward through appropriate committees.

3 Meetings Attended and Meetings Scheduled

In addition to my regular meetings with cabinet colleagues, officers, Leaders of other groups etc I have during this period attended or will have by council (of potential interest);

Norfolk Public Sector Leaders Board

Norfolk refugee response co-ordination meeting

Meetings on the refugee situation with central government

Norfolk Covid 19 Engagement Board

Hunstanton Advisory Board initial meeting

Members Major Projects Board

Liaison meeting with DMTC

Liaison meeting with Chair of New Anglia LEP

Visit to the Swan Project in Downham Market

Meeting with members of the Campaign group against the Wisbech Incinerator