

CABINET MEMBERS REPORT TO COUNCIL

28 November 2024

COUNCILLOR ALISTAIR BEALES – LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

For the period 1 to 28 November 2024

1 Progress on Portfolio Matters.

Given the seemingly very short time since the last Council meeting, I will focus on the less well reported areas of my portfolio.

Emergency Planning – in view of the awful flooding in Spain, particularly Valencia, I asked our District Emergency Planning Officer for comment on our warning systems of such events, there having been some criticism of the Spanish system. As follows:

We have a multilayer system (flood alert, flood warning and severe weather warning), that uses mobiles, landlines and also pushes to smart devices if they are located in an area at risk. In addition to that, in extremis the government alert system can be activated if required if immediate threat to life occurs - this will be pushed to all devices in a particular area.

As part of the community engagement work, we do with colleagues from the Environment Agency we regularly promote that to individuals, business and to parishes. Also, as part of the planning process, I comment with advice on how to receive these messages on any development in areas at risk of flooding:

Because of its location in an area at risk of flooding I would suggest that the occupiers:

-Should sign up to the Environment Agency flood warning system (0345 988 1188 or www.gov.uk/flood)

- A flood evacuation plan should be prepared (more details at www.gov.uk/flood):

- This will include actions to take on receipt of the different warning levels.*
- Evacuation procedures e.g. isolating services and taking valuables etc.*
- Evacuation routes*

The aim is to get the message out to more and more people in West Norfolk so that if we were in a position of widespread tidal or river flooding, we should be able to warn as many people as possible in advance.

Central Services – the Assistant Director, Central Services reports the following work is being undertaken in addition to the normal workings of the department.

- Work is underway within Communications to review and refresh our communication channels internally with staff and members and externally with residents, and to revise our consultation processes.
- Supporting the transfer of Alive West Norfolk back into the Council.
- Taking part in the national recruitment campaign to promote careers in local government.

Southgates – the Sustainable Transport and Regeneration Scheme (STARS) scheme continues to progress. The design and development of this transformational scheme to the town's historic gateway continues to take shape with progress being made by NCC officers on the submission of the Outline Business Case to government for the STARS highway and public realm element of the masterplan. In parallel, officers continue to progress the design development and assessment of delivery options for the development sites as set out in the masterplan; stakeholder meetings have taken place this month to support the continued development of this scheme. While we were unsuccessful in a recent bid for Brownfield site funding to support the financial viability of the development, we are hopeful the new government will make new funding opportunities available to support sustainable housing growth in the town.

Towns Fund - significant progress is being made across the delivery of the £37m Town Deal programme with planning permission secured for the Guildhall but there remains substantial work to do to keep the programme on track. The Town Board and officers continue to monitor the programme delivery closely and will make the appropriate strategic decisions required to ensure delivery. The Town Board is recruiting further private sector representatives to join the board and the recruitment pack can be found on the Borough Council website.

2 Forthcoming Activities and Developments.

Council budget – members will be aware of the looming deficit if no action is taken. By 2026/27 we would have a multi-million pound deficit and no reserves to balance the budget. This is a key challenge facing our new CEO and one of the key qualities we were looking for in those interviewed and the person that was successful, was an understanding of and willingness to tackle the deficit. The CEO has risen to that challenge and there has been something of a culture change within the organisation and as part of that, addressing the deficit is top of the agenda and actions are being formulated. At this stage, I have laid out broad parameters for the CEO and her team but I am not involved in the detail, nor are elected colleagues. The officer team,

having been tasked with this as a

matter of urgency, need the space to think freely and present the cabinet with options. Cabinet will see those options shortly and following cabinet debate and deliberation, all councillors will be briefed as soon as is practicable and proposals will go through the full democratic process. The deficit is serious and structural and will require some big and perhaps difficult decisions and I aim to build a political consensus around the actions needed in the best interests of our community. Obviously, that requires that elected members are well informed and able to input into the process. You can all be assured that will be the case and I look forward to healthy debate and I hope, agreement. More info to follow as soon as I am able.

Devolution – as we know the Norfolk and Suffolk deals agreed with the previous Government did not proceed and the following link to a Govt. statement explains why and gives some detail on the new Govt's approach.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/four-devolution-agreements-signed-off-and-others-progressing>

The key question for all of us is what happens next. The Chancellor referred briefly to devolution in her Budget stating that the upcoming devolution white paper "will set out more detail on the government's devolution plans, including on working with councils to move to simpler structures that make sense for their local areas, with efficiency savings from council reorganisation helping to meet the needs of local people". It also said that it would set out the government's plans to "widen devolution to more areas and deepen the powers of existing mayors and their combined authorities, ensuring they have the tools needed to boost economic growth".

All will become clearer when the English Devolution Bill White Paper is published. Our officers believe that could be as early as the week of this full Council meeting following conversations with officials from MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government). Reading between the lines it appears that unitary could be back on the agenda. I have my own views on that but will await the White Paper before commenting.

3 Meetings Attended and Meetings Scheduled

4th Nov – update from Communications team.

4th Nov – Cabinet sifting.

5th Nov – meeting with Persimmon Homes at the Willows, Downham Market

5th Nov – Cabinet

6th Nov – meeting with Associated British Ports

6th Nov – trees on Purfleet Street (site visit)
6th Nov – Cabinet briefing
7th Nov – briefing meeting on Grimsby to Walpole NSIP
7th Nov – portfolio meeting
7th Nov – prep for meeting with James Wild MP/Director General NT
7th Nov – meeting with all Group Leaders
8th Nov – meeting with Leader & CEO of Breckland District Council
11th Nov – Members Major Project Board
11th Nov – meeting with CEO
12th Nov – Leader/Deputy briefing with CEO
13th Nov – meeting at Portcullis House with James Wild MP/Director General of the National Trust
14th Nov – cemetery briefing
14th Nov – fortnightly briefing from Monitoring Officer
14th Nov – meeting with Independent Review Panel (member allowances)
14th Nov – pre meeting to prep for meeting with ALB's on 21st Nov
15th Nov – reception Swan Youth Project (apologies given at late notice)
18th Nov – introduction to interim providing HR support
18th Nov – briefing on Hunstanton remembrance service
18th Nov – pre meet for meeting with MHCLG re grant funding methodology and allocation
18th Nov – West Norfolk investment plan priorities
18th Nov – Audit Committee
19th Nov – budget briefing
19th Nov – Transport Informal Working Group
19th Nov – R&D Panel
20th Nov – Cabinet Away Day (at Kings Lynn Town Hall!)
21st Nov – Brancaster ward visit
21st Nov - meeting with MHCLG re grant funding methodology and allocation
21st Nov - meeting with Arm's Length Bodies (ALB's) including Historic England, the Arts Council, Visit England, Norfolk & Suffolk Local Visitor Economy Partnership, Department for Business and Trade, Homes England and others.
22nd Nov – meeting with Terry Jermy MP
22nd Nov – meeting with Broadland Hosing Association
22nd Nov – Town Deal Board
25th Nov – meeting with Monitoring Officer
25th Nov – West Norfolk Prosperity Funding
26th Nov – wildlife site at Florence Fields
26th Nov – Shareholder Committee
26th Nov – planning meeting
26th Nov – E&C Panel
27th Nov – High Street update
27th Nov – full Council pre meet
27th Nov – transformation briefing with CEO/Deputy
27th Nov – Exacom
27th Nov – EELGA leaders meeting
27th Nov – CPP
28th Nov – meeting with CEO
28th Nov – pre Council briefing on West Norfolk as a Marmot Place

28th Nov – full Council