

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Blended Meeting of the EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE held in Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Newtown St Boswells and via Microsoft Teams on Tuesday, 3 October 2023 at 2.00 pm

Present:- Councillors E. Jardine (Chairman), L. Douglas, M. Douglas, J. Greenwell, C. Hamilton, S. Hamilton, J. Linehan, D. Parker, E. Robson, M. Rowley, F. Sinclair, R. Tatler, and E. Thornton-Nicol(from para. 3).

Also Present:- Councillors W. McAteer

Apologies:- Councillors C. Cochrane, E. Robson, T. Weatherston

In Attendance:- Director – Corporate Governance, Director – Education and Lifelong Learning, Director - Finance and Procurement, Director- Infrastructure and Environment, Director - Resilient Communities, Democratic Team Leader, Democratic Services Officer (D. Hall).

1. **MINUTE**

There had been circulated copies of the Minute of the meeting held on 12 September 2023.

DECISION

APPROVED for signature by the Chairman.

2. **STRATEGIC HOUSING INVESTMENT PLAN 2024-2029 SUBMISSION**

- 2.1 With reference to paragraph 2 of the Minute of the meeting held on 4 October 2022, there had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Infrastructure and Environment which sought approval of the Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP) 2024-2029 so that it could be submitted to Scottish Government by 27th October 2023 deadline. The report explained that Local Authorities were required to submit a SHIP to the Scottish Government on an annual basis. Scottish Borders Council, with the involvement of its key partners via the SHIP Working Group, had prepared this SHIP submission. The SHIP articulated how the Council and its Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners would seek to deliver the Border's affordable housing investment needs and outcomes, identified in the Council's Proposed Local Housing Strategy (LHS) 2023-2028, over a rolling 5-year planning horizon. Based on available Resource Planning Allocations from Scottish Government and resource planning assumptions, RSL partner, private sector borrowing and commitment from the Council's Affordable Housing Budget, approximately 201 new homes could be delivered during 2023/24 and potentially up to 1,122 new affordable homes over the five-year SHIP 2024- 2029 period. The latter figure assumed that all identified challenges and infrastructure issues were resolved in a timely manner, funding was available, and that agreement was reached between all interested parties and the construction sector had capacity to deliver the identified projects.
- 2.2 The Lead Officer, Housing Strategy and Development, Ms Donna Bogdanovic presented the report and responded to questions. In response to a question regarding emergency housing for homeless people, Ms Bogdanovic explained that funding for that category of homes was not eligible to be included in the affordable housing supply programme. Work was ongoing with RSL partners to ensure that emergency accommodation was provided to people in need, with a desire to provide people with permanent tenancies rather than temporary accommodation. Regarding the appropriateness of reference in the report to the slow-down in house sales and low level of building in the region following the financial crash of 2008, Ms Bogdanovic explained that the crisis in 2008 had a catastrophic impact on the number of houses being built. Whilst Covid-19 had negatively impacted upon the

number of houses being built, the 2008 crisis had a much greater degree of negative impact. Building levels had not returned to pre-2008 volumes. Regarding the potential financial benefits in council tax revenue referred to in the report, Ms Bogdanovic outlined that the figure in the report was a basic calculation using the number of units. There were no allowances made in the figure for council tax exemptions. It was confirmed that officers held regular discussions with Scottish Power Energy Networks regarding plans for the number of houses being built to allow them to plan accordingly. The importance of ensuring that there was an appropriate number of heat-pump trained engineers in the region was acknowledged, and Ms Bogdanovic undertook to provide additional detail on decarbonisation work outside of the meeting. Members agreed that a briefing should be organised following the passage of the Housing Bill. In response to a question regarding the level of confidence that developments in Coldstream and Westruther would be delivered, Ms Bogdanovic explained that RSLs, Scottish Government and SBC had formed the opinion that they were deliverable. Whilst there was the potential that some projects on the list might not be delivered, there was also the possibility that additional ones could be added to the list. Ms Bogdanovic confirmed that engagement with place-making groups had occurred, and that feedback was sought from all communities. It was recognised that assessing demand for RSL homes was a challenge.

DECISION

AGREED to approve the Strategic Housing Investment Programme 2024-2029 for submission to the Scottish Government – More Homes Division.

MEMBER

Councillor Thornton-Nicol joined the meeting during the discussion of the item below.

3. THE IMPACT OF AGILE WORKING ON SERVICE DELIVERY

- 3.1 With reference to paragraph 2 of the Minute of the meeting held on 16 May 2023, there had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – People, Performance and Change which sought out the Council's approach to agile working and the positive effect on standards of service deliverability. The report also set out the background in relation to agile working and the benefits to the adoption of that way of working for the Council, employees, and prospective employees. Scottish Borders Council's agile working approach had been developed over the past 15 years and had evolved over that period. Whilst the report discussed some options in relation to our policy and approach to this, with the technology now in place, moving away from agile working was not considered a viable option given the challenges the Council faced in an increasingly competitive employment market. The Director – People, Performance and Change, Mrs Clair Hepburn, presented the report and responded to Members questions. Mrs Hepburn outlined that SBC's current productivity compared to pre-Covid levels was 88% positive or unchanged. Of the 153 outputs reported, 53 showed a positive change, 82 remained unchanged and 9 had a lower rate. 8 outputs could not be compared and 1 had no data available. It was highlighted that flexible working represented a key strand in the context of employee benefit packages, as well as attracting and retaining staff. There had been benefits to SBC from agile working in the form of increased staff wellbeing and a reduced carbon footprint associated with fewer staff driving to work. Conversely, there had been challenges associated with reduced mental wellbeing and difficulties in interaction, collaboration, and engagement. Members welcomed the report, expressed their thanks to Mrs Hepburn for the extensive data provided on the impact of agile working on service delivery, and acknowledged that whilst the figures were overall positive there were still some areas of concern. In response to a question Mrs Hepburn acknowledged that there were challenges associated with the public perception of home working and suggested that communications and engagement with the public could be undertaken to demonstrate that Council staff continued to deliver effective services. The Director – Infrastructure and Environment highlighted that business mileage was one of the two key areas in the context of the Council's reduction of its carbon emissions, and that a report would be brought back at a future date. In response to a question regarding teams which had been identified as having low rates of interaction, Mrs Hepburn explained that some teams also

inherently had less interaction with their teams due to the nature of their work and highlighted that work was ongoing to create office spaces that would encourage staff back to the office. Mrs Hepburn undertook to share information regarding in-person team induction and team building information with Members. It was confirmed that a policy on hybrid working was already in place and that there was no prescription regarding the number of days that home-working staff were required to be in the office. Individual team managers had responsibility for, and discretion to decide, how their teams would work. In response to a suggestion that home working staff be required to regularly attend the office, Mrs Hepburn explained that an Integrated Impact Assessment would need to be carried out prior to the approval of such a proposal. In response to a question regarding the place of work stipulated in contracts of employment, Mrs Hepburn explained that such contracts stipulated that employees could be asked to work in any location in the Scottish Borders, with the employer designating the work location. In the context of home working and the contract of employment there had been no move to the home being contractually stipulated as the place of work for a variety of reasons. Mrs Hepburn provided assurance that staff were not pressured to work from home, and that, particularly in instances of onboarding and younger members of staff, managers should always choose the course of action which best suits the needs of their team. In response to a question regarding mental health, Mrs Hepburn explained that SBC took the mental health of its staff very seriously, that various avenues of support were available to staff, and confirmed that there had not been an increase in the number of staff absences due to mental health since agile working had been implemented. The Chairman highlighted the importance of staff morale and unity.

- 3.2 Following extensive discussions on whether the recommendations in the report were adequate, there was a difference of opinion so a vote was required as follows:

VOTE

Councillor Rowley, seconded by Councillor Marshall Douglas moved that the recommendations as contained in the report be approved .

Councillor Leigh Douglas, seconded by Councillor Linehan moved as an amendment that an additional recommendation which stated “this council continued to promote opportunities for office attendance within our overall agile framework for teams” be approved alongside the original recommendations of the report.

On a show of hands Members voted as follows:-

Motion – 5 votes

Amendment – 9 votes

The amendment was accordingly carried.

DECISION

DECIDED:-

- (a) **to note there was significant interest in more flexible forms of working, and agile working, was now an essential tool in attracting and retaining staff. Organisations who support flexible forms of working experience reduced employee turnover, increased employee engagement and improved rates of talent attraction. Agile working could also provide many other opportunities for the Council including reduced estate and facilities costs, improved employee wellbeing, diversity and inclusion as well as being more environmentally friendly;**
- (b) **to acknowledge the mainly positive comparison in performance in 2019 and 2022 respectively across those Services utilising agile working arrangements;**

- (c) to note the adopted agile working principles and supports that were in place to provide a framework to support the effective operation and management of agile working. Our aim was to continue embedding an agile working model that gave our people greater flexibility in balancing their work and home lives whilst simultaneously supporting effective recruitment and retention and the health & wellbeing of our staff;
- (d) to recognise that we want to build a culture where our people are customer focused, feel trusted and empowered, and will have greater freedom on how, where and when their work was delivered. Focus would be placed on outcomes as opposed solely to attendance at our offices. However, that level of flexibility, due to the nature of some roles, would not be achievable for all our people. Nevertheless, there would remain a commitment within the Future Operating Model to explore how a level of agile working could be built into roles across the organisation;
- (e) that teams that can utilise agile working engage in co-designing their Team Agreements which describe how they will work. That included when they were required to hold face to face team meetings, time with new colleagues and how they would collaborate. It was part of the HQ refresh plan to ensure there was the right collaborative and workspaces available for those days, so employees could book desks in the same location or arrange other meetings or collaborative events.
- (f) that supporting agile working in the longer term would require more inclusive approaches to remote working, more training and support to workers on cybersecurity and increasing access to digital technologies and infrastructure as well as improving digital skills;
- (g) to endorse the vision to nurture an empowered, resilient, and high performing workforce. A workforce which had the skills and equipment to work flexibly to deliver high quality services in an efficient, sustainable, and environmentally friendly way, now and in the future. Workplaces with modern, flexible spaces not only encouraged collaboration across functional activity but also strengthened our corporate culture, increase engagement with our partners and supported a better customer experience; and
- (h) that the Council continued to promote opportunities for office attendance and collaboration within our overall agile framework for teams.

4. **PRIVATE BUSINESS**

AGREED under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 to exclude the public from the meeting during consideration of the business detailed in Appendix 1 to this Minute on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 9 of Part I of Schedule 7A to the Act.

SUMMARY OF PRIVATE BUSINESS

5. **MINUTE**

The Private Section of the Minute of the meeting held on 12 September 2023 was approved.

The meeting concluded at 3.45 pm