

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

MINUTES of Meeting of the EXECUTIVE
COMMITTEE held via MS Teams on
Tuesday, 1st March, 2022 at 10.00 am

Present:- Councillors M. Rowley (Chairman), S. Aitchison, G. Edgar, C. Hamilton,
S. Hamilton, E. Jardine, J. Linehan, S. Mountford, R. Tatler, G. Turnbull and
T. Weatherston.

Apologies:- Councillor S. Haslam

In Attendance:- Chief Executive, Director Education and Lifelong Learning, Director Finance &
Corporate Governance, Director Infrastructure & Environment, Director
People Performance and Change, Director Resilient Communities, Director
Social Work and Practice, Director Strategic Commissioning and
Partnerships, Clerk to the Council, Democratic Services Officer (D. Hall)

1. **MINUTE**

There had been circulated copies of the Minute of the meeting held on 8 February 2022.

DECISION

APPROVED for signature by the Chairman.

2. **OUR PLAN AND YOUR PART IN IT: SBC'S CORPORATE PERFORMANCE AND IMPROVEMENT REPORT QUARTER 3 2021/22**

2.1 With reference to paragraph 9 of the Minute of the meeting held on 16 November 2021, there had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – People, Performance and Change which presented a high level summary of Scottish Borders Council's Quarter 3 2021/22 performance information with additional detail contained within Appendix 1-4 of the report. A summary of the Community Action Teams' activity was provided in Appendix 5 to the report. The report also included highlights on the progress of change and improvement projects across Scottish Borders Council (SBC), under the Fit for 2024 programme, and monitored progress of the Recovery Plan. SBC approved a revised Corporate Plan in February 2018, with four corporate themes. In order to monitor progress against the four themes, performance and context information would be presented quarterly to the Executive Committee, with an annual summary in June each year. During Quarter 3 2021/22, SBC had continued to press ahead with a range of important initiatives and innovations, including the utilisation of technology to automate and streamline processes; the launch of a Digital Skills programme aimed at improving the overall digital skills of the workforce; the engagement with Area Partnerships to extend place making opportunities to all Border communities and localities; and engagement with SBC Employees. The information contained within the report was to be made available on the SBC website.

2.2 The Director - People, Performance and Change, Mrs Clair Hepburn, presented the report, drawing attention to the highlights and ongoing challenges contained therein and responding to questions. In response to a question from the Chairman regarding the monitoring of SBC's newly agreed Council Plan, the Director confirmed that the reporting and monitoring of the transformation programme and performance targets would be realigned to reflect the new Plan. There remained other areas that the Council was required by statute to continue reporting on, and that would be unaffected by the planned realignment. In response to a question regarding a potential increase in the number of foster carers, the Director Social Work and Practice clarified that SBC had a higher proportion of kinship carers than many other Council Areas, and that the recruitment for paid foster carers remained a challenge. The high percentage of children looked after in

the community rather than residential placements continued to be a positive. Regarding high levels of staff absences in the Education department, the Director – People, Performance and Change, acknowledged that burnout, stress and high levels of pressure were having an impact. Covid and self-isolation requirements had also impacted on front line staff absences. In response to a question regarding the digital asset management system, the Director explained that the system was used to log and record all of the assets in a single department, to allow for more effective management and deployment of equipment. Regarding the potential extension of the opening hours at the newly reopened customer Contact Centres, the Director explained that the operating parameters of the Centres were under review, and that due to higher rates of telephone and online contacts in-person usage of the facilities had not returned to pre-Covid levels. In the context of communication with home working based staff on the topics of workload management and stress, the Director outlined that the usual mechanisms for reporting issues remained active and that there was an additional planned assessment to ascertain employee morale and sentiment. In response to a question, the Director explained that the 24 digital champions referred to in the report was based on the “champion” model previously used, whereby employees could contact one of the designated champions – a non IT based employee and someone they were potentially familiar with - for advice on a problem, rather than contacting a more formal help desk. It was expected that this model would help reduce barriers to staff seeking help with the use of technology. Regarding the impact of Covid on areas designated as red in the RAG matrix, the Director acknowledged Covid pressures had impacted on those areas. In response to a question regarding low levels of capital receipts, the Director, Infrastructure and Environment undertook to investigate the marketing of properties and provide a response to Members.

DECISION

NOTED:-

- (a) **the progress update relating to Change and Improvement Projects referenced at section 4 and detailed further in Appendix 1 of the report;**
 - (b) **the changes to performance indicators outlined in Section 5 of the report; and**
 - (c) **the performance summarised in Sections 6 and 7, and Approves the Quarterly Reports set out at Appendices 1-4 of the report and the action that is being taken within services to improve or maintain performance.**
3. **PROPOSED USE OF SECOND HOMES COUNCIL TAX GRANT TO ASSIST DELIVERY OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING AT THE FORMER HIGH SCHOOL SITE, EARLSTON**

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director, Infrastructure and Environment that sought approval of the Executive Committee to use Second Homes Council Tax funding to grant assist Eildon Housing Association to deliver 64 affordable homes at the former High School site, Earlston. The Council’s current Strategic Housing Investment Plan 2022-27 identified the former High School site, Earlston as a priority project. The site was owned by Eildon Housing Association and the project had secured Planning Consent, with estimated completion in 2024/25. The report advised that as a result of rising tender prices a funding gap of £200,000 had been identified. Members discussed the proposal, recognised the project as important for the region, and agreed that the scheme represented good value for money.

DECISION

AGREED to grant assist Eildon Housing Association to provide gap funding of up to £200,000 towards the costs of delivering 64 new build affordable homes for social rent at the former High School site, Earlston.

4. **NETHERDALE 3G SURFACE REPLACEMENT**

- 4.1 There had been circulated copies of a joint report by the Director, Strategic Commissioning & Partnerships and Director, Infrastructure & Environment seeking

approval to replace the 3G Sports Surfaces at Netherdale, Galashiels. The two artificial 3G sports pitches at Netherdale were installed in 2011/12. The main pitch was suitable for football & rugby use and there was a further five-a-side pitch. In general terms, the life-span of 3G pitches was 10 years, dependent on usage and the care and maintenance regime. Both of the Netherdale surfaces had been well used by club and community and well maintained by Live Borders, but both surfaces were near end of life and required replacement. At the time of the original construction, a £200k sinking fund (for surface replacement) was established for Netherdale (£100k contribution from the Hayward Trust plus a £100k contribution from Live Borders). The Netherdale management agreement stated that 'if the cost of renewal were to be greater than £200,000 then SBC shall be responsible for these additional costs'. The estimated replacement cost for both pitches at Netherdale was £350- £425k, therefore on top of the £200k sinking fund additional capital of £150- £225k was required – either from SBC or via external funding. A £200k funding application had been submitted to the Scottish Football Association (SFA) to access funding for the 'replacement and enhancement of existing 3G football surfaces'. A decision on SFA funding was expected by the end March 2022. Netherdale appeared to be ideally placed to meet the SFA funding criteria which included facilities that could demonstrate grassroots football servicing the local community and focused primarily on football development; increased participation; criteria focusing on investment into Deciles 1-6 of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD); multi-sport development; and improved access to sport facilities for women and girls.

- 4.2 In response to a question regarding any risk to the success of the application to the SFA that could arise from SBC agreeing to fund the project at this stage, the Director, Strategic Commissioning and Partnerships explained that there was no obligation to advise the SFA that SBC had agreed to fund the project in the event an application was unsuccessful. The Director, Infrastructure and Environment explained that SBC, as part of the application, had previously advised the SFA of the budgetary pressures faced by SBC in the context of funding the replacement and maintenance of sports pitches. Members expressed their support for the plans and the highlighted the positive impact that 3G sports pitches had made on communities. The Director, Finance and Corporate Governance provided reassurance to Members that a funding strategy was in place for the maintenance and replacement of the more modern pitches in the region, and clarified that the need to fund the replacement of the Netherdale pitches was because the pitches had predated the current, proactive sinking fund strategy.

DECISION

AGREED:-

- (a) that the 3G synthetic sports surfaces at Netherdale be replaced with new 3G surfaces;**
- (b) to the funding arrangements as detailed in the report;**
- (c) that if the £200k SFA funding application fail and/or SFA funding was less than required, that SBC would fund the balance – as per the terms of the Netherdale management agreement; and**
- (d) that work would be prioritised to deliver the pitch replacement project to completion in calendar year 2022 and as far as possible that the pitch replacement project coordinated its work with the project delivering the £1.4m SBC investment into the Netherdale stand overhaul/upgrade.**

5. PRIMARY SCHOOL WIDE AREA NETWORK BANDWIDTH UPGRADE

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director, Strategic Commissioning and Partnerships that proposed digital enhancements to the Wide Area Network (WAN) bandwidth capability within the Primary Schools estate. A review of the Council's Primary Schools network capability had identified that a number were now experiencing peaks heading towards the limits of the technology that was currently provisioned. BT would

switch off the analogue network in 2025, and the proposed solution addressed the sites that were not currently on a fibre service. It was anticipated that the proposed enhancements would, for every primary school, provide a minimum of a 100mbps connection over a 1000mbps circuit, provide equity of access to digital learning, irrespective of location within the authority, and enable the primary schools to be 'Fit for 2024' and beyond. By providing 1000mbps connections, this would accommodate anticipated bandwidth increases, at a fixed cost, as and when demand increased. In response to a question regarding the prioritisation of the works, the Director, Strategic Commissioning and Partnerships undertook to discuss the matter with the provider and report back to the Committee. Members praised the project and highlighted its comprehensive and forward thinking nature.

DECISION

AGREED to implement the proposed Wide Area Network bandwidth increases within the primary school estate.

6. PROPOSED USE OF SECOND HOMES COUNCIL TAX GRANT TO ASSIST DELIVERY OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING AT KIRKHOPE STEADING, ETRICK BRIDGE

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director, Infrastructure and Environment that sought approval of the Executive Committee to use available Second Homes Council Tax funding to grant assist Etrick and Yarrow Community Development Company to deliver 5 affordable homes at Kirkhope Steading, Etrick Bridge. The Council's current Strategic Housing Investment Plan 2022-27 identified Kirkhope Steading as a priority project. It was now under construction, with anticipated completion in late July 2022. The report advised that as a result of the need to re-roof the steading, and the national context of increasing building material costs, revised tender costs had risen to £1.231m. There were also concerns regarding the potential adverse impacts of continued increases in interest rates on the longer term financial viability of the project. Members praised the project and highlighted that it had the potential to serve as a template for future rural regeneration projects.

DECISION

AGREED to grant assist the Etrick and Yarrow Community Development Company up to £120,000 match funding for an additional £120,000 grant contribution from Scottish Government Rural Housing Fund in line with recently increased grant rates, towards costs of delivering the 5 home affordable housing project at Kirkhope Steading, Etrick Bridge.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Councillors Mountford and Tatler declared an interest in the following item of business in terms of Section 5 of the Councillors Code of Conduct and left the meeting during the discussion.

7. PLACE BASED INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director, Resilient Communities providing an update on the delivery of the Scottish Government Place Based Investment Programme which had allocated £38m of capital funding to Scottish Local Authorities, payable in the financial year 2021/22 to support town centre regeneration projects and community wealth building. Scottish Government and Council Leaders had agreed that Local Authorities would receive a share of funding to help support place based investment over the next five years. The Scottish Borders had been allocated £912k based on a combination of total population and existing deprivation levels. The allocation needed to be financially committed by the end of the current financial year. A previous paper to the Executive Committee in October 2021 allocated £560k to three key projects in the priority towns of Eyemouth, Galashiels and Jedburgh. The report sought to allocate the residual funding available during the current financial year to suitable projects in the Scottish Borders. Council officers had identified a number of potential projects throughout the

Scottish Borders that funding could be allocated to within the current financial year, including a focus on Hawick and the surrounding area which was the fourth key priority town identified in the Council's Town Centre Matrix. Members praised the projects, and expressed their hope that further projects would be ready in future years. In response to a question regarding whether the money could be carried forward into the next financial year, Graeme Johnstone, Lead Officer, advised that the allocation had to be used fully in the current financial year. Councillor Rowley proposed that should additional projects come forward within the financial year, that authority was delegated to the Chief Executive, in consultation with appropriate Members, to approve these from the remaining financial year allocation and this was unanimously approved.

DECISION

(a) AGREED to:

- (i) commit £335k from the current financial year allocation to six key projects throughout the Scottish Borders including the priority town of Hawick; and**
- (ii) delegate authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with appropriate Members, to fund additional projects with the remaining financial year allocation.**

(b) NOTED the progress made to deliver the Scottish Government's Place Based Investment Programme.

MEMBER

Councillors Mountford and Tatler re-joined the meeting following the discussion of the above item.

URGENT BUSINESS

Under Section 50B(4)(b) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the Chairman was of the opinion that the item dealt with in the following paragraph should be considered at the meeting as a matter of urgency, in view of the need to keep Members informed.

8. UKRAINE

The Chairman advised that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a matter of great concern but no information had yet been received from either the UK or Scottish governments on how the Council could help. The Convener, as Civic Head, would likely address this in due course and in the meantime the gravity of the situation was acknowledged. The Chairman confirmed that arrangements were being made for the flag of Ukraine to be flown at Council Headquarters.

9. 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 4 of Part I of Schedule 7A to the Act.

SUMMARY OF PRIVATE BUSINESS

10. PRIVATE MINUTE

The private section of the Minute of the meeting held on 8 February 2022 was approved.

The meeting concluded at 11.15 am