

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Blended Meeting of the EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE held in Committee Rooms 2 and 3 Council Headquarters, Newtown St Boswells and via Microsoft Teams on Tuesday, 5th December 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:- Councillors E. Jardine (Chairman), L. Douglas, M. Douglas, J. Greenwell, C. Hamilton, S. Hamilton, J. Linehan, S. Mountford D. Parker, J. Pirone E. Robson, M. Rowley, F. Sinclair, R. Tatler, and T. Weatherston.

Also Present:- Councillors W. McAteer

Apologies:- Councillors C. Cochrane and E. Thornton-Nicol,

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

1. ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chair varied the order of business as shown on the agenda and the Minute reflects the order in which the items were considered at the meeting.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BUSINESS

Present: Ms Kathleen Mason (Federation of Small Businesses)

2. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

- 2.1 There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director - Resilient Communities which provided elected members with an update on key areas of economic development delivery in the Scottish Borders. The report identified the major policies and strategies that were driving regional economic development and detailed key pieces of work. The Local Employability Partnership (LEP) was established in September 2021 to help drive the employability agenda and to foster a strong collaborative approach to delivery. One of the key areas of work was the delivery of the No One Left Behind (NOLB) funding programme which had a greater focus in 2023/24 on Child Poverty. At the end of the first half of 2023/24 the Council's Employability Service had a working caseload of 419 clients across the region with a range of barriers to employment. Scottish Borders Council and South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) agreed to form a strategic partnership for delivery of the Business Gateway service in November 2020, with the transfer of services completed in April 2021. The report provided an update on delivery through the second quarter of the current financial year and indicated strong enquiry numbers and confirmed a continued general increase in Business Gateway activities. All of the key partners in the South of Scotland, including Scottish Borders Council were collaborating on the development of a single Responsible Tourism Strategy for the South of Scotland. The development of the new strategy was progressing well following consultation events led by the South of Scotland Destination Alliance (SSDA) over the summer, and it was proposed to launch the strategy at the SSDA Tourism Conference on 20 March 2024. Following assessment of the latest round of funding applications in November, twelve projects in the Scottish Borders had been awarded approximately £1.45m of UK Government Shared Prosperity (SPF) Funding, and the Scottish Government Community Led Local Development (CLLD) Programme was fully committed after the approval of a series of successful applications by the Local Action Group. As part of the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal, the Business Infrastructure Programme (Scotland) was a £13.7m capital programme for the South of Scotland, for building industrial units and the servicing of land at five sites across

the South of Scotland, including £3m of Borderlands funding for the Scottish Borders and a contribution of £632k from Scottish Borders Council for investment in Coldstream and Hawick in the Scottish Borders. Following recent business case approval by the Scottish and UK Governments and the Borderlands Partnership Board, the Coldstream project had started and site work would commence early next year. The Chief Officer – Economic Development, Ms Sam Smith, presented the report and highlighted that reference in the report to the first half of the year, should refer to throughout 2022/23.

- 2.2 The Chairman welcomed Ms Lesley Forsyth and Ms Tracey Graham of SOSE to the meeting to provide an update on the work that had been undertaken on the Scotland Starts Here project. Ms Forsyth explained that work to develop a website to act as a place to tell the story of the South of Scotland and to attract National and International investment. The website had been designed to be visually engaging, with embedded videos amongst other features. Maps, outlining the location of the region's key infrastructure, would also be available on the site. The key economic sectors of the area, including case studies, news and resources would also be present. Ms Smith highlighted that the website had the potential to provide a shop window for the region, and that work was ongoing to ensure that appropriate signposting to Council departments was in place. In response to a question regarding information on the workforce of the area, it was confirmed that information on the available labour force would be included on the site. The Director – Resilient Communities confirmed that a report evaluating the outcomes of shared prosperity investments would be presented in due course. In response to a question regarding collaborative work with national partners, Ms Graham confirmed that discussions had been held with the Department for Trade and Industry and Scottish Development International. The importance of providing effective transport infrastructure to the region was highlighted. The Chairman thanked attendees for their presentation and highlighted that 6 Thistle Awards had been won by businesses from the area.

DECISION

AGREED to:-

- (a) **note the information that was provided regarding the current economic development landscape affecting the Scottish Borders; and**
 - (b) **note where future delivery updates would be reported back to Executive.**
3. **CYCLING WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS IMPACT REPORT**
- The Chairman invited Mr Jim Law of Jim Law Research Associated Ltd to present an Economic and Social Impact Evaluation of the World Cycling Championships events which had taken place between Sunday 6 August 2023 and Saturday 12 August 2023 in Glentress Forest. 483 competitors from 61 countries had taken part in the mountain bike cross country, whilst 164 competitors from 37 countries had taken part in the mountain bike marathon. 360 volunteers had assisted at the event. 23,493 spectators were estimated to have attended across all the days, with the number of unique spectators estimated to be 11,082, with 4,339 event specific visitors to the region. It was estimated that there had been 3,410 commercially staying visitors who had come to the region specifically to attend the event. Mr Law explained that they had been commissioned by SBC to conduct the study at Glentress, with face-to-face primary research conducted on site. From all of the sources of information gathered it was estimated that the direct economic impact of the event was £6,039,308. £3,379,277 was generated in the accommodation sector, from 18,273 bed nights. A further £2.1m was spent by athletes/teams on food, drink and other items. £600k was spent by organisers with contractors based in the Scottish Borders. The breakdown of the spend by teams made up 59% of the economic impact, with 31% by spectators. The feedback from local residents and visitors had been extremely positive. 99% of all spectators agreeing that the region was friendly, whilst 98% of spectators thought that the Scottish Borders had beautiful countryside. A satisfaction rate of 100% was reported by attendees. Mr Law provided an overview of the viewing figures, highlighted that there was a cumulative

broadcast audience of 43.6 million views. Engagement with Scottish Borders Council event specific media included 426,569 Facebook impressions and 83,894 Twitter impressions. Members thanked Mr Law for his presentation, and expressed their gratitude to Jane Warcup and Cameron Balfour of SBC's events team for their outstanding work organising the event and ensuring that it went as planned. In response to a question regarding visitors experiencing difficulties finding hotel rooms in Peebles, Mr Law outlined that whilst he was aware of anecdotal reports of problems, no issues had been formally recorded. The Chief Officer – Economic Development undertook to explore with SBC's Communications team further promotion of the event and the positive feedback that had been received.

**DECISION
NOTED.**

4. PLACE MAKING UPDATE

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Resilient Communities which provided an update on progress with Place Making, including an update on funding allocated and the planning process in relation to the development of Local Place Plans, including the four Borderlands priority towns. Place making continued to represent a significant opportunity for communities across the Borders to unlock external funding opportunities and shaping and informing the planning and delivery of critical public services. It was increasingly being built into legislation (the Planning Scotland, Joint Working (Scotland), and Community Empowerment Acts). It would impact on and transform the way both Council and Community Planning Partners worked together with communities to understand, support and respond to local needs and ambitions. Continuing to follow the inclusive approach agreed with Area Partnerships to open up place making opportunities to all communities, over 50 places had noted an interest in developing community-led plans and their progress was supported through the place making officers within Community Engagement, Planning and Transformation teams. Over the coming year, the main focus of place making activity would be around four main areas of work: a) supporting the plans of Borderlands communities - Eyemouth, Galashiels, Hawick and Jedburgh - through the approval process to develop Borderlands Town Investment Plans; b) continuing to support other participating communities to progress their plans and ambitions; c) ensuring that funds such as the Shared Prosperity Funds were used to best effect in supporting communities; d) ensuring that place making was seen as “the way things get done” – informing service and community planning, the way that projects were identified and developed and the key to accessing external funding – all built on community needs, aspirations and priorities. Members welcomed the report and highlighted that Place Making had been well received by communities across the region. The Director – Resilient Communities explained that once work to update the Scottish Borders Council website had been completed there would be an opportunity to share case studies and other key information and documents online. It was agreed that a briefing on the support available for communities involved in Place Making for Elected Members would be held.

**DECISION
AGREED:-**

- (a) to note the progress made with place making activity across the Scottish Borders; and**
- (b) that the continued focus for delivery in the coming year was on the four Borderlands towns as outlined in the report.**

5. STRANRAER PLACE PLAN

The Director – Resilient Communities introduced Mr Stuart McMillan of Dumfries and Galloway Council and Ms Barbera Chalmers, an independent consultant who had led work alongside Stranraer Development Trust to develop the Place Plan for Stranraer. Mr

McMillan explained that Dumfries and Galloway were in a similar position to the Scottish Borders, with 5 Borderlands towns. Each of the towns had unique challenges and had developed their own Place Plans. Support for developing the Plans had been provided by Dumfries and Galloway Council and from South of Scotland Enterprise. Ms Chalmers explained that the development of the plan had involved considerable engagement, involving different stakeholders and local people. A range of events had been held, with a total of 2849 engagements. Five key strands, including quality of life; work and opportunity; play and creativity; environment and climate; and pride and citizenship, had emerged from those sessions, with six priorities identified within those strands. Those elements had formed the basis of the Place Plan, which had been subject to a month-long consultation. 600 responses had been received, with the public able to vote via Citizen Space on which elements they thought were the most important. Members thanked Ms Chalmers for her presentation and insight into work on Place Plans. In response to a request that the presentation be shared at Area Partnership meetings, Ms Chalmers indicated that she was happy to share the presentation as part of a short film. Officers undertook to ensure that the video recording of the presentation could be shared.

OTHER BUSINESS

6. MINUTE

There had been circulated copies of the Minute of the meeting held on 14 November 2023.

DECISION

APPROVED for signature by the Chairman.

3. SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL'S QUARTER 2 2023/24 PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

With reference to paragraph 5 of the Minute of the meeting held on 12 September 2023, there had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – People, Performance and Change which presented a summary of Scottish Borders Council's Quarter 2 2023/24 performance information. The information contained within the report would be made available on the SBC website: www.scotborders.gov.uk/performance. The Director presented the report and highlighted that of the 18 milestones reported in the quarter, 9 had been achieved as planned. One was rescheduled to a future quarter, and there were 8 milestones which had been partly completed. Of the 90 indicators presented, 68 were in a good position. 13 were highlighted as areas of focus for improvement. There was a delay in receiving information for 4 of the indicators. The Power Bi dashboard had been developed and allowed the public to view data on any of the performance indicators that they wished to see. The Community Action Team had been operating at full strength since 1 June 2023. There had been an upturn in statistics, particular for high visibility foot patrols and mobile patrol hours. In response to a question regarding the increase in time taken to process new housing benefits claims, the Director – Resilient Communities explained that there had been a considerable number of vacancies in the team, which combined with a spike in the number of staff on annual leave had led to performance levels dipping. Performance had returned to expected levels, however an analysis to fully understand the issue was ongoing. Regarding capacity to deal with the increasing volume of complaints being received, Ms Craig explained that complaints were dealt with by front line staff and that most complaints could be dealt with at that stage. Digital transformation efforts were expected to enable the Council to continue to effectively manage its complaints as the volume increased. In response to a question regarding the system in place for the closure of complaints, Mrs Craig highlighted that a report concerning the complaints system had been presented to the Committee at its meeting on 14 November 2023, and that a relatively small number of people reported being unsatisfied following the closure of their complaint. The Chief Executive outlined that a review of all outstanding complaints had been undertaken which had indicated that a number of complaints which were thought to have been closed had in fact been left outstanding in the system. Such instances had made a negative impact upon the overall

statistics. Training for complaint handlers was planned to resolve such issues. Members highlighted the importance of ensuring that the dashboard was user friendly, easily accessible, and requested that context could be provided alongside the statistical information where possible. It was agreed that a workshop session on the complaints system be held with elected members.

DECISION

AGREED to:-

- (a) note the Quarter 2 2023/24 Council Plan Key Milestones and Performance Indicators Report contained in Appendix 1 to the report; and**
- (b) note the quarter 2 2023/24 Community Action Team Performance Report contained in Appendix 2 to the report.**

8. SECOND HOMES COUNCIL TAX AFFORDABLE HOUSING INVESTMENT BUDGET PROPOSALS

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Infrastructure and Environment which sought approval of an allocation of £961k in financial commitment from the Council's Second Homes Council Tax Affordable Housing Investment Budget to support the delivery of the identified affordable housing project at Upper Langlee and an additional £12k to support community led affordable housing opportunities across the Borders. As first reported in SHIP 2019-2024, the Council had been working closely with Waverley Housing to progress the regeneration of former public sector housing in and around the Beech Avenue area in Upper Langlee. That was a high-cost regeneration project with estimated costs of over £30m, requiring a total of £961k grant assistance to progress phase 1 delivery. South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH) provided long-term support to community organisations relative to the planning and delivery of community-led housing. £12k was required to support SOSCH with the early stages of project development work on behalf of communities. The sums recommended for approval supported the delivery of the Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP) 2024-2029 which was approved in October 2023 and the Local Housing Strategy 2023-28. Contextual commentary on the SHIP and current challenges in delivery and the financial assistance required was also outlined. Members welcomed the report and highlighted the positive impact that the project could have on Galashiels.

DECISION

AGREED to:-

- (a) approve the use of £961k to ensure the delivery of phase 1 of the affordable housing development at Upper Langlee;**
- (b) approve the use of £12k to support South of Scotland Community Housing with community led affordable housing projects; and**
- (c) delegate authority to the Director of Finance and Procurement to liaise with Waverley Housing and agree the timing and payment arrangements for the £961k.**

5. SECOND HOMES COUNCIL TAX AFFORDABLE HOUSING INVESTMENT BUDGET PROPOSALS (PART 2)

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Infrastructure and Environment which sought approval of a reallocation of £273k from a £450k commitment from the Council's Second Homes Council Tax Affordable Housing Investment Budget, initially earmarked for a project at Heather Mill, Selkirk to a project at Fairhurst Drive, Hawick. In May 2023, an allocation of £450k to support SBHA with the acquisition of Heather Mill, Selkirk and £512k to ensure the delivery of affordable homes at Fairhurst Drive and Leishman Place, Burnfoot, Hawick had been agreed. Due to significant change

in the costs associated with the delivery of the homes at Burnfoot in Hawick there was a substantial funding deficit of £374k. A Vacant and Derelict Land Fund (VDLF) application had been submitted to the Scottish Government which would help to fund the deficit at Burnfoot but the outcome of the application to Scottish Government would not be announced until the end of January 2024. Delaying the site start until after the outcome of the VDLF decision could result in a potentially greater project deficit due to continued construction price inflation and it would also delay the project delivery times detailed in the SHIP 2024-2029. As a result, that added further risks related to maximising the Affordable Housing Supply Programme grant funding allocated to the Borders in the current financial year. In response to a question regarding the potential impact of the project being unsuccessful in its VDLF application, the Principal Housing Officer, Ms Donna Bogdanovic, explained that the funding pot which had been allocated to Heather Mill, Selkirk would be reduced to £177k. The Chief Executive highlighted that the second homes council tax budget was replenished by £800k per year. In response to a question regarding the pipeline of schemes, Ms Bogdanovic explained that projects were usually prioritised based on their deliverability and in line with the Strategic Housing Investment Plan.

DECISION

AGREED to:-

- (a) approve the reallocation of £273k of the £450k approved to support Heather Mill, Selkirk to the project at Fairhurst Drive, Burnfoot, Hawick;**
- (b) note that initially this was an underwriting position. If the VDLF application was successful the reallocation of funds would not be required, but if the VDLF application was not successful the reallocation would be required to ensure the project is able to progress; and**
- (c) delegate authority to the Director of Finance and Procurement to liaise with SBHA and agree the timing and payment arrangements for the £273k reallocation should the outcome of the VDLF application not be favourable.**

10. KALEMOUTH SUSPENSION BRIDGE

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Infrastructure and Environment which provided an update on the status of Kalemouth Suspension Bridge. The report proposed that further detailed design work was undertaken and that external grant funding be sought to allow essential repair works to be undertaken on the timber elements of the bridge. The Bridge was a Category ‘A’ Listed structure which carried the unclassified D101/4 public road over the river Teviot. It was an example of a historic wrought iron chain-bar suspension bridge with timber deck. The bridge was closed to vehicular traffic in August 2020 when substantial decay was discovered in some of the main timber deck elements. Prior to its closure the bridge had a 3T weight restriction which allowed single file traffic to cross the river between the A698 and the small settlement of Ormiston Mains which consisted of around 12 properties. Various investigations and detailed assessment work had since been carried out and this had found that the main wrought iron suspension structure of the bridge was unable to demonstrate sufficient strength to safely carry 3T vehicles or sufficient strength to carry full pedestrian crowd loading. Passage had therefore been further restricted to a maximum of 10 people at any one time. Due to the very high costs that would be associated with strengthening a Category ‘A’ listed wrought iron suspension bridge and the potential for adverse impacts on the bridges special architectural and historic nature it was proposed to progress a scheme to only replace and renew the timber elements on the bridge. Those elements had reached the end of their serviceable life and replacing them would safeguard the bridge into the future and ensure it could remain in use for pedestrians and cyclists. Costs associated with replacing all timber elements on the bridge were estimated to be around £1M and as such a proportion of external grant funding was being sought to allow these works to go ahead. Members acknowledge local

frustration with the condition of the bridge and recognised that the report represented the best outcome based on the financial situation.

DECISION

AGREED:-

- (a) to note the updated position regarding Kalemouth Suspension Bridge;**
- (b) the proposed way forward of developing a project to replace all timber elements on the bridge in 2025/26, subject to successful external grant funding applications; and**
- (c) that local Elected Members be provided progress reports on a 6-month basis.**

11. OUT OF AREA PLACEMENTS

- 11.1 The Chairman welcomed the Resources Group Manager – Social Work, Mr Gareth Stott to the meeting to provide a presentation on the topic of Out of Area Placements. Mr Stott explained that due to issues with recruitment and retention there had been a net decrease in the number of foster carers in the Scottish Borders. The trend has also been seen nationally. That decrease had contributed to pressure on the looked after children sector. The cost of external placements had also increased, whilst the needs of children, young people and parents were more complex. A Senior Officer Panel at the Council had been convened to explore alternative options to external placements where appropriate. A range of actions included building options for managing complex needs, developing community-based family support, and reviewing recruitment of foster carers were being explored. Mr Stott presented the number of cases involved and highlighted that the number of placements in 2023/24 had increased considerably compared to 2019/20. The associated costs had also increased considerably, ranging from an 75.7% increase in the costs of residential/secure placements to an 81% increase in the costs associated with complex needs. Fostering costs had remained largely stable. Mr Stott highlighted that a 1% increase in the costs of residential placements required an additional £129,287 of budget resource.
- 11.2 As part of the review of external placements, several emerging themes had been identified. The number of children aged under 11 years old being placed in external placements had increased dramatically over the preceding 5 years. That often had a negative impact on education and familial ties. Whilst many of the emerging trends were not new, they had become more significant in recent years. The Senior Officer Panel which had had been convened had also examined the decision-making process for current placements and had not identified any inappropriate placements. Meetings with SBHA for the provision of buildings for complex need provision were ongoing, and work was ongoing to scope options for an additional children's provision in the Scottish Borders. That required appropriate education and healthcare provision to be in place. Other areas of progress included the establishment of a Childrens Health and Disabilities Team and positive joint working arrangements with the Education department. Mr Stott explained that long-term solutions required multi-agency co-operation including the Council, NHS Borders, Police Scotland and the third sector. Systemic developments were required to improve the overall situation. Members thanked Mr Stott for his presentation and acknowledged that the solution to resolving the ongoing issues would be complex and multi-faceted. In response to a question regarding the factors behind the difficulty in recruiting foster carers Mr Stott explained that a consistent message was more effective at improving numbers compared to a large campaign. Regarding the potential for people to move from continuing care to foster care, Mr Stott explained that the legislation and rationale which underpinned continuing care was focused on replicating a healthy family environment. Mr Stott confirmed that there were instances where young people in continuing care moved out of the area for further education or employment but returned for visits and holidays. In response to a question regarding the evaluation of how well the

Council was performing, Mr Stott explained that the Council was good at evaluating outcomes for young people, and that work was ongoing to ensure that its delivery model continually improved.

**DECISION
NOTED**

The meeting concluded at 1.30 pm