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North Yorkshire County Council

Transition (LGR) Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday, 21st September, 2022 commencing at 10.00 am.

County Councillor Malcolm Taylor in the Chair plus County Councillors Philip Broadbank, Nick Brown, Caroline Dickinson, Richard Foster, George Jabbour, Andrew Lee, John Mann, Heather Moorhouse, Stuart Parsons, Clive Pearson and John Ritchie.

In attendance: County Councillors Cliff Lunn and Simon Myers.

Officers present: Daniel Harry, Karen Iveson, Gary Fielding, Kieran Jones, Richard Webb, Steven Lister (Hambleton DC), Theresa Dykstra and Will Baines

Apologies: County Councillors Kevin Foster, Bryn Griffiths and Kirsty Poskitt.

Copies of all documents considered are in the Minute Book

1 **Welcome and Apologies**

Apologies were received from County Councillors Kevin Foster (substitute County Councillor Andy Brown), Bryn Griffiths (substitute County Councillor Chris Aldred) and Kirsty Poskitt.

2 **Declarations of Interest**

County Councillor Malcolm Taylor declared a personal interest in item 6 as his wife works in Customer Services at Hambleton District Council.

3 **Public Questions or Statements**

There were no public questions or statements.

4 **Overview of the Transition (LGR) O&S Committee**

Considered – Report of the Principal Democratic Services and Scrutiny Officer on the formation of the Transition (LGR) O&S Committee.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

5 **Council Tax Harmonisation**

This report was brought forward in the agenda.

Considered – A presentation by County Councillor Cliff Lunn, the Chair of the LGR member working group on Council Tax Harmonisation, and the Corporate Director for Strategic Resources on the discussions held to date.

Some of the key points highlighted in the report are as summarised below:

- The working group meetings had worked with independent expert consultants to review issues and get the experience of other local authorities who have been through Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) to develop the Council Tax Harmonisation proposals.
- The member working group had recognised at an early stage that there are pros and cons with all of the harmonisation options presented, so sought to achieve a balanced approach that is as fair to taxpayers as possible but also practical to administer.
- A weighted average approach had been taken, with a 2-year harmonisation period seen as the preferred solution to manage the process of equalising the council tax payments across the seven districts and boroughs.
- Other options reviewed included harmonising over 1,3,4 and 8 years, as well as equalising to Hambleton and Harrogate levels. However, the high costs of administering the longer harmonisation periods, such as continuing to use seven ICT systems and seven different ways of working were problematic, so these were discounted in favour of the 2-year harmonisation.

There followed a discussion with the key points as summarised below:

- The two-year harmonisation period was seen as the most pragmatic solution by the member working group.
- A clear explanation and rationale will be needed for taxpayers from the districts and boroughs where top up harmonisation amounts will be required to get to the weighted average. Residents in those areas will look at the different top up amounts across the districts and boroughs and wonder why they are having to pay more than others without a clear explanation.
- It was noted that financial savings will be made from LGR as detailed in the Case for Change but separate from this harmonisation process. For example, cost reductions in back office, senior management, and councillor synergies will bring savings. The new unitary council provides an opportunity to deliver these savings, with some made in year 1 but the majority coming in future years.
- The key focus is to make sure that residents do not see a detriment to service on day 1.

The Chair County Councillor Malcolm Taylor noted that the member working group had worked collaboratively to come up with the two-year Council Tax Harmonisation solution for residents in the proposals presented.

Resolved – That the presentation be noted.

6 Local Government Reorganisation - Customer Overview

Considered – A presentation by Theresa Dykstra, Senior Project Manager, into the work undertaken towards the new unitary council as part of the Customer LGR workstream.

Some of the key points highlighted in the report are as summarised below:

- One of the defined customer principles is that the experience for citizens will be at least as good across the three primary contact channels (phone, face to face and web) on day 1 and where possible it will be better.
- Work on establishing the 'One Front Door' approach for the new council is ongoing. It is hoped that the customer experience will not change and be as seamless as possible. Under the new authority, one of the key assumptions is that customer services will be delivered by the same staff teams, in the same locations as currently

and using the same IT systems. This has been made clear at an early stage to give assurance to those staff affected.

- It is expected that a single website will be created, to replace the current eight sites with a new design. The content from the district and borough council websites needs to be migrated across so that it looks and feels like one organisation. As part of this migration process, content is being reviewed as it is moved across. It is also hoped to make more use of chatbots as part of the single website, as well as ensuring that website accessibility requirements for public sector bodies are met.
- A single phone number is also key, with the use of a natural language Interactive Voice Solution (IVR) is under consideration. This automated telephony system is able to intelligently direct queries to the appropriate team. However, a safety net staff team will be in place, particularly on day 1 and during the first few months, to act as a fall back for any calls where they cannot be directed correctly, to avoid any poor customer service complaints.
- The key main customer access points at the district and borough council offices will remain as they are. It is hoped that these access points will be rebranded by day 1 but this may not be possible. There is a concern of a person walking into a customer access point in one part of North Yorkshire and requesting information or asking a question regarding a service provided by another district or borough in the county. This is likely to lead to training implications to bring all staff up to speed with what is going on in the other district and boroughs. It is also planned to align the opening times across all of the customer access points to try and ensure consistency across the main access points.
- In order to avoid situations like the example above, it was noted that one of the key early transformation projects that needs to be ready for day 1 is the creation of a location search tool for users to be able to select/choose their location to ensure that they are provided with the correct information for where they live.

There followed a discussion with the key points as summarised below:

- It was suggested that the new website and automated telephony system should be in place at least a week ahead of day 1 to ensure it is robustly tested and working properly, as there would be significant reputational damage if there are issues. A glide path approach was suggested to introducing new systems ahead of day 1, rather than going live for the first time on 1 April 2023.
- It was raised whether 'customers' was the correct terminology given there was no element of choice for residents in North Yorkshire choosing a local authority from 1 April 2023.
- It was asked whether the customer service teams currently working on the frontline across the districts and boroughs were to be given the opportunity to suggest service improvements. It was confirmed this was taking place through workshops with customer service team managers. It was felt that front line staff had lots of good ideas for service improvement and that these needed capturing through consultation with the local teams by those involved in setting up the new unitary authority.
- The aging population in North Yorkshire was highlighted and the ability of elderly residents to be able to easily access services online as part of the new single website. In particular, the need to be signposted and helped to find the right content to answer their queries. It was comforting to note that the existing phone numbers and website links for the district and borough councils will continue to be active after day 1 and be retained to redirect customers to the new North Yorkshire Council sites and phone numbers as required.
- Telephony would be a key contact channel, particularly for those residents who don't have the internet and for those customers who like to speak to a person to resolve their queries. It was asked if a performance target has been set yet for answering calls at the new council. In response, it was noted that a set of performance standards are to be worked up and will be considered by the LGR customer service member working group in due course.

- Support for the use of chatbots and the ‘One Front Door’ approach was expressed, with agreement of the idea of using a glide path approach to launch rather than a sudden change in April. The example of the 8am rush to call GP surgeries to book appointments was an approach to avoid for the new unitary authority when thinking about customer service standards.
- Data control was also discussed and whether consent was required to transfer from the district and borough council databases to the unitary authority. This was also under consideration as part of the LGR customer service member working group.

The Committee thanked Theresa for coming along to the committee and answering questions.

Resolved – To note the presentation and for the feedback received to be taken onboard.

7 Leisure Services: Selby interim options and countywide Strategic Leisure Review

Considered – A presentation on the interim proposals for the Selby leisure service from August 2024 and the countywide Strategic Leisure Review.

Some of the key points highlighted in the presentation are as summarised below:

- County Councillor Simon Myers, Executive Member for Planning for Growth, introduced the item, giving an overview of the different service delivery models across the county and discussing the interim solution proposed for the Selby district, using an existing Teckal agreement already in use for the Harrogate Borough area to allow Brimhams Active to take on the service from August 2024. This is on a “without prejudice” basis.
- Following visits around the leisure facilities in the districts and boroughs of North Yorkshire, it was clear that the county council plays a key role in improving public health through its leisure facilities to tackle issues of health and obesity. A working group will be set up to carry out a strategic review into leisure services.
- Steven Lister, Director of Leisure and Communities from Hambleton DC, spoke about the community and grassroots sport work currently underway at a district level, with a strong local emphasis to this offer. This ‘Hub and Spoke’ model was important to find the balance between using the facilities that already exist, whilst going out into the community to provide activities in more rural settings that can be accessed by residents in surrounding villages.

There followed a discussion with the key points as summarised below:

- Further detail was asked for about the funding solution required in 2027 when the different leisure service delivery models used across the county come to an end. This would be considered as part of the countywide strategic review process.
- It was asked whether by using the Teckal agreement, if savings will be made on NNDR for the Selby and Harrogate areas. This would be pending the new North Yorkshire Council policy.
- It was asked whether the fees and charges for leisure services would be equalised across the county. For example, would the offer of free entry to leisure facilities for children in care be extended across the county? In response, it was noted that fees and charges is a crucial area that needs to be done right, so a sensible approach will be taken over time that doesn’t leap into any blanket decisions.
- Concerns were raised about how residents in rural areas will be able to access the different leisure facilities. For example, someone living in Hawes who is prescribed a form of exercise by their GP, they would face a 54-mile round trip to use the nearest leisure facilities.
- A member welcomed the use of the Teckal arrangement for Selby, as they felt that

the current leisure provider had not delivered for the district to date. The use of a subsidy from NYCC to run the leisure services was also questioned and whether it can be justified in the future. In response, County Councillor Myers suggested the subsidy could also be seen as an investment into a facility and the local area as a whole. A member compared the leisure facilities situation to the recent street lighting project, where a business case was developed and an 'invest to save' approach adopted to replace all the streetlights with LED technology.

- The role of public leisure facilities up against commercial gyms was highlighted by several members. In response it was emphasised that the public use facilities play a key public health role alongside private facility provision.
- It was noted that the leisure facilities embedded in the local community such as Starbeck Baths were greatly valued by the local communities, shown in the recent usage figures.
- It was important for leisure services to build link with schools, in particular primary school children, to encourage participation given the statistics around lack of activity.
- Local authorities are working to decarbonise leisure facilities, with a number of councils already undertaking improvements, with Hambleton having received a £4.7million government grant towards reducing the carbon footprint made by the council's leisure centres, which has seen carbon emissions reduced by half.
- The contribution of culture and arts was also highlighted as important for mental health along with leisure activities.

Resolved – To note the presentation and take onboard the comments from members ahead of the countywide strategic review of leisure facilities.

8 Work Programme 2022/23

Issues that were put forward for further consideration as part of the Local Government Reorganisation transition included:

- Support for businesses, particularly SMEs
- Tourism
- Planning
- Localism, in particular double devolution
- The merger of district and borough council functions into the new unitary authority
- The role of the Area Committees

9 Other business which the Chair agrees should be considered as a matter of urgency because of special circumstances

No other business was raised.

The meeting concluded at 12.10 pm.

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