

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 24 January 2024 in the Council Chamber - Council Offices at 9.30 am

Committee	Cllr N Dixon (Chairman)	Cllr M Batey
Members Present:	Cllr J Boyle Cllr C Cushing Cllr M Hankins Cllr N Housden Cllr L Vickers	Cllr G Bull Cllr A Fletcher Cllr V Holliday Cllr R Macdonald

Officers in Attendance:	Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny, Chief Executive, Democratic Services Manager, Assistant Director for Finance, Assets, Legal & Monitoring Officer, Director for Resources / S151 Officer, Director for Communities, Housing Strategy and Delivery Manager and Housing Options Manager
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101 TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was submitted by Councillor Saul Penfold.

102 SUBSTITUTES

There were no substitutes at the meeting.

103 PUBLIC QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS

None received.

104 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 13th December 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

105 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None received.

106 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received.

107 PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None received.

108 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE BY A MEMBER

None received.

109 RESPONSES OF THE COUNCIL OR THE CABINET TO THE COMMITTEE'S REPORTS OR RECOMMENDATIONS

The Democratic Services and Governance Officer advised that there were no responses from Cabinet to recommendations made by the Committee.

110 COMMUNITY CALL FOR ACTION - HOMELESSNESS

The Committee considered a Councillor Call for Action from Councillor Dr Victoria Holliday on Homelessness.

Councillor Holliday stated that as of 30th November 2023, there were 2495 households on the council waiting list, with 562 having the most urgent housing needs. Houses let from 1st April to 31st October 2023 were 155. As of 30th November, there were 141 households either homeless or at threat of homelessness, and 66 households in temporary accommodation. Of these latter group, 45% had dependent children. The majority of households are in temporary accommodation for 3 months or more, at maximum up to 2 years. The emotional, mental and physical toll this takes on households was beyond comprehension.

Councillor Holliday added that there were certain unique factors to homelessness in North Norfolk and that the Council should take a deep dive into the causes and relief of homelessness in our district.

The committee noted that the Council's constitution set out a range of options for how it could deal with this request and after hearing from the Council's Portfolio Holder, Councillor Wendy Fredericks, that there was some Audit work being undertaken to look at whether the Council's Homeless service had the resources in place to deal with the increase in demand for housing and homelessness, the committee agreed that there was scope to look at the wider issues that caused people to become homeless.

The Committee agreed to set up a Task and Finish group made up of 5 Councillors, with group leaders requested to put forward members from their groups to sit on the group. Councillor Cushing advised that Councillors Holliday and Vickers would sit on the group on behalf of the Conservative Group.

The Committee agreed that Councillor Holliday chair the Task and Finish group.

Resolved that a Task and Finish group of 5 councillors, to be chaired by Councillor Dr Victoria Holliday, be established to look into the causes and relief of homelessness in the district and make recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on its findings.

111 DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET FOR 2024/2025

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Estates & Property Services, Councillor Lucy Shires, presented a report on the Council's Draft Revenue Budget for 2024-25, along with proposed budget savings and use of Reserves used to set a balanced

budget for 2024/25.

The Committee noted that the final budget report will be discussed by Cabinet at its meeting on 5 February 2024 along with any recommendations made by this Committee, so that it can make its recommendations to full Council on 21 February 2024.

Councillor Shires advised that local authorities throughout the UK are finding themselves affected financially by many external factors that are beyond their control such as the war in Ukraine, a continuing cost-of-living crisis and an uncertain economic outlook but the Council was in a better position than some other authorities in Norfolk.

The Committee noted that the Council was seeking to address a £1.49m deficit in its 2024/5 budget to be funded through proposed budget savings and the use of the Council's reserves. The Portfolio Holder expressed her confidence that the level of proposed savings and expected increase in income expenditure could be achieved following the level of work that has been undertaken by the Council officers in determining where savings could be best achieved. However, there was further work to be done on finalising the savings proposals before they went to full council.

The committee raised the question as to what provisions there were for contingency funding within the council's budget to cover any unexpected circumstances that the council would face in the future. Councillor Shires commented that there were enough savings proposals for this year and that work will be ongoing each year to determine where future savings will come to cover any budget gap the council may have.

In response to questioning, both Councillor Shires and Councillor Wendy Fredericks, Portfolio Holder for Housing and People Services, expressed their frustration at the level of government funding that the council received especially in respect of homelessness where local authorities of all political colours had sought additional government funding to deal with the extraordinary numbers of people becoming homeless in their areas.

The Portfolio Holder and the Director of Resources gave more information to questions from Councillor Nigel Housden on the changes in expenditure in the Communities service area, the level of Revenue Financing for capital, and Retained Business Rates, that were shown on page 27 of the agenda.

In response to a question from Victoria Holliday, on using the income from the second homes premium on dealing with the number of people made Homeless in the District, the Leader of the Council, Councillor Tim Adams, stated that it was the council's intention but due to the wording of the legislation, the council had to negotiate with Norfolk County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner to try and seek funding to help the Homelessness situation in the District.

Councillor Shires confirmed that 4 or 5 of the budget savings proposals would be subject to public consultation as well as questions on the overall budget on the council's website and the business community, the results of which will be part of the budget report that goes to full council.

Councillor Shires considered that the vast majority of the current budget savings proposals were about doing things more efficiently rather than directly affecting members of the public, but it may be the case in the future that there may be proposals that could disadvantage some people.

Following a suggestion from Councillor Shires the committee agreed it would be useful for the council's budget monitoring to include the expected level income streams within the council budget and this should be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Committee further agreed that it would be useful for the Director of Resources to produce at the start of the new financial year a timetable that sets out the key events as the budget is developed throughout the year such as which committee meetings it will be reported to and periods of public consultation.

Recommendation – that (A) council's budget monitoring to include the expected level income streams within the council budget should be reported in future to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and

(B) the Director of Resources be requested to produce at the start of the new financial year a timetable that sets out the key events as the budget is developed throughout the year such as which committee meetings it will be reported to and periods of public consultation.

112 MANAGING PERFORMANCE 2019 - 2023

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Tim Adams presented a report final managing performance report for the Council's Corporate Plan 2019 – 2023.

Councillor Adams reflected on the success and disappointments especially as the global COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 required the Council to direct and deploy its resources for an extended period of time initially in responding to the pandemic and keeping our communities safe through periods of national lockdown and subsequently supporting businesses and local communities to “open up” during the recovery phases of the crisis.

Councillor Adams was very pleased by how well the officers and Councillors had responded to the challenges presented by the pandemic. The Committee joined Councillor Adams in thanking members of staff during this period.

In response to questioning on long term empty properties and affordable homes, Councillor Adams commented that the post created to deal with empty properties had largely paid for itself and there was an opportunity to move forward on affordable homes following the disappointment caused by nutrient neutrality. The Committee noted that both issues could be looked at by the Homelessness Task and Finish group that the committee had established earlier in the meeting.

Of taking learning from the Plan, Councillor Adams thought it had shown the value of people-based services and the importance of net zero and biodiversity to the local communities but now the Council faced a Housing crisis as a result of nutrient neutrality and rising homelessness.

In respect of a question regarding the Council's carbon footprint the committee agreed that it would like a report to the committee's meeting on 20 March 2024 on the progress towards the council's Net Zero 2030 strategy including the Council's carbon footprint.

In respect of questions regarding water quality issues Councillor Adams felt that this was an issue that the Council and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee needed to

continue to look at.

Resolved – that (A) the Overview and Scrutiny Committee acknowledges that the majority of the Corporate Plan 2019-2023 priorities and objectives were achieved despite the unprecedented circumstances presented by the global COVID pandemic,

(B) the Council's staff be thanked for their work in dealing with the challenges presented by the Covid pandemic, and

(C) a report be submitted to the committee's meeting on 20 March 2024 on the progress towards the council's Net Zero 2030 strategy including the Council's carbon footprint.

113 MANAGING PERFORMANCE QUARTER 2 2023/24.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Tim Adams presented a report that detailed the Council's performance in the period 1st July to 30th September 2023.

Councillor Adams stated that he was pleased with the progress that was being made towards the Council's objectives but as this Corporate Plan had only just started there was a long way to go yet.

Councillor Fredericks, Portfolio Holder for Housing and People Services, in response to a question from Councillor Cushing, said the take up for the Government's Warm Homes Grant had improved following a targeted campaign although the public were unsure about the grants. The Council was currently the second best in Norfolk for their take up, but more proactive work was planned.

Councillor Withington, Portfolio Holder for Community, Leisure and Outreach, in response to a question from councillor Holliday, advised that there hadn't been negative feedback from members of the public regarding the length of time needed to answer calls in the Customer Contact Centre, but they were more concerned about getting the right answers which sometimes took time to resolve.

Councillor Heinrich, Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Growth confirmed that he would respond in writing to Councillor Cushing's request for more details of where in the District the Shared prosperity fund had been spent.

The Director of Resources in response to a question from Councillor Cushing on the work on taking a more commercial approach to the delivery of discretionary services was currently looking at discrete service areas but it was still in its early stages.

Councillor Adams following a question from Councillor Housden stated he wasn't aware of any variance to the budget for the works needed on the structure of Cromer Pier.

Councillor Fredericks in response to a comment from Councillor Dixon on press reports on how the Council compared to other Broadland and South Norfolk Councils on the number of homelessness, said that North Norfolk had the highest number of owner owned homes in Norfolk, the highest number of second homes in the country apart from London, and the oldest demographic in the United Kingdom which created very different circumstances resulting in very few homes to buy or rent in the district.

Resolved that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of the

Quarter 2 Managing Performance Report 2023/24

114 PEER REVIEW - ACTION PLAN

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Tim Adams presented a report on an Action Plan that had been developed in response to recommendations following a Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge in September 2023.

The Chief Executive commented that the Peer Challenge had noticed the significant improvements that had been made by the Council and in the way it worked but there were some areas of improvement that been highlighted which the action plan sought to address.

The Chief Executive added that the Local Government Association would revisit the authority in approximately June or July 2024 to check how the Council had responded to its recommendations and to see what improvements had been or were likely to be made.

Councillor Dixon in response to a question from Councillor Housden commented that there was scope for more joined up and effective working between the Council's committees and the externally facilitated workshop referred to in paragraph 3.6 of the report was to be arranged to look in part at this.

Recommended - that (A) the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agrees that the Peer Review Action Plan be presented to Cabinet for agreement and adoption.

(B) a report be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee following the Local Government's Association revisit to the Council on the progress that had been on the changes proposed with thin the Action Plan.

115 TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Treasury Management Strategy

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Estates & Property Services, Councillor Lucy Shires, presented a report on the Council's Treasury Management Strategy for the year 2024/25. It set out details of the Council's Treasury Management activities and presented a strategy for the prudent investment of the Council's resources. It also set out the Council's approach to the deployment of capital resources in meeting the Council's overall aims and objectives.

The Committee commented following a question from Councillor Shires that the recent training on Treasury Management had not been sufficient in bringing the new information committee members had been seeking to help understand the complexities involved in the Treasury Management Strategy.

Councillor Cushing stated that it would be useful for members of the public if the report detailed the key risks and challenges that the Council faced in delivering this strategy.

The Director of Resources in response to Councillor Housden's question advised that the Council's liquidity allowance was a professional requirement that the Council had to meet.

The Director of Resources would reply in writing to the committee following

Councillor's Hankins question on who brokered the council's investments.

Councillor Dixon's response to Councillor Housden comments that investments should meet the ethical requirements that the council has set and should be reviewed regularly could be done by the Governance Risk and Audit Committee and there needed to be a discussion about that.

Resolved that the Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25 be submitted to full council as written.

116 THE CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee noted the contents of the Cabinet's current work programme.

117 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND UPDATE

The Democratic Services and Governance Officer presented a report that detailed the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's work plan.

Councillor Dixon commented that it would be useful for a verbal update to be given at future meetings of the committee on the progress of The Homelessness Task and Finish group that was established earlier in the meeting.

The Chief Executive advised in response to Councillor Hankins concern at the level of postal deliveries in rural areas across the district that this did fall into the wider question around the loss of services within the rural areas of the district and was an area of concern for local councillors.

Councillor Hankins advised that he would undertake further investigations and produce a report.

Councillor Housden questioned whether it would be beneficial to call the Environment agency to a future committee meeting on the issue of water quality. The Chief Executive advised that the East of England Local Government Association was holding a Water summit on March 8 but the council only send one Councillor and one Officer to it.

The Committee agreed that it would be useful to have a report back from that summit to the March or April committee meeting.

Councillor Withington, Portfolio Holder for Community, Leisure & Outreach in response to a question from Councillor Boyle advised that she had just attended a briefing on dentistry that morning and would be happy to produce a summary of the key points from it to all members of the council.

Resolved that (A) verbal updates be given to the Committee on the progress of The Homelessness Task and Finish group,

(B) a report back from the East of England Local Government Association Water summit be given to the March or April Committee meeting.

118 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The meeting ended at Time Not Specified.

Chairman