

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22

Summary: This report aims to provide the Council with an outline of the role of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and a summary of the work undertaken throughout the 2021-22 municipal years.

Options considered: N/a.

Conclusions: Throughout 2021-22, the Committee fulfilled its obligation to provide oversight of Council business and hold Cabinet to account. Whilst Covid-19 had a significant impact on the Committee's working practices, the Committee have adapted to remote and hybrid working and continued to deliver effective scrutiny.

Recommendations: 1. **It is recommended that Council notes the report, affirms the work of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and considers the following concerns raised within the report:**

- **Additional Committee substitutes required to adequately address the number of apologies given.**
- **Late submission of reports continues to cause volatility in the Work Programme.**
- **Too many 'last minute' requests to include items under Urgent Business which degrades both the quality of scrutiny and the opportunity to add maximum value to the process**

Reasons for Recommendations: To inform Council of the work of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in 2021-22 and address concerns raised.

Cabinet Member(s): N/a
Ward(s) affected: All

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1. Introduction – Role of the Committee

1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is the Council's primary oversight Committee that seeks to ensure that Cabinet is held to account and that reliable services are provided, whilst best value for money is achieved. Introduced by the Local Government Act 2000, Scrutiny Committees are able to monitor internal Council affairs, and also review the work of external bodies such as the Police, health providers, utility companies and the voluntary sector.

1.2 As outlined in the Constitution, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's terms of reference are as follows:

- To scrutinise and review decisions or other actions taken with respect to non-executive functions.
- To make reports or recommendations to the Full Council or to the Cabinet about one or more particular issue(s), service(s) or matter(s), which affects North Norfolk and its residents. Reports or recommendations may be carried out on whatever issue, service or matter the Scrutiny Committee thinks fit and may be carried out on any subject if the Full Council or the Cabinet requests it to do so.
- To carry out best value reviews.
- To act as the Council's Crime and Disorder Committee.
- To produce an annual report to Council on the work of the Committee over the year.
- To ensure effective scrutiny of the treasury management strategy and policies.

1.3 The remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee also includes undertaking policy review and development, monitoring performance management, promoting community well-being and improving the quality of life in the District. Scrutiny is Member-led and independent of party political arrangements. At North Norfolk District Council, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is chaired by a member of the opposition. Scrutiny should always be viewed as a function which belongs to and benefits the whole council.

2. Committee Background

2.1 Subsequent to minor changes, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee was comprised of the following Members at the end of the 2021-22 municipal year:

Chairman - Cllr N Dixon
Cllr H Blathwayt
Cllr P Heinrich
Cllr V Holliday
Cllr A Varley
Cllr A Brown

Vice Chair - Cllr S Penfold
Cllr E Withington
Cllr N Housden
Cllr E Spagnola
Cllr C Cushing
Cllr P Fisher

2.2 Who participates in Scrutiny:

- The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee take a pro-active role throughout the process, attending pre-agenda meetings and steering and scoping the direction of questioning and investigation.

- Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members – Scrutiny is different from other committees in that it calls for Members with investigative and creative minds who are prepared to “do their homework” out of the Council Chamber and think outside of the usual committee framework, tailoring the method of review to suit the topic.
- Cabinet Portfolio Members are invited to attend meetings of the Committee to present and answer questions on Reports relevant to their portfolio. The aim is that the Portfolio Member should have an opportunity to contribute to any issues relating to their portfolio.
- All non-Executive Members of the Council are routinely invited to attend Committee Meetings and offered the opportunity to ask questions on issues that matter to the residents they represent.
- Officers are involved in a number of ways – those directly involved in supporting the scrutiny process and those who are called to compile Reports for the Committee.
- Invitees and Witnesses can be called not just from within the Council, but from partners and public service providers.
- The public are welcome to attend meetings of the Committee with a provision to submit questions or statements up to 24 hours in advance, in order to raise issues of concern that they would like the Committee to consider.

3. Committee Role and Responsibilities

- 3.1 Scrutiny of decisions made by Cabinet - The Overview and Scrutiny Committee routinely reviews decisions made by Cabinet to ensure that they are appropriate and provide best value for money.
- 3.2 Pre-Scrutiny - This enables greater co-ordination between the Cabinet and Scrutiny work programmes, whereby the Committee can provide input into policy and decisions prior to their approval. This process ensures that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and wider Members can provide meaningful input into key issues, reducing the likelihood of call-ins. Some examples include:
- Commenting and providing input into corporate projects.
 - Providing input during the Policy development process.
 - Considering key strategies prior to approval by Cabinet.
- 3.3 Call-ins - All key decisions made by Cabinet that have not been pre-scrutinised are subject to a five day ‘call-in’ period, prior to implementation. This enables the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider whether any contentious decisions are appropriate, and provides the opportunity to recommend to Cabinet that the decision be reconsidered, if necessary.
- 3.4 Financial Scrutiny – This allows the Committee and wider Members the opportunity to review and comment on draft budget proposals, budget monitoring reports, the Medium Term Financial Strategy, and other financial strategies. Consideration of financial reports is a statutory requirement for the Overview & Scrutiny Committee’s work programme.
- 3.5 Performance Monitoring - This is a quarterly item for the Committee that provides an opportunity to ensure that service areas are meeting performance targets, or highlighting issues where further investigation may be required. It

is also important for holding the Cabinet to account, by considering whether the administration are meeting the objectives set within their Corporate Plan and subsequent Delivery Plans. Following requests by Members of the Committee, the Council has begun to explore benchmarking of performance with neighbouring authorities and CIPFA 'nearest neighbours'.

- 3.6 External Organisations - The Committee may request briefings on matters of concern from external organisations. These are usually followed by a Q&A session to gain further insight into the chosen subject. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has a statutory obligation to oversee crime and disorder in the District, and this is usually achieved by a briefing from the Police and Crime Commissioner, accompanied by senior Police Officers.
- 3.7 Focused/Rapid Reviews - The Committee may choose to look at a topic in depth over a specific period of time to consider whether it is achieving the necessary outcomes. This could be undertaken by the whole Committee as a rapid review in a single day, or as a smaller review by a Task and Finish Group, usually lasting six months.
- 3.8 Petitions - The Committee has an obligation to consider petitions received from members of the public, which can be submitted electronically or by hard copy. There is a threshold of 750 signatures required from within the District in order for the petition to be subject of a full debate by the Committee.

4. Work of the Committee 2021-22

4.1 2021/22 was a positive year for the Committee with the many newly elected Councillors that joined the Committee in 2019 now fully settled into their roles and established as scrutineers. A new Vice Chair was appointed at the beginning of 2021 that has helped to strengthen the cross-party working of the Committee and ensure that debate remains a-political. Work has also continued to make use of all pre-scrutiny opportunities, with special reference to Strategy and Policy development. Eleven formal Committee meetings were held in the 2021-22 municipal year, with all meetings held back in the Council Chamber as social distancing and work from home requirements came to an end. The Committee did however continue to stream its meetings on YouTube, with select officers and other attendees able to join remotely to avoid overcrowding the Chamber whilst Covid-19 remained a potential risk.

4.2 Highlights from the 2021/22 Work Programme are listed below:

- Sheringham Leisure Centre (Reef) Project Monitoring: From the outset of the Sheringham Leisure Centre project, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee played an important role in receiving regular monitoring reports to observe progress of the project, recommended contingency options and maintain oversight of the project budget. The development and the unveiling of the new 'Reef' Leisure centre culminated in a soft opening and Members' visit in November 2021.
- Crime and Disorder: In May 2021 the Committee received a briefing on the Norfolk County Community Safety Partnership's draft Safer Norfolk Plan 2021-2024. In March 2022 the Committee followed this up with a briefing from the newly elected Police and Crime Commissioner for Norfolk on the Police, Crime and Community Safety Plan for Norfolk 2022 – 2024, and how this overlaps with the Safer Norfolk Plan 2021-2024.

Members will continue to monitor implementation of these Plans on an annual basis to ensure that policing of crime and disorder remains effective across the District, and focused on relevant issues.

- **Ongoing Ambulance Response Times Monitoring:** Whilst the outbreak of Covid-19 had a significant impact on health services across the globe, the monitoring of ambulance response times has continued at a local level on a six-monthly basis, with the addition of Cllr V Holliday taking up the issue with renewed vigour having worked in the medical profession and chaired a Parish-level Working Group monitoring coastal response times.
- **Waste Contract Briefing:** Now well into delivery of the waste contract, a gap analysis of the contractual obligations was completed to determine which elements of the contract were yet to be delivered. As part of this analysis, the waste contractor Serco has established a timeline for introducing a new target operating model expected to go live in September 2022, over which the Committee had continued to maintain close oversight.
- **Pre-scrutiny of the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Policy:** Following a Full Council motion to adopt the HRA definition of anti-Semitism, it was determined that a full overhaul of the existing Equality and Diversity Policy was required. Whilst this work was significantly delayed by the impact of Covid-19 alongside a preceding management restructure, the Committee rejected the first draft and continued to monitor development with the final Policy approved early in the 2021-22 municipal year following extensive input and commentary from the Committee, officers and the Staff Focus Group.
- **Pre-scrutiny of the Tree Planting and Net-Zero Strategies:** As outlined as some of the Council's key priorities in the 2019-2023 Corporate Plan, pledges were made to plant a tree for every resident in the District and to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2030. Both of these projects required a detailed strategy to implement, with the Committee asked to provide input during development through workshop sessions and Committee debate. Now approved, the Committee continues to closely monitor the implementation of these strategies as part of its performance monitoring work.
- **Review of NNDC Public Car Park Charges:** Subject to annual review and conscious of budgetary pressures placed on the Council, the Committee made a number of recommendations to Cabinet to raise the cost of parking charges in-line with CPI inflation. Whilst the majority of the Committee's recommendations were accepted for general parking charges, Cabinet chose to maintain current prices for season ticket holders to help reduce the burden on residents.
- **Planning Performance –** the Committee continued its efforts to review the Council's planning performance in a wider context, by recognising the need to look beyond existing data sets and considering customer experience and outcome satisfaction. This is a work in progress, although the customer / user survey has been delayed by general data protection regulations.

- Establishment of a trial Environment and Quality of Life Scrutiny Panel: Established for a six-month trial period beginning in January 2022 the Panel has focused primarily on reviewing the Council's public conveniences over several months, creating significant additional capacity for the Committee. Work is well underway with final recommendations expected for consideration at the July 2022 Committee meeting.
- Councillor Call for Action – Impact of Second Homes and Holiday Lets: In December 2021 a CCfA was called to request that the Committee consider the impact that second homes and holiday lets have on the District. The Committee determined that the best course of action would be to undertake a scoping exercise, which then led to a request for a formal investigation to collect data on the potential impacts and any mitigation actions implemented elsewhere across the Country. A small Member-Officer group was established from relevant service areas with results of the initial investigation expected in July 2022.
- North Walsham High Streets and Heritage Action Zone Project Monitoring: 2021-22 saw the start of a new project for the Council in North Walsham with over £3m of funding secured for regeneration projects, implementing public realm improvements and exploring the cultural and historical roots of the town. As with all major projects, the Committee will monitor the project progress and budget closely, with the option available to make recommendations or propose suggestions if required.

4.1 In summary, the Committee reviewed approximately fifty-seven topics, though this number includes recurring items such as performance and budget monitoring. Seven of these topics could be defined as pre-scrutiny, in that they were reviewed by the Committee in advance of approval by Cabinet or Council. In total, the Committee again made over thirty recommendations to Cabinet/Council and requests to CLT. The formation of a Scrutiny Panel has greatly increased the capacity of the Committee and allowed extended or in-depth reviews to take place on matters relating to key priorities of the Corporate Plan. Overall the Committee remains keen to be actively involved in policy and strategy development, whilst also maintaining key oversight of ongoing projects and Cabinet decisions.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 2021-22 was an interesting year for the Committee, with a return to physical meetings, hybrid attendance by officers and ongoing concerns regarding Covid-19. This resulted in attendance by wider Members being relatively low, but despite the challenges faced, the Committee continued to provide valuable and effective oversight for the Council, whilst providing input into policy development and service delivery, without need for any call-ins of Cabinet decisions.
- 5.2 Agreement and adherence to the Executive-Scrutiny Protocol continues to be a valuable asset for both the Committee and Cabinet, that has significantly improved working practices, and led to increased opportunities for pre-scrutiny, whilst improving cooperation with Cabinet.

5.3 Whilst the Committee has been very effective in delivering its roles, the following recurring limiting factors from last year remain to be resolved by both Members and Officers in the year ahead:

- There were twenty instances where apologies were given in the 2021-22 year with substitutes only available on nine of these occasions. Changes to Cabinet has also meant that previously reliable Committee substitutes are no longer available, and it is therefore necessary for all group leaders to reconsider their substitute appointments.
- Delays to reports remain a significant issue for the Committee and the wider business planning process, with the Work Programme planned well in advance meaning that any delay will have a knock-on effect for future meetings. Whilst these delays are in some cases unavoidable, efforts should be made to address all delays, where possible.
- Too many last minute requests to include items under 'urgent business' which degrades both the quality of scrutiny and the opportunity to add maximum value to the process. Better co-ordination and planning of work programmes is needed to resolve this systemic shortfall.