

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Friday, 20 September 2024 in the Council Chamber - Council Offices at 9.30 am

Committee Cllr S Penfold (Vice-Chairman in the Chair)

Members Present:

Cllr M Batey
Cllr P Bailey
Cllr J Boyle
Cllr C Cushing
Cllr A Fletcher
Cllr M Hankins
Cllr P Heinrich
Cllr V Holliday
Cllr N Housden
Cllr L Vickers

Members also attending:

Cllr T Adams, Cllr A Brown, Cllr W Fredericks, Cllr L Shires

Officers in Attendance:

Chief Executive, Director for Communities and Solicitor

182 SUBSTITUTES

There were no substitutes at the meeting.

183 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted by Councillor Nigel Dixon.

184 PUBLIC QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS

There were none received.

185 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on held on 17 July 2024 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

186 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None received.

187 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received.

188 PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None received.

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

None received.

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

The Committee noted the current tracker of its recommendations to the Cabinet.

191 BUDGET MONITORING P4 2024/25

Councillor Bailey asked what the £350k underspend in employee costs in the Place and Climate Change consisted of. The CEX advised that the underspend was in the current financial year and Appendix A was the officer suggestion for savings as the current position in quarter 4.

Councillor Cushing asked if the Council had been able to manage with these vacancies do the posts still need to exist. Councillor Shires advised that there were service reviews being undertaken and that would be one of the questions that would be asked.

Councillor Holliday asked what is the effect of the outcomes being received on the residents of these vacant posts. The CEX stated that was being worked on at the moment by officers and the Cabinet some of which may not be permanent posts and an appraisal is undertaken on the effect of the removal of a post when it becomes vacant.

Councillor Boyle asked about the ongoing costs of paying agency staff to fill vacant posts. Councillor Shires advised that the agency fees were for the finance department. The CEX stated that the agency arrangements for the deputy Section 151 officer post would end in October.

Councillor Housden asked if the Council was being compromised by the number of vacant posts. Councillor Penfold added where there was a point at which it tipped to affect the delivery of services.

The CEX advised that the recruitment challenges had changed across services over time and some of those were national shortages. Performance in some services were good compared to other authorities but there remained recruitment issues in some services.

Councillor Penfold asked about the progress on getting donations and advertising income for Pier and Car Parks. Councillor Shires stated that the Estates Team were working on this for a more commercially based approach as referenced by the recent Corporate Peer Review recommendations.

Councillor Bailey asked if was possible to have a snapshot of the Council's investments and to look at the Council's best practise. The Democratic Services (Scrutiny) Officer advised that the Treasury Management Strategy ought to go to the Governance, Risk and Audit Committee.

Councillor Hankins commented that the council needed to borrow money to bridge the gap with the Parish and Town Council precept and the income and expenditure

were not synchronised and asked what was the prospect of this changing.

Councillor Shires stated that the council paid the precept up front and would ask the Director of Resources to provide a written response on the level of borrowing the Council needs to cover this.

Councillor Cushing asked if the council borrowed £8m internally to pay for the work on the Reef and Refuse Freighters does this mean the council has to find another £8m to put back into the reserves. The Director of Resources was asked to provide a written response on this.

Councillor Holliday asked whether it was possible to spend the £150,000 earmarked in the capital programme for the Public Conveniences Energy Efficiencies for the provision of temporary accommodation instead. This would create revenue savings that could then be put into public toilets.

Councillor Shires advised that this scheme was to create savings in the council's existing public toilets but would investigate and provide a written response.

Councillor Penfold asked if the Meadow Road Car Park, Cromer extension scheme was an invest to save scheme as it would provide additional revenue when completed. Councillor Shires advised that this would be for car parks across the district rather than just Meadow Road.

Councillor Cushing commented that it would be good as the budget cycle moved forward to understand what elements of the capital programme were externally funded.

Councillor Cushing asked if the Council having to collect kitchen waste in 2026 was factored into the budget. The Director of Communities advised that mandatory food collection was in last year's Environment Act, but the secondary legislation had been delayed due to the general election. The expectation was for this to come into effect for April 2026 and some capital funding has already been received by the Council was that was seen as not been sufficient to match the council's costs. There was also some revenue funding expected as this was a new burden but that had not been announced by the Government yet.

Recommended that –

(A) The Governance, Risk and Audit Committee be requested to consider the Council's Treasury Management Strategy at its next meeting,

(B) the Director of Resources be requested to provide a written response on

(1) on whether the Parish and Town Council precept payment could be synchronised so that the income and expenditure did not result in the Council having to borrow money to do this to include how much this currently costs the Council

(2) on how the Council will cover the £8m internal borrowing to pay for the work on the Reef and Refuse Freighters, and

(3) whether changing the £150,000 earmarked in the capital programme for the Public Conveniences Energy Efficiencies to instead providing for additional new temporary accommodation instead would result in greater revenue

savings that could be spent on the public toilets

192 HOMELESSNESS TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Councillor Holliday, the Chair of the Task and Finish Group, advised the committee that on 31 August 2024 there were 2,369 households on the council waiting list with 488 having the most urgent housing need with only 136 houses let. There were 53 households in temporary accommodation. The Council received a forecasted net subsidy of £6.5million for 2024/5.

Councillor Holliday stated that the Task and Finish Group (TFG) sought to find the widest possible interventions to prevent and reduce homelessness as well as solutions to relieve homelessness.

Councillor Vickers asked why the recommendation of working with the registered providers to reduce tenancy fraud had not been put forward by the TFG. Councillor Holliday stated that there was some data from Victory Homes and there a question on whether that data that it was the highest in North Norfolk correlated to what the council understood.

Councillor Fletcher asked whether the costs of the vetting of the Cornwall scheme that matched younger residents who need accommodation into a home with an older resident(s) that needed assistance would outweigh its benefits.

Councillor Holliday advised that Cornwall were a higher tier authority so could do the assessments needed more easily but had achieved 50 or 60 supported people through the scheme.

Councillor Shires added that it might be worth talking to Norfolk County Council on their Housing for Carers scheme.

Councillor Penfold referred to the recommendation on the potential of a pilot scheme that moves out the perpetrator in domestic abuse cases rather than the victim and asked whether it was being trailed elsewhere. Councillor Holliday confirmed that it had been.

Councillor Holliday added that the Domestic Abuse Charities had indicated that they would like to work more closely with the Council to provide greater support to victims at an earlier stage.

Councillor Hankins commented in respect of communication with Parish and Town Councils on Domestic Abuse that he felt the Councils knew of the data in their areas but were unsure what to do with it and a checklist from the council of how they could help would be useful and how to raise it with their communities.

Councillor Housden stated that homelessness and housing supply was a wider problem there was a recommendation on empty shop buildings being converted to accommodation. Town and Parish Councils could help with long term empty properties, some landowners would be happy to take pods. Giving a portfolio of options to the Councils was needed.

Councillor Housden added that it was a matter of discussing with people and that the pressures on homelessness were going to grow and the Council needed solutions and to engage with communities to build the right message and address preconceptions that were inaccurate.

Councillor Fredericks asked Councillors to go out and talk to their local communities and spread the message on homelessness and what can be done. It is their residents who are homeless.

Councillor Holliday advised that the Campaign for Rural England had suggested Homes for Local People was a good phrase and all neighbourhood plans should include exception sites were all background to the TFG recommendations.

Councillor Heinrich advised that on planning applications that were objections on rural exception sites and Home for Local People would be better received and may reduce objections. The Council needs to sell idea to Parishes that it is about local people.

Councillor Heinrich added that a number of shop conversions were happening in North Walsham and need to watch the consequences of removing Section 21 notices in the private rental market. He would like to see the recommendations moved into a priority order that showed what was achievable in the short, medium and long term.

Councillor Boyle advised that the TFG and spoken to the Landlords Association and there was deep concern about the dwindling number of landlords and the landlords with one property will find it too challenging.

Councillor Vickers added that the Association had offered to host a forum and the Campaign for Rural England had offered to host a conference about Local Homes for Local People at their own cost, but that recommendation had been changed. It would be a good opportunity to talk to the local communities.

Councillor Holliday commented that a Conference that had a wide range of people to give expert advice on housing would be different to a Town and Parish Council Forum. A Landlords Forum would help those people who were uncertain about what was involved and would be able to get the help they needed.

Councillor Housden stated that the Private Rental Legislation needed changing but there was an opportunity to get the right people in the room to discuss the way forward. The TFG has a basket of recommendations that were operable, and the Council needed to get on with them.

The Democratic Services (Scrutiny) Officer advised that the TFG had considered the Council's draft Housing Strategy and Housing Allocations Policy before making its final recommendations.

Councillor Brown advised Government consultation on changes to the National Planning Policy Framework on the definition of affordability that as the Planning Portfolio Holder, he would in conjunction with the Assistant Director be framing the Council's response which will go in next week.

Councillor Brown stated that the Council now had six neighbourhood Plans with three more in the pipeline. However, staff had been lost in the Planning Policy team who dealt with neighbourhood planning and would need to look at resources if the council is to encourage more of these plans.

Councillor Brown added in respect of how to increase engagement with the Town and Parish Councils on the number of long-term empty properties in their areas that could be achieved either by local Councillors going to Parish Councils.

Recommendations that the Council

(A) To prevent homelessness

expands its homelessness service prevention work to undertake such work at an earlier stage along with multi agency support, on an invest to save basis, to seek to reduce the number of people going into temporary accommodation and the costs of that to the council that should include

- 1. increasing the awareness and risks of homelessness in the local communities, on the value of prevention for homelessness and that early intervention requires people to ask for help before it becomes too late**
- 2. increasing its communication work which should include Parish and Town Councils and should also provide support to Councillors to enable them to help signpost those people who need housing help**
- 3. increasing the range of interventions to help people especially on benefit support and with financial viability assessments**

(B) Managing homelessness

Explores how it uses partner, charity, and voluntary organisations to create a series of outreach hubs and front-line services in North Norfolk for homelessness to create a network of advice and support including appropriate partner organisation(s)

(C) Housing allocation

Considers the viability of a support match scheme to match younger residents who need accommodation into a home with an older resident(s) that needs assistance in a similar way to the scheme in Cornwall [Supportmatch Homeshare - Cornwall Council](#)

(D) Increase housing supply

- 1. Continues to encourage its Councillors to work within their local communities to seek to find additional plots of land that can be used for new affordable housing schemes**
- 2. As a medium-term solution looks at setting up an investment partnership to provide affordable local housing for local people at social, discount and market rent. We would recommend the model used by Cambridge City Council and Gravesham Borough Council who set an investment partnership with the Hill Group on a 50:50 basis**
- 3. Explores the use of Solo Haus one bed housing where additional temporary accommodation for single people is required**

(E) Increase affordable house building/supply

- 1. Undertakes an audit of shop fronts away from primary retail areas and empty units above and behind shops to assess their potential for conversion to residential usage or renting out rooms**

2. An affordable housing conference be set up to encourage Parish and Town councils to create neighbourhood plans that include allocations for community led development for local people and encourages community land trusts to come forward with affordable schemes in rural exception sites
3. Continues to seek from Norfolk County Council a minimum 50% return of the extra Council tax that will be received from the new extra second homes premium and that the money the Council receives is ringfenced for affordable housing
4. Responds to the Government consultation on changes to the National Planning Policy Framework on the definition of affordability
5. Explores the potential to use Better Society Capital/National Homelessness Property fund 2 funding for 3-to-4-bedroom properties
[National Homelessness Property fund 2 | Better Society Capital](#)

(F) Increase/sustain Private rental tenancies

1. Explores the model of using a local estate agency to set up a Council letting agency and also looks at whether homelessness prevention grant could be used to bring empty properties back into use
2. Encourages the new government to continue the previous government's work on introducing an appropriate licencing scheme for all short-term lets
3. Continues to engage proactively with private landlords and considers whether setting up a Landlords Forum would be beneficial with an introductory conference type session including mortgage brokers, lenders, insurance companies as well as landlords and housing associations to explore solutions to the issues Landlords are experiencing

(G) Reducing Long Term Empty Homes

1. Continues to have an Empty Homes Officer as a permanent role
2. Considers how to increase engagement with the Town and Parish Councils on the number of long-term empty properties in their areas
3. Continues to investigate whether funding could be found to refurbish empty properties for people in housing need

(H) Sustain social tenancies

1. Continues to investigate with registered providers on the reuse of sheltered housing and to seek fewer age designated homes
2. Continues to have a strategic discussion with the registered providers on potential disposals that may occur over the next few years
3. Encourages registered providers to ensure sufficient target hardening is provided in Domestic Abuse cases

(I) Prevention of/provision for victims of Domestic Abuse

1. Explores how partner organisations can be used to help with homelessness prevention especially in domestic abuse cases that would include tenancy support by the Registered Providers and spreading awareness to Parish and Town Councils and Councillors

2. Asks the new Norfolk Police and Crime Commissioner whether the offer of scoping out a pilot that moves out the perpetrator in domestic abuse cases rather than the victim is still valid

193 REPORTING PROGRESS IMPLEMENTING CORPORATE PLAN 2023-27 DELIVERY AGAINST ACTION PLAN 2023-24 AND ACTION PLAN 2024-25 - TO END OF QUARTER 1 - 30 JUNE 2024

Councillor Adams, Leader of the Council, updated the Committee on changes between the 2023/4 Action Plan and the Quarter 1 2024/25 Action Plan. Councillor Adams was satisfied with the progress on the 2023/24 Plan.

Councillor Cushing commented that it would be useful to have delivery date targets for each action to assess the progress on each item. The report said that 10 actions in the 2023-24 Action Plan had been completed with 18 carried forward but this was difficult to judge without delivery dates.

Councillor Cushing added that he would expect to see more a mix of Red, Amber and Green actions in the plan and there was lot of green in this plan which might raise questions about how the RAG status is being assessed.

Councillor Adams advised that it was planned to meet and review the assessments, but it was the target to complete actions within the year. He would take away the comments about the delivery dates.

Councillor Penfold asked what methodology was being used to make the assessments and whether it was a common one or was it down to the individual lead officers.

Councillor Adams stated that Cabinet did challenge the RAG assessments. Green was on target or delivered, Amber was not on target but intention to deliver a different way or slightly delayed with Red not on target. White indicated work hasn't started. The commentary was as important as the RAG status.

Councillor Penfold referred to the action Produce and publish a Rural Strategy and Action Plan by June 2024 which had a commentary of Initial scoping discussions held yet was marked as Green and should be an Amber.

Councillor Adams advised that there would be a focussed look at the RAG assessments including that one which would be report back to the committee.

Councillor Holliday asked about how actions were carried forward on achieving external funding and the take up of benefits and how they were assessed when circumstances changed from one year to the next.

Councillor Adams confirmed that there had been £1.2m received of additional benefit payments for residents which was a huge level of achievement but the changes to Winter Fuel Payment would change that focus but it was right that they remain a priority albeit with a bit more of a focussed approach.

The Chief Executive (CEX) advised that the Corporate Plan was aspirational and sought to match the manifesto commitments of the administration with the resources that were available to the council and was not a performance report. Officers had advised that annual action plan would enable accountability about when things might happen. He added that the Council was a very small organisation facing an increased demand for its services.

Councillor Heinrich asked what were the success criteria for the actions and it would be useful to have a couple of bullet points at the end of an action to illustrate how successful it has been.

Councillor Housden queried what the protracted discussions with stakeholders were in relation to the provision of a banking hub.

The CEX advised that the Council had contacted the LINK group about creating a bank hub in Holt and Stalham initially but were only facilitating this rather than directly providing it. Cash Access were seeking a property for a hub but may use the Town Council for a model different to the national one. In Fakenham and North Walsham, the Council was looking at ways to speed up the process.

Councillor Housden asked whether it had a place in the report and if some of it was out of the council's hands and was down to external organisations. Councillor Adams stated that it should as the council was a key partner in assuring it happened and there may be some tangible actions for the council in the upcoming months.

Councillors Cushing asked about the RAG assessment of the Fakenham Leisure and Sports Hub proposal as it was a key priority. Councillor Adams commented that the Council was awaiting the Government's decision.

Recommended that - more detailed information be provided within the action plan that would include delivery dates where possible and success criteria to give a greater understanding of the progress being made against each of the RAG targets

194 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND UPDATE

Councillor Holliday advised that she had done a Freedom of Interest request on the number of people who were going to get Dental treatment and there was provision in Fakenham and the figures were significantly less when compared to Norwich and were unacceptable.

Councillor Boyle agreed and highlighted that the practise in Fakenham wasn't in the report considered by the Norfolk Health Overview Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Brown asked if the loss of the devolution deal meant the dental school proposals would not go ahead. Councillor Boyle commented that there were a number of options being considered and there was strong support for a dental school.

Councillor Penfold asked how the North Norfolk Profile Indicators would fit in with the other reports that came to the committee. The Director of Communities (DoC) stated that they would sit alongside the existing performance reports and would be indicators that would consider North Norfolk as a whole rather than the council's performance for example housing data that could indicate the likely future risk of homelessness.

Councillor Housden asked if the indicators would look at influencing factors in Norfolk that would have wider effects. The DoC advised that this was looking at data sets and trends and you could look at wider indicators and picture including comparative information.

Councillor Holliday asked about how the Performance and Productivity Oversight Board intended to work whether that would be with a contextual approach or a traditional performance management approach. The DoC advised that the Board has only just started and there was a lot of work needed to do. There was still an opportunity to further mould the board's terms of reference.

The DoC added that the aim was to make the indicators that were used to be beneficial to the Council and could give an indication of a potential direction of travel for the Council to recommend to the Cabinet.

The Democratic Services (Scrutiny) Officer advised that there was a workshop planned to consider the indicators on the afternoon of 9 October and as the outstanding recommendation from the committee's workshop in May to undertake some questioning training had yet to be done this would be a chance to undertake that training prior to the workshop.

Resolved – that a workshop be held on 9 October PM to consider some North Norfolk Profile Indicators and to undertake some questioning training,

195 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

None

The meeting ended at 12.25 pm.

Chairman