

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 13 November 2024 in the Council Chamber - Council Offices at 9.30 am

Committee	Cllr N Dixon (Chairman)	Cllr S Penfold (Vice-Chairman)
Members Present:	Cllr J Boyle Cllr A Fletcher Cllr P Heinrich Cllr N Housden	Cllr C Cushing Cllr M Hankins Cllr V Holliday Cllr L Vickers

Members also attending:

Officers in Attendance:

Also in attendance:

210 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted by Councillors Batey and Bailey

211 SUBSTITUTES

There were no substitutes at the meeting.

212 PUBLIC QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS

None received

213 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2024 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

214 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None received.

215 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received.

216 PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

A petition has been submitted in respect to the Stalham Town public toilet closure. This has been approved by the Monitoring Officer. This matter will be listed as an item for discussion on the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 11 December 2025, where recommendations will be made as to how this can best be taken forward.

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

None received.

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

Councillor Dixon updated the Committee that the recommendations made at the meeting held on 16 October 2024 regarding the options for the car park charges and the ongoing management of beach huts were discussed at the Cabinet meeting on 04 December 2024. These were largely accepted with some minor amendments.

219 VISITOR INFORMATION SERVICE

Councillor Withington introduced the item by asking the committee to consider the impact of not having a tourist information centre (TIC) in Cromer on both the residents and tourists visiting the District. A number of options were put forward for discussion.

Alongside this the committee were also asked to consider how the important work of promoting the Deep History Coast initiative could be facilitated if the centre was to close.

The cessation of the Tourist Information Centre could provide the Council with an approximate £129,000 saving at a time when members are having to make difficult decisions as to which services should be retained.

Councillor Hankin asked why there was no mention of the heritage centre in North Walsham which provides visitor information.

Councillor Withington was able to explain that as this centre is run by the Town Council and charity supported, it does not form part of the Council's offering.

Councillor Vickers enquired as to whether a cost benefit analysis had been carried out to determine that renting the building out would be preferred to selling the building and taking the capital receipt.

The Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth was able to confirm that a cost benefit analysis had been undertaken but due to the complexity of the building, with the public conveniences and shared lobby, this property did not lend itself to disposal and rental of the existing North Norfolk Visitor Centre would allow for the public toilets to be retained.

Cllr Heinrich stated that the Council is operating in a different world than when Tourist Information Centres were first introduced. Both residents and visitors have no shortage of sources of information. It is therefore difficult to justify maintaining the TIC service, but was of the opinion that the Deep History Coast exhibition should not be lost and should be relocated to the Cromer museum.

Cllr Boyle confirmed that the Deep history coast exhibition is an important asset that should not be lost. She understood the importance of visiting a physical tourist information centre for some people and that this decision would disadvantage those that are not technologically minded. Understand the importance to some people who

do like a physical tourist information centre. It would be good to strengthen links with Visit North Norfolk (VNN) to ensure that we maintain an adequate level of tourism promotion.

The Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth was able to confirm that the VNN relationship is not at risk as it has a direct tourism promotion role. The TIC is a customer services function that is about helping people when they arrive in the District.

Cllr Boyle confirmed her support that the Council should not continue with TIC, it is a tough decision and there will be people disadvantaged by this decision but unfortunately given the current climate members will need to take a number of tough decisions.

The Assistant Director for Sustainable Growth advised that of the 9.4 million visitors to the District last year, 82,000 people visited the TIC. How many come for the deep history coast display and how many come in for other information is unknown. The site is popular because of location, next to the central car park in Cromer. People go into the building because they are walking past the door as they exit the car park and head into town. There are very few hotel bookings completed through the TIC. Day visitors make up the majority of visitors to the District, however the overnight visitors provide more income to the District.

Cllr Housden advised that the Council should look to do something more profitable with the site.

Cllr Holliday expressed that it would be good to move the provision further into the town. The current Deep History Coast display housed in the North Norfolk Visitor Centre provides an appetiser for the experience. Full information can be found at the destinations along the coast. In line with our Climate Change ambitions, we should be looking to discourage the use of cars so it would be good to look at providing information at bus stops.

Cllr Penfold felt it would be good to provide visitors and residents alternative ways to access information. This could be through a QR code, pod at the pier or interactive boards.

Cllr Cushing voiced that he felt the TIC was a luxury that the Council can no longer afford.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended that Cabinet consider

- **The building being made available for an alternative income generating use.**
- **What provision can be made to continue a tourist information service – be that through an enhanced online presence, electronic information boards or physical leaflet stands at prominent locations within Cromer such as the Pier and other visitor attractions.**
- **Relocation of the current Deep History Coast display housed within the North Norfolk Visitor Centre to a suitable alternative location, possibly Cromer Museum.**

The Director of Resources explained that The Medium-Term Financial Strategy had come to the Committee as a pre-scrutiny item, prior to it going to Cabinet.

The information is constantly changing and as such there has been some updates since the report was published.

Since the budget at the end of October, the Council will now need to include National Insurance contribution increases of around £350-400,000. This may be funded by Government, but this has not yet been confirmed.

New homes bonus, as at 15 October, there has been a substantial increase in properties available for Council tax leading to an estimated grant income of £550,000.

Car parking income is expected to increase due to the rise in car parking fees agreed at Cabinet in October.

The Government has also announced a 3.2% funding guarantee, which should provide an increase in the Council's core spending power. Does assume that we apply a maximum council tax increase of £5 or 3% whichever is greater. Not a straightforward calculation but should be around £400,000 better off.

Borrowing costs however have increased and these will need to be budgeted for at approximately £350,000 per year going forward.

There are lots of uncertainties within these figures at the moment.

There has currently been no communication from Government, but we expect that settlement figures will be announced on 19/20 December.

Cllr Hankin enquired as to whether staff resource had been looked at as part of the ongoing budget process and whether a workforce strategy produced.

The committee would like to know many people work in a hybrid way.

How many staff work part time.

Cost of agency staff.

When a vacancy arises – is there a process where a manager looks at the resource and output, to determine if that role is still required.

Cllr Shires explained that agency staff were used to assist the depleted Finance team, where resourcing had been an issue. This has now been resolved so it is hoped there will not be a need for agency staff moving forward. The Council will only look to employ people based on the needs of the organisation

The Director of Resources reported that the people strategy is being finalised and will come forward to the Committee once this has been completed.

Cllr Holliday voiced that she felt the report was well written, but asked how the Committee could input into Section 8.

Cllr Shires replied that any help that the committee could provide in identifying areas of budget savings would be greatly received.

The Director of Resources explained that there is also the prospect of business rates reform on the horizon, and this could result in the Council losing a significant amount of funding. However, the Government will have to look at those authorities that are hit hard and potentially provide a transitional grant to help authorities function. We are heading into a time where there is so much uncertainty, but we have to ensure we set a balanced budget that delivers for residents.

Cllr Heinrich asked if Officers had looked at non statutory and statutory services, as

they all need to be evaluated in terms of benefits to economy and benefits to residents. Need to make savings from a point of knowledge.

Cllr Fredricks stated that officers had been working for months to identify savings, including doing their own business analysis.

Cllr Shires it is useful for all members to understand which services are statutory and non-statutory. A workshop can be arranged following this year's budget setting to improve awareness among members.

Cllr Cushing voiced his approval for how clear sections 1 to 7 of the report was. However, felt that the strategy within Section 8 needed to be expanded. 90% of the Council's costs are staff so it is necessary to have a firm handle of the number of people employed and understand how these costs are broken down by statutory and non-statutory services.

The Director of Resources explained that staffing costs are currently below 90% of total expenditure. The Council has less flexibility on contract costs. Currently there are 314 staff employed by the Council - 329 full time and 85 part time. We need to determine what level statutory services should be provided at. Every time there is a staff vacancy a business case must be drawn up for filling the vacancy. Agency staff are a last resort, but some areas are very difficult to recruit into. CLT do consider very carefully the need to employ staff.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee confirmed support for the proposed steps to close the gaps within the MTFS.

It also made the following recommendations to Cabinet:

- **To take a twin track approach to savings, looking not only at those that can be achieved within 2025/26 but also those with a longer lead in time to ensure savings are progressed into 2026/27 and beyond.**
- **The awaited Workforce strategy be used to help understand staff costs arising from use of part time and hybrid working and agency staff cover to explore scope for greater efficiency savings.**
- **A Workshop be arranged to understand options around statutory and non-statutory service provisions and to explore and evaluate options for beneficial changes. Action Cllr Shires.**

221 BUDGET MONITORING

Cllr Shires updated the Committee that that Budget monitoring for Period 6 showed a slightly improved position with a deficit of £0.995million.

Cllr Penfold asked if the Collectors Cabin roof replacement was based on a quote.

The Director of Resources answered that the £30,000 is considered to be a top end estimate for the work and it is hoped that the work will come in under this budget. Quotes will be sought for the work prior to the recommendations going to Full Council.

Cllr Holliday asked if the increased work within Licensing would continue moving

forward such that a further licensing officer is required?
What the savings are expected to be from the LED lighting work?
Will the income from the Collectors Cabin cover the cost of the replacement roof?
Will the customer services software provide work efficiencies?

Cllr Shires answered that the licensing work increases have been substantial and that this post will be funded through the income generated within this service. It is expected that the work level will remain at this level or may even increase further. Collectors cabin will generate sufficient income to cover the expense of replacing the roof.

Customer services software is a replacement for workbench. Workbench is unsupported so needs to be replaced. It is not yet known if this will provide work efficiencies.

The Director of Resources explained that she did not have the savings for the LED lighting to hand but said these would be circulated following the meeting.

Cllr Cushing asked if alternative options could be looked at with regard to the Collectors cabin thatched roof.

O&S noted the contents of the report and the current forecast year end position and recommended that:

1. Officers to work to further reduce the overall projected General Fund deficit for 2024/25
2. In respect of item 7 below, the Estates Team to explore the most cost-effective materials options (in addition to rethatching) for the re-roof of the Collectors Cabin with competitive quotes and that the budget for the work should be up to £30,000.

O&S supports Cabinet seeking approval from full Council in respect of the following:

- 3.) to include an addition to the revenue budget of £13,000 for an addition to existing Exacom software as laid out in paragraph 4.8.1
- 4.) to include a permanent increase to the revenue budget of £34,000 for an additional member of staff in the Licensing Team as detailed in paragraphs 4.8.2 to 4.8.5. This will be funded from the ring-fenced licencing income.
- 5.) to include an additional capital budget of £22,000 to complete the Cromer Offices LED lighting project. This is to be funded from the Net Zero Initiatives reserve as detailed in paragraph 5.4.2
- 6.) to include an additional capital budget of £5,600 to pay the retention sum for the Crinkle Crankle Wall and that this is funded from the Major Projects Reserve as detailed in paragraph 5.4.3
- 7) to include an additional capital budget of £30,000 to rethatch the Collector's Cabin roof and that this is to be funded from the Asset Management reserve as detailed in paragraph 5.4.4
- 8) to include an additional capital budget of £23,400 to develop the customer services C3 software and is to be funded from the Development Plan reserve. as detailed in paragraph 5.4

222 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND UPDATE

The Committee considered the work programme.

Due to some changes in the Cabinet work programme, it was asked that the Budget Proposals come to the Overview and Scrutiny meeting in January once they have been to Cabinet.

Resolved – that the committee’s work plan be discussed outside the meeting to address potential changes in when the budget information will be coming to the Committee for discussion.

223 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

Not required.

The meeting ended at 11.55 am.

Chairman