

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 11 December 2024 in the Council Chamber - Council Offices at 9.30 am

Committee Members Present: Cllr N Dixon (Chairman) Cllr S Penfold (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr P Bailey
Cllr J Boyle
Cllr A Fletcher
Cllr V Holliday

Cllr M Batey
Cllr C Cushing
Cllr M Hankins
Cllr L Vickers

Members also attending: Cllr L Shires
Cllr A Brown
Cllr A Fitch-Tillett

Officers in Attendance: Tina Stankley – Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer
Cara Jordan – AD Legal and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Emma Childs – PA to the Corporate Leadership Team

Also in attendance: Members of the Public

224 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Heinrich and Cllr Housden

225 SUBSTITUTES

None in attendance.

226 PUBLIC QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS

Mr Foster, Chair of the Stalham Town Local Plan committee and the Stalham Town Team, was invited to speak by the Chair.

Mr Foster addressed the Committee and stated that Stalham has created its own local plan as when the District plan was created Stalham was not happy with the way they were represented.

Stalham is keen to represent itself as it is felt that Stalham is at the bottom of the list for the District Council, with the highest level of social and economic deprivation in North Norfolk.

During the previous budget proceed Stalham were told that they could not expect high levels of investment as the District Council does not own many assets in Stalham. Therefore, why are the toilets being proposed for closure given they are one of the few assets NNDC holds in Stalham.

The District Council asked Stalham to take part in the national high street task force set up by the Government. Residents have attended meetings and workshops and set up a town team to look at the high street. Three Government advisors have been shown the high street and they have been impressed by the changes and adaptations that the high street has made to meet changing needs.

The high street no longer only serves a retail function it now has a service and social function - Optician, Vet, every service is available.

Stalham has also started to introduce activities in the high street.
The committee want people to use Stalham high street and for this to be viable people must have access to a toilet.

Due to the ageing population in Stalham they have more need for the toilet than most. Access to a toilet is necessary to allow older residents to feel confident in coming to events on the high street.

227 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 November 2024 were approved as a true and accurate record and signed by the Chairman, subject to a change on Page 2 where the s had been missed off Cllr Hankins' name.

228 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None

229 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Dixon declared a nonpecuniary interest in the petition for Stalham as he currently sits as the County Councillor for Stalham.

230 PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

A petition had been submitted in respect on the Stalham Town public toilet closure and approved by the Monitoring Officer. It was decided at the Overview and Scrutiny meeting on 13 December for this to be discussed.

The Monitoring Officer spoke and outlined the background for the petition.
A report went before Cabinet on 09 September which proposed full or winter closures of a number of public toilets. The Stalham toilets were one of these toilets, identified as having low usage and other facilities available in nearby businesses.

Subsequently the Council received a petition which the Monitoring officer confirmed was a valid ward petition.

The aim of the petition is to not close the public toilets in Stalham until further consultation has been undertaken and new toilets are put in place.

The Committee were advised that the potential options they could consider were:

- i. Note receipt of the petition and take no further action;
- ii. Agree that appropriate action has already been taken, or is planned, and no further action is necessary;
- iii. Request a report from the relevant officer;
- iv. Require to be undertaken a detailed scrutiny review, gathering evidence, prior to making recommendations to the relevant committee; Cabinet, or Full Council
- v. Refer the matter to another Committee, Cabinet or to Full Council where, in the view of the Committee, appropriate action has not been taken or planned, and it is significant enough to merit this

The Monitoring Officer also advised members that whilst there are no particular resource implication in the discussion of the petition, any outcome may impact upon the Council's finances and resources and any recommendations should be commensurate and considered with regard to Council resources, including actions for officers.

It was noted that the management and maintenance of Council's public toilets stock was considered by Cabinet in light of a worsening financial detailed in the MTF5.

Cllr Taylor, lead petitioner, was invited to present the petition.

Cllr Taylor began by thanking Officer Henry for his work behind the scenes on the petition.

The petition had one objective which was to highlight the strength of feeling following the decision to progress the closure of the toilet block in Stalham.

It was felt that this decision was a massive retrograde step, which had the potential to damage the local economy and harm the wellbeing and health of residents.

The availability of local and well-maintained public toilet facilities is intrinsically linked to the health of our communities.

This decision if actioned would leave Stalham as the only town in the District, without public toilet facilities.

Over 1,500 people signed the petition, some of whom live in Stalham, many of whom live in villages which Stalham serves and some who visit Stalham every year on holiday.

Tourism is the cornerstone of the economy in North Norfolk and the need for this provision in Stalham cannot be highlighted enough.

Stalham is a key gateway for those moving from inland locations to a wide swathe of the North Norfolk Coastline.

The toilets are signposted off a principal transportation route the A149.

Stalham also has the biggest boatyard in the Norfolk Broads.

The damage that this closure could cause in terms of both financial and perceptive terms cannot be underestimated.

NNDC are due to meet with Stalham Town Council to discuss potential arrangements and therefore we would like to push the Committee to look to recommendation 3 to allow further discussions to take place.

Cllr Shires, Portfolio holder, thanked the committee for hearing the petition.

Cllr Shires commended Cllr Taylor and Cllr Bayes because without hard working councillors, communities do not get heard.

Cllr Shires explained that the Council are currently at the start of the consultation and no decisions have yet been made regarding three of the four toilets earmarked for closure.

Some positive news was announced at the last Cabinet meeting that the Norfolk Wildlife Trust will be taking on the running and management of the toilet facility at Hickling, ensuring this will remain open for the future.

It was confirmed that a meeting has been arranged with Stalham Town Council and that the Council are looking to work with communities to find solutions to this issue.

Whilst the Council has a budget need presently, we need to ensure we protect the District's assets for the future.

There is a fear in light of current devolution conversations that if toilets are not moved to be held and managed within the community, they will be put at risk of closure in the future.

Cllr Penfold thanked Cllr Taylor for bringing this Committee and asked if usage data is available for the Stalham toilets.

Cllr Taylor replied that that data provided by the District Council does show that the usage for these toilets is lower than in other market towns. However, when Councillors have been out in the town the flow of people into the toilet was much higher than the data that had been provided. One of the asks is for the data to be properly drawn out to ensure decisions are made on the best available information.

Cllr Shires explained that counters were placed on the door, utilities bills have been analysed and show low water and consumables usage at these facilities and mobile phone data is used for location positioning.

Cllr Penfold asked Cllr Shires to confirm that the toilets will remain open until a solution is found.

Cllr Shires guaranteed that the toilets will remain open for the foreseeable future. Any decision will have to go through Cabinet and all discussions will be kept in the public domain.

Cllr Cushing agreed with Cllr Penfold on the need for accurate data around the usage of the data.

Cllr Cushing expressed his concerns that public toilet facilities are key to the survival of Market Towns and that Stalham is not being involved in discussions regarding this key facility.

Cllr Cushing proposed option 3 be taken forward by the committee and asked where the Stalham High Street Task Force fit into these proposals.

Cllr Taylor explained that the High Street Task Force brings community groups together. There is strong feeling from Community Groups that they do not want to see toilets closed. There is intense concern that these may be mothballed while discussions are ongoing. At a recent Conference it was stated that good public toilets are required in order for market towns to thrive.

The Monitoring Officer made some enquiries as to the position of the Stalham High Street Task Force. Officer Young has explained that there are no regeneration schemes currently in place for Stalham. The Stalham High Street Task Force was a government funded project that gave recommendations for stakeholders and businesses in the town on ways they could work together for the benefit of the High Street.

Cllr Taylor explained that the High Street Task Force is in its infancy and will provide the starting point for a regeneration scheme. There is also £20,000 in the budget for public toilets in Stalham.

Officer Stankley updated the Committee that the deadline has already passed for the Changing Places Facilities Grant and there was no agreed plan for Stalham.

Cllr Taylor felt that it was unacceptable that Cllr Bayes and himself had not been involved in the discussions and were not aware that the scheme had been deemed unachievable in Stalham.

Cllr Holliday said that she was most upset to hear that Stalham would not be getting a Changing Places Facility given the large elderly population. It is these decisions that disenfranchise people within that District.

Cllr Shires explained that it was not possible to progress the scheme with the provider who had the space for this facility.

Officer Stankley confirmed what Cllr Shires said and stated that NNDC weren't able to progress the scheme at Stalham, at the proposed site. The grant was only available until March 2024 and there was no scheme available to go forward with in this time.

Cllr Holliday asked if discussions were held with the Town Council and Local Councillors.

Cllr Shires took away the action to speak to Officers and find out why Local Members were not kept informed about the fact the proposal could not be moved forward.

Cllr Taylor was deeply upset and stated that had the Local Councillors been kept informed that could have offered an alternative site for this important provision.

Cllr Dixon sought clarification about the Richardsons' announcement about an investment programme to build new facilities to encourage day visitors and whether discussions had been had with Richardsons about whether the District Council could partner with them in this endeavour to achieve enhanced public toilet facilities.

Officer Stankley responded that discussions were had with the museum, but the site offered was not suitable due to the prohibitive cost and the District Council couldn't find a suitable site that was affordable to progress with.

Cllr Vickers asked what Cllr Taylor hoped to get from the report if option 3 was proposed by the Committee.

Cllr Taylor replied that the main outcome for the report would be to assess the damage that would be caused by the closure of the toilets on local residents, business, events and street fayres.

Cllr Vickers seconded Cllr Cushing's proposal that the committee vote for option 3.

Cllr Taylor explained that the report would help with conversations with local groups and organisations, as these need to be held from a position of information.

Cllr Penfold – to have as much information as possible will ensure informed decisions. Growth, community impact, etc. discussions on best information available.

Committee Discussion

The Monitoring Officer explained that if the Committee were minded to recommend option 3 further specifics would be required as to what would be expected within the report.

Cllr Dixon stated there were a number of points which had been raised that may require further exploration including:

- The number of assets the District Council own in Stalham.
- Levels of Socio-economic deprivation in Stalham.
- High street task force project
- Stalham would be the only town in the district which would not have public toilets – justification about why that is the case if the decision is taken.
- Work to be done regarding further opportunities.

- Facilities remaining in use while the decision is being made
- Call for further usage information
- Factual report and evidence that supports a case one way or another.
- Impact of growth in Stalham.

Cllr Penfold concurred that the list provided a very good starting point and stressed that above all the report must be factual. The question that needs to be answered is does Stalham need public toilets. Cllr Shires and Cllr Taylor need to agree what the report should contain. Town council discussions should also factor into the report.

Cllr Taylor agreed to work together with Cllr Shires to formulate the report. The report doesn't need to stop conversations but should feed into the discussions.

Cllr Dixon recommended that the author of report should include opportunities for Cllr Shires and Cllr Taylor to inform the body of the report.

Cllr Cushing asked that the report contain information about the costs of running the service, other options for service provision and the impact of not having the toilets on the wider community.

Cllr Shires responded that this needs to be part of a bigger conversation and that the Council need to ensure that we bring the community along with us.

Cllr Penfold agreed that the Committee does not want the report to get in the way of any potential solution that is found in the meantime.

Overview and Scrutiny request an officer report be prepared by Director of Resources to provide information on Stalham public toilets, covering:

- **Details as to how levels of usage has been captured**
- **Costs of maintaining this asset and cost comparisons**
- **Impact of not having these facilities from an assets and social economic perspective**
- **Any alternative opportunities including partnership funding**
- **Understanding how this aligns with the High Street Task Force**
- **Reasons for closure, and why appropriate, being the only town in the district that would be without public toilets.**
- **Consultation with Cllrs Shires Taylor and Bayes**
- **Conversations with STC to continue in the meantime**

The Chair moved to a vote on recommendation 3.

In favour - 10
Against - 0
Abstain – 0

The recommendation was agreed.

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

None

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

The recommendations from the last meeting were accepted in full by Cabinet.

233 FEES & CHARGES 2025/2026

Officer Stankley explained that the report provides details of how the Council sets the fees and charges. There has also been a request for a further fee to be included within the report. Legal advice to third party public service organisations which will be at the solicitor's hourly rate.

Cllr Dixon confirmed that the Committee had considered car park charges and chalets and beach huts fees as separate topics.

Cllr Holliday expressed her pleasure at seeing the benchmarking undertaken by the Environmental Health Team. She asked if there were any other areas that would benefit from benchmarking or were due to have benchmarking carried out in 2025.

Cllr Shires answered that Officers always use some element of bench marking when looking to set the fees for the following year as the Council needs to ensure our fees and charges are competitive. Cllr Shires will ask that evidence is included as part of report moving forward.

Cllr Cushing enquired about the new fees for pre-planning advice and whether any calculations have been made as to the additional income this will bring in and any adverse impact this might have.

Cllr Brown responded that NNDC do charge for pre application planning advice, but it is at the discretion of the Council to set the fees. Can relax charges on a case-by-case basis.

Cllr Hankins asked why the waste collection fees have not yet been published.

Cllr Shires explained that the PFH was not in attendance and therefore a written response will follow the committee.

Officer Stankley responded that due to the complex nature of the contract and discussions are ongoing. It is hoped to have the full details ready for Full Council in March.

Overview and Scrutiny approved the recommendations within the report.

234 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND UPDATE

The Monitoring Officer provided an update on the ongoing problems within Democratic services. The recruitment for the democratic officer has not yet been successful. This will be going back out to advert next week. Steps are being put in place to assist democratic services.

235 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

None

The meeting ended at 11.10 am.

Chairman