

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 12 February 2025 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 C Cushing Cllr M Hankins Cllr V Holliday	Cllr J Boyle Cllr A Fletcher Cllr P Heinrich
Members also attending:	Cllr. Tim Adams Cllr. Wendy Fredericks	Leader of the Council - Portfolio Holder for Executive Support & Legal Services Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing & People Services
Officers in Attendance	Steve Blatch - Chief Executive Emma Childs - PA to Corporate Leadership Team Nicky Debbage - Housing Strategy and Delivery Manager Cara Jordan - Assistant Director for Finance, Assets, Legal & Monitoring Officer Emma Hallums - Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) Karen Hill - Assistant Director People Services Cara Jordan - Assistant Director for Finance, Assets, Legal & Monitoring Officer David Knight - Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) Tina Stankley - Director for Resources / S151 Officer	

249 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

It was noted that **(i)** Councillor Liz Vickers had tendered her apologies for absence; and **(ii)** Councillor Angie Fitch-Tillett was attending as her substitute.

250 PUBLIC QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS

None received.

251 MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 22ND JANUARY, 2025.

Minutes of the meeting held on 22nd January, 2025 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

252 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of urgent business.

253 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interests were received at the meeting.

254 PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None received.

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

None received.

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

None received.

257 HOMELESSNESS TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The Committee received a report that provided a response and update on actions to address the recommendations as agreed by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee's Homelessness Task & Finish group.

Questions Responses and Discussion

The mains points of the discussion maybe summarised as follows:

The Committee:

- I. In response to a question raised by Councillor Boyle it was **noted** that homeless pods are primarily a temporary shelter that can provide a safe space for people experiencing homelessness that should be used as a stepping stone to permanent housing.
- II. **Noted** that the Council's homelessness problem is not really about rough sleepers. Also, the Council has accessed government grant programs and now has five units of ex-rough sleepers' accommodation in one-bedroom flats that allows someone a two-year tenancy to enable these individuals get on their feet, to learn useful life skills, and to enable to them move on into more permanent housing. That is not to say that the Council has rejected the idea of homeless pods but that officers are looking to identify the most effective use of temporary accommodation.
- III. **Noted** that Councillor Heinrich had expressed his concerns that the private rental sector in North Norfolk is shrinking primarily due to a high influx of holiday homes and second residences that compete with long-term tenants for available housing, pushing up prices and making it difficult to find affordable private rentals in the district.

This situation is further exacerbated by a lack of new affordable housing development to meet local needs. Therefore, it was suggested that Councillor Fredericks (Portfolio Holder for Housing & People Services) should write to central government, setting out the situation in North Norfolk regarding the private rental sector reducing housing stock levels and the key reasons for the withdrawals and ask central government for action to address the progressive stock loss and help this Council retain and even grow private sector stock levels.

- IV. Following comments from Councillor Penfold **agreed** that housing providers are a key partner in the Council's overall homelessness strategy **(1)** offering readily available housing options for people at risk of becoming homeless, **(2)** offering supported housing for those with complex needs, **(3)** sharing data on housing availability, **(4)** working together to address homelessness in Norfolk.
- V. Following comments from Councillors Fredericks and Holliday it was **understood** that the money generated from the council tax premium on second homes would be used to fund affordable housing and homelessness services.
- VI. **Noted** that: **(1)** there are a significant proportion of second homes in North Norfolk; and **(2)** following discussions with the county council it has been agreed that from 1st April, 2025 it will set aside 25% of the council tax premium to fund the services for affordable housing and homelessness in the District.
- VII. **Agreed** that the Council should make use of this additional money to address the immediate need for temporary accommodation and the wider issues around housing and homelessness in the area.
- VIII. **Agreed** that it would be helpful to receive details of the timeline for formalising the benefit that the Council will receive from the second home council tax premium (**e.g.** invest into land and buildings and refurbishment of long-term empty properties).
- IX. Following comments from Councillor Fredericks it was **agreed** that as the government is developing a national strategy to end homelessness it would be sensible for the Council to home **(1)** their homelessness strategy timeline in line with the that of the governments: and **(2)** a stratagem based on the money that is available for homelessness.
- X. **Agreed** that the Council are challenged to a greater extent because of North Norfolk's fairly unique rural and coastal nature. Therefore, it is important that **(1)** the government has an understanding of these particular factors as this will impact on funding the Council will receive in future, and **(2)** the Council feeds into that process to obtain the most beneficial result for North Norfolk.
- XI. Following comments from Councillor Penfold **noted** those further actions and the timescales associated with them which allowed the Committee to **(1)** track trends over a period of time, **(2)** identify patterns, **(3)** accurately assess progress by comparing data points from different time periods; and **(4)** make the analysis more meaningful and actionable.

- XII. **Noted** that when the Council accesses private rented accommodation to house homeless individuals, key issues include: **(1)** limited availability of suitable properties at affordable prices, **(2)** concerns about difficulties in vetting landlords and properties, **(3)** potential for higher costs compared to social housing, **(4)** challenges in ensuring consistent quality and tenant protections within the private rental market, often leading to concerns about the suitability of the accommodation for vulnerable individuals
- XIII. **Noted** that landlords are leaving the rental sector due to a combination of factors including rising costs, stricter regulations, increased taxation on rental properties, particularly from recent legislative changes, and concerns about potential future policy shifts, which are making it less financially viable to remain landlords, especially for the smaller investors.
- XIV. Following comments by Councillor Penfold it was **noted** that the homelessness charity Emmaus offer a stable environment with the opportunity to gain new skills and help people to regain any lost self-esteem and confidence, helping them to get back on their feet and create a new future for themselves.
- XV. Following comments from Cllr Fredericks the Committee **noted** said that the Council has been working with the East of England Local Government Association (EELGA) to review the effectiveness of the Council's temporary accommodation provision.
- XVI. **Noted** that the EELGA report had highlighted the challenges and the need for housing development which is one of the biggest challenges facing the East of England today, and that more needs to be done to support new development of social housing in the area **e.g.** resource are needed to enable providers to keep rents low.
- XVII. **Agreed** that "Affordable" rent is not affordable for those on low incomes, especially when rent and deposits are needed in advance to obtain a tenancy. In addition, the reform of local government could significantly impact the provision of social housing by altering the funding, capacity, and priorities of the Council potentially leading to a reduction in the development and management of social housing units, due to decentralization or reduced funding for housing initiatives.

In conclusion the:

Chairman **MOVED** and Overview and Scrutiny committee **RESOLVED** to recommend that:

That the:

1. the Portfolio Holder for Housing & People Services writes to central government, setting out the situation in North Norfolk regarding the private rental sector reducing housing stock levels and the key reasons for the withdrawals and asks central government for action to

address the progressive stock loss and help this Council retain and even grow private sector stock levels; and

2. Committee should receive a further report on this subject in July 2025 to coincide with the pre scrutiny of the homeless strategy.

258 **CORPORATE PLAN 2023-27 ACTION PLAN – TO END OF QUARTER 3 – 31 DECEMBER 2024**

The Committee received a progress report showed that twenty-six of the actions are in progress and on track and nine have been completed. It was noted that **(i)** one action is identified as red and six actions are identified as amber, **(ii)** there has been a reduction in the number of actions identified as amber from sixteen in the previous quarter to six; and **(iii)** the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) have reviewed actions flagged as red and amber in the last quarter.

Questions Responses and Discussion

The mains points of the discussion (Including those issues raised by Councillor Cushing, Hankins, Holliday, Fletcher and Heinrich) maybe summarised as follows:

The Committee:

- I. **Noted** that the activities detailed in the Action Plan have been developed in support of the five themes in the adopted Corporate Plan recognising the increasing pressure on the Council's budget, the moves towards establishing a Combined Authority for Norfolk and Suffolk under the Government's English Devolution programme and the proposed Local Government Reorganisation which will change the context in which the District Council operates, alongside continuing with "Business As Usual" to maintain service delivery for the district's residents until any proposals for new unitary councils in Norfolk are agreed.
- II. **Noted** that the actions proposed seek to balance the capacity of the organisation to deliver, taking into account the staff and financial resources available to the Council, the need to focus on supporting the transition of services into any new unitary council(s) and the potential to access external funding or partnership resources, with the aspirations laid out in the Corporate Plan.
- III. **Noted** the Council's had hosted a major summit event in partnership with the Bacton Energy Hub, National Gas and key stakeholders on 14th January 2025. The Bacton Energy Hub (formerly known as Bacton Gas Terminal) has a complex of five gas terminals, which are to be transitioned to Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage (CCUS). It was **noted** that the summit had, had three key aims:
 1. To **raise** with the UK Government the future significant opportunities which operators, local stakeholders and future

investors believe exist for the Bacton Energy Hub site in terms of decarbonising the existing natural gas operations, and the development of the CCUS proposals.

2. **Promote** the benefits of greater collaboration in securing a renewable electricity supply to Bacton to support the decarbonisation of the existing gas processing and transmission operations and increased electricity and water availability to support potential future hydrogen production at Bacton; and
 3. **Seek** to agree how the future opportunities for Bacton might be shared with the local community to build community understanding and support for future developments at the site.
- IV. **Noted** that the Council is working to **(a)** develop a deeper understanding of the constraints of existing mobile and digital infrastructure in North Norfolk; and **(b)** lobby key operators and providers so as to reduce the “digital divide.”
- V. **Agreed** that the primary focus should be on enhancing broadband internet access, particularly by rolling out full-fibre networks to rural areas, as North Norfolk is currently considered one of the worst areas in the UK for broadband speeds, and also addressing poor mobile phone signal coverage across the region, which is a major concern for residents and businesses alike
- VI. **Agreed** that this can be achieved through collaboration with mobile network operators and government initiatives to expand network infrastructure in rural areas.
- VII. **Agreed** that for those living in rural areas, bad phone signal is more than just a nuisance, it can be a lifeline lost. Vulnerable residents may find themselves unable to call for help in emergencies, and poor connectivity can leave people feeling isolated and cut off from vital services, friends, and family. Mobile connectivity is no longer a luxury or fashion item. Today, it is an essential part of daily life; while people still use phones to make calls, they spend more time using the data connection to run their businesses, access social media, bank accounts or to do their daily shop. Local Councils rely on mobile networks to enable residents to access services and for officers to work off-site remotely or, with the advent of faster 4G and 5G technologies, to introduce smart lighting or refuse collection, as well as improved residential care.
- VIII. **Agreed** that the Council needs to act as a digital champion to promote investment to address any competitive disadvantage by including it within their strategic thinking by considering mobile connectivity up front **e.g.** examine the causes when mobile phone mast applications fail; advance a map of signal “not spots” from information gathered by the current surveying program; and support providers to improve mobile signals strength, evaluate how the Council communicates its actions regarding this issue to both residents and businesses.
- IX. **Agreed** that there is still a need for banking services to be developed as the withdrawal of banking services from towns such

as Fakenham has disadvantaged sections of the local community
e.g. the vulnerable and the digitally excluded.

In conclusion the Chairman **MOVED** and Overview and Scrutiny committee **RESOLVED** to

1. **note** that Corporate Plan 2023-27 Action Plan 2024-2025; and
2. **ask** that the Cabinet undertakes a review of the available options to:
 - a. analyse the reasons why mobile phone mast applications fail.
 - b. develop a map of signal "not spots" from data gathered by the current surveying program.
 - c. support providers to improve mobile signals strength, evaluate how it communicates its actions regarding this issue to both residents and businesses.

259 PEER REVIEW FEEDBACK

The Committee **noted**:

(A) that following the Corporate Peer Challenge in September 2023, the District Council had developed an Action Plan, as a response to the Peer Challenge recommendations, for delivery over the period to June 2025; and
(B) progress made in delivering against the actions in the Action Plan over the period to December 2024 when the Local Government Associations (LGA) Peer Review Team had returned to the Council to assess the progress made against the recommendations made in their original report.

Questions Responses and Discussion

The mains points of the discussion (Including those issues raised by Councillor Cushing, Hankins and Boyle) is summarised as follows:

The Committee:

- I. **Noted** that it was clear to Peer Review Team that the Committee is working much better with improved attendance, debate, and outcomes.
- II. **Noted** the new strategic oversight boards that had been established in July 2024 to provide clarity of operational and strategic management. With each board being chaired by a director with a focus on monitoring progress and performance and reporting to members by exception.
- III. **Noted** that in regard to of the support offers available for members around devolution and local government reorganisation the LGA will be providing support to councils to help them address specific challenges at all stages of devolution and local government reorganisation (LGR).

In conclusion the Chairman **MOVED** and Overview and Scrutiny committee **RESOLVED** to:

1. **note** the report of the Peer Review Team's, follow up visit to the Council on 12th December 2024.

260 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) 2025-28

The Committee received and noted a report that: **(i)** outlined how Council's priorities will be achieved by setting out the framework within which resources that are available to the Council over the medium term and the financial challenges facing the Council in terms of future funding gaps; and **(ii)** through disciplined execution of this strategy, the Council will achieve financial sustainability while continuing to serve the community effectively.

Questions Responses and Discussion

The main points of the discussion (Including those issues raised by Councillor Cushing, Fletcher and Heinrich) have been summarised as follows:

The Committee:

- I. **Noted** that developing a detailed precise plan to achieve the required savings over the next 3 years has been challenging, as it depends on both internal and external factors. Internal factors include the council's operational efficiency and the ability to innovate, while external factors range from economic conditions and government policy changes to unforeseen global or regional events.
- II. **Noted** whilst higher interest rates have improved returns on investments, the cost of borrowing has increased, therefore meaning that any borrowing either short term to cover potential shortfalls in cash flows, or longer-term borrowing which may be used to cover larger projects becomes more expensive. Therefore, requiring careful consideration in the current interest rate environment as when interest rates are low, the Council earns less on their investments, reducing the income that can support service delivery. When interest rates rise, the cost of servicing debt increases, which can reduce the funds available for other services if borrowing is sought.
- III. **Noted** that given the current uncertainties around issues such as changes to the Local Government funding mechanisms it is essential to identify new opportunities to either increase income, increase efficiency through the redesign of services, explore new partnership models for service delivery etc and this will be one of the main challenges over the medium term.
- IV. **Noted** that whilst the Council's reserves provide some level of comfort over the short term and can be used to address budget deficits this is not a sustainable financial strategy for the medium to long term.
- V. **Noted** that the MTFS had been significantly restructured and redrafted from comments received from this Committee at its meeting of the 13th November, 2024 and approved by Cabinet on 2nd December, 2024 with further work to be undertaken following receipt of the

- Financial Settlement.
- VI. **Noted** the Council generates income through various fees and charges for services provided to residents and businesses. These charges help fund essential services and maintain financial sustainability.
- VII. **Noted** there are currently reserves that can be used to fund one-off costs for projects that will deliver a longer-term benefit. **e.g.** to fund one-off restructuring costs, where a restructuring will deliver a longer term saving for a service and for the implementation and project costs for the Business Transformation programme that will deliver future savings. The use of reserves in this way will be considered as part of the full business case for individual project proposals, taking into account the payback period of the project along with indirect financial implications, for example, reduced balances available for investment and the associated loss of investment income.

In conclusion the Committee:

The Chairman **MOVED** and Overview and Scrutiny committee **RESOLVED** to

1. To **note** the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy.

261 THE CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received and considered a programme setting out the current work programme of the Councils Cabinet.

Accordingly, the Chairman **MOVED** and Overview and Scrutiny committee **RESOLVED** to note the current work programme of the Councils Cabinet.

262 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND UPDATE

The Democratic Services (Scrutiny) Officer advised that there had been a change to the workplan since the last meeting.

The Chairman **MOVED** and Overview and Scrutiny committee **RESOLVED** to that the revised committee's work plan be agreed.

263 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The agenda circulated contained no exempt/confidential business and there was therefore no requirement to exclude the press and public to allow for its consideration.

The meeting ended at 12.30 pm.

Chairman