

## OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 16 July 2025 in the Council Chamber - Council Offices at 9.30 am

<b>Committee Members Present:</b>	Cllr P Bailey	Cllr J Boyle
	Cllr C Cushing	Cllr A Fletcher
	Cllr V Holliday (Chairman)	Cllr M Gray
	Cllr K Bayes	Cllr M Hankins
<b>Members also attending:</b>	Cllr W Fredericks (PH for Housing and People's Services)	Cllr L Shires (PH for Finance, Estates and Property Services)
<b>Officers in Attendance:</b>	Democratic Services Manager, Assistant Director Finance & Assets, Assistant Director Legal & Governance, Monitoring Officer, Housing Strategy and Delivery Manager, Housing Options Manager, Director of Service Delivery and Assistant Director People Services	

**Also in attendance:**

### 27 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllrs P Heinrich, S Penfold, C Rouse and N Housden.

### 28 SUBSTITUTES

None.

### 29 PUBLIC QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS

None received.

### 30 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the committee held on 11<sup>th</sup> June were approved as a correct record, subject the following appendment:

Anglian Water will discuss their answers when they come back to speak at the committee. If members have any specific, further, questions, before then, these will be collated and Anglian Water asked to respond before so they can be discussed at that later meeting.

### 31 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

### 32 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None received

### 33 PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None received

**34      CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE BY A MEMBER**

There were no matters for consideration referred to the Committee by a member.

**35      2024/25 OUTTURN REPORT**

The Chairman invited the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Cllr L Shires, to present this item.

Cllr Shires thanked the Committee and the Officers for their hard work. Cllr Shires noted the work done in 24/25 would put the council in a stronger position for the 26/27-year budget.

Cllr Shires summarised the report and the outturn position for 2024/25 which was a general fund surplus of £0.622m

Cllr Shires wished to add an additional change from Pg. 41 5.6(a) that the underspend in the Purchase of Bin capital budget be put towards the cost of delivering food waste which is not fully funded by the Council. She has suggested to Cabinet this be moved to an additional capital budget to help bring up the shortfall.

Cllr Shires suggested this be an additional recommendation.

The Chair then invited members to speak.

In response to Cllr Fletcher's question, regarding the surplus and the general reserve levels, as to why the Council is retaining the surplus for future eventualities, Cllr Shires said that early indicators suggest a significant shortfall in Government funding for next year and with that future uncertainty it was prudent to budget for a shortfall with the surplus the Council is putting in general reserves.

Cllr Bayes highlighted that none of the capital bids were east of North Walsham and questioned how this cycle could be broken to enable investment to come into Stalham, as all assets had been sold off in those areas. Cllr Shires explained the 25/26 budget would be monitored for future investment and that Stalham is referred to in the corporate plan. The Committee was informed that the Leader, Cllr Adams was positive about the budget, and investment, once a vision for the area was in place. It was recognised that Stalham, and other eastern areas, would be in a safer place to receive further investment beyond any current Council set up if local members for those areas continued to promote that need.

Cllr Shires provided assurance to Cllr Boyle on savings on repairs and maintenance to assets. Cllr Shires agreed that assets had previously not been invested in prior to this or previous administrations due to budget constraints but assured the committee that the underspend was only due to sound budget management by the Officers. Cllr Boyle thanked Officers and Portfolio Holders for their scrutiny.

Cllr Cushing said he was pleased to see the surplus from 2024/25 but expressed concerns around sound financial planning as back in February, an approximately £1m deficit had been anticipated and this had turned into a £0.660m surplus. He highlighted the £1.6m variance on forecast and asked how such a big variance could be accounted for. Cllr Cushing referred to the net cost of service which went from £23.6m in January to just shy of £19m a variance of £4.7 million. He then questioned what assurance the Committee had in any future estimates provided given the extreme differences.

Cllr Shires explained to the Committee, that previously it had been too late to act when a deficit was identified, so the budget monitoring process had been reviewed and changed. Technical accounting could appear delayed, but it was preferable to know the financial trajectory earlier rather than discovering issues too late.

The Assistant Director Finance and Assets explained that the £4.7m deficit was before any transfer to and from reserves, it appeared to be a large variant but excluded any use of reserves. The delays were due to reporting, either because of year end accounting adjustments or timing differences. Parking income and planning fees were hard to forecast and therefore not always fully reflected in the period 10 Budget Monitoring report.

In response to Cllr Cushing, the Assistant Director Finance and Assets explained employee costs would have been budgeted for at start of year. The variance reflected the vacancies that had not been filled, such as the Director of Resources post which was currently vacant.

In response to a further comment from Cllr Cushing, the Assistant Director Finance and Assets explained that there was every intention to fill those posts, and they were not being held open purposefully to create an underspend but that there would be specific reasons within each department as to why they remained vacant. Cllr Cushing summarised by saying he was concerned about the level of discrepancy. Cllr Shires added that she was not concerned as this is a factual report, but she acknowledged that there was a request from Cllr Cushing to focus on staffing costs in budget monitoring going forward.

Cllr Cushing wished to make Cllr Shires aware of a typing error on Pg.36, 3.10, Table 2d, 2024/25 Outturn should be £36,358 not £26,358 as stated.

The Chair added that there was no indication that delivery or performance had been affected and asked if their wellbeing had been impacted by the increase in workload and asked where this information would be captured. Cllr Shires replied that performance is captured elsewhere, and today's was a factual, data-based report and said that she would check with Cllr Adams, in whose portfolio it sat, as to what was being done to monitor staff wellbeing.

Cllr Fredericks wished to celebrate that both Revenues and Benefits teams were

nominated for national awards which indicated a high level of performance as well as celebrating all staff who maintained the highest delivery of standards which were reflected through performance reviews.

The Director of Service Delivery assured the committee that HR did monitor staff wellbeing through typical indicators reflective of the staffing cohort, such as sickness absence, and they were at or below national or regional averages, for a local authority. The JSCC (Joint Staff Consultative Committee) received reports on such issues and considered the position of wellbeing by those measures on a regular basis.

The Chair asked if the impact of Local Government Reform (LGR) had been considered on staff wellbeing. The Director of Service Delivery replied that once further information was received from Government this could be brought to the Committee to discuss.

Cllr Bayes queried if the gap in staffing was due to the lack of or qualifications of staff applying and whether the devolution agenda was having an impact on numbers applying and leaving. Cllr Shires acknowledged this was a sound question but not relevant to the 2024/25 Outturn report. The Director of Service Delivery assured the Committee that the numbers applying for posts at the Council was very good for several positions, citing the 31 applicants for the recent Assistant Director position as an example, but explained the conscious decision around managing staffing budgets due to the financial deficit. The automatic delay and lengthy recruitment process, together with many local government workers moving between neighbouring authorities, accounted for the natural delays in filling vacancies.

The Chair referred to page 45, capital project budgets being rolled forwards, specifically those which are funded by borrowing, and wondered if there was any flexibility around that borrowing. The Assistant Director of Finance and Assets explained that this reflected internal borrowing to fund the project to help with cash flow constraints but was a stand-alone for a 1-year agreement not tied to a specific project which is held with the Public Works Loan Board (PWLb). These projects were managed on a case-by-case basis when there were no other means to fund the project such as capital receipts or grant funding, so the Council borrowed against Minimum Revenue Provision and then effectively repaid itself.

**The Committee RESOLVED** to make the following recommendations to Full Council:

- a) The provisional outturn position for the General Fund revenue account for 2024/25 (as shown in Appendix A).**
- b) The transfers to and from reserves as detailed within the report (and Appendix C).**
- c) The surplus of £0.622m be transferred to the General reserve to mitigate future funding shortfalls.**
- d) The balance on the General Reserve of £2.825m following the transfer**

outlined above.

- e) The surplus of £0.384m relating to retained business rates be transferred to the Business Rates reserve.
- f) The financing of the 2024/25 capital programme as detailed within the report and at Appendix D.
- g) The updated capital programme for 2025/26 to 2030/31 and scheme financing as outlined within the report and detailed at Appendix E.
- h) Approval of additional funding to cover capital project overspends of £10,816 as detailed in paragraph 5.7.
- i) The roll-forward of existing capital project funding from 2024/25 into 2025/26 as detailed in paragraph 5.9.
- j). To note the addition of £55,000 towards the New Play Area (Sheringham, The Lees) to be funded from the Asset Management Reserve in 2025/26 for a total project budget of £120,000
- k) The addition of £6,081 towards the Cromer Offices LED Lighting in the Capital Programme to be funded from Capital Receipts in 2025/26 for a total project budget of £178,796.
- l) The addition of £20,000 towards the Public Conveniences (Sheringham & North Walsham) project in the Capital Programme to be funded from Capital Receipts in 2025/26 for a total project budget of £565,514.
- m) The addition of the Holt Eco Learning Space scheme for £100,000 into the 2025/26 Capital Programme to be funded by an external contribution.
- n) The addition to Pg. 41 5.6(a) that the underspend in the Purchase of Bin capital budget be put towards the cost of delivering food waste and moved to an additional capital budget to help bring up the shortfall

## **36 DEBT RECOVERY 2024-25**

Cllr Shires presented the report to the committee and congratulated the Revenues team for their hard work and their national standing and recognition.

Cllr Cushing made an observation about the low level of direct debit (DD) payments and asked if there was ongoing work to encourage more of the public to pay this way. Cllr Shires explained that there was ongoing work actively encouraging and supporting residents to switch to DDs. Cllr Shires concluded that support and education, and awareness of Council Tax Support (CTS), to help bridge financial gaps and a shift from paying by cash for instance and onto DD was needed. The Revenues team were working hard to achieve this, with the Financial Inclusion (FI) and Benefits teams, to assure residents' support was out there.

Cllr Bailey sought further clarification on charging orders. Cllr Shires assured the Committee this route was very much a last resort but would provide figures for the Committee on this as soon as possible. Cllr Shires explained that for many there were much wider issues ongoing than not paying Council Tax and the recovery methods taken were reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Cllr Shires said that the Council wanted to support residents who were struggling financially.

Cllr Boyle thanked the team for an excellent report and their hard work.

The Chair commented that the level of DD payments was also low for non-domestic rates (NDR), at 30% and asked if members should be concerned. Cllr Shires agreed it did appear low but said that it might depend on the size of the business as many small businesses would prefer to be more in control of when they paid due to cashflow for example. Cllr Shires did recognise this was something that could be explored when the next consultation with local businesses was undertaken to try and understand what the barriers were for them not paying via DD

**The Committee RESOLVED** to make the following recommendations to Full Council:

1. Approves the annual report which details the Council's write-offs, in accordance with the Council's Debt Write-Off Policy and performance in relation to revenues collection.
2. Approves the continued delegated authority as shown in appendix 2 for write offs.

**37 HOUSING BENEFIT DEBT RECOVERY REPORT - 1ST APRIL 2024 TO 31ST MARCH 2025**

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Benefits, Cllr Fredericks, presented the report to the Committee and said that she wished to highlight how much the Council's teams supported residents and always took a compassionate approach.

Cllr Cushing commented it was a challenging report to draw anything from and suggested a more readable and better layout for future versions might be helpful. He asked for the following to be included: how much was paid out in Housing Benefit; the amount of and main causes for overpayment; and what was being or might be done to recoup that money.

Cllr Cushing sought clarification regarding the information set out on Pg.118, commenting that the total overpayment to recover stood at £0.918m whereas on Pg.116 it stated the Council was required to pay back the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) 60% of the overpayment. Cllr Cushing questioned whether the risk to NNDC was £0.550m.

The Assistant Director People Services explained that the £0.918m was total debt accumulated to the Council, over a number of systems, and increased year on year. The overpayment figure changed throughout the year as, even though the Council was recovering debt, more debt was accumulated as overpayments were discovered. As people migrated to Universal Credit (UC) there was a reduction in housing benefit (HB) being paid out but also a reduction in the means for recovery as the Council cannot recover through ongoing HB benefit payments.

Cllr Cushing asked how regularly the Council paid back overpayments to the DWP and whether HB was still a benefit that the Council was responsible for overseeing. The Assistant Director People Services explained this was through an annual subsidy claim, not a repayment and that the Council would continue to pay HB until the full transition to UC was completed.

Cllr Fredericks confirmed HB was a legacy system as people slowly converted over to UC which pays a lump sum with a housing (costs) element Included.

The Assistant Director People Services clarified that UC was not currently migrating over all HB claimants and explained that pensioners were still able to claim although there were ongoing discussions for housing costs to be included in Pension Credit. The Assistant Director People Services explained that those in Temp. Accommodation and Supported Housing would need to claim and be paid HB as this was not currently part of UC benefit. It was highlighted to the Committee that there were challenges for recovery ahead, as systems changes were introduced, and the Benefits teams work level was not reducing. Although the number of claims was going down the high level of HB being paid was due to number of vulnerable customers and the many 'Change in Circumstances' for existing HB and UC claimants as these changes could affect CTS.

In response to the Chairs question regarding benchmarking across Councils in Norfolk, the Assistant Director People Services explained that the demographics of claimants was very different in each area, with North Norfolk having many older claimants compared to perhaps Norwich which had more working age and homeless claimants, The team collaborated with neighbouring authorities where possible. She added that the Benefits team had just been nominated for the team of the year in National IRRB awards.

**RESOLVED** to make the following recommendations to Full Council:

1. That Full Council approves the annual report giving details of Housing Benefit Overpayment debt recovery in accordance with the Council's Debt Recovery Policy, Write-Off Policy, and Housing Benefit Overpayment Recovery Policy.

## **38 HOMELESSNESS & ROUGH SLEEPER REVIEW**

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Benefits, Cllr Fredericks, presented the report to the committee.

The Assistant Director for People Services explained this was an early pre- scrutiny review. This stage set out the process for the review, then the review would be undertaken over the coming months, culminating in a draft and then final strategy. The team would be coming back to O&S Committee to consider the review and strategy as pre scrutiny.

Cllr Cushing asked if the new strategy would vary greatly from the existing strategy and questioned the impact of LGR. The Assistant Director People Services explained the new strategy would be mindful of LGR, but it will not change for the people who needed support. There may be risks with LGR that meant that those people would have a larger area for which to be considered for housing, and constraints may be introduced, but Officers would continue to be as compassionate as possible, remain concerned about the quality of Temp. Accommodation and the need to keep people local. Cllr Fredericks said she was a member of the East of England Housing and Homelessness Delivery Group working with other councils in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex in this respect, for 'life after' LGR.

Cllr Boyle asked if the Council was fully utilising different upstream services like the Early Help Hub and other initiatives. Cllr Fredericks confirmed Community Connectors actively encouraged people to come to the Council for help before they became homeless, the Early Help Hub team was identifying those who were at risk of homelessness. The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) was also now present in the Council offices for further support and cases involving bankruptcy etc.

Cllr Fletcher asked about the work to get empty homes back into use. Cllr Fredericks confirmed that officers were working very hard to contact and investigate any empty homes and to get them back into market sale or market rent, but explained that it was unlikely that they could be renovated to a standard where they could be used for Temp. Accommodation as they have been unused for so long and would incur costs to renovate.

The Chair asked if the review was tailored to the North Norfolk housing market. The Assistant Director People Services advised that the process itself was prescribed but when the data was assessed it would be localised. As far as empty homes are concerned, these would not help homelessness, and the strategy should be focussed on understanding what was needed to help that cohort as per the Council's allocation programme. She added homelessness was higher profile for the Council than previously.

Cllr Bailey commented that it was helpful for O&S to understand geographically (at parish level) where the need was locally to help find sites. Additionally, he felt it would be helpful to hear of success stories as currently the perception was that Temp. Accommodation costs, were a short-term funding requirement and often linked to domestic abuse, and this could help educate residents and their local communities about the challenges people faced. He also asked whether previous local accommodation schemes such as Homes for Ukraine could be rolled out in wider circumstances.

The Housing Strategy and Delivery Manager advised that, as far as information on needs was concerned, this was something that Task and Finish work group had identified. She added that annual data is sent to every local parish to show local needs figures for their area, that it was needed across the district, as there was a misconception that homelessness was not something that affected their parish, when in truth it affected all areas. A 'good news story' was a good idea and this approach was already used for promoting rural exception schemes. The Housing Strategy and Delivery Manager explained the different types of Temp Accommodation and the circumstances for when, and why, they were used and reiterated that the Council did not lose money on its Temp Accommodation. She also, confirmed that when it came to local accommodation, the model set out by Homes for Ukraine, had been considered previously and would be again in the future.

In response to Cllr Bayes question regarding communication with parishes, using heat maps as an example, Cllr Fredericks said that the Council communicated twice a year with each parish regarding the number of homeless people in their area and the contact details should they become aware of a homeless person. The Housing Options Manager added that there was data for rough sleepers but there was a reluctance to putting anything into the public domain that could identify people as the numbers were so small. The Council did provide a 'snapshot' once year for to the Government, but she felt that a heat map would not be a true reflection at any one time. There was a mechanism where people could report a rough sleeper which went to the team and additional communication was done through social media, the general public and the Council's teams to highlight the help and support for rough sleepers.

The Chair asked whether it could be identified through the data which group was most in need of support, dependency or health issues for example. The Assistant Director People Services said it was about 'sense checking' on the data and using it



wisely, bringing everything together in a review document, asking for any additional information as required, before we move into the strategy process. The Council could liaise with the parishes, through the clerks, by sharing a copy of the review encouraging them to share any changes or recommendations they had, whilst keeping them informed of any issues, and providing as much information as possible, for their area.

Cllr Boyle commented that it was too early to make any specific recommendations to localise the review process to North Norfolk.

**RESOLVED** The Committee noted the report and agreed they had provided sufficient feedback.

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

Noted

**40      THE CABINET WORK PROGRAMME**

No comments

**41      OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND UPDATE**

No comments

**42      EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

The meeting ended at 12.04 pm.

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Chairman