

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 15 October 2025 in the Council Chamber - Council Offices at 9.30 am

Committee	Cllr P Bailey	Cllr J Boyle (Vice-Chair)
Members Present:	Cllr K Bayes	Cllr S Penfold
	Cllr A Fletcher	Cllr M Gray
	Cllr M Hankins	Cllr P Heinrich
	Cllr V Holliday (Chair)	

Members also attending:	Cllr J Toye (PH for Sustainable Growth)
	Cllr L Shires (PH for Finance, Estates and Property Services)
	Cllr H Blathwayt (PH for Coast)

Officers in Attendance:	Democratic Services & Governance Manager (DSGM), Director for Resources (DFR), Deputy Monitoring Officer (DMO), Democratic Services Governance Officer (DSGO), Assistant Director Sustainable Growth (ADSG), Economic Growth Manager (EGM), Assistant Director People Services (ADPS), Housing Strategy & Delivery Manager (HSDM), Housing Options Manager (HOM).
--------------------------------	---

58 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllrs C Cushing, N Housden and C Rouse.

59 SUBSTITUTES

Cllr A Fitch-Tillett substituted for Cllr C Cushing.

60 PUBLIC QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS

None received.

61 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 17th September were approved as a correct record.

62 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None received.

63 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

64 PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

The Chair gave a statement in response to the petition group, known as Preserve Our Woods, who were looking to restore access to the path known locally as 'God's Path' in Pretty Corner Woods, Sheringham. The Chair acknowledged the corrections and viewpoints the petitioners had submitted in response to the Officers' answers at the meeting held on the 17th of September 2025 but explained that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (O&S Committee) did not have a mechanism to deal with correspondence subsequent to the petition submission. Unfortunately, the matter did not fall within the powers and functions of the O&S Committee. In addition, the Chair added that the separate complaint that had been submitted in relation to Pretty Corner Woods needed to go through due process and the Committee would be informed of its outcome. The Chair concluded by saying that the Committee encouraged officers and the petitioners to continue to maintain a dialogue with one another.

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

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

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

None received.

67 HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

It was agreed by Members no presentation was required as they had all read the report, so the Committee went straight to questions.

The ADPS confirmed they were required to carry out the review of homelessness as part of developing the new Housing Strategy. As part of that process, they were proposing to develop a single year Action Plan due to the uncertainty over funding.

Cllr Fletcher asked why the Council was only able to recover a small proportion of the Housing Benefit (HB) paid out on nightly paid accommodation. The HSDM explained that when someone presents as homeless the first, and only, option at that point is a hotel as accommodation must be ready to be moved into at short notice. The Government penalised local authorities for using nightly paid bed and breakfast as a form of temporary accommodation (TA) by only reimbursing a very small percentage of the accommodation's costs. The HSDM explained this was one of the drivers, along with human rights and quality of accommodation, to the Council purchasing their own temporary accommodation, as they wouldn't incur the same penalties when placing households in the Council's self-contained TA. The ADPS added that the figure being paid back by government against nightly paid accommodation had not been reviewed for some time.

When asked by Cllr Bailey what would be the ideal number of TA sites to have, the HSDM explained she was not confident in giving an exact number. The HSDM explained that by the end of this year the Council would have 32 units of temporary accommodation, five of those being move-on accommodation for ex-rough sleepers and the others being standard, self-contained accommodation, but that was not enough. She explained that typically the Council had 60 to 70 households to house each night. The figure, the HSDM estimated, was somewhere between 30 and 70 but they would keep monitoring as they could see the effectiveness of having their

own TA. The net costs to the Council had gone down and the quality of that accommodation and the support households received whilst in that type of placement improved their future chances. In an ideal world, the HDSM said, the quantity of TA needed would be zero, but with homelessness being at current levels she could not see that happening in the foreseeable future.

In addition, the ADPS said ideally there would be a more accessible and affordable private rented sector but there was little the Council could do to influence that.

The ADPS also responded to a question by Cllr Bailey regarding the average length of stay for a household that the Council placed in temporary accommodation. Some people through choice may only stay one night and then leave and that brought the average down; some may leave and then come back again. The ADPS explained they did have averages, but it would not be meaningful and felt it was unwise to present those figures. Someone who needed housing might look at that figure and deem that as the number of days they would be housed in TA and if they hadn't been moved by that point, they would query as to why. With low turnover in social housing, placing larger families in need of 4 bed houses could take several years before they were moved out of TA. Also, some providers may refuse to re-house someone if there was a history of arrears from a previous tenancy with that provider, and this further delayed certain households from being moved out of TA.

In response to a further query as to whether or not a similar scheme to the Homes for Ukraine could be implemented to support those households in need of short term or TA, the ADPS said that many people believed this could be part of the solution but similar schemes were very resource intensive. For the numbers that would potentially consider being a host, and the time in identifying suitable homes, it would be a significant challenge. The ADPS said it was still a potential avenue and something of which the Housing Team would be mindful, but as the Homes for Ukraine was a government scheme there were issues that, as a local authority, they could not implement without government intervention, such as around council tax liability.

Cllrs Bayes, Hankins and Fitch-Tillett found the review document difficult to analyse, stating that there was an overload on data, some of which they didn't understand or which was not clear. It was suggested that an executive summary would have been useful with some clear bullet-points to the key findings. Cllr Bayes felt the starting point should have been to begin the review looking at the 2019-2024 Housing Strategy and then picking out the key themes and issues that came out from that, as many of the priorities within that strategy still existed today.

The ADPS explained it was a legal requirement to produce a strategy based upon a review and felt that level of in-depth of review was needed to really understand the way forward and not to make assumptions. The ADPS used the example that many people were suggesting the Council should focus on the private sector when the results of the review had indicated that this wasn't going to be the answer to tackling homelessness. It was essential to produce a high-level review to aid in managing their limited resources. The ADPS said to have provided an executive summary would have been to present what they believed was right, and fit for purpose when, in fact, they were asking the Committee if that was the case.

The Chair agreed that there was a lot of data and that it was not unreasonable or disadvantageous to discuss solutions regarding what to do next as the following stage was to produce an action plan and strategy. The Chair suggested graphics would have helped Members see key themes and trends, such as which methods

that the Housing team currently used were effective or what was working, adding that it was difficult to pull these out. She felt that it was a missed opportunity to 'myth bust' or share success stories, supported by the data.

The ADPS said that this report set out the review data and the officers' analysis of that data, which was then tested with stakeholders and consultees stage by stage.

Cllr Heinrich asked if the Council had clear projections as to where the private sector was headed and was the Council facing an increasing number of people being forced out of the private sector. The ADPS explained the District had a large number of landlords as not many had large portfolios, unlike most urban areas, and those landlords were making decisions based on personal circumstances rather than the wider economy. The Housing team did have some information to suggest the worst was happening now and, when new Government legislation came in, issues such as evictions may settle down again, but even if stability came back to the private sector, it would never be affordable. The expectation of what landlords believed they could achieve in rent was such that they were out of reach for those dependent on a top-up of Universal Credit. The HSDM said she had been monitoring the market for 3 years and had not seen a decline in the number of properties available in the private sector, but that there were consistently not many properties available. It was the cost of those properties that was the problem: only two in the whole of 2025 were within local housing allowance (LHA) levels. The average 3-bed property was £500 a month more than the LHA, which is a gap a low-income family could not bridge.

The HSDM confirmed for Cllr Heinrich that overall, the number of affordable homes was on the increase with the new local plan coming in, but the number of voluntary disposals by Housing Associations (HA) into the general market was unlikely to decrease, as HA identified the properties that had a negative impact on their business plan. The issue was that the homes disposed of were in villages and the new homes were in the bigger towns that were easier for HA to attract tenants. Those disposed homes were not lost but when on the market they were not at the affordability levels that would help the type of clients that presented in need to the Housing team.

The ADPS responded to Cllr Gray who queried if the numbers of people who would present as homeless more than once was captured anywhere. The ADPS clarified that there would always be an element of repeat homelessness; people who would continue to sleep rough or sofa surf etc and then present again as homeless and this was captured within the increases in figures to people presenting as homeless. The ADPS said that officers were trying to use 'upstream prevention', so people were not becoming homeless in the first place, or for a shorter period.

Cllr Boyle noted that the Housing Team was considering developing expertise in service delivery to reflect the 3 main reasons for homelessness and queried how they were hoping to achieve this. The ADPS explained it was to allow for more time to build that trust and working relationship between staff and their clients and looking at their wider resources in working with local communities to help prevent homelessness. Cllr Boyle appreciated that the uncertainty around staff funding was difficult and thanked the team; she applauded schemes such as the purchase of the Council's own TA properties that had made such a positive difference to the costs involved in tackling homelessness.

Cllr Hankins queried if the second homes premium was having any effect as he felt that the idea behind it was to create more local homes coming onto the market for local people. The HSDM said any change was going to take a while to happen but

would have expected many second homes to switch over to holiday lets. The premium had allowed the Housing team to purchase more of their own TA, as funding those purchases had been possible from the revenue generated by the additional premium income. However, the HSDM did warn the Committee that it would take a massive shift for the housing market in North Norfolk to bring any second homes into reach for those on average incomes. This was something that the second home premium would have no impact in changing. It was building affordable homes that would ultimately make a positive difference for local people.

Cllr Shires reminded the Committee that the Council had created a reserve out of the revenue generated by the Council's portion of the second home premium to help with the increase in homelessness costs.

Cllr Penfold asked where, in a national context, the most significant pressures to housing arose. He explained that there was a lot of national discussion on migration and asked for some clarification, for the record, if those figures being mentioned nationally were at all accurate. The ADPS said migration was not a significant pressure from a housing and homelessness standpoint, but rather an unknown pressure. The data suggested it wasn't going to become a pressure in the foreseeable future but this could change. Government had decided that the burden of migration should be shared by the whole country and asylum seekers were to be more equally dispersed across the country. The ADPS said the Housing team had to manage that with a great deal of sensitivity due to community tensions, but it was inevitable that they would see refugees and asylum seekers being housed in the district at some point. However, she expected numbers to be very small and the impact minimal.

The Chair noted that the number of approaches to the Housing team were up, but duty numbers had remained stable, and that one third of those seen by the early intervention team succeeded in finding their own accommodation. The ADPS felt it was a case of managing client's expectations as sometimes the pathway isn't into social housing and then those clients who approached the council chose to help themselves, which reflected the Council was capturing the numbers approaching, and was offering relevant information, advice and support.

Cllr Bayes asked how the rough sleeper data was obtained. The HOM explained that every year there was a date when officers were asked to estimate the number of rough sleepers. In addition to this they recorded monthly on a particular day how many people are sleeping rough in the district, but also how many people are rough sleeping throughout the entire month as they came and went.

The Committee provided feedback below, and noted, the review.

- **An executive summary to be provided in future reports with clear bullet points to key findings.**
- **Reports should contain a manageable amount of data**

68 NW HAZ UPDATE

Cllr J. Toye gave a brief presentation on the North Walsham High Street Heritage Action Zone (NW HAZ) update and took questions from the Committee.

Cllr Hankins asked what key elements had been learned from the project and said that an executive summary and bullet points highlighting those elements would have been useful in the report. Cllr Toye said the Council now had a baseline and from the data presented in the report could now monitor this and use for future projects

within North Norfolk town centres. Cllr Toye agreed to take the idea of bullet points onboard for the future.

Cllr Penfold felt a clearer distinction between project impact vs town centre health would have been of benefit. It was important that, in partner projects such as this, the Council took away learning focused on discovering the priorities of that partner to help better understand its objectives and the impact of their investment. The EGM believed that the Council had moved on enormously since the bid for NW HAZ in 2019 and said officers had no real evidence at that time but that they did now have that data available for all towns. He added that the key was how that information was used in a meaningful way and this might be better distilled into a dashboard rather than bullet points, as suggested. In terms of business cases, town vitality and attracting funding, the Council did not have this data previously but did now and as a result was in a much stronger position going forward.

The EGM explained that the Council had a project management team and there was a requirement for officers to provide an evaluation framework before starting any project such as this. The project management team had been set up as a result of the learning gained from the NW HAZ when the Council recognised it needed to be able to monitor a project's impact better than previously.

Cllr Penfold said a report such as this should have perhaps had more focus on heritage, including the town's stories and people, as this could be an economic driver and help with regeneration. Cllr Toye acknowledged this but said the purpose of the report was to assess how the Council monitored the effects of a particular project, the health and economy of the town, so if there was a heritage project elsewhere this would still help inform the Council of its outcomes. The heritage aspects of NW HAZ were covered in the previous report to the Committee. Cllr Penfold felt that heritage, and assessing the health of a town, also meant asking about a sense of place and wondered if young people understood their heritage. The EGM agreed and took onboard but said it was harder, and less tangible, to monitor, whether it was cultural or heritage. The EGM said when those local 'sense of place' events took place, be it cultural or heritage, there was good evidence to show a strong spike in footfall reinforcing that both were potent economic drivers.

Cllr Bayes queried if people were spending money when in the town. He also focused on car parking and the amount of time people were staying in the town. Commenting on the empty retail units, he asked whether those vacancies were comparable with other similar size towns in the district which had not seen that level of funding. His last question was regarding the groups using public transport. Cllr Toye said when the funding was allocated for a particular project the Council could not then look to spend that on a different town: it had to be spent on the town to which it was given. Cllr Toye felt that the report clearly showed that North Walsham was growing and more people were visiting the town and there was data that could determine what groups into which those visitors fell. The EGM said he would have liked to have a better understanding of the public transport data to understand the net gain of people coming in compared with those going out. The vacant units were constrained by size so limited the type of business that might move in but, short of conducting high street business surveys, which were labour intensive, and asking for turnovers, which businesses may be reluctant to share, it was difficult to monitor the impact on business growth. The EGM agreed officers needed more data but said that there was a limit on what they could obtain. Cllr Toye said it was very important for Members to engage with that economic activity and get businesses local to their area to sign up to 'In the Know', with Invest North Norfolk.

North Walsham East was the most deprived area in the district, so Cllr Shires felt that judging the success of the project based on what money people were spending in the town would be unfair, it was about what time people were willing to invest in their local area and how they felt about the town in which they lived and worked.

Cllr Fitch-Tillett felt that, after talking to people, they didn't use the town any longer as they couldn't just come into the marketplace and pop into the shops as they would before. In response, Cllr Heinrich stated that there was plenty of free parking in Bank Loke and that was less than a 1-minute walk into town. He pointed out that traffic figures for train stations were no longer available as Government didn't publish them so that footfall was hard to measure, but figures on the Bittern line were in excess of pre-Covid numbers and rising. North Walsham figures were below that rate of increase, and he believed that was due to the 30min express bus service into Norwich, which had made the city more accessible and made a great difference to the town and its residents.

Cllr Gray felt investment into North Walsham, the largest town in North Norfolk, was long overdue and congratulated the team behind the project. He believed there was a large interest from businesses in filling those remaining empty units. Cllr Toye said the Economic Growth Team was always there to help investors looking to come into town and develop an existing unit but noted Cllr Heinrich's point that some of those buildings were restricted by the fact they were so small as the downside of heritage and the number of historic buildings.

The EGM agreed with the points raised by Cllr Gray who was concerned there were some omissions from the report, such as New Road car park as an important avenue into the town. Cllr Gray also felt the Shambles Slope was beautifully done and very well used, so he saw having no data to reflect that positive impact as a disservice to that area; equally the Black Swan Garden space use had not been captured. Other than that, he believed this was a good report. The EGM explained how the system they used as a source for getting much of their footfall data, ActiveXChange, worked and agreed to look at how they could pull out more information based on specific areas within a town. Cllr Gray wished to ensure that, if this project was used as a template for similar ventures going forward, that the Council was best reflecting all the data that was open to them; he was aware of a footfall counter that had been installed at the former Barclays site that had been collecting data for a few years but nothing on the report to suggest that data had been used. The EGM admitted that counter was no longer active but noted the feedback. Cllr Toye thanked the Committee for some good insights into the project which they would use going forward.

The EGM reassured Cllr Hankins that the demographics used to describe certain households were a known and recognised quantity. They were used by Experian, the UK's main credit reference agency, and were a mosaic, cross-channel consumer classification that was adopted to segment the markets.

The Chair agreed that some scope to quantify the economic benefit as well as the social and heritage benefit wasn't captured quite as it could have been. The EGM confirmed they had no spend data available to them to consider within the report.

It was confirmed by the Chair that the feedback given will be captured as actions by the officers, so no formal recommendation was required.

The Committee provided feedback upon, and noted, the review.

69 MOBILE PHONE CONNECTIVITY

Cllr Toye presented the report on mobile connectivity and took questions from the Committee.

The Chair recognised that mobile connectivity was not within the gift of the Council but the lack of it was a source of inconvenience, frustration and potential harm to residents.

Cllr Fitch-Tillett felt that operators should be encouraged to share masts rather than just being for one mobile provider, as well as being more creative in the masts they erect in designated areas, adding that masts could be disguised as trees.

Cllr Gray noted that it was important to know what success would look like and what outcome they were looking for as the subject matter was so broad. One option would be to have a mobile infrastructure action plan identifying areas of land the Council owned where masts could be housed, for example. Cllr Gray also suggested it may be more effective if the Committee could focus on a key matter of concern such as no or poor signal when trying to obtain access codes for defibrillators - those instances could have tragic consequences. This approach would ensure the Committee focused on an achievable outcome and then this could be built on to gain wider successes.

The EGM did explain that the Streetwave data sources that were used could have slight imperfections as there may be roads and areas that the bin lorries, which carried the Streetwave technology, would not go down. It became more granular the closer you focused into an area, but that was not always going to be accurate so it was difficult to pinpoint exactly where those no service areas were: they may just be a field or very rural area. The EGM also said the feedback from residents that the County Council had been obtaining, had over 1000 responses and he would encourage everyone to complete the survey to help provide a clearer understanding of the location of problem areas.

Cllr Hankins welcomed the report and thought that it was important to invite the Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) to tell the Committee what their plans were, the timings behind those, and what they intended to do to improve the signal in those rural areas with poor signal. Cllr Toye thought it was important to look at that collectively rather than at each individual operator and to make sure they were working with the Shared Rural Network to provide better mobile service, regardless of which network residents were on.

Cllr Bayes agreed that health providers and businesses, needed good mobile connectivity, and were the areas that the Committee needed to focus on and he queried if vacant church towers could be used to house mobile masts. Cllr Toye said they had been deemed not acceptable, technology wise, from the MNOs' viewpoint but he would welcome that conversation with them as to the reason. Cllr Penfold reminded the Committee of a previous initiative regarding the use of church spires as masts and wondered if it was still extant. Cllr Heinrich believed that the cost to get power to them to run the masts would be a big issue as many churches had no existing power supply.

Cllr Toye highlighted that the areas individual operators stated they covered was different than the service available on the ground and it was important for everyone to fully understand why that was. Cllr Gray believed if the Committee was to ask about wider service plans, the MNOs would just say that improvements were on the

way with no real timeframe, so he reiterated the importance of focusing in on one area, adding it was not about business or economy but about people's right to call 999 in an emergency and to know they were safe. Cllr Boyle agreed this would be a good focus and a more achievable goal. Cllr Penfold however felt that the Committee should not disclose the primary purpose for calling in the operators as Members would want to scrutinise them on other factors besides emergency calls.

Chair sought support from the Committee to request Officers and Portfolio holder to contact the four main MNOs to invite them to attend a Committee meeting with the proposed date of the 28th January 2026 clearly highlighting the key issues identified by the report and listing, in priority order, the areas the Committee wished to discuss.

AGREED that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee would convene a dedicated scrutiny session on mobile connectivity and formally invite the four main Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) - EE, O2, Three and Vodafone - to attend an O&S meeting on the 28th January 2026. This would help the Council to better understand their investment plans and present the opportunity to work towards some agreed objectives that will improve and expedite digital connectivity within the district.

Cllr Bayes offered his apologies at this point as he left the meeting.

70 BUDGET SETTING 2026/2027

Cllr Shires thanked the Assistant Director Finance and Assets for producing the budget setting update which highlighted where the Council was in the process and the challenges faced. The biggest current concern was the delivery of the food waste collections. Cllr Shires felt that the Government had underestimated the cost of providing this service and the cost to the local taxpayer, as they had done with Local Government Reform (LGR). The Council was unsure what funding would be forthcoming at this time. Cllr Shires said that the leader of the Independent Group had met with her to learn more about where the Council was with regards to budget setting and moving forward, and her door was always open to talk to other Members should they wish to discuss this.

Cllr Boyle thanked the team for an excellent update, saying it was very easy to understand. Cllr Shires reassured Cllr Hankins that LGR had no impact on the 2026/27 budget, unless Government was to change the rules, but it would have an impact on the medium-term financial strategy as that forecast was for 3 years ahead. The DFR explained that the one unknown was that the Council was expected to fund the preparatory work for the new Unitary authority and that model would not be confirmed until, most likely, mid-March. What the Council may do was partly dependent on the settlement, but it was proposed that earmarked reserves were established to draw on for the revenue costs for the closure of the District Council. In answer to a query by Cllr Hankins, Cllr Shires did explain the Council was not yet at the stage of producing any form of transitional financial document for the new Unitary authority. Due to good practice, the Council had to budget with the presumption that the Council would still exist, in its current guise, beyond 2028.

The Committee noted the update.

Cllr Boyle offered her apologies at this point as she left the meeting.

71 O&S ANNUAL REPORT 2023-2025

The Chair acknowledged the former O&S Chair, Cllr Nigel Dixon, who had steered the Committee with skill and aplomb during the period for which this report was written, and thanked the officers who had supported him so ably and to the current DSGO for preparing the report.

In response to a question from Cllr Hankins on whether the Committee wished to continue with the pre-meetings, it was agreed by remaining Members present to retain them. Cllr Gray found them a very good way to discuss topics beforehand and defuse any potential differences. Equally, Cllr Bailey thought they were a great way to do some fact finding and helped in shortening the length of the Committee meeting but would like to see more O&S Members attend those pre-meetings.

The Chair felt it was important to arrange a substitute if Members knew they were unable to attend the meeting. The Chair also felt that the Committee could follow up the soft actions, such as engaging Members into the community first responder scheme, more closely. The DSGM agreed and the DSGO would look into how that was best achieved and feedback. The Committee agreed that those items of wider interest to residents should be followed up and reported back on.

The Committee agreed to RECOMMEND to Full Council that they note the report, affirm the work of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and considers the following concerns raised within the key issues section of the report:

- **An average of more than 1.5 apologies given every meeting with limited substitutes being sought needs to be considered and addressed by Members.**
- **Now the new Scrutiny Officer is in place, training needs should be assessed so that the Scrutiny Officer can best support the Members of the Committee in fulfilling their roles. Any training Members need to help them feel more confident in their roles should be encouraged.**
- **Monitor the work programme and avoid slippage in key areas such as the Police and Crime Plan to ensure that there is no lengthy gap.**

72 THE CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

No comments

73 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND UPDATE

The Committee proposed to delegate timing of the session with MNOs to Officers.

74 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The meeting ended at 12.36 pm.

Chairman