

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 28 January 2026 in the Council Chamber - Council Offices at 9.30 am

Committee	Cllr P Bailey	Cllr K Bayes
Members Present:	Cllr V Holliday (Chair)	Cllr P Heinrich
	Cllr N Housden	Cllr C Cushing
	Cllr A Fletcher	Cllr M Gray (Vice-Chair)
	Cllr M Hankins	Cllr K Leith
	Cllr C Rouse	

Members also attending:

- Cllr L Shires (PH for Finance, Estates and Property Services)
- Cllr T Adams (Leader of the Council)
- Cllr L Withington (PH for Community, Leisure and Outreach)
- Cllr J Boyle (PH for Housing and People Services)
- Cllr J Toye (PH for Sustainable Growth)
- Cllr A Brown (PH for Planning and Enforcement)
- Cllr M Batey
- Cllr M Taylor (Vice-Chairman of the Council)

Officers in Attendance: Director for Resources (DFR), Democratic Services Governance Officer (DSGO), Assistant Director for Finance and Assets (ADFA) Deputy Monitoring Officer (DMO)

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr S Penfold.

108 SUBSTITUTES

None.

109 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

110 MOBILE CONNECTIVITY REVIEW SESSION WITH MOBILE UK REPRESENTATIVE

The Chair introduced the item and the representatives attending the meeting, Gareth Elliott, Mobile UK, Director of Policy and Communications, and Menekse Meech, BT Business, Field Account Manager.

Cllr Gray thanked them both for attending and asked Mr Elliott what Mobile UK's latest assessment was for outdoor voice calling on the network. Mr Elliott introduced himself and explained he represented the three main Mobile Network Operators (MNOs): Virgin/O2, Vodafone/Three and EE. He subsequently informed the committee that regrettably he could not provide data on individual operator's plans. This was due to commercial sensitivity and confidentiality. Mr Elliott encouraged the Committee to engage with the MNOs directly to gain an insight into the requested information.

Mr Elliott explained that the MNOs were regulated to provide data to Ofcom which was available through the Map Your Mobile service. He was aware there were concerns about the veracity of that data and highlighted that the previous Minister, Sir Chris Bryant, updated the threshold for what would be deemed a good mobile signal, from a download speed of 2.5MB per second to 5MB per second. He did advise that it was a predicted signal coverage. MNOs could not provide a live coverage checker: it was a wireless signal, with many variables such as weather, trees, buildings and coastal location that could affect a reading from one day to the next.

As an organisation, Mobile UK had some reservations about how Streetwave data was collected, mainly in that it was only collected on roads that bin lorries could access and was a snapshot of signal strength at the time it was taken and not over a sustained period.

Mr Elliott said there was some good news on the investment that was coming in the next few years. All three MNOs were investing heavily in their networks. They had a commitment, with Government, for 5G standalone by 2030, with 90% of all populated areas to be covered. Vodafone/Three had a target to have 99.95% coverage by 2035 when they committed £11 billion of investment by 2030. Virgin/O2 were investing around £700 million annually to extend their 5G network: at this time they are estimated to have 60% population coverage. EE are moving very quickly to invest by that same 2030 target.

It was explained to the Committee that, as 2G and 3G services are switched off and as those were upgraded into 5G, that would see a much-improved service, expected to be completed by 2033. By the end of the 1st quarter of 2026 all three MNOs were expected to have switched off their 3G networks.

It was noted that, through Mobile UK, the three MNOs were keen to work with NNDC to talk about their specific plans for the district.

Cllr Gray asked if the public could help, for example with crowdsourcing apps, in reporting areas of poor coverage and was it helpful for the Council to encourage the use of such technology.

Mr Elliott explained that the MNOs knew their networks and have that data but having a single point of contact for them, such as a Digital Champion, to know who to talk to and which such data could be funnelled was extremely useful for the MNOs and Mobile UK. Mr Elliott was happy to be a single point of contact that the Council could utilise to speak to and ask questions of the operators.

It was expressed by Mr Elliott for the need of leadership in changing public perception around planning applications for new mobile infrastructure and urged for a move away from any stigma that existed, so when a new application was made it didn't immediately generate negative press and an objection. Mr Elliott explained that MNOs carefully pick a location because it matches the radio physics and the existing network, and they found that the public wanted better coverage but preferred the mast was somewhere else.

In an era where digital inclusion is becoming increasingly important Mr Elliott explained putting the mast somewhere else only resulted in a weaker signal, and as technology moved forward to, for example, fixed wireless access, broadband via a sim card rather than a cable, then people would need to be nearer to those masts.

Mr Elliott called for that leadership to highlight the benefits of that infrastructure and why it was important rather than focusing on negative, visual aspects.

Mr Elliott did express that conversations that operators had with the Council's planning team were largely positive as they were keen to engage with the MNOs.

The Chair brought to Mr Elliott's attention a map (see Appendix) the Committee had produced, based not only on Streetwave data but also overlaid with local testimony which highlighted the experience of users on the ground. Mr Elliott felt this was a very useful tool, for both sides, to start a conversation and to work together in overcoming some of those connection issues and he was happy to feed that back.

The issue of 4G was raised by the Chair as she asked about capacity with 3G being turned off and, with the swell in population during the summer months, whether that had an impact on network coverage or signal. Mr Elliott outlined that 3G used less than 2% of their network running but 35% of their energy usage so it was a very inefficient technology. Mobile UK and MNOs were aiming to educate people as to why 3G was being turned off and to the benefits of 4G and 5G, so they better understood the switchover. The Chair agreed that perhaps all Members could help better inform residents of the benefits.

Cllr Cushing asked Mr Elliott to clarify how reliable Ofcom's coverage predictions were and was it reasonable to use that data, or that from real life data such as crowdsourcing, for investment planning. Mr Elliott reiterated that the threshold of the Map My Mobile checker had increased and that included data from crowdsourcing already which had been provided to Ofcom via third parties. This was constantly updated as MNOs continued to feedback to Ofcom as new developments were introduced, and Mr Elliott hoped that improvements would be reflected when checking that online mapping tool as time went on.

Cllr Housden wished to bring to Mr Elliott's attention the area on the NNDC map he represented to the west of the district, where it was difficult to obtain any data based on its findings. Landowners in those areas had offered MNOs the land for free and an opportunity to apply for new infrastructure but none of the MNOs were forthcoming in either taking up those offers or explaining why they had no interest in those sites. Mr Elliott did not know specifics and what negotiations potentially took place but offered to find out what he could through the MNOs, and through that as a secretary of the Mobile Infrastructure Forum who represented the four main tower companies, Cornerstone, MBNL (Mobile Broadband Network Ltd), Wireless Infrastructure Group and Cellnex.

The Chair wished to express the utility of Mr Elliott being a conduit for questions to be answered and for that information to be fed back to the MNOs.

Cllr Heinrich asked what were the main blockers that prevented progress to improving voice coverage for emergency calling in North Norfolk. Mr Elliott had seen local MPs and councillors object to masts and that was a blocker itself when planning applications had gone through due diligence and a lot of work to determine how they sat within the existing network. The MNOs didn't want to just build masts anywhere and respected that planning system. Mr Elliott felt that more support from local members would be the best solution to overcoming many of those blockers. As society became more reliant on mobile phones and digital technology, Mr Elliott was eager to get across that public perception of masts was something completely different to the reality, and support in breaking that perception down into what benefits they bring was essential. Mobile UK were working with MNOs and the

Government in planning reform to enable them to build masts more easily and rapidly across the country.

Cllr Heinrich urged the MNOs to get in contact with the Council's planning department and the Portfolio Holder for Planning who would be eager to discuss ways forward to find a solution that worked for all.

Mr Elliott was keen to stress that in many cases they did prefer to have those early conversations with planners through pre-planning advice, but where rejections occurred, they very often went to the planning inspectorate, and in the majority of those cases they were successful in overturning that decision.

It was asked by Cllr Rouse if MNOs prioritised replacing older masts with newer ones or finding new sites for new infrastructure. Mr Elliott explained it was on a case-by-case basis but in their targets up to 2023 they were largely focused on upgrades and to utilise existing infrastructure. As part of the Vodafone/Three merger they were looking to consolidate their infrastructure and reduce the number of masts, as that was in their financial interests so to do. He did explain that current planning rules meant they often had to apply for full planning just to upgrade which added significant time and cost.

Mr Elliott also wished to dispel the myth that MNOs do not share their infrastructure, when they do. The Shared Rural Network (SRN) was created based on that very principle and the recent merger of Vodafone and Three would only strengthen that.

Cllr Toye offered an example of why he had objected to a mast previously as this was due to the infrastructure company not engaging with him on why that particular site in question had been chosen and would not explain the benefits of that site being selected or how it would link up to the network. When suggesting alternative sites they rejected those out of hand. Cllr Toye asked Mobile UK to relay to MNOs and infrastructure companies that if councillors were being asked to support applications through planning: they needed the dialogue from those digital companies so they could better inform residents of the argument for supporting it. Mr Elliott was happy for the DSGO to pass on his details so that could be relayed.

In answer to a query from Cllr Hankins in relation to how MNOs would notify residents, over time, of their network being available in their area, Mr Elliott suggested they would need to have that conversation with individual operators as only they were privy to those commercial plans for future development.

It was raised by Cllr Leith that many residents were concerned that, as traditional landlines moved to digital/VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) services, they would have little to no ability to make emergency calls in the result of a power cut. Mr Elliott said he could not discuss the landline switchover which sat with BT but appreciated that mobile phones were being increasingly needed as a back up when traditional methods of calling became unavailable and one of the key reasons the 2G/3G switch off was being rolled out was to provide better network capacity. In terms of power resilience, they were having that conversation around national resilience with Government themselves at that time. MNOs were very dependent on power networks as when power goes off, they were similarly impacted. Currently there was no prioritisation to restore mobile networks in the result of a power cut, but they were asking if this could be considered going forward. The MNOs admitted they were part of the solution to provide emergency calling and did have responsibility themselves and they took that very seriously by sending out cells on wheels to provide temporary coverage in areas where there had been power loss. The estimated cost

to provide battery backups on all their networks had been estimated at £2billion, equally if the power is off for some time a battery backup may not be sufficient in many cases. The idea of backup generators had also been considered but where they had trialled this in areas such as Scotland it had run into difficulties with theft of fuel, and with the additional planning needed as the site grew due to the additional infrastructure being required.

It was suggested by Cllr Toye that BT, the MNOs, local authorities and power companies get together to make a clear plan that when it is known in advance that power was going to be lost in an area a backup signal is provided for the period power is down. Mr Elliott reiterated that conversations were taking place with Government to ensure some resilience existed when planning for all contingencies.

Cllr Rouse suggested if it would be a good idea if members could work with MNOs in finding suitable sites for new infrastructure, but Mr Elliott was cautious to stress that identifying a site based on where there is no signal did not mean that site is suitable for a new mast. It could interfere with existing coverage, have no access to power or other reasons that made it unsuitable. MNOs had engaged with Government in funding the role of Digital Champions, within councils, so Champions had the necessary skills and knowledge the MNOs could have those discussions with.

Mr Elliott confirmed it was useful to work with MNOs in identifying potential sites but rather than just providing dots on a map, it needed to have relevant information attached to it, such as, was there fibre on site, did it have power, what was the access like, was there a rooftop, what was the elevation. Once that information had been collated, they would consider, was it suitable for what they were proposing and was that something they could discuss with pre-planning or the Digital Champion.

In response to a question by Cllr Bayes to how MNOs tracked reported areas of no service over time and if they monitored whether reports reduced following upgrades, Mr Elliott could not provide specific data as each MNO would track those internally and would report results back to Ofcom that then fed into the online tracker.

The Chair queried if the reason the last few BT phone kiosks that remained open was due to them being in areas where it was deemed to have poor signal. BT and Mobile UK were happy to investigate that and report back to the Committee, but Mr Elliott was keen to explain that it may not be just that there is no signal, but it could relate to there being no capacity. It could be that there was signal but due to the sheer volume of people trying to access the network it could not function efficiently for all users. Mr Elliott said as BT also ran the Emergency Services Network, it would be worth considering those reasons.

In response to a query from Cllr Housden, coverage and capacity were not interchangeable. Coverage was where the infrastructure exists, but capacity was where that infrastructure needed upgrading to meet demands of the volumes of users who lived within that catchment area. Mr Elliott further explained that in terms of capacity MNOs reached their target of providing coverage to 95% of the UK landmass in June 2025, it was now a case of adding additional capacity to those sites that provided coverage.

Mr Elliott agreed with Cllr Fletcher's concerns in that people were very anxious about being able to access reliable mobile coverage as essential services like banking, jobs and medical appointments were largely done through using digital technology. The need to engage on MNO plans with the public was something that Mr Elliott encouraged but again felt that was a two-way relationship that should be led by local

members emphasizing the benefits of such mobile developments. There was an admission from Mr Elliott, however, that MNOs could do more within that relationship to engage with councillors to better communicate those benefits to the public.

As much as 25% of the population solely access the internet through their mobile phone so Mr Elliott fully understood the need for good mobile service and stipulated that information was key. He signposted Members to the Mobile UK website where there was a lot of material on such things as 5G.

Cllr Bailey said the Committee had spent a lot of time trying to identify areas where there were total or partial not-spots and wondered if it would be helpful to operators to provide the top 3-5 areas where there was less connectivity. Then councillors could talk to residents explaining that could be resolved by having new masts, hopefully then saving MNOs time in planning. Mr Elliott was happy to liaise with MNOs on this proposal.

In response to a question from Cllr Housden in relation to rural roaming, Mr Elliott confirmed that as an industry they do not agree with rural roaming, as it does not provide additional coverage and it can only provide a signal where infrastructure currently existed. He explained that was why the SRN was put forward as a solution and equally needed Government investment. MNOs were private companies in a competitive commercial industry and that is why large investment was happening quickly rather than any alternative solutions where technology wasn't being developed as fast.

The Chair asked how much of the SRN investment was in North Norfolk and was the district seeing any benefit from that. Mr Elliott admitted that vast majority of SRN investment had largely been in Scotland and Wales and less in England. There was ongoing discussion as to what happened next and where any future investment may be targeted. The MNOs were keen to learn what happened to those areas where it was not economically viable to invest in new infrastructure. Mr Elliott felt that there was an opportunity for discussion that could be had between local authorities and Government, but this was a public policy issue, and not one for MNOs, on how best to move forward in servicing those rural and remote areas.

In answering a query from Cllr Housden around where they saw North Norfolk within the SRN framework and what chance did the area have in seeing some total-not-spots covered off as part of the SRN, Mr Elliott reiterated that it was a public policy issue that needed to be addressed in conversation between local authorities and central Government and where any future investment should be directed.

Cllr Bayes asked if consumers could get impartial advice as to which operator had the best coverage to meet their needs. Mr Elliott encouraged consumers to look at the Map My Mobile website and seek independent advice when making a choice that worked best for them.

Cllr Bayes continued by asking why the many local churches were not being considered as a means to roll out further masts to increase coverage when the basic infrastructure was seemingly available on those sites. Mr Elliott was happy to confirm that there was an agreement in place with MNOs and the Church of England and many of those sites had been considered; for various reasons such as location, the structure's age, its access to power, the ability to gain 24hr access to the site or even for the ability to be able to add security measures to those infrastructures many were deemed not feasible or unsuitable. The Church had concerns over what could be broadcast from masts and was sensitive to such issues. There were examples

where those sites had been used but Mr Elliott warned it was not a silver bullet.

In response to a query from Cllr Brown, as to whether having a large number of conservation areas in the district was an issue, Mr Elliott confirmed that it was due to there being extra planning constraints around sensitive sites so that made deploying their infrastructure more difficult. They abided by planning rules and worked within those constraints and built where they could, but it added cost, complexity and delay. They did already work with planning authorities to be able to use those sites where possible and as sensitively as possible.

Cllr Withington asked how pro-actively MNOs looked at new, large developments coming in and if that affected their strategic planning for that area when dealing with capacity. Mr Elliott confirmed that MNOs and tower companies do look at the plans but was mindful to add that they are not statutory consultees within the current planning guidance and there was no notification protocol in making MNOs aware of new developments. The MNOs were having discussions through, and responding to, the government consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and permitted development rights, as to how that notification can happen better and into ways they could feedback into the planning process. Developers should have had a requirement to consider how their proposals impacted on the network. There may have been existing infrastructure that covered any new development, but if developers were more mindful of having that discussion with the MNOs as part of the planning process, they could then consider the impact that would have on capacity and if they needed to upgrade to meet the demand.

Mr Elliott confirmed it would be helpful, as, per Cllr Withington's suggestion, if the Council's own pre-planning checklist asked for mobile connectivity to be an additional consideration. Cllr Brown advised he was happy to bring up that suggestion within the planning team as part of his role as Planning Portfolio Holder.

On reflection to a question made by Cllr Hankins if there was any scope for MNOs to come together and decide between them who covers what area, in respect of that last 5% of total UK coverage, where not-spots exist, Mr Elliott explained that it was a very competitive industry and the merger of Vodafone and Three was in itself a major consolidation of the network.

The matter of MNOs linking up with Starlink was raised by Cllr Bayes and he wondered if that would have an impact on not-spots. Mr Elliott explained it could be a positive, but satellite technology was very much in its infancy. All MNOs were pushing to developing relationships into satellite connectivity with trials happening that year, but nothing yet matched the capacity, latency and speed from on the ground infrastructure. However, in rural areas it was part of the solution.

The Chair asked if the Committee were minded to write to the Digital Minister in support of rural roaming, which, until she heard from Mobile UK, she had been in support of or if the Committee were minded in asking for the Government's plans for investment for North Norfolk as part of the SRN, and to learn of any plans that Government had to extend that programme so they could secure additional funding for the area.

Cllr Gray welcomed any information on planned investment for the area, and although he could see why MNOs were against rural roaming still believed it was something the Committee could get behind.

Action: The Committee agreed unanimously to

- Write to Digital Minister/local MP asking for rural roaming and supporting the Access to Telecommunications Network Bill, currently going through parliament.
- Write to Digital Minister requesting information as to their intention regarding further investment in rural mobile networks in North Norfolk.

Action: Mobile UK and BT kindly agreed to provide further information to, and to feedback to MNOs on, questions and suggestions raised.

- To why land in the west of the district, that was offered to MNOs as potential sites for new masts, was never considered.
- Why the few remaining BT phone kiosks remain in the area. Is this due to poor mobile signal?
- Could each of the three MNOs provide a list of where not-spots (biggest 3) exist on their network within North Norfolk, then NNDC and partners can look to locate potential sites for investment.
- For MNOs, NNDC, BT and Power Network companies to have regular dialogue to enable plans to facilitate power backups to affected areas, when instances of power outages are known in advance.

Action: Cllr Brown, as Portfolio Holder for Planning, agreed to raise the possibility of introducing mobile connectivity to be an additional consideration as part of the council's pre-planning application process.

111 PUBLIC QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS

None received.

112 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 10th December 2025 were approved as a correct record.

113 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None.

114 PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None received.

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

None received.

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

None received.

117 DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET FOR 2026-2027:

Cllr Shires introduced the report in which she explained they had achieved a balanced budget which was to be celebrated. It was proposed local members, through a Local Members' Fund, could apply for grants for their local communities and they would add further detail once it was agreed at Full Council. She suggested a cross-party working group would be formed to determine the purpose and governance around the grants award, and that final control would be exercised through a four person panel consisting of two members, a legal officer and finance officer who would meet monthly.

It was highlighted by Cllr Shires that they did not have a list of savings to consider as efficiency was interwoven into every decision they made and not something they considered just once a year.

Cllr Shires explained, as with all Norfolk Councils, they had to budget as if the council was continuing but asked the Committee to note they had created a reserve for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). It was also noted that, despite the additional pressures of having to provide food waste collections, no additional grant was received for new burdens funding even though this was a scheme introduced by Government.

It was also brought to the attention of the Committee that the overall share NNDC received from council tax had reduced to 7.4% last year from 8% the year previously. Until everyone sets their budgets, they wouldn't know how that adjustment was going to look and whether they would continue to see a 7.4% share of the overall council tax bill.

The Chair invited members to ask questions.

It was queried by Cllr Hankins how the draft budget ended up being seen at such short notice at today's meeting for pre-scrutiny when it was originally in the work programme to be seen in February as a scrutiny item and, if they saw the budget at this meeting, would there be any need to discuss it again in February.

The Chair explained that it had been suggested, by the Chief Executive and Cllr Shires, that it would be prudent to allow the Overview and Scrutiny committee an early sight of the report so the Committee could feedback into the budget setting process before going to Cabinet the following week. Cllr Shires queried whether this was the reason for the report coming to the Committee at short notice, but said it was always her preference to have pre-scrutiny, to get the Committee's input before it went to Cabinet in case there were any adjustments that needed to be made. Cllr Shires thanked officers for turning the papers around quickly so it could make the meeting. The Chair outlined that the pre-scrutiny would be for information and the Committee would need to see it again in February before it went to Full Council.

Cllr Toye wished, as a cabinet member, to reinforce what Cllr Shires also said, that it was very useful to Cabinet for O&S to look at the budget as a pre-scrutiny item as it

helped inform them that they were producing a budget that was acceptable.

The Chair thanked the finance team for doing an excellent job in bringing the report to the Committee when details of funding coming from Government was so late.

Cllr Cushing drew Cllr Shires' attention to the base budget for next year when compared with this year it had increased by £2million. Cllr Shires said those figures included an assumption that the council tax will go up, even though Cabinet did not like to make an increase and did everything it could not to. Cllr Shires noted Government were now taking a larger share of business rates.

It was explained by Cllr Shires they were receiving less compared to a lot of other councils across the country. The funds were instead being given to metropolitan boroughs and councils with adult social care responsibility, in preference to smaller shire districts.

Cllr Hankins asked about the Planning Policy and Built Heritage Working Party that were faced with a request to update their planning standards and codes. There was a consideration that this would be quite expensive to complete, to the region of approximately £50k, and he didn't see anything in the budget that considered this requirement. Cllr Shires did reassure him that there was a planning reserve of £325k and this would be used, in part, to meet that requirement. The Chair asked what the rest of that amount of reserve was intended to cover. Cllr Shires explained that in part it was for the Local Plan, and the inspection of that plan, within the next 2 years.

Cllr Hankins asked Cllr Shires to confirm if the cost of, possibly, being required produce the updated planning standards and codes had been calculated as part of that overall reserve when factoring in the costs of delivering the local plan and Cllr Shires confirmed that she believed there would be money left over in the reserve to cover that requirement. Cllr Hankins asked for that to be noted in the minutes.

Cllr Brown wished to make the Committee aware that, when the Local Plan was passed, the Inspector advised they would need to start by June 2026 on a new Local Plan. A substantial part of that £325k would be earmarked for the creation of the next, new Local Plan. The estimated costs for a review of the proposed design guide were £50k, for a basic guide, and up to £160k for a more lavish design guide that completely rewrote the existing guide that was previously published in 2008. As things stood, they were looking to come back to the Working Party to propose a simple, cost-effective, tweak to that existing design guide.

Cllr Housden asked if they could explain the drop off in the capital programme for 2026/27 under meeting their housing needs. Cllr Shires explained that in the capital programme currently they had the Disabled Facility Grant, compulsory purchase of long-term empty properties, the Community Housing Fund which was the grants to housing providers, Council owned temporary accommodation, Housing Section 106 enabling and loans to housing providers. The additional money is on top of that and that's where it was detailed within the capital bids.

The increase in business rates valuations was cited as a major concern, by Cllr Bayes, for many local firms, and the hospitality industry, and he queried if there was a serious risk of business closures because of that increase. Cllr Shires felt that was a very good question and something the Government could look at, but she had heard that the increase in rateable value was bringing business rates down. Cllr Shires felt that as Members they could promote the reliefs that were available to businesses to help with their bill and the Economic Growth team could further

ensure that message was getting out to local businesses.

Cllr Bayes felt that the hospitality industry, which was so important to the local economy, was very worried and making decisions, now, in looking to get out or stay stagnant rather than looking to grow due to their concerns over business rates. Cllr Shires agreed that she would not want local businesses to suffer as a result and at the next Cabinet meeting they would discuss ways they could ensure those businesses are properly informed of reliefs and grants that were available to help.

The point made by Cllr Bayes was supported by Cllr Cushing who had noted two local business closures in the Fakenham area on the back of the concern over increased business rates rateable values. Cllr Toye assured the Committee that Economic Development were already in discussions with local businesses and the hospitality industry to actively find solutions and support businesses to keep running.

Cllr Cushing went on to ask about second home premiums and asked if the County Council had agreed the same terms as currently agreed and what estimates did they have on what that might generate and where that money might be spent. Cllr Shires explained that that the intention for the money remained the same as it was in the current year, and to invest in the purchase of their own temporary housing accommodation. The DRF said they had been actively negotiating with County Council, and leaders from both councils were in regular contact, as to their share with the aim to carry on at the same basis. This year that stood at 25% of what this council had collected. Originally that was forecast to be £1.3million, but their current expectations stood closer to £1.6million. For 2026-2027 that figure could go up or down. If everyone paid for the same second homes that figure would go up but with the increase in business rates rateable value it might encourage people to register their homes as businesses and to claim Small Business Rates Relief.

Cllr Bayes asked if the second homes premium had resulted in many of those homes being sold, but Cllr Shires assured him that the figures for the current number of second homes in the district remained remarkably comparable to the previous year, which she felt showed how invested those owners were in their local community. The revenues team had considered the number of people who would be selling or switching to business rates so the finance team had purposefully underestimated the revenue the premium might generate, and they had far exceeded that estimate due to their excellent collection rates.

In response to a query by Cllr Bayes, over increase in salaries and if a pay award had been agreed and whether a risk had been added if that award needed to be increased down the line, Cllr Shires said they are not fully in control of pay awards. The NJC (National Joint Council) meet and the overall increase is negotiated from there but they will not know that final figure until September so they estimate as to where they believe they will be based. The DFR explained there was still sufficient reserves to ensure that the budget was balanced and that will go through Committee if those reserves are used, but they felt they had enough collective influence and mitigation in place that they could manage that risk.

The Chair asked why the revenue support grant had increased, but that was due to the losses on everything else for New Homes Bonus, the Funding Guarantee etc. They were no longer given a breakdown as to each component as it was given as one lump sum. Cllr Shires was hopeful with the 3-Year Funding Guarantee they would have consistency going forward.

The £225k in premises cost variance, work to council assets, not in capital bids, was

also queried by the Chair. Cllr Shires explained the difference between Capital and Revenue, but the DFR felt it reflected where works they had previously considered they could postpone were now becoming a necessity. As they looked to transition to a new unitary authority, it was the Council's wish to pass on its assets in the best possible state of repair to that unitary, as there was a considerable risk that the new authority may wish to de-prioritise North Norfolk's public realm over other areas, especially if it is a single unitary.

In response to why the environmental services growth had increased significantly the DFR explained this was due in part to a grant that was to do with packaging and was awarded a year-by-year basis so no guarantee in funding, but the growth in the cost was due to the new burden of the new food waste service.

Finally, the Chair asked if they could justify why they had put £750k into a reserve for LGR. Cllr Shires advised there would be costs which the councils had to bear and they were being prudent in ensuring they had money to do that. The DFR explained that the figure of £750k was comparable to what the other Norfolk councils were budgeting for in covering those costs of forming the new unitary.

The Chair asked for feedback on the budget report from the Committee in terms of presentation or content.

Cllr Cushing felt the way the presentation of the Capital Programme could be improved, as the summary at the end shows where the money has come from but in the projects where we are asking to borrow money you can't see where they are when you look at the programme. He would like a breakdown for capital receipts and borrowing. Cllr Shires tried to be clear on the focus so officers knew what the ask was, which was to clarify for each project how that project was going to be funded.

The Chair believed if the narrative could be strengthened they wouldn't feel the need to ask as many questions, the Chair used the second homes council tax as an example: she felt that if they were explained in a little more depth it would help enormously. Cllr Bayes agreed with that. Cllr Shires felt that when seen in conjunction with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy it would make more sense but admitted they perhaps had a little bit of work to do on explaining the national picture more clearly and on strengthening the LGR aspect.

It was noted by the Chair that some additional information on business rate relief would be useful but believed that had been covered and officers of the Revenues team would consider as a result of the observations made during the meeting.

Cllr Gray reiterated how important it was for Members to really engage with local business and explain business rate relief, or get officers to help them understand it, so they could fully support their local businesses. You wouldn't want to see people get scared and closing their business down needlessly simply because they didn't understand the support that was out there or for accidental misinformation to be given.

The Chair outlined the suggestion of expanding the narrative of the report and in providing a business rates pack to help Members but recognised there appeared to be little appetite within the Committee to formalise those suggestions.

The Committee **noted** the Draft Revenue Budget report to Cabinet.

No comments

119 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND UPDATE

The DSGO gave an update on recent answers received in response to the O&S Action Tracker and outlined the Committee work programme. The Committee **Agreed** that a scoping session to determine the next focus of the Committee should be convened at the earliest opportunity.

120 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The meeting ended at 12.37 pm.

Chairman

