

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 16 October 2019 at the Council Chamber - Council Offices, Holt Road, Cromer, NR27 9EN at 9.30 am

Committee

Members Present: Mr N Dixon (Chairman)
Mrs W Fredericks
Mr N Housden
Mr N Pearce
Mrs E Spagnola
Mr A Varley

Mr H Blathwayt
Mr P Heinrich
Mr G Mancini-Boyle
Miss L Shires
Mr J Toye

Members also attending:

Mr A Brown (Observer)
Mr N Lloyd (Observer)
Mr E Seward (Observer)
Mrs A Fitch-Tillett (Observer)

Mr J Rest (Observer)
Ms V Gay (Observer)

Officers in

Attendance: Democratic Services and Governance Officer Scrutiny (DS&GOS), Housing Options Manager (HOM), Revenues Manager (RM), Head of Economic and Community Development (HECD) and Democratic Services Manager (DSM)

Also in

attendance: Press

1 TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Cllr T Adams.

2 SUBSTITUTES

None.

3 PUBLIC QUESTIONS & STATEMENTS

None received.

4 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th September were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

5 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None received.

6 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

7 PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None received.

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

None received.

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

The DS&GOS informed Members that at their meeting on Monday 7th October, Cabinet had agreed to the Committee's recommendation to develop an Executive-Scrutiny Protocol, and that work was now underway.

10 DETERMINATION OF COUNCIL TAX DISCOUNTS 2020/21

Cllr E Seward (PH for Finance) introduced the Report, and informed Members that the RM was in attendance to answer any specific revenue related questions.

Questions and Discussion

Cllr E Seward informed Members that the Report had been approved by Cabinet on 7th October, and outlined that the key changes were to Council Tax premiums charged on empty properties. It was noted that this charge had been a 50% premium for empty properties, whereas now the premiums could be raised to 100% for properties empty for two years or more, and 200% for properties empty for five years or more.

It was reported that there were currently 146 properties in the district that had been empty for two or more years, and 49 that had been empty for five or more years. Cllr E Seward stated that the Council Tax premiums were a maximum inducement to bring down the number of empty properties in the district.

The RM stated that he and the Combined Enforcement Team Leader considered all options to encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use. He added that discretion would now also be available to annul charges in cases of development or difficulties. In response to a question from the Chairman, the RM confirmed that this discretion had not yet been utilised, as it was a new policy. He added that in some cases a 200% premium would discourage developers, but this discretion to relax premiums could encourage development by allowing limited flexibility in special cases.

The Chairman asked for the definition of an empty property, which the RM defined as unoccupied and unfurnished, with long-term being defined as six months or more. He added that in addition to the proposed premiums identified in the Report, it was expected that next year a further penalty could be introduced on properties unoccupied for ten or more years.

Cllr N Pearce asked for clarification on whether there was any leeway on the changeover period for bringing a property back into use. It was confirmed that new owners would be liable for payments from the first day of ownership, though properties would not be considered unoccupied if furnished. The RM reminded

Members that single occupants were still entitled to a 25% discount.

Cllr L Shires referred to revenue data on properties in Eccles, and asked what could be done to bring these properties back into use. Cllr E Seward replied that these properties were not unoccupied, but paid lower Council Tax rates as a result of discounts applied due to poor road surfaces.

Cllr H Blathwayt asked for clarification on chalet and beach hut rates collection. The RM replied that whilst the Council acted as the collection authority, the rates themselves were set by the Valuation Office. He added that the difference between the two was a planning issue, as the Chalets were likely built prior to the implementation of seasonal planning regulations, meaning seasonal exemptions did not apply. The HECD provided further clarification that beach huts and chalets were not dwelling properties, but leased and licensed with no overnight stays permitted, meaning they were not subject to dwelling rates.

Cllr N Pearce proposed to commend the Report to Council and Cllr J Toye seconded the proposal.

RESOLVED

To commend the Report to Council.

11 HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY 2019 – 2024

Cllr A Brown (PH for Housing & Planning) introduced the Report, and stated that rough sleeping was a national plight that posed a serious risk to life. He outlined that the aim of the strategy was to achieve earlier identification of those at risk of becoming homeless, and to avoid a return to homelessness for those that had found accommodation. It was explained that the strategy would take a multi-agency approach to tackle all aspects of homelessness and rough sleeping.

Questions and Discussion

The HOM informed Members that the strategy was renewed every five years and reviewed annually. This year the strategy was due for renewal, and had been approved for public consultation with responses required by 4th November. She added that feedback had already been received from NCC and that the Council was looking into providing additional temporary accommodation. It was confirmed that the strategy would go to Cabinet in December for final approval.

In response to a question from Cllr G Mancini-Boyle, it was confirmed that statistics on the number of homeless coming into the district was limited to those with a connection to North Norfolk.

The Chairman raised concerns regarding resource implications, and asked what the strategy would mean for the Council's resources. The HOM replied that the strategy did not imply that there would be any increase in resources beyond the existing Housing Services Team, though funding had been previously secured for four additional fixed term posts. The Chairman asked a subsequent question on the cost implications of the strategy, to which the HOM replied that the Council would always incur costs in this area due to its duty of care. She added that due to the variable number of people in need of assistance, it was difficult to quantify a cost at this stage. The Chairman asked whether the fixed costs such as staff salaries were reported transparently in the strategy, to which the HOM replied that this had not

been included previously, but could be taken into consideration as part of the consultation.

The Chairman asked whether collaborative working had been considered as part of the strategy e.g. shared services. The HOM replied that the Council did work closely with its partners, but had to focus primarily on the need in North Norfolk. She added that the Council had worked extensively with NCC to help vulnerable young people. The Chairman asked whether there was any statutory reason why the Council could not share its services. It was confirmed that there was no specific reason not to share services, though Councils often took a different approach to one another that could make this difficult. Members were informed that all seven Councils in Norfolk did work collaboratively on specific issues such as helping domestic abuse victims.

An individual case was discussed and it was confirmed that whilst NNDC was not the principal authority handling the case, accommodation would be offered in circumstances of extreme weather, and assistance would be offered after the principal authority's 56 day duty of care period.

A question was asked regarding the rising costs of temporary accommodation, to which the HOM replied that due to the limited accommodation available in North Norfolk, it was often necessary to seek accommodation outside of the district which incurred additional costs.

Cllr J Toye expressed his thanks to the Housing Strategy Team for developing the Strategy and asked what could be done to offer the biggest help to the Team. The HOM replied that more homes to take complex individuals with specialist needs was the top priority. Cllr J Toye asked what could be done to support individuals or organisations that offer this type of accommodation, to which the HOM replied that the Council currently employed a Tenancy Sustainment Officer on a fixed term basis that fulfilled this role. It was confirmed that the officer provided support to landlords in these circumstances.

It was proposed by the Chairman that the Committee should respond to the consultation with the following recommendations:

1. To recommend that costings and resource implications be included in the Strategy.
2. To recommend that the Strategy demonstrates that all potential areas for collaborative working have been taken into consideration.

The proposal was seconded by Cllr E Spagnola.

RESOLVED

That the Committee submit the following recommendations to the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Consultation:

- 1. To recommend that costings and resource implications be included in the Strategy.**
- 2. To recommend that the Strategy demonstrates that all potential areas for collaborative working have been taken into consideration.**

12 SPLASH LEISURE CENTRE PROJECT UPDATE BRIEFING - OCTOBER 2019

Cllr V Gay (PH for Culture & Well-Being) introduced the briefing and informed

Members that the briefing had been requested following a recommendation at Council for the O&S Committee to provide additional monitoring of the SLC project after £2m of additional funding was approved.

Questions and Discussion

Cllr V Gay stated that whilst the budget position on the project remained unchanged, all Members had a responsibility to continue to monitor the project. It was confirmed that the remaining sum of the Sport England grant should be delivered by November.

Cllr V Gay informed Members that risks associated with the project were ranked on a scale of 1-16k, calculated by multiplying the impact by the likelihood, and that at present, there were only medium risks ranging from 2-4k.

Communications of the project was discussed, and the Committee were reminded of the SLC event held in September to introduce new Members to the project. It was confirmed that the HECD had also attended a meeting of Sheringham Town Council to update them on the project.

The Committee agreed, in response to a question from Cllr V Gay, that the update was useful for Members to keep track and monitor the progress of the SLC project. The Chairman stated that all Councillors had a duty to help monitor the project, and added that Members must remain vigilant. He then asked whether the Committee wished to continue receiving monthly updates in the same format or consider alternate arrangements. Cllr N Housden suggested that it would be helpful to see actual spend alongside the budget, including details of any cost overruns with concerns highlighted in red. Cllr V Gay replied that the budget monitoring of the project had been included in the Report to Council, but agreed that it could be useful in the updates. The HECD stated that the budget would not change unless either significant problems were encountered or changes to the design were requested. He added that cash-flow monitoring was not necessarily needed, but agreed that it could be useful to see quarterly budget updates.

Cllr N Pearce expressed his appreciation of the Committee's role in increased monitoring of the project, and suggested that the same level of scrutiny should have been applied from the start. He added that there were still many potential risks within the project, and that the Committee must therefore continue to monitor its progress.

The Chairman stated that a budget profile should be included in updates, as opposed to cash flow information. The HECD agreed and added that new governance arrangements had been set in place to closely monitor the budget.

Cllr J Rest reminded Committee Members that as Chairman of GRAC, he had requested that the Internal Audit Team undertake a review of the project that would include an explanation for the overspend. It was expected that the Report would be presented to the December GRAC meeting.

The Committee agreed that the SLC updates should continue at their current frequency until the Committee was satisfied that the project no longer presented a significant risk to the Council.

Cllr N Housden proposed that a budget profile be provided quarterly as part of the SLC project updates, and Cllr N Pearce seconded the proposal.

RESOLVED

For a budget profile to be provided quarterly as part of the SLC project updates.

13 CONSIDERATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE REVIEW OF THE DRAFT FRAMEWORK OF THE CORPORATE PLAN

The Chairman introduced the item and informed Members that the Committee was required to formalise recommendations raised at the additional O&S meeting, held on 9th October, to review the Draft Framework of the Corporate Plan. It was agreed that the recommendations would be taken en bloc once agreed.

Questions and Discussion

In reference to the first recommendation, Cllr J Toye stated that mobile libraries should be included when distributing hard copies of the Corporate Plan across the district. The HECD suggested that the distribution should be as broad as possible, taking into account areas that bordered the district, such as Aylsham and Wroxham. It was agreed, following a question from Cllr N Housden, that the distribution must also include all Parish and Town Councils.

On the second recommendation, the Chairman expressed disappointment that the residents' survey used to inform the key themes of the Corporate Plan had not yet been shared with Members of the Committee. It was suggested that these concerns could be added to the recommendation, alongside a request to share the survey with Committee Members as soon as possible. Cllr L Shires stated that the Corporate Plan's key themes echoed concerns that had been raised by the public when canvassing. Members discussed the distribution of the survey, and it was agreed that the request for further distribution and return metrics would remain, despite suggestions that further data may not be shared.

Recommendation three, to consider the renaming of the affordable housing theme was discussed, and concerns were raised that the proposed 'local homes for local people' could affect property values. The Chairman replied that the suggestion had to be seen in context as a generic title, that reflected the Council's desire to build homes for local residents, which in itself was not a policy that would affect property values.

Members agreed that the content of the fourth recommendation was satisfactory.

On recommendation five, it was suggested that reference to specific areas should be changed to specific barriers faced when doing business in North Norfolk.

Members agreed that the content of the sixth recommendation was satisfactory.

On recommendation seven, to suggest that the customer focus theme be renamed, Cllr H Blathwayt suggested that the term customer could be patronising to individuals receiving fines or rejected applications. Cllr L Shires stated that customer focus suggested a quality of service that the Council should aspire to. It was agreed that the recommendation would remain open for Cabinet's consideration.

Cllr N Lloyd (PH for Environment) referred to the eighth recommendation, and stated that several suggestions had been made to place greater emphasis on coastal issues within the environment theme. He informed Members that he would look to

amend the theme title to reflect this.

Members agreed that the ninth recommendations should remain unchanged.

On recommendation ten, Cllr V Gay stated that whilst the Corporate Plan was still in its early stages, success descriptors had been considered and would likely be included in the final version of the Corporate Plan.

The recommendations were proposed by Cllr P Heinrich and seconded by Cllr G Mancini-Boyle, to be taken en bloc.

RESOLVED

To make the following recommendations to Cabinet:

- 1. To share with Overview & Scrutiny Committee Members as soon as possible, the residents' survey used to inform the Corporate Plan, together with relevant distribution and return metrics. The Committee agreed that Cabinet should be notified of their concerns that the survey had not been shared in time for the drafting of the recommendations below and thus wasn't available to support validation of the 6 themes.**
- 2. That two copies of the final version of the Corporate Plan be placed in all public libraries (including mobile libraries) across the district and a copy sent to every parish clerk, to provide accessibility for members of the public without internet access.**
- 3. That consideration be given to renaming the 'Affordable Housing' theme 'Local Homes for Local People', as this has broader application.**
- 4. That consideration be given to including a reference to the 'sustainability' of existing businesses, both in the heading and underlying content of the 'Boosting Business Growth' theme of the Corporate Plan. The revised title of "Boosting Business Sustainability and Growth" was supported.**
- 5. That consideration be given to identifying the specific barriers faced when doing business in North Norfolk within the Business theme of the Corporate Plan.**
- 6. To share a summary of the feedback from the environmental consultation undertaken at the Greenbuild event held in September.**
- 7. To give consideration to renaming the 'Customer Focus' theme to encompass everyone who used the Council's services. The options discussed included: People Focus, Resident Focus, Service User Focus, etc, but 'Customer Focus' gained most support.**
- 8. To consider adding an additional descriptor to the Environment theme title - such as "Protecting the Environment"; the Cabinet Member had advised 'Climate Change, Coast and Environment' could be an option.**
- 9. To remove the high level challenge statements from future documents, as they had now served their purpose.**
- 10. To consider developing progress/success descriptors for each theme**

alongside performance monitoring and management targets/indicators as part of the delivery and action work stage.

14 THE CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The DSM informed Members that the previously discussed Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy would go to December Cabinet to be considered for final approval, once the public consultation had closed.

The DS&GOS informed Members that the Digital Transformation Update was expected to slip, and would subsequently not be on the November Scrutiny agenda.

RESOLVED

To note the Cabinet Work Programme.

15 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND UPDATE

The DS&GOS provided an update on the Committee's Work Programme, and reminded Members that the waste contract and crime & disorder briefing on rural policing were expected at the next meeting. Members were informed that the waste contract was now in its final stages, which meant that further amendments could not be made. Members were reassured that the Committee had been given ample opportunity to comment on the contract options during its development.

The DS&GOS encouraged Members to submit questions in advance of the next meeting once the agenda had been published, for more detailed responses to be given at the meeting, and to make better use of the available time.

RESOLVED

To note the Overview & Scrutiny Work Programme.

16 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

17 TO CONSIDER ANY EXEMPT MATTERS ARISING FROM CONSIDERATION OF THE PUBLIC BUSINESS OF THE AGENDA

The meeting ended at 11.36 am.

Chairman