

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, GERONON ROAD, LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY, SG6 3JF
ON TUESDAY, 12TH SEPTEMBER, 2023 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Councillor Val Bryant (Chair), Clare Billing, Mick Debenham, Dominic Griffiths, David Levett, Nigel Mason, Ian Moody, Ralph Muncer, Daniel Wright-Mason and Lisa Nash*

In Attendance: *Jeanette Thompson (Service Director - Legal and Community), Rachel Cooper (Controls, Risk and Performance Manager), Eleanor Hopcraft (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager) and Lisa McDonnell (Safeguarding Team Ledaer)*

Also Present: *There were no members of the public present for the duration of the meeting.*

Councillors Alistair Willoughby, Elizabeth Dennis and Ian Albert were also in attendance.

224 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 2 minutes 38 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Matt Barnes and Adam Compton.

Having given due notice Councillor Lisa Nash substituted for Councillor Matt Barnes.

225 MINUTES - 20 JUNE 2023

Audio Recording – 2 minutes 57 seconds

Councillor Val Bryant, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Nigel Mason seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 20 June 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

226 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 44 seconds

There was no other business notified.

227 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 48 seconds

(1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be audio recorded.

- (2) The Chair drew attention to the item on the agenda front pages regarding Declarations of Interest and reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest needed to be declared immediately prior to the item in question.
- (3) The Chair advised that for the purposes of clarification clause 4.8.23(a) of the Constitution does not apply to this meeting.

228 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 4 minutes 38 seconds

There was no public participation at this meeting.

229 URGENT AND GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 45 seconds

No urgent or general exception items were received.

230 CALLED-IN ITEMS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 54 seconds

There have been no called-in items.

231 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 59 seconds

No questions had been submitted by Members.

232 RESOLUTIONS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Audio recording – 5 minutes 07 seconds

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report entitled 'Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee' and drew attention to the following:

- Following consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair the Task and Finish Group had been cancelled.
- The Draft Sustainability SPD had moved to November Cabinet meeting and there was work ongoing on the Design SPD.
- The LGA Peer Review Action Plan had been included as an appendix to the Work Programme report to monitor progress, with most actions currently ongoing.
- A section had been added to this report to list referrals from this Committee, so that the Committee can review the outcomes.
- All referrals from the June meeting had been approved.

Councillor Ralph Muncer welcomed the Scrutiny Officer to their first Committee meeting in their new role.

Councillor Dominic Griffiths proposed and Councillor Nigel Mason seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the report entitled 'Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee' was noted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review and comment on actions and feedback received regarding resolutions previously made.

233 ANNUAL SAFEGUARDING REPORT 2023

Audio recording – 7 minutes 15 seconds

Councillor Alistair Willoughby, as Executive Member for Community and Partnerships, presented the report entitled 'Annual Safeguarding Report 2023' and advised that:

- There were 658 referrals made in the year 2022-2023, which was the same as the previous year with a slight change in type. There were 370 adult safeguarding referrals, which marked a 6% decrease, and 288 child safeguarding referrals, which marked an 8% increase.
- There had been an increase in mental health referrals due to the impacts of the cost of living crisis, with statutory and third sector organisations noting that these issues can be distressful for the individual and time consuming for officers.
- The Council continued to work with SADA, particularly in areas where there was an underreporting of domestic abuse. It was noted that some domestic abuse survivors were being forced to stay with abusers due to the cost of living crisis.
- Member completion of safeguarding training was low and all Members should be encouraged to complete the training.
- Actions completed this year were included at paragraph 8.2 of the report.
- Future plans included a continuation of promoting national and local campaigns, introducing bespoke training on mental health and hoarding and a continuation of the partnership with SADA.
- The Shared Internal Audit Service (SIAS) had completed an audit, with the action plan, including any progress updates, included as Appendix B to the report.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Clare Billing
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor David Levett
- Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason

In response to questions, the Safeguarding Team Leader advised that:

- Most referrals from the previous three years had been received from Council staff.
- In 2020/2021 9 external referrals were made, in 2021/2022 6 external referrals were made and in 2022/2023 3 external referrals were made.
- They did not have comparative figures for County Council, or other district councils, but could provide these outside of the meeting.
- Without reviewing referrals from recent years, it would not be possible to indicate why there was an increase in both adult and child referrals where the individual was 'at risk of significant harm', but this could be completed and provided outside of the meeting.
- The numbers in table 1 of the report included those with no recourse to public funds who were referred under the National Referral Mechanism for Modern Slavery.

In response to questions, the Service Director – Legal and Community advised that:

- At an employee level it is now agreed that an appropriate level of training will be undertaken and that all staff, since July 2023, have been required to complete the e-learning module within the first days of employment.
- Members at this Committee have previously recommended Members safeguarding training be made mandatory but would need to be agreed to be taken forward.

- The e-learning module took around 30 minutes to complete and all, staff and Members, should be encouraged to complete this.
- A self-audit of training took place with Members previously and it was felt from this that mandatory training was not required.

The Chair advised that discussions had taken place between the Chair, Vice-Chair and Officers regarding the presentation of information to Members in the Members Information Service and that some commentary on the data would be provided in future published updates.

In response to a question, Councillor Willoughby noted that concerns that fall below the threshold were already detailed in the table within the report, so this should already be picked up on. Should the threshold be lowered further, then this would be addressed and captured.

Councillor Muncer noted that it was reassuring to hear increases were not reflective of an increase in abuse in communities and commended the actions of the Council to raise awareness of domestic abuse. He noted that more work needed to be completed, but that it was positive to see Council, and Officers, working on this and the annual report for 2023/24 would indicate the impact of these actions.

Councillor David Levett proposed and Councillor Dominic Griffiths seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- (1) Received and commented on the annual report of progress made against the Council's fulfilment of the statutory duty to maintain an effective safeguarding function regarding children, adults, modern slavery and domestic abuse.
- (2) Noted the recent Shared Internal Audit Service (SIAS) audit (Appendix A) and its Action Plan tracker (Appendix B).
- (3) Agreed that sufficient and robust processes are in place at the Council for application and review of safeguarding processes, and that an annual review and presentation to this committee should continue.

REASON FOR DECISIONS: The recommendations made are the best course of action that can be accommodated within the approved budget and officer resources, that will fulfil our statutory and lawful obligations but also ensure that a regular, corporate review exists.

234 Q1 2023-2024 UPDATE ON THE COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN

Audio recording – 27 minutes 29 seconds

The Controls, Risk and Performance Manager presented the report entitled 'Q1 2023-2024 Update on the Council Delivery Plan' and advised that:

- This was the first quarter update on Council projects, as approved by Cabinet, and was intended to be an evolving document and could be updated following feedback from Members.
- Point 8.2 of the report detailed the changes to milestones, which were highlighted in yellow in Appendix A.
- Point 8.4 of the report clarified that the completion status was based on the current milestone, therefore if milestones were changed the original date would not be visible. It was being explored how this could be presented without referring to past reports.
- It was expected those projects with higher priority would have fewer milestone changes.

- Project prioritisation had been discussed at the previous Committee meeting and informal discussions were taking place with Executive Members on this, with a view to present this alongside the second quarter report.
- All projects, risks and milestones were available for Members to view on Pentana.
- As previously requested, an update on resourcing at the Council had been provided at point 8.7 of the report.
- The progress bar in Appendix A highlighted the progress on the current milestone, not the entire project, and this only reported on milestones within this financial year.
- The 27 projects and their status were included on page 68 of the report pack, with those as amber status included at the front of the report.
- There were five projects highlighted amber, three were green with some requests for date changes and there were four new Performance Indicators included on projects.
- The report was intended to be an overview of projects, but further details could be provided on specific projects if requested by Members.
- Questions submitted by Councillor Matt Barnes had been responded to via email prior to the meeting, and circulated to Members.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor David Levett
- Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason
- Councillor Nigel Mason

In response to questions, the Controls, Risk and Performance Manager advised that:

- A consultant had been appointed on the Churchgate project, however a longer lead in time was required before they could begin, which had led to the date slippage.
- There had been resourcing issues which had affected the digital hubs.
- They were keen to add transparency by adding detail around the changing dates to make it easier for Members. However, there was an auditable trail back through Overview and Scrutiny reports of any date slippage.
- Detailed updates could be provided on projects, including the history of that project, should Members make these requests.
- HR had been doing a lot of recruiting in different ways to address resourcing issues, including social media, making the role more attractive and promoting the benefits of working in local government.
- There were some areas that were difficult to recruit into, despite actions being taken by HR, and this was common in these areas across local authorities.
- The use of agency staff in these areas highlighted the problem and even the recruitment of agency staff in these areas was becoming increasingly difficult.
- The Council was unable to offer more pay for roles, therefore there was a need to promote other aspects of the roles.
- The Council had previously shared officer posts with other authorities and the Council currently had a joint Waste Service Manager with East Herts Council.
- The milestones highlighted under the Delivery of Housing on Council Land project were to have their dates reviewed to the end of September. There were no further milestones on this project in this financial year, unless new milestones were added.

In response to questions from Councillor Muncer, the Chair requested that specific questions be addressed to the Officer outside of the meeting to ensure a full answer could be provided. Councillor Muncer accepted the comment of the Chair, but noted that it was for the Committee to hold Executive Members to account by asking questions.

Councillor Clare Billing proposed and Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- (1) Noted the progress against the Council projects as set out in the Council Delivery Plan (appendix A) including changes to milestones, performance indicators and risks, and makes any recommendations or comments to Cabinet.
- (2) Considered the presentation of the report for future meetings, especially in relation to milestones and project status, and made any recommendations or comments to Cabinet.

REASON FOR DECISIONS: The Council Delivery Plan (CDP) monitoring reports provide Cabinet with an opportunity to monitor progress against the key Council projects, and understand any new issues, risks or opportunities.

235 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

Audio recording – 51 minutes 07 seconds

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report entitled 'Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme' and drew attention to the following:

- The LGA Peer Review Action Plan had been included with the report at Appendix C to review progress on actions.
- The Crime and Disorder Matters item had been scheduled for 29 January 2024 and requested Members make suggestions on topics.
- The Strategic Housing Policy Update, requested in March 2023, had been added to the Work Programme.
- There were ongoing discussions with the Chair, Vice-Chair and Officers regarding how best to provide Enterprise Directorate updates to the Committee.
- The Call To Account for Harkness Court had been provisionally scheduled for November and there would be a pre-meeting briefing for Members arranged before.
- Members were welcome to make other suggestions for topics.

Councillor David Levett requested that the Update on the Common Housing Allocation Scheme and the Biodiversity Strategy 2023-2028 be added to the Work Programme from the Forward Plan. In response to this, the Scrutiny Officer advised that these could be added, however the Biodiversity Strategy item had been delayed, but would be added as to be scheduled.

In response to a question from Councillor Ralph Muncer the Scrutiny Officer advised that the invitation to settle had been sent this week.

Councillor Clare Billing proposed and Councillor David Levett seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Committee prioritised topics for inclusion in the work programme attached as Appendix A and, where appropriate, determined the high-level form and timing of scrutiny input.
- (2) That the Committee, having considered the most recent iteration of the Forward Plan, as attached at Appendix B, suggested that the 'Update to Common Housing Allocation Scheme' and 'Biodiversity Strategy 2023-2028' items be considered at its meetings in the coming civic year.

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- (3) That the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan as attached at Appendix C was considered.

REASONS FOR DECISIONS:

- (1) To allow the Committee to set a work programme which provides focused Member oversight, encourages open debate and seeks to achieve service improvement through effective policy development and meaningful policy and service change.
- (2) The need to observe Constitutional requirements and monitor the Forward Plan for appropriate items to scrutinise remains a key aspect of work programming.

The meeting closed at 8.26 pm

Chair