

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, GERONON ROAD, LETCHWORTH, SG6 3JF
ON TUESDAY, 9TH JANUARY, 2024 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Val Bryant (Chair), Dominic Griffiths, David Levett, Nigel Mason, Ralph Muncer, Daniel Wright-Mason and Daniel Allen.*

In Attendance: *Deborah Coates (Principal Strategic Planning Officer), Rachel Cooper (Controls, Risk and Performance Manager), Christine Crofts (Communications Manager), Ian Fullstone (Service Director - Regulatory), Sarah Kingsley (Service Director - Place), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager), Nigel Smith (Strategic Planning Manager) and Sjanel Wickenden (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer).*

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

262 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 2 minutes 9 second

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Matt Barnes, Clare Billing, Adam Compton, Mick Debenham and Ian Moody.

Having given due notice Councillor Daniel Allen substituted for Councillor Debenham.

263 MINUTES - 7 NOVEMBER AND 5 DECEMBER 2023

Audio recording – 2 minutes 38 seconds

The Chair advised that Councillor Ralph Muncer had advised of an error in the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee from the 7 November 2024. This related to his name being wrongly included within the list of Members who had received dispensation from the Monitoring Officer to take part in the Call to Account on the Harkness Court Project. As he was not on the Planning Control Committee, he had not been required to seek a dispensation.

Councillor Nigel Mason proposed, as amended, and Councillor David Levett seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meetings of the Committee held on '7 November 2023, as amended, and 5 December 2023' be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

264 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 46 seconds

There was no other business notified.

265 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 50 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.

266 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 4 minutes 41 seconds

There was no public participation.

267 URGENT AND GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 49 seconds

No urgent or general exception items were received.

268 CALLED-IN ITEMS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 52 seconds

There have been no called-in items.

269 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 58 seconds

No questions had been submitted.

N.B Councillor Dominic Griffiths entered the Council Chamber at 19:36.

270 RESOLUTIONS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Audio recording – 5 minutes 17 seconds

The Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager presented the item 'Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee' and highlighted:

- The Draft Sustainability SPD was presented to Cabinet with the Overview and Scrutiny referral on the 12 December 2023 and was approved.
- This Committee made a referral to Cabinet in November regarding the Waste Recycling and Street Cleansing Contact Service Design with an amended recommendation to remove the delegation to the Service Director. The amendment was accepted by Cabinet in November 2023 and the item was deferred to the 12 December 2023 Cabinet meeting where it was considered and approved.
- The Leisure Management Contract Award was approved by Cabinet on the 12 December 2023.

Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason proposed and Councillor Daniel Allen 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.

271 Q2 UPDATE ON PROGRESS AGAINST THE COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN

Audio Recording 7 minutes 17 seconds

The Controls, Risk and Performance Manager presented the report entitled 'Q2 Update on Progress against the Council Delivery Plan 2023-24' and advised that:

- This was the second quarter update on Council projects, as approved by Cabinet, and was intended to be an evolving document with updates on project risks.
- The original due date of projects was now included on Appendix A, as highlighted at paragraph 8.3 along with the revised due date. Milestone dates are changed following Cabinet approval.
- There were 13 projects with requested milestone changes, these were highlighted including reasons in paragraph 8.4 of the report.
- Appendix B detailed the prioritisation tool that had been developed for scoring criteria and weighting of each project, from 2024/25 this would be used to evaluate and prioritise the projects to be included on the Council Delivery Plan. A shorter more focused list of key projects would then be presented to the Committee from 2024/25.
- Following discussions at Cabinet in September only relevant milestones will be included going forward in the report, this will reduce the report length. Members can use Ideagen to access further details.
- Appendix A detailed the 27 projects and their current status using the red, amber and green rating. Projects with an upward facing arrow showing an improvement in status and a high risk project had a red risk score. The progress bar on each project showed the percentage completion of each project for the current year milestones only and not for the entire project.
- The Place Narrative project had been completed and would be removed from the plan.
- There were 12 projects that now had amber scores.
- The milestone changes were due to slippage or a requested change in date.
- There had been a requested change to the Charnwood House project to extend the bid period.
- The Memorandum of Understanding had been signed for phase one of the Local Authority Housing Fund and the houses are now occupied.
- There would be a wider discussion of the Museum Storage project as the item was deferred by Cabinet in September.
- The Solar PV Leisure Centre and the Royston Solar Thermal projects were on hold pending the results of a grant application to the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.
- Quarterly assessments were ongoing for red risks not linked to specific projects regarding resourcing and cyber risks highlighted on page 58 of the report.
- There was a link on SharePoint to Ideagen (formerly Pentana), a video guide for users was expected in March.
- Further in depth details of specific projects can be provided from Officers and Executives either offline or at the next meeting.

N.B Councillor Ralph Muncer entered the Council Chamber at 19:46.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Dominic Griffiths
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor David Levett

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

- Work was ongoing on the EV charging project the completion due date was now October 2024. Further details of any additional support required to complete this project could be provided.
- The outcome of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme was expected in January 2024.
- Details would be provided on the level of engagement with the Churchgate digital hub.
- Details would be provided on when we can expect to see a proposal for the Churchgate project.
- There had been resourcing issues on the Enterprise Strategy project, details of any outsourcing costs could be provided at a later date, if this was in the interest of the Council to go down that route.
- The proposed number of EV charging points to be installed, in the District was set out in the project specification and would be investigated and provided to the Committee.
- The Enterprise strategy scope was due for sign off after the production date of this report. An update to include the outcome of the briefing held on the 14 December 2023 would be provided.

The following Members took part in debate:

- Councillor David Levett
- Councillor Ralph Muncer

Points raised during the debate included:

- It was important that the Waste Depots project was completed on time to ensure service to residents was not affected.
- There were concerns regarding the volume of projects that had turned amber especially those that had resourcing issues.

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

RESOLVED: That the Committee identified any project(s) for which they would like to receive a more detailed update.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET: That the Committee noted the progress against Council projects as set out in the Council Delivery Plan (Appendix A) including changes to milestones, performance indicators and risks, and made recommendations and comments to Cabinet.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION: 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.

272 LOCAL PLAN REVIEW

Audio Recording 25 minutes 48 seconds

The Deputy Executive Member for Planning and Transport, Councillor Ian Mantle presented the item entitled 'Local Plan Review' and highlighted that:

- A comprehensive report had been produced with recommendations for a full review supported by the Executive Member and Deputy.
- It would be prudent to commence the full review using the new regulations.
- The Government had recently been discussing the levels of control Councils had creating their local plans.
- It had been 10 years since the current local plan had been created.
- The new plan would incorporate the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
- The review should proceed in a timely manner.

The following Members asked questions:

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

In response to questions the Deputy Executive Member for Planning and Transport advised:

- Any strategic sites currently progressing through planning would have a masterplan and where the Full Council agrees with the strategy, they would be unlikely to be rejected by Planning as the work will have been done up front.
- The growth bids mentioned at paragraph 10.3 and 10.4 related to the budget of the Council.
- The majority of the review will be conducted by current staff.

In response to questions the Strategic Planning Manager advised:

- The local plan needed to be reviewed, paragraphs 9.4 and 9.5 of the report stated that any review of the local plan would not affect nor render the current local plan as out of date.
- Subject to the budget being approved the agreed budget for the review was £800K; significantly less than the £1.6M for the current local plan.
- There would be some specialist consultant work for complex matters. The remaining work would be completed using the current staff structure.

In response to a question the Principal Strategic Planning Officer advised that the aim was to reach examination by 2027 with a view to extending the plan period to 2046, ensuring compliance with the 15-year period required by national policy.

The Service Director – Regulatory stated that a number of growth bids had been put forward for consideration at the budget workshops relating to the delivery of the plan and staffing resources. Further instalment funding had been drafted into the budget for consultant fees, with the Executive Member and Deputy receiving regular resourcing updates.

The following Members took part in debate:

- Councillor David Levett
- Councillor Daniel Allen
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Dominic Griffiths

Points raised in debate included:

- This review was important, and an early review was expected as so much had changed.
- Although previously against the Local Plan, a review of the plan would be good for the people of North Herts.
- The reforms had taken a considerable amount of time, a review should be started as soon as possible.
- There had been changes to policies and legislation since the adoption of the current Local Plan.
- Concerns had previously been raised when the local plan was adopted, they strongly welcomed a review.
- The 2011 plan was adopted in 2022, therefore it could be argued that the plan was outdated as soon as it was adopted.
- Design policies should be considered to enhance sustainability and longevity.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET:

- (1) That Cabinet note the results of the review of the policies of the NHLP set out in Appendix A and the PAS toolkit in Appendix B.
- (2) That Cabinet agree that a full review and update of the NHLP is undertaken.
- (3) That work commences during 2024/25 on updating the technical studies needed to provide a robust evidence base to inform an update of the Local Plan and early community engagement take place.
- (4) That a further report on the detailed scope of the update and the timetable for its preparation, submission and examination is prepared at the earliest opportunity once the implications of the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) are better understood and the statutory framework required to implement the reforms has been approved.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS: To ensure that North Herts Council fulfils its commitments as set out in Policy IMR2 of the North Herts Local Plan which requires the Council to undertake a whole plan review by the end of 2023 to determine whether the plan needs to be updated either in whole or in part.

273 2024 - 2028 MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Audio Recording 47 minutes 27 seconds

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Elizabeth Dennis presented the report entitled '2024-2028 Marketing and Communications Strategy' and highlighted that:

- It was important that the Council reviewed how it was positioning, presenting and communicating effectively with all stakeholders.
- There had been a shift from pure communication to more marketing-based communication to help promote the Council narrative and raise awareness of Council priorities.
- Data analysis showed there was an 82% success rate with projects when communication teams were involved from the start
- Communication was not just for the Communications team but down to everybody involved with the authority.
- Other Local authorities and the private sector already recognised and have built on this model of communication.

- There would be a People First approach for marketing and communications, with the refreshed recruitment campaign using existing staff being a great example of this. Other recent examples included the Climate Hive, the Bee Corridor and the Churchgate digital hub.
- There would be a digital first approach across channels, but other channels would still be used. By using different modes of communication, it would allow for adaption to use the most suitable method for the topic and the person reading it.
- There would be quarterly and annual reviews of the communication outputs to ensure that the strategy was being delivered.
- The Council cannot afford to stay still and needs positive engagement to support everyone.

The following Members asked questions:

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

In response to questions, the Leader of the Council advised that:

- A review would be sought from Officers regarding any environmental impact and costs. However, this Committee was currently reviewing the strategy itself and not the products involved.
- New digital products would appear on the fast moving digital market and this strategy was agile and flexible to reflect this.
- Key area to be measured were highlighted in the report and included temperature checks through resident engagement, local resident surveys, and completing 'You said, we did' exercises. These would be conducted quarterly and annually.
- As the strategy would run for 4 years and marketing and communications is fast-moving, the KPIs will be reviewed on a quarterly and annual basis.
- This strategy was prepared alongside the Community survey.
- The strategy would use appropriate language for the audience.

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

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET: That Cabinet approves the 2024 - 2028 Marketing and Communications Strategy.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION:

- (1) With residents facing a cost-of-living crisis and council budgets being tightened further, it has never been more important for councils to communicate effectively with their audiences.
- (2) Effective communication is critical as it has the power to engage communities, challenge misconceptions, build trust and confidence in the council and through that, strengthen relationships with residents, stakeholders, and staff.
- (3) Although communications help to tell the story of North Herts Council (and improve resident perceptions of the council), marketing is needed to promote and raise awareness of our vision, priorities, and themes, to ensure that the right people, get the right message, at the right time through their preferred channel of choice.

- (4) It is therefore recommended, that the 2024 - 2028 strategy is a Marketing and Communications Strategy.

274 COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS (MARCH - JUNE 2023)

Audio Recording 1 hour 20 seconds

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Elizabeth Dennis, presented the report entitled 'Community Survey Results (March – June 2023)' and highlighted that:

- District Wide surveys had previously been completed every other year by telephone.
- This was the first digital survey conducted for the Council by Zencity and would be conducted every 6 months.
- The use of a digital survey allowed more frequent feedback from residents and saved costs.
- It was important to note that there would be a difference between the data produced from a digital only survey compared to the results from a phone survey. Residents were unable to converse with the interviewer during a digital survey, compared to a phone-based alternative, and evidence suggested that results would be lower due to this.
- There was an 183% increase in response from the 16-34 age bracket.
- Overall, residents were satisfied with North Herts as a place to live and would recommend it to others.
- Trust in the Council was at 40%, however this was 5% higher than the results from the survey conducted in June 2023.
- There was some confusion amongst residents regarding what services North Herts District Council provided and what Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) provided.
- Challenges with Waste and Street Cleanliness were identified and feedback had been given to those teams with work ongoing to address issues raised.
- 84% of those surveyed said that the Council could listen more and work was now ongoing regarding 'you said, we did' communication, to highlight how feedback was turned into actions.
- The services covered by North Herts need to be clearly communicated to residents.
- Residents of Royston had a feeling of disconnection and work was planned to make them feel part of North Herts, which included an extension to the leisure facility.
- It was recommended at 8.5.4 of the report that future results are not brought to Cabinet but published on the Council website. However, Cabinet would monitor and review outside of a formal meeting and address any issues raised.
- There were known data differences on this survey compared to the previous telephone surveys, and the results and feedback had been considered accordingly.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Dominic Griffiths
- Councillor Nigel Mason
- Councillor David Levett
- Councillor Ralph Muncer

In response to questions, Councillor Dennis advised:

- The surveys were conducted by Zencity so did not incur any Officer time. Officer time was still required to analyse and report the data.
- The survey was promoted by the Council through its mailing list.
- There was some weighting on questions regarding use of the service.
- This first digital survey would be used to benchmark future surveys. The Marketing and Communications Strategy, as well as other policies being developed, should improve

results and especially have an impact on the views of residents as to whether the Council involves, consults and engages with the local community.

In response to questions, the Communications Manager advised that:

- For two surveys a year the cost was £6K, the telephone surveys previously cost £17.9K and occurred every other year.
- Zencity used software through Google and Facebook ads to reach a representative sample of North Herts residents.
- Some residents answered questions regarding services they had not used. For future surveys residents would not be able to score services which they did not use.

The following Members took part in debate:

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

Points raised in debate included:

- That the survey results should be reported to Cabinet on a regular basis, as they are a measure of the performance of the Council and the effectiveness of the policies of the Council, as perceived by our residents and a formal annual review should be undertaken.
- Some of the questions were the same as in previous surveys, particularly the 2019 survey, which could be used for benchmarking.
- Survey results were generally more generous when completed by telephone.
- Comparison with results from other local authorities would be useful.
- Responders commented on road improvements, however, these are provided by Hertfordshire County Council and not the remit of North Herts.
- Residents are satisfied with the District and environment they live in but not by the provisions and services provided.
- Findings should be compared but the comparison should be of the same thing and in the same way.
- Funding for local authorities had decreased by 33% over the last few years, which could explain concerns with services.

During the debate, Councillor David Levett advised that he felt he had been unable to raise points he wanted to make; the role of the Committee was to act as a critical friend, and he considered that he had been prevented from raising pertinent questions and would take no further part in the debate. He would raise this issue formally.

Councillor Daniel Allen proposed and Councillor Dominic Griffiths seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET: That Cabinet comment on and note the key findings and observations from round one of the Community Survey and comment on the approach to future surveys (as detailed in section 8.5).

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION: To ensure that Cabinet is aware of the results of the Community Survey (our first digital residents' survey) and how they compare to the Local Government Association (LGA) June 23 Resident Satisfaction phone survey results.

275 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

Audio Recording – 1 hour 30 minutes 21 seconds

The Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager presented the item 'Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme' and highlighted:

- The Committee can add items to the work programme by informing the Chair and the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager.
- On the 29 January 2024 Hertfordshire Police will attend the Committee meeting to discuss issues relating to hate crimes in North Herts.
- Settle had been invited to the Committee Meeting on the 29 January 2024 to discuss complaint handling and any changes relating to the Rental Reform Bill.
- Other items listed for the 29 January 2024 included the Empty Homes Strategy, Council Tax Premiums for Empty and Second homes and the Chairs reports on the Call to Accounts for the Harkness Court Project and Lord Lister Hotel.
- Appendix C highlighted the recommendations from the LGA Corporate Peer Review, with actions and timescales.
- The Scrutiny Officer position had a closing date of the 15 January 2024 and had been advertised utilizing the Essex County Council jobs board, interviews were scheduled for the 31 January 2024.
- The Call to Account preparation briefings would become a standard for any subsequent call to account items.
- Ensuring minutes reflected the decisions of the meeting was now completed, as the resolutions report captured any specific requests.
- Any referral rejected by Cabinet would be reported in the resolutions report at the beginning of each Overview and Scrutiny committee, along with the rejection reason.
- The training items on the report related to post election and would be included in the Induction Programme for Members following the elections in May 2024.
- Items relating to meeting protocols were ongoing and would be further developed by the new Scrutiny Officer.
- The definition of the Committee would be discussed outside of this meeting.
- Work would commence on the Task and Finish group once any topics for consideration were received.

In response to questions from Councillor Ralph Muncer, the Chair advised that the Call to Account reports for the Harkness Court Project and Lord Lister Hotel would be presented at the next meeting of the Committee on Monday 29 January 2024.

Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason proposed and Councillor Dominic Griffiths 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 a list of items to be considered at its meetings in the coming civic year.
- (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 9.07 pm

Chair