

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

DECISION SHEET

Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, District Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth, SG6 3JF on Monday, 29th January, 2024 at 7.30 pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ian Moody.

2 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business notified.

3 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

- (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.

4 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation at this meeting.

5 URGENT AND GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS

No urgent or general exception items were received.

6 CALLED-IN ITEMS

There have been no called-in items.

7 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

No questions had been submitted by Members.

8 PRESENTATION FROM SETTLE

A presentation was received from settle Group providing information about the organisation, with a focus on the projects they have been working on over the last 12 months.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER MATTERS

A presentation was received from Hertfordshire Constabulary regarding Hate Crime in North Herts.

10 RESOLUTIONS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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.

12 EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY

RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET:

- (1) That Cabinet adopt the Empty Homes Strategy 2024-29.
- (2) The Cabinet should note that although there is no legal requirement for the Council to have an Empty Homes Strategy, there have been several significant Government-focussed documents and papers highlighting their importance, including a House of Commons Briefing Paper stating that each local authority should have such a strategy to help reduce the number of long-term empty homes in their districts.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) The recommendation and considerations are being made to allow the Council to formerly adopt the 5-year Empty Homes Strategy 2024-29 to allow the Environmental Health service to work directly or with others to identify and deliver the most appropriate intervention programme to allow the Council to aim to bring as many long-term empty homes back into occupation as practicable.
- (2) The strategy allows the Council to state its intention to consider every aspect linked to the housing sector to bring into use as many opportunities as it can to meet the district's housing needs, without having to rely solely on new build. Whilst the number of long-term empty homes is small, and the number likely to be brought back into occupation will be smaller still, this strategy does address this sector which would otherwise be omitted from the overall resource potentially available to form our housing stock.
- (3) By adopting the strategy and allowing for the development of a culture of greater awareness of vacant homes, allows for homes which become vacant to be highlighted sooner, and so they can be monitored and their owners challenged at an earlier point, thus also contributing to hopefully having more homes available for the residents of the district.

13 COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS FOR EMPTY AND SECOND HOMES

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (1) That in accordance with Section 11B and 11C of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as amended by Section 2 of the Rating (Properties in Common Occupation) & Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018 and the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, Cabinet considers increasing the council tax premiums on empty homes and introducing a new premium on second homes in a phased approach as follows:
 - (1.1) That from 1 April 2025 the Council adopts the following full Premium levy rates:
 - Properties empty for one year but less than five will receive a 100% Premium.
 - Properties empty for five years but less than ten years a 200% Premium.
 - Properties empty for more than ten years a 300% Premium.

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- (1.2) That from 1 April 2024 until 31 March 2025 the following interim premiums are introduced:
- Properties empty for one year but less than two will not receive a Premium.
 - Properties empty for more than two years, but less than five years will receive a 100% Premium.
 - Properties empty for five years but less than ten years a 150% Premium.
 - Properties empty for more than ten years a 200% Premium.
- (2) That from 1 April 2025 a 100% Premium is levied on all properties that are determined as a second home, subject to any exceptions once these have been confirmed by Regulations and that the Service Director – Customers in consultation with the Executive Member for Finance and IT is delegated authority to make any amendments following further confirmation of the Regulations.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) To support the principle of bringing unoccupied properties back into occupation in line with the proposed empty homes strategy. At the time of writing there are 43 properties that have been unoccupied for over five years.
- (2) The introduction of a phased approach of increasing the premiums enables us to advertise the changes. As the introduction of premiums for properties unoccupied for between one and two years is new there will be no expectation on the owners of these properties of an additional premium and therefore it is recommended that this aspect is deferred until 2025 to allow time to advertise the change.
- (3) In respect of a premium on Second Homes the Council is required to give one year's notice as this is the Council's first determination in this regard and therefore a resolution must be made before the end of the 2023/24 financial year in order to bring in the premium from 01 April 2025.
- (4) The Council does have the ability to revoke the decision in relation to Second Homes premium, during the year should any consultation that is carried out provide evidence that this would not be effective.

14 REGULATION OF INVESTIGATORY POWERS ACT ('RIPA') ANNUAL REVIEW

RESOLVED: That the content of the report, and the IPCO's assurance letter Appendix A, was noted by the Committee.

REASON FOR DECISION: To comply with best practice guidance and the Committee's terms of reference.

11 CALL TO ACCOUNT - LORD LISTER HOTEL - CHAIR'S REPORT

RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee referred the report, attached as Appendix A, to Council, together with the copy of the lessons learnt and the appropriate section of the minutes of the meeting of 28 September 2022.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION: The recommendations had been made following the Call to Account on 28 September 2022.

15 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

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.