

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, GERON ROAD, LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY, SG6 3JF
ON TUESDAY, 4TH FEBRUARY, 2025 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Matt Barnes (Chair), Tom Tyson (Vice-Chair), Jon Clayden, Ralph Muncer, Louise Peace, Martin Prescott, Laura Williams, Claire Winchester, Donna Wright, Daniel Wright-Mason and Emma Fernandes.*

In Attendance: *Jo Dufficy (Service Director - Customers), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Chris Jeffery (Customer Service Manager), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager), Jeevan Mann (Scrutiny Officer) and Polly Simonds (Customer and Digital Project Manager).*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting approximately no members of the public were present.*

Councillor Ian Albert, as Executive Member for Finance and IT, and Councillor Val Bryant, as Executive Member for Community and Partnerships, were in attendance.

73 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 1 minute 43 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Tina Bhartwas and Elizabeth Dennis.

Having given due notice, Councillor Emma Fernandes substituted for Councillor Bhartwas.

74 MINUTES - 7 JANUARY 2025

Audio Recording – 1 minute 58 seconds

Councillor Matt Barnes, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Ralph Muncer seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 7 January 2025 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

75 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 2 minutes 43 seconds

There was no other business notified.

76 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 2 minutes 47 seconds

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be 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) The Chair reminded Members of the adopted North Herts Scrutiny Charter and the need to ensure that the meeting was conducted with independence, initiative and integrity. The full Charter was available to Members via the Scrutiny Intranet pages.
- (5) The Chair advised Members that the updates and questions for Agenda Item 11 and Agenda Item 12 would be taken together, however they would require separated votes to approve. It was notified that for future meetings, the reports for the two agenda items would be merged into one.

77 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 4 minutes 2 seconds

There was no public participation at this meeting.

78 URGENT AND GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 7 seconds

No urgent or general exception items were received.

79 CALLED-IN ITEMS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 13 seconds

There have been no called-in items.

80 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 17 seconds

No questions had been submitted by Members.

81 HEALTH MATTERS

Audio Recording – 4 minutes 22 seconds

Michelle Campbell and Steve Claydon of Herts and West Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB) provided a presentation on dentistry provision in North Herts, and advised of the following, that:

- The Integrated Care Board had taken over delegated commissioning of all dental services from NHS England (NHSE) in April 2023.

- Unlike GP practices, dental practices did not operate a registered patient list, therefore patients both within and outside the North Herts and West Essex boundaries could access treatment from the dental practices there.
- There were two types of contracts awarded to practices under the National Dental Contract. The first was General Dental Services contracts which were to provide mandatory dental services. Contracts were commissioned on “units of dental activity” (UDA) which was set against a baseline reference year prior to 2004.
- Within each contract, there were four treatment bands going from Band 1 for regular assessments and examinations all the way to Band 4 for urgent treatments.
- Contracts allowed for 4% under-delivery 2% over-delivery of UDA which was either carried over or deducted from the contractual baseline the following financial year. However, if funding was available, they would pay the practices that over delivered their services.
- The second type of contract was Personal Dental Services contracts which were for locally commissioned services such as orthodontists. These were time limited and were not in perpetuity.
- The ICB had delegated functions to make decisions on contractual changes such as practice relocation, alteration of practice activity bases and values, and incorporation requests.
- 229 General Dental Services and Personal Dental Services contracts were active across Herts and West Essex. These were broken down into 185 General Dental Services, 21 Orthodontic Contracts, 2 Special Care Dental Services, 1 Prison Dental Service (not currently managed by ICB), 1 Domiciliary Dental Service, 1 Dental Out of Hours Service, 16 Intermediate Oral Surgery Services, 2 Sedation Services and Secondary Dental Care.
- Since Covid, providers and commissioners of dentistry had faced increased patient demand, more complex treatment needs, workforce recruitment and retention (although this had seen recent improvement), restricted funding for treatments, increased costs due to inflation, financial instability due to under-delivery, and contracts based on activity rather than outcomes.
- A Primary Care Strategic Dental Delivery Plan had been developed in 2023 to identify priorities which would address the oral health needs of the population.
- These were identified as improving urgent access to dental care, delivering oral support to the public through education, strengthening outreach to care homes, allocating the current workforce more effectively and planning routine care to reduce the need for urgent care.
- The priorities identified from the delivery plan would also align with most of the priorities set by the ICB for 2024/25 and 2025/26.
- In February 2024, NHSE in partnership with the Department of Health and Social Care had published a Dental Recovery Plan, targeting the recovery of NHS dental services.
- The plan aimed to support the prevention of poor oral health by working with public health and local authorities through the Oral Alliance Group.
- It also aimed to increase the delivery of dental services by introducing a New Patient Premium for practices to see patients who had been unable to access care in the past 2 years.
- Additionally, there was a national increase to the minimum UDA from £23 to £28, funding for 240 posts nationally on the proviso that the dentist committed to staying for three years (three posts had been allocated for Herts and West Essex ICB) and the introduction of Dental Vans to support rural, under-served and hard-to-reach communities although Herts and West Essex did not meet the criteria for these.
- Almost 90,000 new patients had accessed dental care since April 2024 under the New Patient Premium.
- Since taking over in 2023, the ICB had introduced an enhanced dental access pilot to offer urgent access appointments seven days a week both in and out of hours.
- The pilot was originally commissioned for six months, however, due to its success, it had been extended until the end of March 2025. By the end of March, they predicted that

nine to ten thousand additional appointments would have been delivered to patients that were unable to regularly access an appointment.

- As part of the pilot, four providers in Hertfordshire were offered contracts to administer urgent care in-hours and six providers saw their out-of-hours capacity doubled.
- The pilot had provided lots of data for the model to continue once the ICB had reviewed their business planning process.
- 3.14% of all treatment for children had been urgent and just over double the percentage of adult treatment had been urgent at 6.67%.
- As the oral health of the population improved, there would be a reduction in the higher banded treatment as the need for invasive treatment would decline.
- The data on dentistry in Herts and West Essex that had been presented could be circulated to Members after the meeting upon request.
- A dental access and health review had been undertaken for the ICB in late 2023 through to early 2024 which had given them data on the oral health of the population and located hotspots which were areas where residents had low access, but a high need for dental services.
- From this, the ICB were able to able to the areas where it needed to prioritise their resources and had allocated them respectively.
- There had been collaboration with the public health team within the Local Authority to provide pop up dental clinics, reach out to family centres and schools to provide advice, in addition to training and education on oral health.
- There had also been participation in the National Epidemiology Survey where a cohort of patients were assessed to provide information on dental health. The previous year had assessed year six pupils and the current year had assessed care homes, producing a rich data set for commissioners to work with.
- Since taking over the delegated commission, there had been high levels of investment in Herts dental services to increase their level in line with Essex.
- This investment included the purchase of bariatric chairs for bariatric patients that would have previously been referred to Bedfordshire and the implementation of an anxious patient pathway for patients that would have been referred to the London Acutes but are now rejecting out of area referrals.
- There were 20 dental contracts in North Herts, 18 of those were General Dental Services (GDS) practices and 2 were orthodontic practices and 1 of the GDS practices provided oral surgery. Overall, the boundary was well served for NHS dentistry.
- The recruitment and retention of the dental workforce in Herts and West Essex was above average compared with the rest of East of England.
- Healthwatch had published several reports on NHS dental health and access since 2016. The ICB had commissioned Healthwatch to deliver four programmes a year on topics that they had chosen. One of those topics would be the oral health of children which they had given Healthwatch permission to carry out a survey on this that would commence within the week.
- Over the next two years, the out-of-hours contracts would need to be reviewed and reprocured, collaboration with local authorities to improve the oral health of the population would take place, and a care home pilot to understand what the treatment needs of the elderly would be planned.
- Many contracts were not hitting the minimum 96% delivery rate and the ICB would be working with dental contractors to address this.
- From April 2025, the ICB could rebase a contract if there had been 3 years of underperformance. This underperformance could then be redistributed to practices that were demanding activity.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Claire Winchester

- Councillor Jon Clayden

In response to questions, the Herts and West Essex Integrated Care Board representatives advised that:

- The increasing population in North Herts would present a significant challenge to the ICB, however they would work with the Council to understand the growth and commission dental services where they were most needed.
- The ICB Premises Team worked with planning authorities to draft responses to developers on Section 106 contributions for all primary care services including dental practices. This included dental practices in Royston, but it was explained that GP services and pharmacies in the town were covered by Cambridge and Peterborough Integrated Care System and any response to developers on Section 106 contributions within the town would need a dual response from both organisations.
- Dental providers were required to submit workforce returns data to the Business Services Authority, however this was not shared with the ICB.
- If a practice underdelivered on their contract, they would pay back the ICB for any activity that was not performed.
- Under delivery of activity could be down to staffing problems, but it could also be because some practices were unwilling to perform certain treatments.
- Post-Covid, there had been a significant increase in the delivery across Herts and West Essex which had increased from approximately 72.5% in 2022/23 to 92% in 2023/24, and the forecast for 2024/25 was 96%.
- Only three fully funded dental posts had been allocated to Herts and West Essex as there were lots of criteria to be met in addition to other areas being under served compared to Herts and West Essex.
- Two contracts had been handed back to the ICB since 2023 as the providers had decided to go private, however, their activity had been reallocated to others.
- One practice withdrew from the enhanced dental access pilot once they realised the costs associated with providing urgent care as it required the use of experienced dentists whose pay was much higher than newly qualified ones. There was dialogue between the ICB and the provider to find a solution, however they ultimately decided to pull out of the pilot.
- Once a review of the pilot had taken place, their intent was to increase the number of participating providers as it was in their work programme for 2025/26 and they had the funding available to do this.
- A detailed clinical data set was collected for each treatment provided, and if there was a significant variance in activity compared to the national benchmark, they could discuss this with providers and conduct audits where necessary.
- Routine checkups were no longer standard practice. Instead, every patient was individually assessed for their needs and given appointment accordingly.
- The purpose of the ICB was to get the health service to work closely with local authorities to promote and improve oral health. Bio-directional feedback from North Herts Council would benefit the ICB hugely in instances where big housing developments were being considered and the ICB could obtain funding through applying for Section 106 contributions.

Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason noted that it would be useful if the recruitment and retention figures in North Herts were examined in more detail to see if external factors such as affordable housing in the region were impacting this.

Councillor Val Bryant advised that Councillor Tina Bhartwas was the Health Champion for North Herts as well as the North Herts Council representative on the Health Scrutiny Committee at Hertfordshire County Council and could act as a point of communication between the ICB and local authorities.

The Chair thanked Michelle Campbell and Steve Claydon for their presentation.

N.B. Following the conclusion of this item, there was a break in proceedings and the meeting reconvened at 20:43.

82 DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME UPDATE

Audio Recording – 1 hour 13 minutes 22 seconds

Councillor Ian Albert, as Executive Member for Finance and IT, introduced the Information Note entitled 'Digital Transformation Programme Update' and advised that:

- The Digital Transformation Programme was a critical initiative and was a key tool in the Council Delivery Plan.
- Despite challenges such as public sector recruitment and retention, multiple business applications and a lack of synergy between applications, the IT Team had made significant progress on the programme.
- In 2024, the Customer Relation Management (CRM) system contract had ended, but this had allowed the Council to explore other digital platforms.
- After extensive research and testing, it was decided to go with a low code solution called Netcall which allowed users to create digital applications with minimal coding skills and had allowed the Council to accelerate its own digital transformation and create a Digital Transformation Strategy that was approved by Cabinet in January 2024.
- Several goals in the strategy had been achieved including the investment in the low code digital platform, the implementation of a chatbot service, the integration of SharePoint, and signing a digital declaration introduced by the Government which many other councils nationally had also signed.
- Ongoing projects included making services digital by default, conducting a customer-centric review of end-to-end processes and experimenting with generative AI.
- More projects would be executed such as the creation of a new waste system, a Town Hall booking system and a burial system which would help to improve the service received by customers.
- The feedback from the Corporate Peer Review was positive, however they would look to improve on digital inclusion, staff engagement, and capitalisation on digital skills across the Council as per paragraph 4.4 of the review.
- It was recognised that residents who were not able to use digital services would have the necessary offline services made available to them.

The Customer and Digital Services Manager and the Customer and Digital Project Manager provided an update and advised of the following:

- When the Covid Pandemic took place, the Council had to change the way it carried out its work practices and customer interactions, but this had presented an opportunity for them to embark on a new digital transformation programme.
- To address several ongoing challenges such as the uncertainty of funding, advancements in AI and the increased demand from the Local Plan, a Digital Services Team was built from existing budgets.
- Various digital platforms were explored to replace the expiring CRM system. After market research had taken place, Netcall was chosen as a low code solution going forward.
- It had helped to deploy applications to automate tasks, optimise business operations and deliver improved experiences.
- A comprehensive Digital Strategy was produced to better meet the needs of those that the Council served. This document was a commitment to continuous improvement and innovation in service delivery.

- Digital Transformation was an enabler and would allow the Council to tackle its workforce challenges and allow it to deliver both its current and future ambitions.
- The Council was aiming to build a robust digital infrastructure to strengthen service delivery and meet the needs of residents.
- Goals and objectives that the Council had were efficient working, gaining customer insight, reduction in current and future costs, faster development and innovation, more agility and faster response to feedback, and collaboration with other councils.
- There were three main areas of focus for the Digital Transformation Strategy, people, processes and technology.
- The success of the digital transformation depended on the participation of people and constant training, inclusion and collaboration with staff had helped to ensure this.
- Regularly monitoring digital initiatives had allowed the Council to deliver value to residents and staff, keeping them at the core of their work.
- The metrics that had been used to define the success of the programme were summarised as cost and efficiency.
- Projects that had already been completed or soon to be complete using the digital platform included advancing e-forms on the CRM, creation of the MyCouncillor account, an out-of-hours application for Careline, a Grants database and a portal for the Garden Waste Project.
- Economic and non-cashable savings would be made in the long-term in line with contract end dates.
- The Digital Strategy was put together in 2024, and since its inception, the Customer and Digital Team had tried to be informative about the digital transformation without using technical jargon.
- The mid-term review of the Digital Strategy would encompass signposting to other authorities across the County that were doing work on digital inclusion.
- The vision and guiding principles in the strategy were used to consider new projects for the transformation programme.
- These guiding principles were listed as being digital for customers, making technology work better for staff, making processes as simple and efficient as possible, having an agile and iterative approach, organisational culture and capacity, being data-led in decision-making, continuous development of the services and technology, and making a positive impact to their climate commitment.
- As part of the development of the digital strategy, a wide range of stakeholders were consulted.
- The East of England Local Government Association were consulted and conducted a digital maturity assessment.
- Shared Internal Audit Service reviewed the digital strategy and benchmarked it against the digital strategies of other councils across the country.
- Sessions were held with the senior management group which showed that better integration, eliminating human error and data sharing between services were all common desires of Council departments.
- The feedback received from the Corporate Peer Review on capacity to deliver had been positive.
- Ofsted excellent training provider, Multiverse had gone into partnership with the Council to offer digitally focused apprenticeships across the Council. Nineteen staff members joined the first cohort, and their apprenticeships would be centred around AI for business value, transformation and data insights.
- Once the apprenticeships had progressed, the skills gained by staff members would be capitalised upon and would add value to the Council.
- Microsoft Co-Pilot was being trialled in a phased approach by a small group of users to focus on how the Council could best use the technology.
- It was expected that Co-Pilot would improve staff wellbeing, service delivery and staff confidence with technology.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Martin Prescott
- Councillor Donna Wright
- Councillor Claire Winchester
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Jon Claydon
- Councillor Laura Williams
- Councillor Louise Peace
- Councillor Jon Clayden

In response to questions, Councillor Ian Albert advised that:

- The government gave advice on Digital services, but did not dictate the direction that councils took on it. However, it would be a welcome development to have a central organisation in which councils could work together to achieve their digital goals and make time and cost savings in the process.
- Applications had been improved based on staff comments from surveys that had been circulated.
- Savings made from the integration of new applications were hard to track as they were not cost related, they were more focused on enabling officers to perform their jobs better or in the case of the Hitchin Town Hall booking system, making it easier for residents to access council services.
- Safety and security was a priority and a Corporate Cyber Board with Members and key officers had been established for issues on cyber security within digital transformation to be discussed.

In response to questions, the Service Director – Customers advised that:

- Netcall had a large community of users who collaborated and shared information regularly about the platform, which would help the Council with their application building.
- A graduate was working on their AI pilot and a Data Strategy was in the early stages of development.
- The partnership with Multiverse was helping to upskill staff on data collection, allowing the Council to make better business decisions.
- The first application built using Netcall was the CRM programme and using the low code system allowed them to launch it in a short period of time.
- The Digital Transformation Programme was on the list of Council Corporate Projects and on the Council Delivery Plan, therefore it was being reported on regularly at staff briefings, senior management groups, and at an oversight group that met to provide support and direction on the project.
- Improvements could be made on staff engagement, however there were forums in which staff could engage, and updates on the programme were given in both the internal staff hub and monthly magazine. As a result, staff were regularly approaching the Digital Team to provide feedback on applications.
- Longer-term savings would be measured at contract end dates when there would be cost avoidance as the Council would be able to build their own applications rather than renew a contract with an external provider, but they were too early into the programme to measure the savings.
- Opportunities to track productivity were limited, but these would develop over time as the programme progressed.
- All technology that was considered by the Council went through procurement and IT assessments before being introduced.
- Technology was ever changing, and a mid-term review of the Digital Strategy would be carried out to address any issues since its inception.

In response to questions, the Customer and Digital Services Manager advised that:

- It was recognised that the Digital Strategy was focussed internally, but as part of the mid-term review, they would develop a communications plan to circulate information about digital services to residents and customers.
- Residents accessed Council services offline by coming to the Council office reception where they could use self-service computers with the help of customer service staff. They did not currently have a system in place to monitor customers that only used offline services, but they were open to suggestions from Members.
- Several of the aims and ambitions were ongoing rather than complete, but a point raised to have an end date for all goals was noted.
- Microsoft Co-Pilot would have many uses such as generating job profiles, creating emails, prioritising email inboxes and transcribing meetings, but it would take time to find the right prompting for these.
- The chatbot that had already been implemented was a navigation tool but the new version of this would be powered by AI and provide answers to customers with live chat additionally linked. This would extend to the telephony channel that would provide answers to frequently answered questions with more complex enquiries being directed to the customer service centre.

In response to questions, Councillor Val Bryant advised that the Council had replaced over 100 applications since implementing Netcall and their digital maturity was ahead of most other councils.

In response to questions, the Customer and Digital Project Manager advised that:

- The Digital Team received continued input from all service areas across the council regarding newly built applications. The problems raised and improvements that had been suggested by staff meant that they were more invested in the outcomes and because of this, the relationship between the Digital Team and other service areas had strengthened.
- Microsoft Copilot would cut time on administration due to its ability to summarise long documents and assist with emails.
- Copilot adhered to the governance of existing Microsoft programmes used within the Council.
- Built applications aligned to the accessibility standards for diverse language and literacy needs.
- Cloud based systems were being looked at on a case-by-case basis, but they would only be implemented if it made financial sense to do so.

The Chair thanked Councillor Ian Albert, the Customer and Digital Service Manager, Customer and Digital Project Manager and Service Director – Customers for their presentation and responses to questions.

83 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report entitled 'Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2024-25' and the 'Decisions and Monitoring Tracker' and advised that:

- Section 106 training took place on Monday 13 January and a background paper was circulated to Members on the effectiveness of S106 funding in delivering community infrastructure.
- An email had been sent to group leaders about proportionality of the Section 106 Task and Finish group, and following this, leaders would be contacted for nominations.

- The LGA Peer Review actions were included in Appendix C of the report.
- A proposal had been put to councillors to align the Council Delivery Plan updates against service delivery updates. This would enable Members to look at the projects of each service area in detail and ask questions to the relevant Executive Members and officers.
- Questions should be submitted ahead of each meeting to give officers and Executive Members time to research and compile the necessary information to respond at the meeting.
- The Council Delivery Plan would next be generated in line with a Planning and Transport Portfolio update at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 11 March 2025.
- The referrals and recommendations from the tracker, following the last meeting, were made to Cabinet on 14 January 2025 and presented by the respective Executive Members at the meeting. The recommendations were considered and noted by Cabinet and had been marked as complete on the tracker.

In response to a question from Councillor Jon Clayden, The Chair advised that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee could consider a Council Data Strategy at a future meeting.

The Chair noted that the Peer Challenge Report, the Council Delivery Plan in line with a Planning and Transport Portfolio update, and a Museum Storage update would all be discussed at the next meeting on 11 March. The Chair also informed Members that the RIPA Annual Report was required to be completed within the Civic Year and would therefore be scheduled for the March meeting.

Councillor Matt Barnes, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Tom Tyson seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Committee prioritises topics for inclusion in the Work Programme attached as Appendix A and, where appropriate, determines 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, suggests 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 be 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.

84 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY DECISIONS AND MONITORING

Councillor Matt Barnes, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Tom Tyson seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the content of the Decisions and Monitoring Tracker was noted.

Tuesday, 4th February, 2025

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

The meeting closed at 9.55 pm

Chair