

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, 10TH JUNE, 2025 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Claire Winchester (Chair), Jon Clayden (Vice-Chair), Matt Barnes, Tina Bhartwas, Sadie Billing, Cathy Brownjohn, David Chalmers, Elizabeth Dennis, Martin Prescott, Paul Ward and Daniel Wright-Mason.*

In Attendance: *Faith Churchill (Democratic Services Apprentice), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Chloe Hipwood (Shared Service Manager - Waste), Chris Jeffery (Customer and Digital Services Manager), Sarah Kingsley (Director - Environment), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager) and Jeevan Mann (Scrutiny Officer).*

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

Councillor Amy Allen as Executive Member for Environment, Councillor Daniel Allen as Leader of the Council, and Councillor Val Bryant as Executive Member for Customer Experience were in attendance.

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 1 minute 28 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dominic Griffiths and Ralph Muncer.

Having given due notice, Councillor Matt Barnes substituted for Councillor Griffiths.

2 MINUTES - 11 MARCH 2025 AND 6 MAY 2025

Audio Recording – 1 minute 46 seconds

Councillor Claire Winchester, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Jon Clayden seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 11 March 2025 and 6 May 2025 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 2 minutes 36 seconds

There was no other business notified.

4 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 2 minutes 43 seconds

N.B. Councillor David Chalmers entered the Council Chamber at 19:33.

- (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 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 4 minutes 2 seconds

There was no public participation at this meeting.

6 URGENT AND GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 7 seconds

No urgent or general exception items were received.

7 CALLED-IN ITEMS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 11 seconds

There have been no called-in items.

8 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 15 seconds

No questions had been submitted by Members.

9 INFORMATION NOTE - FULL YEAR PERFORMANCE UPDATE ON 3CS 24/25

Audio recording – 4 minutes 23 seconds

Councillor Val Bryant, as Executive Member for Customer Experience, presented the Information Note entitled 'Full Year Update on Comments, Compliments and Complaints (3C's) 24/25' and advised that:

- This Information Note included a comparison of data with 2023/24.
- The number of compliments received by the Council had decreased and complaints, including those to contractors, had increased which was attributed to the change in leisure contract detailed at paragraph 3.10 of the information note.

- The percentage of Stage 1 complaints resolved within ten days had increased to 91% which was well above the 80% target.
- The percentage of visits and interactions with the Council resulting in a complaint remained below 1%.
- Urbaser saw a 73% decrease in complaints received compared with the previous year.
- The Council and their contractors received 184 compliments across a variety of service areas as shown at Appendix B.
- 24 Stage 2 complaints were received across all service areas but only 9 were justified to be escalated to senior managers.
- 5 complaints were received from the local ombudsman and 2 of these were upheld for fault and injustice, however, the other 3 were closed after initial enquiries.
- Monthly meetings were arranged with the Customer and Digital Services Manager to discuss Customer Service Centre (CSC) related issues.
- CSC staffing had been problematic through some parts of the year but was now at a good level.
- The leisure contract change had caused call volume to increase greatly from April to September 2024.
- Call volume had also increased due to increased resident anxiety which was attributed to some major events throughout the year.
- One of these was Council Tax reminders which were sent to residents earlier in the year and required them to use a new reference number to pay their bill, which a huge number could not find. This was being investigated to make sure that in future, anxieties stemming from new systems like this were pre-empted.
- Increased resident anxiety had also come from the garden waste invoices which some residents had perceived to be a scam. Due to the timing of a police message through Herts Connected which advised residents to contact the business directly if they were unsure, call volume had increased from this as well.
- To reduce resident anxiety resulting from Council correspondence, they would trial human blind testing on documents before they were sent out to residents to test that officer and Member perceptions matched that of residents.
- A suggestion had been made to create another resident panel to focus on pinpointing problems on council forms and applications before they were formally introduced to reduce the likelihood of resident anxiety resulting from these.
- Work would begin to take place on digital inclusion to ascertain the data on digitally excluded residents and how the Council could better reach them through their communication streams. Funding had been dedicated to this and an officer had been recruited to work on digital inclusion, however, they were still at the initial stages of this process.
- The Council had a team focused on developing apps so that residents would be able to apply online for more services such as burials and grants with the latter currently being tested by the Community Partnerships team.
- On a broader spectrum, they would look to make things smoother for residents by utilising modern technology.

The Chair invited the Customer and Digital Services Manager to give a verbal update on the current performance of the Customer Service Centre. They advised that:

- Alongside the 3Cs, the contact centre performance dashboard was requested by a previous Member of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee due to a period in 2024/25 in which callers were waiting for much longer than usual to get through to the CSC.
- In Q1, 96% of calls were answered with a high percentage of those answered in 45 seconds.
- In Q2, they began to experience staff shortages due long-term sickness and staff leaving the Council entirely which impacted on performance. Additionally, some staff moved internally to other service areas including HR and Revenues which was positive for the Council, however CSC were still losing staff. At this point, they were still receiving

a very high volume of calls, emails, live chats and in-person visits at the reception from residents.

- In Q3, temporary staff were recruited to ensure that CSC operations could continue, however, existing staff were required to train them which affected resourcing.
- It also took time to recruit the staff required as some recruits were unable to commit to the work patterns and some found jobs elsewhere.
- The customer service element of the waste contract was brought back inhouse in December 2024 and the staff from the waste contractor as well the waste customer contact were transferred over.
- From there, contact levels in January and February became more manageable and they answered 94% of calls.
- However, in March, there was a huge spike in customer contacts due to the garden waste subscription billing period. Digital Services had successfully delivered a Garden Waste Portal which lots of residents signed up to, but many customers still wanted to pay over the phone and this came at the same time as the annual Council Tax billing period which caused a rise in contact.
- Enquiries on the removal of litter bins also in this period meant they were receiving 601 calls on average per day in March compared to 269 in February.
- Alongside the garden waste subscriptions, a new payment system was introduced which some staff experienced issues with while trying to take payments over the phone. This was escalated to the payment system provider but took a while to fix. Consequently, calls were lasting longer which meant that customers were waiting for more time and because of this, they would try to recontact the CSC in different ways such as hanging up and calling again, emailing or visiting reception.
- In May, Council Tax recovery was sent out for the first time since the previous year due to unallocated payments in suspense, which created another increase in contact.
- Automated phone systems were in use for the Revenues and Benefits lines for the past three years which provided customers with information and offered to text links to relevant forms on the Council website.
- The system worked well handling 50-60% of calls, however, the contract with the supplier was expiring and the decision was taken to switch to a system that used AI instead. This system recognised customer intent by voice but would need to be trained over time to handle more calls in the future.
- Another Council Tax recovery period in July was predicted to create another contact spike.
- More contacts were also foreseen in August due to the upcoming waste contract change, but they would get ahead of the potential spike by keeping staffing levels consistent and ensuring that all calls and emails were addressed to in a timely manner.
- Call and email volumes had remained high in Q1 of 2025/26.
- The average wait time in 2024/25 was 4 minutes 10 seconds, and it was noted that recently, for the reasons already outlined, the average wait time had been longer.
- However, comparatively, the wait time on 10 June was detailed as being 1 minute 51 seconds, showing that it could fluctuate.
- In terms of benchmarking, two Councils had similar wait times in Q3 and Q4 of 2024/25 but on the other hand, they had much quicker wait times than many other councils in Q1 prior to staffing problems.
- Staffing was currently in a better position, and they were working more closely with the Waste team to ensure that Veolia were actioning issues effectively.
- Digital Services were integrating more waste services for residents to use on the Council website and onto the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system which would allow the CSC team to process enquiries more efficiently.
- Issues with taking payments over the phone had been resolved and CSC team members were able to process these as required.
- To mitigate the impacts of future busy periods, a reminder was sent to all service managers to contact CSC before invoices, leaflets or other documents were due to be sent to residents, as well as to let them know if any big meetings or group interviews

would be taking place at the Council Offices to increase their awareness of an uptick in CSC contacts and allow them to consider resourcing in advance.

- The situation on wait times and staffing had been largely out of their control, but they had slowly started to see some improvements after measures had been put in place.
- Only 2 official complaints had been received regarding the wait times in 2024/25.
- Working in the CSC team was not an easy job with some contacts requiring safeguarding referrals and extra time to process due to their complexity.
- His team had done a good job in navigating this difficult period and they would continue to work towards hitting more targets.
- Members were welcome to visit to the CSC to meet the team and see their work.
- Most cases on the Councillor Portal were completed within 6 working days.
- Of the 23 cases that took the longest to complete, 10 were down to councillors being unresponsive, some were genuine back and forth and others were due to other service areas being busier than usual.
- A reminder had been sent to all service managers to respond to portal requests promptly where possible.
- Councillors were encouraged to log constituent issues through the Councillor Portal to prevent email clog ups.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Sadie Billing
- Councillor Claire Winchester
- Councillor Tina Bhartwas

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

- To investigate repeat caller data, they would have to complete a thorough examination of the phone system.
- The key performance indicator for wait time was to answer at least 80% of calls within 45 seconds.
- The garden waste subscription invoices suspected to be a scam by residents had not been edited to be customer friendly. This had now been addressed by the accounting team and any future documents would be in the North Herts Council document style.
- The AI already in place on the Revenues and Benefits phone lines would be introduced to the Waste line. The AI would recognise caller intent and provide information based on this, but also text relevant links to the website if requested. However, the option to speak to a CSC representative would still be available to residents if needed.
- The AI website chatbot went live on 29 May and was still in the training period, but so far, no complaints had been received on this.
- The average duration of calls was unknown but the information on this would be circulated to Members following the meeting.
- Complaint volume had gradually declined over the year for all Everyone Active sites, especially since the peak in September 2024 due to the introduction of a dishonour charge on lane swimming at the time.
- They would speak to the Leisure and Active Communities team to see if there was a way of improving the response time of Everyone Active to enquiries.
- Staff morale was currently at a good level because staff levels were optimal and the temporary staff were of a high calibre.
- The Customer Service Team Leader and Senior Customer Services Officer helped to provide a supportive structure for CSC staff when any issues arose.
- Staff members could use the Employment Assistance Programme to speak to someone anonymously if needed.

- Management made themselves open and available for individual chats and staff members were comfortable in seeking them for support when working at CSC.
- Statistics on the level of complaints received when Stevenage Leisure Limited were managing the leisure centre contracts compared to now would be sent to Members after the meeting.
- The number of reception visits by residents were outlined on the performance dashboard and they had seen a big increase in customers visiting reception. The visits were logged internally on the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and they attempted to log customer sentiment on each visit.
- It was difficult to organise data on why customers visited the reception. If Customers visited purely for information, this was logged as a 'Quick Call' where they could also capture customer sentiment, but with more complex enquiries, cases had to be created and they would have to explore individual cases to gather data on reasons for visiting which would be difficult to do.
- As seen on the performance dashboard, residents were mostly visiting the CSC reception if they were unable to contact them via telephone.
- They were aware that AI could use sentiment analysis to provide feedback on calls but unfortunately, it was not part of their contract with the provider. However, this would be discussed as a possibility with the provider going forward.
- They were more than happy to take feedback on the Councillor Portal in terms of request classifications and could action issues when required.
- At the end of the year, optimisation would take place where the team would revisit existing apps and look to improve their functionality.

In response to questions, Councillor Val Bryant advised that:

- Communication between service areas and CSC would have to be clearer to allow them to draw a timeline of key dates and pinch points throughout the year due to more than one event or billing period taking place.
- Discussion had taken place with the Communications Manager on Everyone Active collecting customer interaction data, but the statistics were unknown so an email would be circulated to Members on this following the meeting.
- Compliments were put onto the internal staff hub each month to be seen by all staff members and to spread good practice across the Council.

The Chair thanked Councillor Val Bryant and the Customer and Digital Services Manager for their presentations and Members noted the report.

10 INFORMATION NOTE - MOBILISATION OF WASTE CONTRACT UPDATE

Audio recording – 44 minutes 0 seconds

Councillor Amy Allen, as Executive Member for Environment, presented the Information Note entitled 'Update on Mobilisation of Waste Collection' and advised that:

- The new waste, recycling and street cleansing contract with Veolia had commenced on 4 May.
- Mobilisation of the contract had created minimum disruption to residents.
- Teams were working behind the scenes on IT integrations.
- The delivery of the electric vehicles was delayed due to a manufacturer issue which was out of the control of the Council.
- Over 90% of the new bins had been delivered to North Herts residencies.
- The first draft of the new proposed collection routes had been received and was being examined by officers.
- Service leaflets had been finalised and would be sent to print in addition to letters that would be circulated to inform residents of the new proposed route changes.

- They had successfully recruited for the Waste Communications Officer role and an advert had been released for the Waste Contract Officer vacancy.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Claire Winchester
- Councillor Matt Barnes

In response to questions, the Shared Service Manager – Waste advised that:

- It was difficult to accurately predict the increase in call volumes that the waste contract change might bring, however, additional calls were anticipated, and extra CSC staff had been provisioned for this.
- The Council received 4,000 emails in an average 3-month period. However, during the waste service change in 2018, they received 19,000 over 3 months due to the glitches and data issues that it created.
- However, they knew where they went wrong last time through data analysis and would look at ways to prevent recurrences of issues.
- Phone lines would be available to those who needed additional support and waste officers could respond to problem areas when needed if they could not be resolved over the phone.
- The provision of waste vehicles was part of the Veolia contract, therefore the delay to the delivery of the electric vehicles would incur no additional costs for the Council as Veolia would finance an alternative in the meantime.
- Residents that already required additional waste support services were accounted for and were being contacted regarding the new collection system. They were also contacting medical services to make them aware of the service change so they could make spread awareness of the additional services that the Council offered. More residents were coming forward regarding special waste needs and they were being added to their database.
- The probability for the Material Recycling Facility Contract had reduced to 1 in the Mobilisation Risk Log. It had been procured and was operational as the incumbent supplier was awarded the contract which meant that the transition was seamless. They were in the process of getting the contract signed but no issues were anticipated with the service change.
- Most outstanding new bin deliveries were due to technical glitches in the system and these would be checked over the next four to five weeks before being addressed at the end of the cycle to prevent the disruption of the main mobilisation phase.
- They were also waiting to deliver new bins to complex properties that had communal waste areas or properties that had paper and cardboard sacks.
- There was a list of all the bin deliveries that had occurred to date and Members could report any missed deliveries via the Councillor Portal.
- Waste service changes should not be underestimated and there would always be risks. It was down to them to cope with the pressure but most of their staff had been through the last service change which had greater implications for North Herts than this one.
- Their biggest priority was accuracy and it was imperative for them to check data to ensure that missed collections did not take place in the future. If they got the data evaluation correct, they could focus on supporting residents with the service change rather than resolving day to day issues like missed collections.
- There were a small number of harder to remove litter bins that required additional steps such as pavement reinstatement. The removal of these would be combined with the installation of dual bins and ballot bins.

- Concerns had been expressed by residents over the removal of litter bins rather than an increase in litter, however, they would monitor this.
- Street cleansing schedules were still in the development phase with Veolia.

Councillor Paul Ward advised the Waste team to include both digital and non-digital points of contact where possible as there were some points of contact listed on the website that were digital only.

Councillor Amy Allen thanked Councillor Ward for his engagement with residents and for bringing their attention to any problems that residents had faced regarding waste.

11 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25

Audio recording – 1 hour 0 minutes 7 seconds

Councillor Matt Barnes, as the Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in the Civic Year 2024/2025, presented the report entitled 'Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2024/2025' and advised that:

- The report set out the work undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee over the previous Civic Year 2024/25.
- The report also contained a foreword which highlighted some of the notable achievements of the Committee in the same period.

Councillor Matt Barnes thanked all Members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in 2024/25 for their contributions and thanked the Scrutiny Officer for her support throughout the year.

The Chair thanked Councillor Barnes for ensuring an easy transition process from Committee Member to Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Daniel Allen, as Leader of the Council, put on record his thanks to all Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the Civic Year 2024/25 for holding Cabinet to account in this period and for the ideas that they had conceived.

Councillor Jon Clayden thanked the Chair and Vice Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the Civic Year 2024/25 for being supportive through the transition process from Committee Member to Vice Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Jon Clayden proposed and Councillor Matt Barnes seconded and following a vote, it was:

RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered and commented on the Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2024/25 as attached at Appendix A.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION: To enable the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider and comment on the report of the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding the work of the Committee in the 2024/2025 Civic Year prior to consideration by Council.

12 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

Audio recording - 1 hour 3 minutes 17 seconds

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report entitled 'Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2025-26' and advised that:

- Following the work programme workshop delivered by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny on Tuesday 13 May, Members agreed an initial Work Programme for the Civic Year 2025-26 which was attached at Appendix A to the report.
- Two items on the Pay on Exit Parking Scheme and North Herts Town Centres Strategy were scheduled to be presented at this Committee meeting. However, they had been deferred to a later meeting of the Committee and officers had given reasons for the delay which were outlined in the Supplementary Document to the report.
- Members were reminded that they could suggest topics for the Work Programme or Task and Finish groups in the meeting, to the Chair or Vice Chair or by emailing the Scrutiny Officer.
- The Section 106 Task and Finish Group met on Monday 30 April to finalise the scoping document.
- Another meeting was being scheduled to address any questions on scope or S106 obligation with the Strategic Planning Officer and to have a discussion with the Communications Officer on a consultation.
- The Local Government Association Peer Review actions were attached at Appendix C to the report to allow Members to review their progress.
- Information regarding referrals was detailed in the decisions and monitoring log.

In response to a question from Councillor Paul Ward, the Scrutiny Officer advised that the main reason the Strategic Project Board had agreed to defer the report of the Town Centres Strategy was because they felt that it needed to be of a better standard before being presented to both the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

Councillor Daniel Allen also advised that had the Town Centres Strategy been presented to both committees, it would not have been representative of all towns in North Herts, therefore further work would take place to ensure that the needs of each town were considered within the strategy.

Councillor Matt Barnes took part in the debate and expressed disappointment that the report for the Pay on Exit Parking Scheme had not been presented at this Committee meeting but understood the reasons for its deferral. He also encouraged Members to put forward items for consideration to be put onto the Work Programme and highlighted topics on Crime and Disorder Issues and Health Partners that were not currently listed on it.

Councillor Sadie Billing proposed and Councillor Jon Clayden 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, suggest 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.

The meeting closed at 8.42 pm

Chair