

Overview and Scrutiny Committee



St Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Wednesday 8 November 2017** at **4.00 pm** at the **Conference Chamber West, West Suffolk House**, Western Way, Bury St Edmunds IP33 3YU

Present: **Councillors**

Chairman Diane Hind
Vice Chairman Susan Glossop

Simon Brown
John Burns
Mike Chester
Patrick Chung
Paula Fox

Paul Hopfensperger
Margaret Marks
Richard Rout
Clive Springett
Frank Warby

Substitutes attending:

Peter Thompson

Patricia Warby

By Invitation:

John Griffiths, Leader of the Council
Ian Houlder, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Performance
Peter Stevens, Portfolio Holder for Operations

185. Substitutes

The following substitutions were declared:

Councillor Peter Thompson for Councillor Sarah Stamp.
Councillor Patricia Warby for Councillor Jim Thorndyke.

186. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Sarah Stamp, Andrew Speed, Jim Thorndyke and Anthony Williams.

187. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 September 2017, were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

188. Public Participation

There were no questions/statements from members of the public.

189. Announcements from the Chairman regarding responses of the Cabinet to reports of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Chairman advised that the Vice-Chairman attended Cabinet on 17 October 2017 and presented the Committees report on items it considered on 13 September 2017, which was accepted and noted by Cabinet.

190. Draft West Suffolk Strategic Framework

[Councillor Clive Springett arrived at 4.11pm during the consideration and subsequent voting on this item].

The Leader of the Council, Councillor John Griffiths presented Report No: OAS/SE/17/026, which sought input into the development of the draft West Suffolk Strategic Framework 2018-2020. The strategic framework represented a revision of the existing West Suffolk Strategic Plan 2014-2016.

The report summarised the work which had been carried out to date on the development of a draft West Suffolk strategic framework and sought the Committee's views on the draft document attached at Appendix B to the report. Work undertaken to date had involved the formulation of a draft vision and strategic priorities, based on a review of West Suffolk's existing priorities, and set against a background of evidence about West Suffolk and the issues be faced. The three priorities that emerged from the work continued to be growth; resilient families and communities; and housing. Each of the three strategic priorities was supported by a draft set of projects and actions.

Attached at Appendix A, was diagram showing how St Edmundsbury Borough Council and Forest Heath District Council were contributing to outcomes in West Suffolk alongside others, including residents, families and communities, businesses, the voluntary sector and other public sector partners, including Suffolk County Council and town and parish councils.

The draft West Suffolk Strategic Framework would be considered by both councils' Cabinets and Councils in December 2017. The document would be proof-ready, formatted and designed, including the addition of photographs in advance of being published.

A communications plan for the final stages of the process was also being finalised to ensure all Members, staff and partners were updated on how the final plan had developed.

The Leader of the Council wished to thank officers for their work in developing the attached document.

The Committee considered the report in detail and asked questions to which responses were provided. Discussions were held on the infographics to be included at a later date and how the aspirations in the Strategic Framework would be evaluated.

In particular, responses were provided in relation to the following questions raised:

- Epicentre, Haverhill: Reference to the Epicentre should be kept in the document to demonstrate the council's continuing commitment. The Assistant Director (Growth) was progressing this with the developer as well as the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The LEP was also pushing for better transport links for Haverhill.
- Single Council: The aim of the framework document was to set out the councils priorities for the final year of two separate councils and to set the direction in the first year of a new single council. Decisions on what would happen after May 2019 would be for the new administration, whether or not that was a single council, but it was good practice to set the strategic direction beyond the end of the current administration to allow time for new priorities and plans to be developed.
- Homelessness in Bury: The Council was doing a lot of work behind the scenes to tackle homelessness. West Suffolk was no different to what was happening nationally. The Council had invested £230,000. With this money the council had:
 - Increased the number of staff in the advice and prevention team, with the focus on prevention;
 - Created a new post "Welfare Benefit Officer" to help people to budget, to increase the income and minimise outgoings, arrange payment plans and stop evictions;
 - Added an Income Recovery Officer to support people who might need short-term support to help them retain a home or move somewhere suitable.

This year the Council had prevented 360 families and individuals from becoming homeless by helping them keep their home or find alternative accommodation.

- Plans/Strategies: There were a number of detailed plans being scoped and would be appraised individually through business cases. Once the Strategic Framework 2018-2020 was approved, Strategies would then be developed during 2018, for example, for Growth and for Homelessness.

Comments were made on the following areas of the draft West Suffolk Strategic Framework document:

- (1) Page 10: Point 3, reference to RAF Mildenhall closing – suggest some form of rewording along the lines of "if and when closed"
- (2) Page 11: Point 4, Infrastructure Provision- suggest rewording to include support for a rail link between Haverhill and Cambridge and reference to the A1307 to read "A1307 corridor".
- (3) Page 15: Rural areas - suggest strengthening the wording on how that council was going to increase and improve provision of appropriate housing in West Suffolk in rural areas.

- (4) Page 16: Point 8, reference to Houses in Multiple Occupation – suggest including reference to the role of the voluntary sector.

It was then proposed by Councillor Frank Warby, seconded by Councillor Paula Fox and with the vote being unanimous, it was

RECOMMENDED:

That subject to the approval of Cabinet and Council the Draft West Suffolk Strategic Framework 2018-2020, attached as Appendix B to Report No: OAS/SE/17/026, be adopted, inclusive of comments made during the meeting.

191. Development of a West Suffolk Growth Investment Strategy

The Committee received Report No: OAS/SE/17/027 and supporting PowerPoint presentation (Appendix 1), which sought views on the four principles proposed for the emerging West Suffolk Growth Investment Strategy. At this stage, officers were proposing a set of four principles to ultimately inform the development of the final strategy, which were:

- Principle 1: Investing in our Place and People
- Principle 2: Acting commercially
- Principle 3: Collaborating to maximise benefit
- Principle 4: Using our powers and policies

The presentation (Appendix 1) included information on the evidence base and needs of the community; where the council would be focusing its energy and resources to achieve good growth in West Suffolk; what the council's role should be in responding to its growth priorities; a map setting out the roles and high level strategies and resources which would apply in delivering growth across West Suffolk; the council's role as an investor; what the council's Investment Strategy should be; how projects would be assessed on a case by case basis using an assessment criteria; understanding stakeholders and partners, and what was the council's overall Strategy for investment.

The principles had been considered by the West Suffolk Joint Growth Steering Group, and after consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be presented to Joint Cabinet on 14 November 2017. The final strategy itself would then be developed for subsequent agreement.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee was requested to consider any other factors which should be assessed by Cabinet as they developed the final strategy.

The Committee considered the presentation and principles in detail and asked questions to which responses were provided. In particular discussions were held on monies which had been invested in Barley Homes and concerns about whether it was delivering new homes as quickly as expected. In response members were advised that achieving good growth was about getting the correct balance, which took time and involved economies of scale. The Committee in March 2018 would receive a report on Barley Homes and

members would have the opportunity to hear about the company and its plans.

In response to a question raised on how the council would make sure it had the right infrastructure in place, members were advised that the emphasis going forward was "forward planning". Appropriate planning for infrastructure was needed, which Suffolk County Council was lobbied for. Within the Local Plan the Council would need to know how much infrastructure was needed which would be essential. Also the Council as a local planning authority asked for Section 106 contributions towards infrastructure.

Members also referred to slide 17, which highlighted "increased investment and skills and education", and noted it referenced Suffolk University, which was in Ipswich, and did not mention Haverhill where people went to Cambridge and suggested the council needed to look outside the county boundaries.

Comments were made on the following principles contained in the presentation:

- (1) Principle 1: Investing in our Place and People – bullet point 5: reference was made to "supporting community start-ups" and suggested a future policy to "source more locally" goods and services. A recent example provided was Preston City Council.
- (2) Principle 2: Acting commercially – bullet point 4: reference to the 1% net return was an assumption/aspiration, and suggested rewording to read "... return of 1% *minimum xx*"

It was then proposed by Councillor John Burns, seconded by Councillor Patrick Chung and with the vote being unanimous, it was

RECOMMENDED:

That subject to the approval of Cabinet and Council the principles of the emerging West Suffolk Growth Investment Strategy, as outlined in the presentation, Appendix 1 to Report No: OAS/SE/17/027 be endorsed, inclusive of comments made during the meeting.

192. Anglia Revenues Partnership Debt Recovery Process

Councillor Margaret Marks declared a non-pecuniary interest in her capacity as a landlord and remained in the meeting.

[Councillor Peter Thompson left the meeting at 5.28pm during the consideration of this item.

Councillors Frank Warby and Patricia Warby left the meeting at 5.38pm during the consideration]

Prior to the report being presented, Councillor Ian Houlder, Cabinet Member for Resources and Performance introduced the item and Jo Andrews and Paul Corney from the Anglia Revenues Partnership.

Report No: OAS/SE/17/028 was produced by the management team at Anglia Revenues Partnership (ARP), following a request from the Committee, which explained the processes they followed to recover debt. Debt recovery was identified as a matter the Committee wanted to explore further as effective collection of revenue due to the Council was essential for the Council's finances, as Councillors were asked to approve certain debts to be written off.

The report and supporting PowerPoint presentation provided a review of the processes that ARP followed to recover debts; which included a summary of performance in this area; the collection process; enforcement; housing benefits overpayments; support provided and a case study illustrating the sometimes lengthy and time consuming recovery of a debt.

Attached at Appendix 1 to the report was a flowchart of the debt recovery process.

The Committee considered the contents of the report and presentation and reviewed in detail the processes that ARP followed in recovering debt. Discussions were held on fraud overpayments and how this would be collected when Universal Credit was introduced; the reminder process from first reminder to court summons; and whether ARP held a definitive list of property owners/landlords;

In particular discussions were held on the Council Tax instalment process and suggested that ARP could be more proactive in advertising that payments could be made over 12 months, rather than the statutory 10 months. In response Jo Andrews advised that ARP could look at publicising more the option of payments being spread over 12 months.

The Chairman of the Committee advised that in June 2015, one of the recommendations from the Committee was for ARP to send out how to access debt advice and counselling when sending out the first reminder for non-payment of Council Tax and non-domestic rates. It was noted that emails and texts were sent but felt that people responded better when reminders were sent in writing. In response Jo Andrews advised that information on how to access debt advice was provided on the back of debt reminders.

In response to question raised regarding tenants living in houses of multiple occupation (HMO), it was the landlord who was legally liable for paying the council tax, and ARP had no relationship with the individual tenants living in a HMO property.

With regards to write-offs, ARP agreed to provide members with more detail on the set criteria/reasons used in determining why decisions were made to write off debts, which in some cases were considerable sums. However, members were reassured that if debtors reappeared ARP did reopen written-off cases and pursued the collection of the outstanding debt with the debtor.

On behalf of the Committee the Chairman thanked the representatives from ARP for their informative presentation.

It was then proposed by Councillor Patrick Chung, seconded by Councillor Margaret Marks and with the vote being unanimous, it was

RECOMMENDED:

That the Anglia Revenues Partnership be asked to make the option of being able to pay Council Tax over a twelve month period more prominent when sending out Council Tax bills.

193. **Annual Presentation by the Cabinet Member for Operations**

The Committee was reminded that on 9 November 2016, it had received a presentation from the Cabinet Member for Operations, setting out this responsibilities covered under his portfolio.

At this meeting, the Cabinet Member had been invited back to provide his annual update. Report No: OAS/SE/17/029 set out the focus of the update.

The Cabinet Member was also provided in advance of the meeting with some key questions identified by Scrutiny Members on areas they wished to be appraised on during the annual update, which were included in the report along with responses, specifically:

- 1) **Brown Bins:** Has the Council seen a rise in the number of households signing up to the Brown Bin service in the second year?
- 2) **Brown Bins:** What impact has the scheme had on the weight of refuse going to Great Blakenham and has the cost gone up, if so, by how much?
- 3) **Recycling:** How well is the public doing at separating their waste? (i.e. how much is going into the brown bin which should not?)
- 4) **Fleet Management:** What research has been carried out, and how soon do you expect the Council to have electric fleet vehicles?
- 5) **Christmas Fayre:** Whilst this is extremely successful for attracting visitors to the town and the economy, it is very disruptive to residents. Therefore, how much thought is being given to minimising the impact on residents?

Councillor Peter Stevens opened his presentation by thanking the Committee for the invitation to address the Committee on progress made within his Portfolio since November 2017, and welcomed the new format in providing questions in advance.

The Committee asked follow-up questions relating to the brown bins and subscriptions; recycling; fleet management and Christmas Fayre, to which comprehensive responses were provided.

In particular detailed discussions were held on Bury Christmas Fayre; whether consideration had been made to further extending the Fayre; the desire for a similar Christmas Fayre in Haverhill; comparisons made with European Christmas Markets and how they operated from the end of November to the end of December. In response the Market Development Officer advised that a Christmas Fayre Review was carried out in 2015, and a three year plan was implemented. The plan was now in its second year of operation, and officers

would be looking to carry out a further review of the plan next year. Also, considerable work had been undertaken in Haverhill on its week market and Christmas Market and additional improvements were planned for 2018.

In response to a question raised regarding refuse crews inspecting bins, members were informed that the refuse crew were encouraged to lift bin lids to check the material quality met the minimum standards required and was not contaminated with the wrong material.

Members questioned what research the council carried out for future refuse disposal. In response members were informed that the Suffolk Waste Partnership (SWP) had their own goals, and commercial bins were part of the planning thought process for future housing developments with flats. Talks were also taking place across the county on how to plan for future housing and the collection of refuse. The Council also engaged with the SWP and nationally with the Institute of Waste Management on future developments in waste recycling.

Members discussed fleet management and noted the low annual mileage which related to the light vehicles fleet, which operated close to the depots. Officers explained that fleet vehicles used diesel, and the council supplied its own fuel. If vehicles were changed to petrol, then staff would have to purchase petrol from petrol stations, and there would also be taxation implications for staff.

Members questioned the purchase price of vehicles which was below the market value and felt the 50% residual value was optimistic. In response members were advised that the 50% related to the original price of the vehicle and VAT was not counted.

Members wished to thank the Assistant Director (Operations) and all his staff for the help and prompt solutions they provided. In particular they thanked the Market Development Officer for the new ideas she had brought to the Haverhill Market.

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee wished to thank the Cabinet Member for Operations and officers for their attendance and **noted** the update.

194. **Work Programme Update**

The Committee received Report No: OAS/SE/17/030, which updated Members on the current status of its rolling work programme of items for scrutiny during 2018 (Appendix 1).

The report also requested that Members identify questions they would like the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture to cover in her annual update to the Committee on 10 January 2018.

The Committee considered the report and came up with the following questions to be put to the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture at its January meeting:

- West Stow County Park: West Stow had become very popular with school visits and visitor numbers were up, however the Council still needed to create an income. Therefore, what events were being planned for 2018, for example more events like musical festivals?
- West Stow Country Park: West Stow had recently developed a new website, so why not encourage businesses to advertise for a fee on their website?
- Bury Literature Festival 2017: Bury St Edmunds held its first Literature Festival in 2017, which was a great success. There were plans for a similar event to be held in 2018, and questioned whether the Portfolio Holder would be involved in the planning of the event?

There being no decision required, the Committee **noted** the current status of its work programme and had identified questions to be put to the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture.

The Meeting concluded at 6.30pm

Signed by:

Chairman
