

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council held at South Norfolk House, Long Stratton on 27 November 2019 at 9.30am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: G Minshull, B Bernard, B Duffin, J Rowe, R Savage and J Wilby

Apologies for Absence: Councillors: V Clifford-Jackson and J Worley

Substitute Members Councillors: J Easter (for J Worley) and J Halls (for V Clifford-Jackson)

Cabinet Members in Attendance: Councillor: Y Bendle

Officers in Attendance: The Director of People and Communities (J Sutterby), the Early Help Hub Manager (Liam Pickering), the Housing Standards and Community Protection Manager (T Cooke), and the Senior Governance Officer (E Goddard)

Also in Attendance Mr J Cheyette (Norfolk Citizens Advice)
Ms J John (North East Suffolk Citizens Advice Bureau)
Ms M Jones (Diss, Thetford and District Citizens Advice)

1256 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr J Wilby declared an "other" interest in respect of her being the Council's representative on the Diss, Thetford and District Citizens Advice.

1257 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 27 September 2019 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

1258 SOUTH NORFOLK WELFARE RIGHTS AND DEBT ADVICE PROVISION

Members considered the report of the Early Help Hub Manager, which reviewed the debt and welfare rights advice, provided by the Council, across the District.

Members noted that the purpose of the report was to review the current model in place that provided welfare rights and debt advice provision across the District, but it was not intended at this stage, to consider detailed future funding models. The Early Help Hub Manager stressed the need to ensure that residents received the

right support, as early as possible to prevent issues escalating, and that the Council received value for money.

In presenting his report, the Early Help Hub Manager referred to the range of services delivered by the Council to support residents with welfare rights and/or debt issues, drawing attention to the work of the Welfare Rights and Debt Advice Officer, FIRST Officers and Community Connectors, and the Early Help Hub Flexible Fund. He then referred to the external services available and the funding provided by the Council to North East Suffolk Citizens Advice Bureau, Norfolk Citizens Advice and the Diss, Thetford and District Citizens Advice. He explained that the Council had an extensive history of working in partnership with Citizens Advice and advised that the current service level agreement with them would end in March 2020.

Members noted that now that South Norfolk was working collaboratively with Broadland Council, there was a larger internal welfare rights resource, which could be remodelled to meet the needs of both Districts. It was estimated that up to 3,000 customers would access the Help Hub and over 2,000 would access Social Prescribing during 2019/20. The Early Help Hub Manager explained that although Citizens Advice were also seeing increased numbers, there was a risk of duplication.

The Chairman welcomed representatives (Mr J Cheyette, Ms J John, and Ms M Jones) from the Norfolk Citizens Advice, the North East Suffolk Citizens Advice Bureau, and Diss, Thetford and District Citizens Advice (CABs), to the meeting. Mr Cheyette delivered a presentation to members, which outlined the value and impact these organisations had in the South Norfolk District. Members noted that these organisations advised residents on a whole range of problems, including issues with debt, benefits, employment, relationships and consumer rights. People frequently had multiple issues, which required effective multi-agency partnership collaboration, in order to achieve positive outcomes.

Mr Cheyette presented members with detailed key statistics relating to client numbers, issues and outcomes for South Norfolk, and it was noted that the number of people and the number of issues was rising year on year. Although difficult to quantify, it was believed that these services had over the last 12 months, helped South Norfolk residents gain £429, 000 in income, and reduced debt by £175,000. It cost South Norfolk £3.00 for each issue that the service helped to resolve, and Mr Cheyette believed this to be excellent value for money.

Detailed discussion followed, and both officers and the CAB representatives, responded to a range of questions from members.

During discussion, and in response to a query regarding procurement, the Early Help Hub Manager explained that Citizens Advice were obvious candidates for the provision of external services, however, there were other providers of welfare rights advice, across the country, and therefore any future procurement of the service would take account of this.

Officers explained in more detail the role of the Community Connectors and how the public was able to access this service, and officers agreed to ensure that all members were fully aware of this service provision and how to access it.

In response to a query regarding Broadland District Council's decision not to provide funding to Citizens Advice, Mr Cheyett explained that this had impacted on

its service, although it would never turn away a resident who lived in the Broadland area. He added that King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council had also withdrawn funding, and that should other councils follow suit, it would need to seriously consider curtailing services.

Attention was drawn to the risk of "duplication" across Citizens Advice and services provided by the Council. Mr Cheyette believed that there was always a risk of duplication, but he believed this to be minimal and could be further mitigated through an improved referral system, and more joined up working.

Members recognised that the models of delivery were different and both officers and Citizens Advice acknowledged the need to continuously look at approaches to meet the needs of residents. It was noted that Citizens Advice had recently launched a "Digital Hub", which was very different to the "drop in" model it had traditionally provided.

Some members felt that it was difficult to fully assess the current model, without a more detailed analysis of the costs of internal services. Members noted that a report had been presented to the Scrutiny Committee back in December 2018, which looked at the financial impacts of the Early Help Hub, in more detail. Members noted that this was a complicated process, with a number of different roles impacting on service provision, and that prevention was particularly hard to quantify in monetary terms. It was also noted that the Council had access to external funding to fund some service provision.

The Committee concluded that the work of the Early Help Hub and Citizens Advice could be further enhanced through closer working and members were keen for the Council to take advantage of the collaboration with Broadland District Council in order to improve the service to residents and align approaches.

It was unanimously

- RESOLVED:**
1. That any future external funding resource should be commissioned via the Council's Procurement route.
 2. That the Assistant Director for Individuals and Families works with the relevant portfolio holder, to review the delivery of the service, noting in particular Scrutiny Committee's comments relating to strength in collaboration and the need for internal and external services to work together more closely.

1259 LONG TERM EMPTY HOMES – APPROACH AND POWERS

Members were reminded that on 28 June 2019, the Committee had considered a report regarding the number of long-term empty homes in South Norfolk, and the approach and powers of the Council in respect of these homes. At Scrutiny Committee's request, officers had now produced a further report, which provided additional background information regarding those homes that had been reported as empty, for more than 2 years.

The Housing Standards and Community Protection Manager presented his report to members, outlining the position as at 31 October 2018, in relation to the 61 homes that had been empty for more than 2 years. It was noted that as at October 2019,

this figure had reduced to 48. The current council tax levies in place on empty properties were also noted.

The Housing Standards and Community Protection Manager explained that the Council would only engage with owners when properties began to have a negative impact on the community and the Committee's attention was drawn to Appendix 2 of the report which listed the formal measures available to the Council, when previous advice and assistance had failed to resolve issues.

The Housing Standards and Community Protection Manager responded to a number of queries on points of detail, referring to a number of individual cases. Members expressed their satisfaction with the service provided and felt the Council's response to empty properties to be both proportionate and appropriate.

RESOLVED: That the Council's approach in dealing with empty homes is proportionate and appropriate

1260 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee noted the Work Programme, Tracker and Cabinet Core Agenda.

The Chairman reminded members that they could suggest future items for consideration and should do so through the Scrutiny TOPIC form.

Members noted that due to the change in date of the January Cabinet meeting, the next Scrutiny meeting would be held on Wednesday 29 January 2020 (not 22 January as previously advised)

(The meeting concluded at 11.35 am)

Chairman