

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

**Held on Thursday, 20 March 2014 at 2.00 pm in the
Anglia Room, The Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke, Dereham**

PRESENT

Mr J.P. Cowen (Chairman)	Mrs S.M. Matthews
Mr T. J. Jermy (Vice-Chairman)	Mr R. R. Richmond
Mr A.J. Byrne	Mr J.D. Rogers
Mr K.S. Gilbert	Mr B. Rose
Mr A.P. Joel	Councillor C Bowes (Substitute Member)
Mr R.G. Kybird	

Also Present

Councillor M. Chapman-Allen	Mrs L.S. Turner
Councillor E. Gould	Mr M. A. Wassell
Mr F.J. Sharpe	

Mr Roger Atterwill	- Chairman, Swanton Morley Parish Council
Ms Lynn Riddoch	- Flagship Housing Association
Ms Stephanie Davis	- Broadland Housing Association

In Attendance

Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer
Phil Mileham	- Deputy Planning Manager
Maxine O'Mahony	- Director of Commissioning
Gordon Partridge	- Principal Housing Officer
Martin Pendlebury	- Director of Planning & Business Manager *
Teresa Smith	- Committee Officer (Scrutiny & Projects)
Robert Walker	- Assistant Director of Commissioning

13/14 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

Councillor Rogers noted that he had still not received an answer to the question he had raised under Minute No 5/14 (third paragraph on page 6).

Councillor R Richmond asked for Minute No 8/14 to be amended from Basic to Patient Participation Group in the final sentence.

Subject to that amendment the Minutes of the meeting held on 30 January 2014 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

14/14 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C Carter, Irving and Bambridge (who had been due to attend as Substitute for Councillor Carter).

Councillor Bowes was present as Substitute for Councillor Irving.

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15/14 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 5)

Councillors Chapman-Allen, Gould, Sharpe, Turner and Wassell were in attendance.

Mr Roger Atterwill, Chairman of Swanton Morley Parish Council had requested the opportunity to address the Commission. He was invited to speak for up to three minutes.

Mr Atterwill read from a list of questions (copy attached). As the Commission had not received a copy of the list in advance of the meeting he was advised that some answers were not immediately available. He confirmed that he was happy to provide the list in writing and receive the replies in the same format.

The Executive Member for Planning, Building Control and Housing advised that a rolling programme of training was provided to the Planning Committee and some training on Housing would be taking place soon to explain how the planning process could contribute to affordable housing. Training was carried out by the best source available, which could be Officers, Lawyers or external providers, depending upon requirements.

The Director of Planning & Business Manager (Capita for Breckland Council) was able to advise that Capita currently had 49 full and part time staff. He acknowledged that they were experiencing some turnover.

With regard to response times to telephone enquiries he confirmed that the department did not operate an answerphone service as generally people did not like to leave messages. The target was to respond within 48 hours. Turnaround on calls was good and he could supply statistics on that and on Customer Satisfaction.

Regarding the website upgrade they were taking a collaborative approach. There had been some teething troubles. The upgrade was intended to make the system more user-friendly and enable a document search on larger applications. Some functionality had been lost, including the ability to bookmark, and the Project Group were working with the software provider to address those issues.

Councillor Kybird had used the system earlier in the day and found that only one document could be opened at a time whereas previously many documents could be open at the same time.

Councillor Joel was pleased that the upgrade included dates which made it easier to follow the chronology of the application.

Councillor R Richmond agreed with Councillor Kybird that it seemed to have been a step in the wrong direction only being able to open one document at a time. He reiterated the concern about the failure of designated officers to get back to the Clerk. He gave a recent example where it had taken three weeks for the officer to respond and said it was not an acceptable situation and it was not an isolated incident.

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For clarity, the Chairman noted that the Town or Parish Clerk was the single point of contact for all communications between the Parish and the District.

Mr Atterwill asked where that was written down in the Council's policies and he was advised that it was Local Authority practice. Councillor Rogers confirmed that Norfolk County Council procedures also channelled all queries through the Clerk.

The Director of Planning & Business Manager agreed that it had been an entirely unacceptable time to have to wait and he apologised for that. He asked to be alerted if similar problems were encountered in future.

It was confirmed that Mr Atterwill's questions would be answered in writing.

16/14 EXECUTIVE MEMBER PORTFOLIO UPDATE (AGENDA ITEM 6)

Elizabeth Gould, Executive Member for Planning, Building Control & Housing, provided the Commission with an update on her Portfolio.

Operational Planning

A major planning application for the Thetford Sustainable Urban Extension (Thetford SUE) would be considered at a Special Planning Committee meeting to be held in the Carnegie Rooms in Thetford on Friday 4 April 2014. Due to its significance it was considered proper that the meeting should be held in Thetford. The agenda would be published well in advance of the meeting to give all parties an opportunity to engage in the process. A site visit had already been held and Members had also received a presentation from the applicants, following the previous Planning Committee meeting, which had been confined to matters of fact and had been held in open forum. It would be a significant decision and all Members were invited to participate at the Special Planning Committee meeting.

Contract Monitoring

As part of the Capita contract monitoring a fresh set of Critical and Key Performance Indicators had been agreed with the aim of ensuring that decisions were made in a timely manner to guard against the potential for fee reimbursement to applicants. Other indicators had been introduced which monitored the quality of appeal decisions; improved the speed of determining simpler householder applications; improved the speed of pursuing enforcement action when expedient; and secured the delivery of the Local Plan to agreed timescales.

Enforcement

The speed, efficiency and responsiveness of Enforcement had long been a thorny subject. Since the recruitment of the new Enforcement Team Leader there had been significant improvement. The Planning Committee and other Members now received regular Enforcement updates and it was the Executive Member's view that the service had improved substantially.

Building Control

The service continued to deliver on its performance and retain its

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customer base. Service delivery was essential to retain market share as competition within the Building Control market was very active. There had been numerous calls for 'out of hours' dangerous structure provision during the recent bad weather. The team had met and exceeded all of its performance targets up to January 2014.

Housing

During the summer of 2012 the Housing function had been reviewed and restructured into two main areas: Private Sector Enforcement and Options. Options included homelessness, allocations and advice, whilst Private Sector Enforcement included housing standards, Gypsies and Travellers and housing grants.

By streamlining processes a net reduction in staff had been achieved. The housing enabling function had also been moved from Housing to sit within Planning.

The intent of the review had been the creation of an Options Hub, utilising new IT information handling to allow improved information flow and the identification and realisation of cashable savings.

A number of new officers were recruited to the Options side and staff received regular training to ensure effective operational capability and to keep resilience. Two Occupational therapy staff from Adult Social Services were now co-located within the Housing Team.

Several projects had been running including Empty Homes, a joint programme with ARP which had produced a net reduction of 216 empty dwellings over the year resulting in £1.2million in New Homes Bonus and had gained the Team the Breckland Pride award for Project of the Year.

Other projects included a licensing scheme for Homes of Multiple Occupation (HMOs); a project to reduce temporary accommodation costs; work towards a paperless office; and managing the Housing Register to ensure that those in most need got offered homes faster.

The greatest risk to the new structure was that the IT improvements had not been implemented yet. The current hardware was reaching the end of its operational life and struggling to run the latest specifications of software. Future efficiencies would not be achieved without IT improvements and those were in the pipeline.

In conclusion the introduction of the new structure had involved exceptional commitment by staff which had been reflected in the considerable success that the team had demonstrated in its first year, achieving Team of the Year, Employee of the Year and Trainee of the Year on top of the Project of the Year award.

The Chairman thanked the Executive Member and advised Members that there would be further details in the Housing and Capita items later on the Agenda.

Councillor Sharpe asked whether there would be a new policy on Gypsy and Traveller sites. The Deputy Planning Manager said that the allocation of new sites was being looked at through the Local Plan. The

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first consultation was expected later in the year. Due to the duty to co-operate and the requirement to provide a shared evidence base the timetable for the consultation had moved back to later in the year.

The Chairman noted that the Parish Councils were expecting to be consulted in April/May and if the date had slipped they needed to be advised of that as soon as possible.

The Deputy Planning Manager explained that the new timetable was due to be presented to the Local Plan Working Group in May.

Councillor Sharpe asked whether the caseload of the Enforcement staff had come down. The Director of Planning & Business Manager confirmed that it had. A review of all cases had been carried out and many had been closed. However, the number of new cases and work on Planning Contravention and Enforcement Notices continued to stretch the team. New Planning Enforcement software was being introduced which would have significant benefits, including the ability to generate standard letters automatically.

With regard to the Housing Register, Councillor Sharpe asked why there had been such a drastic reduction in the number of people in the Gold Band.

The Executive Member explained that an exercise had been carried out to contact all the people on the list that had not bid on any properties. That had resulted in people leaving the list. Often people's circumstances changed and they no longer required housing, but did not think to take themselves off the Register.

Councillor Joel asked whether the Thetford Sue application, if approved, would have an effect on the Council's Five Year Housing Land Supply. The Deputy Planning Manager acknowledged that it was a large scheme for up to 5,000 dwellings but the Government only allowed dwellings that would be built in the next five years to be included in the Five Year Housing Land Supply. Only a small portion of the Thetford SUE was likely to be developed in that time.

Councillor R Richmond thanked the Director of Planning & Business Manager for the regular Planning Updates he provided, which were easy to read and understand. He also congratulated the Housing Team on their Empty Homes success. However, with regard to Enforcement he said that the public were amazed that the Council did not do more and it was difficult to make them understand the reasons behind that.

The Director of Planning & Business Manager agreed that it was a source of misunderstanding. People carrying out development without permission were not committing an offence. The offence was in not complying with an Enforcement Notice and there was a significant process to go through to reach that stage.

The Vice-Chairman thanked the Executive Member for her very positive and upbeat report. However, he thought that people would not agree with the housing analysis. It was a big issue and there were harrowing examples of the lack of housing or of poor quality housing or of rental prices that had not been addressed. It was a bleak picture. Having

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empty homes was morally wrong and some homes in Thetford had been empty for up to ten years. He asked how many empty homes had been identified and not brought back into use and he asked whether the Council used all of its available powers to bring empty properties back into use.

The Principal Housing Officer agreed that having empty properties caused indignation, but some empty properties were needed for the market to operate. Their project had targeted the long-term empty properties and there were now less than 500 long term empty properties in the District, which was the lowest figure for 23 years. They were doing very well considering the available resources. The aim was to identify those that could be got back into use. The Council's powers had been strengthened by changes to Council Tax rules which meant that empty properties could be charged at a higher rate. The other power available to the Council was in the form of an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) however, they were difficult to use and only recently had numbers reached three figures for such Orders issued across the entire Country. The Team sought to persuade and guide landlords and that was helped by having a small pot of money for grant aid. Other Councils had used Compulsory Purchase as a tool, but that did not make sense in Breckland as the Council was not a stockholding authority.

Councillor Gilbert was dismayed about the lack of powers to enforce planning conditions. The Chairman agreed and said he received frequent complaints from residents. The Planning Committee arrived at a decision and attached conditions to permissions which would not otherwise have been granted. Those conditions often applied to landscaping. If applicants then refused to comply with the conditions imposed it made residents very cross as they had to live with the consequences.

The Director of Planning & Business Manager pointed out that 99% of people did comply with planning conditions the problem was the few people that knew how to play the system and could stretch the process over years before actually having to comply. It was difficult for neighbours and there was no easy answer. The Government was looking at the system and had made some minor changes to make Stop Notices slightly easier, but there had been no fundamental changes. He asked Members to take heart as the department had focussed on enforcement and it was still a priority area. He would provide more details in the Capita update later on the agenda.

The Chairman thanked the Executive Member for her update.

17/14 HOUSING REVIEW (AGENDA ITEM 7)

Stephanie Davis from Broadland Housing Association and Lynn Riddoch from Flagship Housing Association were present at the Commission's invitation to advise Members how the Policies, which the Housing Task & Finish Group had helped to shape, were working.

The Principal Housing Officer advised that the Allocations Policy had been reviewed in line with recent legislative changes regarding serving Forces personnel. There had also been guidance issued by the

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Secretary of State with regard to local connection. Those issues had been incorporated in the Policy and a report was being prepared for Cabinet recommending formal adoption.

Councillor Kybird asked if the part of the Policy focussing on local applicants had been successful and the Principal Housing Officer said that it had. The requirement to have lived in Breckland for three years or to have a specific local connection (job or family) had reduced numbers on the waiting list by 15/20%.

Ms Davis said the numbers were very positive. She was proud of the fact that there were no 'hard to let' properties in Breckland, even the older properties and bedsits were let quickly.

Ms Riddoch who covered Thetford and Dereham agreed. Sheltered accommodation was the hardest to let and they were investigating why those customers were not on the Register and were working with the Council to address that. The changes were positive and people were being housed more quickly.

Councillor Joel asked if the local connection applied to affordable housing provided on exception sites. The Planning Manager explained that the Local Lettings Policy (LLP) restricted eligibility to within a specific locality.

The Chairman clarified that Councillor Joel was asking about a development in Old Buckenham and the desire for local people to get precedence. He asked how the Allocations and Local Lettings Policies functioned.

The Principal Housing Officer explained that the Allocations Policy applied throughout Breckland, across the whole District, whereas the LLP had geographic restrictions down to village level where there was an identified housing need.

Councillor Matthews asked what triggered the LLP and was advised that it was a combination Planning/Housing issue and the restrictions were applied at the development stage. The Deputy Planning Manager said that in simple terms the LLP applied at site level on exception schemes and was controlled at village level.

Councillor R Richmond noted that such developments could also be delivered through village Action Plans. He asked how people wishing to return to villages, to live near parents for example, could be assisted.

The Chairman thought that the answer could be in the site specifics of the Local Plan by allowing villages to build some houses. The Deputy Planning Manager agreed although he said that there were other mechanisms outside the Local Plan process such as Neighbourhood Plans.

The Leader of the Council thought there was a lack of understanding about the LLP and he said he would ask the Director of Commissioning to write a report to explain it. He would make sure that all Members saw that report. He had received complaints about outsiders getting housing but in most cases it had proved to be in private lettings over

Maxine
O'Mahony

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which the Council had no control. Out of eight to ten Housing Associations with property in the District the vast majority was owned by Flagship. He asked what proportion of properties they owned.

Ms Riddoch acknowledged that Flagship was the majority shareholder. She would find out the figures and supply them to the Chairman.

Councillor Rogers noted that in his Ward there was a large estate with allocated affordable housing. However, the Housing Associations had bought additional housing stock there and they could put whatever tenants they liked into those properties.

The Vice Chairman said that people wanting social housing were complaining that foreign tenants were being housed. He got frustrated because despite putting in Freedom of Information requests he had been unable to find out where new residents were coming from as the information was not collected.

Councillor Sharpe suggested that a housing needs survey should be carried out to identify housing requirements area by area.

The Principal Housing Officer said that the Housing Needs Survey had been incorporated into the Strategic Housing Market Study. That broke down current and projected need by area. The last Housing Strategy had run until the end of December 2013. Due to changes in legislation the Council was no longer required to have a Strategy but it was an important document and was likely to be retained in the same format.

He recapped that the reviewed Allocations Policy would be presented to Cabinet for formal adoption. The Tenant Strategy was still fit for purpose. Under the new Public Health Agenda funding for disabled facilities grants was now in that budget. There was continuing high demand for grants and the funding could also be used for REABLE grants. Empty homes were still high on the Team's agenda. They were also working with Norfolk and Suffolk on a combined approach to Gypsies and Travellers.

Councillor R Richmond asked whether the Policy requiring HMOs to be licensed was successful. The Principal Housing Officer said that it was. He explained that there were a number of mandatory licences but that the Council had adopted an additional policy, mainly due to the large number of migrant workers in the District. It had taken two and a half years to get the policy in place. It required HMOs to be licensed at a cost of £375. The licence lasted for five years. That enabled the Council to ensure that reasonable standards were maintained. The Team were also working with Planning colleagues as planning permission was also required where HMOs housed six or more people.

The Chairman thanked the Principal Housing Officer for the update and then asked the Housing Association representatives some questions. He was encouraged that there were no 'hard to let' properties in the District but he asked if the Housing Associations were providing the properties that people wanted. There was a large demand for one and two bed properties with some families wanting to downsize. He also thought there was a demand for apartments for young single people who could not get on the housing ladder. He asked how the needs of

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those people were being met. The District had an ageing population and many would prefer single storey accommodation. He did not think that the right sort of housing was being provided.

Ms Davis agreed that they had identified a need for one and two bedroom properties, especially in view of the 'bedroom' tax. They had visited every one of their tenants affected by that change in benefits legislation and most had chosen not to downsize. In fact the majority of Broadland Housing Association's Dereham stock was one bedroom properties. They wanted to build more of the type of properties that were required but they were not able to build due to funding restrictions. They were trying to find answers and ways to build. They did have some exception sites and were always supportive of those. The future was difficult and they looked to the Local Authority to support them as they were committed to getting it right.

Ms Riddoch said that she would take the question back and provide answers to the Chairman. She did work closely with the development team and had the opportunity to comment on building plans and on local need. She was aware that people had been affected by the spare room subsidy and they were working closely with those that needed to downsize.

The Chairman noted that the need for smaller and single storey properties did not necessarily sit well with Housing Associations' Business Plans.

The Executive Member for Community & Environmental Services said that Members needed to be pro-active. She had reported some empty properties in her Ward and it had resulted in them being converted into one bed single storey units.

The Leader of the Council asked about disabled facilities adaptations to properties. (He declared an interest as he had a relative in such accommodation). He asked what happened to such properties when the tenant changed; did the Housing Associations keep a list of which properties had been adapted; were the adaptations ripped out? He also asked about the reluctance of the Housing Associations to re-categorize such properties from two to one bed which he assumed was due to the financial effect of having to lower the rent.

Ms Riddoch said that they did keep a database which highlighted adaptations and when the property was re-let they worked closely with colleagues in the ARP to advertise the property with its adaptations. Some of the adaptations were personal to a customer and there had been occasions when they had had to remove them. They worked closely with the Council to find suitable tenants. With regard to the re-categorisation she would ask other colleagues and get back to the Chairman with the answer.

Ms Davis agreed that they had not 'worked smart' with adapted properties previously but they were much better now. They had their own pot of money for adaptations and when such a property became vacant they worked down a shortlist to identify someone needing those adaptations. They also looked for mutual exchanges to ensure that the adapted properties were let to those that needed them.

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Councillor R Richmond noted that it was not unusual for exception sites to come forward and he wondered how the Council could ensure that more affordable housing was delivered.

The Chairman thought it was up to the Housing Associations to work with the Housing Team to ensure delivery.

Councillor Sharpe asked if the Council could dictate the types of houses to be provided on sites where the affordable housing contribution had been reduced due to viability issues. The Chairman thought that should part of the discussions when the planning application was determined.

The Deputy Planning Manager advised that the Council set the Policy and the development proposal should include evidence of need. However, the Director of Planning & Business Manager said that it was sometimes more complicated and that the Council negotiated with the developer to get the best terms. Legal agreements usually included a claw-back clause to enable a reassessment if the market changed.

The Chairman was aware that a lot of the housing stock was old and some conventional building materials were not energy efficient. He asked the Housing Association representatives what they were doing to help residents to become warmer, drier and safer. He also asked that if a house was sold, was there any guarantee that the money would be reinvested in housing stock in the District.

Ms Riddoch would get the answers and send them to the Chairman. The Executive Member for Planning, Building & Housing noted that she held quarterly strategic meetings with Flagship at which funding was a big issue. But she did press them about such matters as sales and repairs.

Ms Davis explained that the Housing Association was a business. They reviewed their stock and if properties did not meet the required standards they did work to get them up to standard or they got rid of them. They had not disposed of anything in Breckland. With regard to energy efficiency, fuel poverty was an issue especially in older properties and they were looking at new ways of investing. In North Norfolk they had developed their first Passive House scheme. They look at what techniques and what European funding was available before considering disposal.

Councillor Gilbert was aware that four old wooden houses had been disposed of in his Ward and the site had been sold and they had never been advised where the money had gone.

The Executive Member for Planning, Building & Housing said it was very frustrating when social housing in villages was disposed of as the village had no opportunity to build another house.

The Chairman thanked the two Housing Association representatives for attending.

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The Director of Planning & Business Manager said that the recent quarterly review meeting with Senior Officers had been a turning point in developing a stronger working partnership with the Council. Capita did listen to the concerns raised and worked to resolve the issues.

With regard to staffing changes, there were several new members of staff. They were: Jason Parker, Senior Development Planning Consultant, Gary Hancocks, Growth & Majors and Richard Michael, Planning Consultant.

The Enforcement Team Leader had made some changes. He produced a monthly newsletter and had carried out a thorough review of enforcement cases. Process mapping of the way the team worked would help to streamline procedures and provide greater quality control.

A new S106 database had been created to ensure the collection of contributions from developers for community schemes. It had been a big piece of work which had impacted on other Enforcement work. However, it was now a more pro-active service again and with the software update there would be significant efficiencies and smarter working.

Building Control had received a rush of applications to beat new regulation changes coming in on 1 April 2014. That had stretched the team. With regard to fee income Capita had applied to take on Approved Inspector status to be able to compete nationally with others in the market.

A lot of work had gone into the Thetford SUE application which was reaching a crescendo.

The Planning Policy Team was working on the Issues & Options document which would include key evidence on Open Space, Retail, Town Centre and Housing Studies. It was likely that consultation would take place in the autumn. The team had also been out making site visits to review the level of housings starts and completions for the Annual Monitoring review. Finally the Croxton Neighbourhood Plan was now looking to include the parish of Kilverstone and Brettenham and Attleborough was trying to progress their Neighbourhood Plan.

Councillor Gilbert said he had never been in favour of outsourcing Planning which had been sold to Members on the basis of being financially beneficial. He asked how beneficial it had been.

The Assistant Director for Commissioning responded, saying that there had been two elements to the Capita contract. The first part had been that the contract would save the Council money and those savings had been met and were guaranteed.

The second part of the contract had been a profit sharing/income generating arrangement. There had been a specified threshold to meet before that part of the contract became operational and it was fair to say that Capita was still not close to hitting that threshold. There was a clause in the contract that if the threshold was not met then a lump sum would be payable to the Council at the end of the contract. It had been expected that the Council would be receiving income by now (five years

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into the contract) however the model had been predicated on Capita doing Planning work for a second authority from Breckland's offices and that had not happened. It was also worth pointing out that the market was significantly different now to when the contract was drawn up.

The Chairman agreed that that was a fair assessment. The extent of work through planning applications was dramatically lower than when the contract started, in fact he said it had 'dropped off a cliff'.

The Leader of the Council reassured Members that regular meetings were held with Capita to encourage them to get as close to the targets as possible. The Council's aim was to provide a service to residents and to generate an income wherever possible.

The Chairman had noted that the consultation date for the Issues & Options document was likely to be in the autumn and he asked that the Parishes were informed of that as soon as possible. There was to be a Town & Parish Forum the following week and that would be an opportunity to communicate that information.

19/14 HEALTH SCRUTINY (AGENDA ITEM 9)

Councillor Kybird provided an update. At their last meeting the Health Scrutiny Panel had focussed on the Health & Wellbeing Plan for 2014. There were to be three priority topic areas

1. Social/Emotional development of pre-school children - in the context of average attainment as there were huge inequalities;
2. Obesity – it was projected that there would be 110,000 diabetics in Norfolk by 2031.
3. Dementia – people suffering from dementia made up 10% of emergency admissions to hospital, compared to 2½% in 2001.

They were big topics which would require County-wide actions.

The Chairman suggested that such issues needed to be built into the Council's policies and the Executive Member for Community & Environmental Services advised that the Communities Team were already working to make people more active and would be creating some allotments alongside the Council Offices.

20/14 SCRUTINY CALL-INS (AGENDA ITEM 10)

Nothing to report.

21/14 COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION (AGENDA ITEM 11)

Nothing to report.

22/14 WORK PROGRAMME (AGENDA ITEM 12)

The Chairman noted that the Executive Members for Assets & Strategic Development was due to address the May meeting of the Commission. However, he might not be able to attend and there might not be anything to report on the Local Asset Backed Vehicle (LABV). If he was

able to attend he would aim to update the Commission on the Thetford Riverside and the Community Interest Company (CIC).

Members were encouraged to put forward suggestions for other items for the programme.

23/14 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 13)

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending, particularly the two Housing Association representatives.

The arrangements for the next meeting to be held on 1 May 2014 were noted.

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The meeting closed at 4.40 pm

CHAIRMAN

Overview & Scrutiny Commission meeting 20th March 2014 @ 2.00pm

Public Participation

Questions raised by:

Mr Roger Atterwill – Chairman, Swanton Morley Parish Council

- 1) In relation to item 6. on the agenda could I please ask what level of training is provided for councillors who are members of the planning committee? Is this training carried out by an external body and if so please can you provide me with the name of the training provider and indeed please can you confirm if the training is provided by legal experts (ie lawyers) or is it carried out by professional planning consultants who can perhaps provide a more practical perspective?

- 2) In relation to item 8. on the agenda I would like to remind members that in 2009 Breckland Council entered into a 15 year contract with Capita Symonds to outsource its entire planning department. The press reports from the time quoted a Council representative as saying that this was a 15 year “trail-blazing deal”. At the time it was also reported that Breckland council’s in-house planning dept. had a 90% performance satisfaction level and that 50 existing staff would be transferred to Capita under a TUPE arrangement. Capita’s own press release stated that the contract is expected to generate £5.7M in savings to Breckland Council. Please can I have answers to the following questions:-
 - a) Please confirm what the current customer satisfaction rate is and how is this figure arrived at?
 - b) What is the department’s policy on its response time for incoming enquiry telephone calls and emails? At the present time the dept. does not seem to have a voicemail system for general enquiries?
 - c) How many staff does Capita now employ in the department?
 - d) Please confirm exactly how much of a monetary saving has been made for Breckland Council so far since the contract started in 2009? Again, please provide substantiation for the figure provided.
 - e) In recent weeks the planning portal has apparently been upgraded. As a frequent user I can say that this has resulted in a service which is significantly less user friendly. Please can you explain why and will this be improved?

- 3) Finally, I was recently very pleasantly surprised to receive an invitation to the Chairman’s reception to be held on 8th April at Barnham Broom Hotel. The invitation states that the event is being sponsored by Capita. Mr Chairman, could I please suggest that any councillor present here today who will be attending this reception should declare an interest for the sake of clarity. I am sure you will agree with me that the general public needs to have confidence in this committee’s work and that indeed the term Overview and Scrutiny Commission should not be construed as a Self-Congratulatory Commission.

Thank you for your time.