

**BRECKLAND COUNCIL**

**At a Meeting of the**

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION**

**Held on Thursday, 3 June 2021 at 10.00 am in the  
Breckland Conference Centre, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke, Dereham, NR19 1EE**

**PRESENT**

Cllr Rhodri Oliver (Chairman)      Cllr David Wickerson  
Cllr Fabian Eagle                      Cllr Peter Wilkinson (Substitute Member)  
Cllr Terry Jermy

**In Attendance**

Cllr Timothy Birt                      Cllr Mike Nairn  
Cllr Hilary Bushell                  Cllr Harry Clarke  
Cllr Mark Kiddle-Morris              Cllr Philip Morton  
Cllr Robert Kybird                    Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen

**Also In Attendance**

Rob Walker                              - Executive Director Place & Delivery and  
Monitoring Officer  
Greg Pearson                            - Head of Strategic Policy  
Jason Cole                                - Assistant Director Customer and  
Performance  
Adele Newsome                        - Customer Experience Manager  
Sarah Wolstenholme-Smy              - Legal Services Manager (Deputy Monitoring  
Officer)  
Teresa Smith                              - Democratic Services Team Leader  
Ruth Tudge                                - Democratic Services Officer

**36/21 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 March 2021 were confirmed as a correct record.

**37/21 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES**

Apologies had been received from Councillors Turner and Martin. Councillor Wilkinson was in attendance as a substitute for Councillor Turner.

**38/21 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (IF ANY)**

None.

**39/21 URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

**40/21 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

None.

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**41/21 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING**

None.

**42/21 CUSTOMER SERVICE REVIEW**

The Executive Member for Customer and Performance, Councillor Robinson was pleased to introduce to the Commission the report on the Customer Service Review that had taken place. The new structure would support the Council's approved Customer Access Strategy and enable the Contact Centre to continue to work remotely and for the team to be fully supported in their day-to-day roles.

The Customer Experience Manager, Adele Newsome, explained the report in further detail stating that during Covid customers had been forced to contact the Council in different ways thereby accelerating channel shift. As part of the Covid response and recovery they had reviewed how the customer service had adapted and responded to the challenges, how they had changed the way they worked, what they had learned from this and how to adapt it for the future. To do this they felt that they would need to change the team structure and ways of working that would enable the team to effectively manage change in demand and optimize productivity. The new structure would create more leadership capacity and attract and retain high calibre staff.

The aim would be to make services available 24/7 through a variety of channels, improve the on-line experience by improving forms and using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and a new Digital Assistant, which was hoped to be available from early 2022, yet still offer customers the opportunity to talk to or see an officer face to face if that was their preferred method. For customers who did not have access to, or struggled with online services, or struggled to contact during normal office hours, they would be supported with some dedicated evening appointments.

The Customer Experience Manager explained the proposed structure including a new senior lead role and allowed capacity for the lead roles to effectively and consistently manage performance. It was designed to encourage a culture of high performance and excellent customer service. It was felt that by creating more leadership capacity the service would be able to pro-actively support and provide a positive working environment.

Cllr Jermy asked about the AI and the costs for implementation and the flexibility built into the structure to cope with peak times during the year.

The customer Experience Manager said that she would get the full financial breakdown and provide this outside of the meeting. With regard to the flexibility, the support roles would not only assist the lead roles but would also support officers and be pulled to provide assistance to the Contact Centre Officer role to whichever channel showed peak and demand.

Cllr Birt suggested that the wording on page 13, paragraph 3.3 of the report was not clear – 'residents would not always be able to talk to a person without delay' and asked for clarity. He also asked for evidence that the AI was fit for purpose and how the Council could ensure it

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would be secure.

The Customer Experience Manager explained that the Service review was currently in two phases and was mainly focused around creating the senior leadership capacity to support the team to remain a remote working environment and provide the customer service. The AI savings were not currently within the review and this would be reviewed in the future. Additionally, work was still on-going with the Data Protection Officer to look at GDPR as well as options for storage of data or where possible no data being stored.

The Assistant Director for Customer and Performance, Jason Cole suggested it might be prudent to bring an item back to the Commission at a future date to discuss AI and security in more detail. It was agreed to include AI in the work programme for a future meeting.

Cllr Kiddle-Morris suggested Members should consider the finance set aside for AI working and that this should be included in the Risk Register.

Cllr Bushell asked if the Contact Centre staff were happy and fully supportive of the review and structure. Members were informed that the team were happy with the suggested new structure, particularly with remote working and the added senior role for support and felt it would also benefit residents. They were also working with staff around any issues and preferred times of working.

Cllr Jermy said a main selling point currently for the Contact Centre had been the amount of in-depth knowledge and the quality of the service once you got through to an officer and that it should be considered when moving to AI that this service was retained and welcomed the suggestion by the Assistant Direct for Customer and Performance to bring this item to a future meeting to investigate further.

The Chairman asked Members to indicate their opinions and whether they were supportive of adding a Risk Register item, specifically on the point previously mentioned of putting the AI Finance on the Risk Register. This was proposed by Cllr Wilkinson and seconded by Cllr Wickerson and Cllr Robinson agreed to take this forward.

Members of the Commission approved the implementation of the revised staffing structure for the Customer Services Team as detailed in the report.

**43/21 Q4 20/21 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

Councillor Robinson, the Executive Member for Customer, Digital and Performance introduced the report. He explained that it now included the extra column, requested by the Commission, showing performance relating to the same quarter 12 months ago. He was pleased to notice positive improvement compared to the same quarter last year in areas such as digital, customer communications and garden waste services. One notable area was the fly tipping rates, which, whilst increased in quarter 4 still fell below the number of fly tips reported annually compared to the previous year.

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The Assistant Director Customer and Performance, Jason Cole added that the Commercial Property gross rental income continued to perform well despite current trading conditions and was happy to take questions.

Cllr Jermy said the number of fly tipping reports remained a concern and although enforcement was good, he felt communication was an issue and that 500 tonnes of fly tipping on Breckland Council land was significant. Cllr Kiddle-Morris agreed that the communication around fly tipping and prevention could be more robust.

Cllr Wilkinson questioned the methodology with missed bin reporting now the environmental services contract had changed to cover two other councils.

The Executive Director Place, Rob Walker, explained that the principle was that if there were small issues relating to individual Councils, they would be dealt with by the Council concerned, however if there was a larger issue affecting all three Councils it would be dealt with by the Strategic Board. The number of missed bins within Breckland remained low although there could be seasonal fluctuations and holidays which caused a change of crew who may be unfamiliar with a route which could increase the number of missed bins reported.

Cllr Wickerson suggested it might be useful to have reports on the new Commercial Waste service offered by the New Environmental Services contract to check its success or issues. The Chairman confirmed the Scrutiny Commission would be looking at the indicators.

Cllr Birt had concerns over the Contact Centre reaction times and felt with the new structure this would be a long time before this issue would be addressed, he also asked how new website visitors were measured and the fact that Breckland Council were not achieving the statutory timescale for Freedom of Information Requests and would like to see an additional part in the reporting on how long it took to respond. He further noted that bringing empty houses back into service had been put back again and felt that this should be addressed.

The Assistant Director Customer and Performance said he would obtain the details on unique website visitors and pick that up with Cllr Birt outside of the meeting. He also said that, although he did not have the details to hand, he suspected that the delay in responding to Freedom of Information statutory timescales, could be due to the fact of receiving a host of requests that hit every Council from various organisations and these were most probably de-prioritised to deal with genuine requests. Regarding the empty homes, he did not have the information to hand and would get back to Cllr Birt directly.

The Chairman agreed with Cllr Birt in that there was further work to be done around Freedom of Information requests.

The Customer Experience Manager explained there had been challenges with meeting reaction times, partly due to the Service Review. Whilst the review was in progress, they were unable to recruit new staff which meant agency staff had to be used during the period of the review. This had resulted in more training and difficulties in staff retention. She felt that once the review had been completed there would

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be more capacity to be able to meet demand.

Cllr Clarke questioned the timescales and responses on complaints and suggested this could be broken down into types of complaint by issue which would highlight trends.

Cllr Kiddle-Morris asked about vexatious complaints and how they were investigated.

The Executive Director Place, Rob Walker explained that Breckland Council had a Vexatious Complainant Policy and certain criteria had to be met. Once someone was deemed to be vexatious the complaints were not used in the statistics and were no longer reported, however the number of vexatious complainants in Breckland was very low.

The Head of Strategic Policy, Greg Pearson stated that the Vexatious Policy included reporting Vexatious Complainants to the Scrutiny Commission on an annual basis. The Chairman said this needed to be added to the Work Programme to ensure it was regularly reviewed.

Members of the Commission noted the report.

**44/21 CORPORATE PLAN REFRESH 2021**

The Head of Strategic Policy, Greg Pearson, introduced the report on the Corporate Plan refresh and explained the reasons behind why this was needed. He further explained that in February 2019 a new Corporate Plan had been agreed which would run until March 2023. However, during the last 15 months there had been a number of significant impacts which had affected this. Firstly, the Covid-19 pandemic, which had impacted the physical and mental health of residents as well as the shape and structure of the local economy and secondly the Council's 10-year strategic partnership with South Holland had come to an end and a new partnership could possibly be formed within Norfolk. With this in mind, it was felt that a more fundamental review was required at this point.

The Head of Strategic Policy explained they had been looking at a revised look and narrative and how to make it more accessible and fully integrated into the Breckland Council website. It was also hoped to link objectives into larger pieces of work currently happening within Breckland. He stated that the vision "Breckland: a place where people and Business can thrive" was still relevant and would remain.

The presentation covered 4 objectives for the lifetime of the plan and explained in further detail what would be included within each objective:

- Inspiring Communities - the community focused action,
- Thriving Places - the growth and economic agenda,
- Breckland 2035 - the environmental agenda,
- Working Smarter - which would set the direction for the council's more internal focused actions to ensure that it was continuously improving.

The Head of Strategic Policy welcomed the feedback from Members and would work further to incorporate the suggestions into the plan to

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bring to Full Council in July with opportunities to have input into the final terminology.

The Chairman suggested renaming Working Smarter to Smarter Working, and suggested Breckland 2035 was a long way in the future and that for Breckland to hit the net zero target would require year on year progress and felt a better title might be more appropriate. He was also conscious that other local authorities in the area had different targets with the County Council most recently stating 2030 and wondered whether any synergies might be obtained working with other authorities to achieve a net zero target across Norfolk.

Cllr Jermy suggested that the working title might be changed to make it more appealing. He also suggested that since the last Corporate Plan things had changed, Breckland had declared a climate emergency and adopted a sustainability strategy, which was quite significant and should run through the entirety of Corporate Plan and should not be seen in isolation. Additionally, he felt that as a Council social mobility should also be improved including people's wages. Maintenance of existing open spaces was also a key issue, if Breckland wanted to instil pride in residents and where they lived, it needed to lead the way and look after its open spaces and take care of community assets and all this should be worked into the Plan.

In response to the suggestion of changing the title, the Head of Strategic Policy said he would investigate some options.

He also agreed about the climate emergency and sustainability strategy, and informed Members that the Team had been working on a narrative that would work alongside that document and would ensure it was reflected throughout. Social mobility was included, however it maybe that it could be made clearer, and he would look at the pride in the place you live which had been incorporated in the cleaner, greener, safer agenda but possibly not explicitly and would revisit this to see how this could be brought more to life.

Cllr Wilkinson had concerns on delivering such a comprehensive list and asked if some things would be prioritised or compromised?

The Head of Strategic Policy explained that this was a high-level strategy and aspirational document which, if agreed, would then progress to put the tools in place to deliver a more detailed document and a Delivery Plan would be worked up to sit underneath this document that would be more precise and identify timings.

Cllr Wickerson felt that overall, it was a good aspirational document; however, there were some things Breckland had no control over, such as education and health. He also agreed with the Chairman's comments that 2035 was too far ahead and should be changed.

Cllr Kybird felt some of the wording could be changed to make it more easily understood by all and had noticed that there was no mention of Member engagement and felt that as elected politicians they were an interface between the public and the Council and was an area that needed some further thought and development.

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The Head of Strategic Policy thanked all Members for their comments and would look at the language and how to work Member engagement into the strategy.

Councillor Kiddle-Morris was pleased to see that some aspirations had been covered by the local plan but there was no reference to the local plan which he felt was needed to ensure the two documents linked together.

The Head of Strategic Policy said he would look at how to weave those two documents in more effectively.

Cllr Birt also agreed that the climate emergency needed to be woven through the entire document. He also commented that Slide 9 highlighted a list of things that Breckland Council would do to be legally compliant and felt that this should be a given.

The Head of Strategic Policy stated that he would re-visit employment and try to reflect this more appropriately. All comments would be taken on board in respect of linking the document to the climate agenda throughout.

**45/21 OUTSIDE BODY FEEDBACK (STANDING ITEM)**

Cllr Wilkinson, as a representative of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital (QEH), Kings Lynn, informed Members that a National Government White Paper had stated that integration and innovation working should be adopted within the care system. The QEH was committed to this way of working and as such the Integrated Care System (ICS), Norfolk and Waveney came into being on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 and the QEH was a part of that. This would bring outside bodies together, with all agencies working together rather than in isolation.

Cllr Wilkinson also stated that the QEH was still lobbying Central Government to have a new hospital built.

**46/21 SCRUTINY CALL-INS (STANDING ITEM)**

None.

**47/21 COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION (STANDING ITEM)**

None.

**48/21 WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chairman, as suggested earlier in the meeting, requested that Artificial intelligence (AI) and Vexatious Complaints be added to the future work programme.

Cllr Jermy asked if Members could review how the Serco contract was performing and suggested September as a good time for this to be discussed. He also asked if the grant system for Inspiring Communities could be added to the October programme as he felt it would be useful for Members to understand how the projects were selected for funding and how it worked.

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Cllr Birt asked for a review of the IT infrastructure and the strength of the current systems to establish if they were robust enough. The Chairman suggested that after a few recent IT items on the agenda that this might be better suited to the future items with a date to be decided.

Cllr Bushell felt it would be useful to discuss Climate Change with Town Councils to see what they were doing and work together for a joined-up approach across Breckland. The Head of Strategic Policy said that he had some meetings arranged with representatives from Town Councils over the next few months to start this piece of work to look at how it could contribute towards Breckland Council's Climate Emergency agenda. He would be happy to bring that back to the Commission, perhaps in October to update Members.

Cllr Webb stated that the Housing Performance Review was due to come back to a meeting to look at how it was performing; however, she would welcome input on what and how Members wanted to measure performance. It was agreed that this should tie in with the metrics and KPIs for the quarterly performance and suggested that Cllr Webb and the Assistant Director Customer and Performance discuss this matter further and arrange a suitable time to bring this back to a future meeting.

**49/21 NEXT MEETING**

The arrangements for the next meeting scheduled for Thursday 15 July at 10.00am were noted.

The meeting closed at 11.55 am

CHAIRMAN