

**BRECKLAND COUNCIL**

**At a Meeting of the**

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION**

**Held on Thursday, 8 September 2022 at 10.00 am in the  
The Breckland Conference Centre, Anglia Room, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke,  
Dereham, NR19 1EE**

**PRESENT**

Cllr Rhodri Oliver (Chairman)	Cllr Lynda Turner
Cllr Roy Brame (Vice-Chairman)	Cllr Peter Wilkinson
Cllr Vera Dale	Cllr Roger Atterwill (Substitute Member)
Cllr Paul Plummer	Cllr Harry Clarke (Substitute Member)

**Also Present**

Cllr Gordon Bambridge	- Executive Member Housing & Homelessness
Michael Horwood	- UKPN Public Affairs Manager
Ian Turpin	- UKPN Strategic Planning Engineer for Norfolk and North Cambridgeshire
Jose Barros	- UKPN Strategic Planning Engineer for Breckland

**In Attendance**

Sarah Shipley	- Assistant Director Health & Housing
Stephen James	- Executive Director
Rob Walker	- Executive Director & Monitoring Officer
Gill Duffy	- Housing Manager
Ellen Spencer	- Private Sector Housing Manager
Ruth Tudge	- Democratic Services Officer

**58/22 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 July 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

**59/22 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Birt, Eagle, Jermy, Kybird, Nairn and Wickerson. Councillors Atterwill and Clarke were in attendance as substitutes.

**60/22 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (IF ANY)**

None.

**61/22 URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

**62/22 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

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None.

**63/22 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING**

Councillor Bambridge, Executive Member for Housing & Homelessness.

**64/22 VISIT FROM UKPN**

Representatives from UK Power Networks (UKPN), Michael Horwood - Public Affairs Manager, Ian Turpin - Strategic Planning Engineer for Norfolk and North Cambridgeshire, and Jose Barros - Strategic Planning Engineer for Breckland, gave a joint presentation with an overview on Electricity Infrastructure to the Members of the Commission.

Mr Horwood explained that they specifically covered the area of the East of England, part of the Southeast and most of London, around 8.3m properties. He explained the complexities surrounding the transmission of electricity, distribution, and suppliers and that the cost of using the networks was included in energy bills, billed by the energy suppliers. He explained that power cuts to the network could happen at any time for any number of reasons and were a priority to fix, although he stated that power cuts were now much less of an issue than it had been in the past as the quality of the provision had improved over the years.

To report a power cut, residents should call the number 105, a free of charge number to connect and call from any mobile or landline – similar to 101 for the police. Residents could also check [www.ukpowernetworks.co.uk](http://www.ukpowernetworks.co.uk) to view details on any power cut and check for updates, expected time of repair, how many properties were affected and the reason for the power cut. UKPN had reduced the impact on power cuts year on year and today, customers connected to the network on average would experience a power cut for appx 28 minutes per year, compared to 64 minutes in 2010/11.

UKPN held a Priority Services Register to provide those in need with extra help throughout a power cut. The Priority Services Register was free to register and no cost to the individual or council for any assistance provided. It offered tailored support if needed such as home visits, hot meals, or keeping friends and relatives updated.

Mr Turpin stated that one of the biggest challenges ahead would be to meet the Net Zero Carbon Emissions objectives with three main challenges which included renewable generation, electric vehicles and heat electrification.

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Mr Horwood explained how the electricity network had been upgraded to cater for increased demand, which could be through two ways:

1. Natural growth:

- As existing houses and businesses continued to use more electricity for low carbon technology including electric vehicles, heat pumps and solar panels, UKPN monitors the load on the network and increased capacity in line with forecasts about use on the network by existing properties.
- These investment costs were paid for within the UKPN part of the average domestic electricity bill. Despite the current rising costs of energy bills, this part of the overall bill remained in the £80s this current year.

2. Customers increasing their electricity supply (connections)

- If a single customer wished to increase their electricity supply above their property's standard connections agreement or they required a new connection, they could request UKPN for such work. For example, this could be developers building a new housing development or a domestic homeowner requiring additional supply.
- The cost of upgrading the network, if required (following a UKPN assessment), was paid for by the customer requesting it, rather than 'socialised' on everyone's electricity bill. The cost could vary depending on whether an upgrade to the cables or local substation was required but followed a standard charging methodology.
- There were some exemptions – for example upgrading (generally older) domestic properties if they wished to install a slow electric vehicle charger for home use (upgrading from 60amps to 100amps fuse board, or upgrading the wider network if necessary)

In terms of power supplies, the Breckland area was divided into three zones:

- North-Western area – primarily supplied from the Swaffham grid
- Eastern Area – supplied from Sall, Earham and Trowse grids
- Southern Area – supplied from Thetford and Diss grids.

In order to model the uncertainties in the pathway to a zero-carbon economy, UKPN had developed a set of Distribution Future Energy Scenarios (DFES) describing the evolution of demand and generation across UKPN's licence areas out to 2050. They were also spending approximately £20m on monitoring technology at a number of substations across the network to review the take up of low carbon technologies such as electric vehicles in order to inform their investment plans. This could be viewed at the following link:

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[www.ukpowernetworks.co.uk/dfes-2022](http://www.ukpowernetworks.co.uk/dfes-2022)

Councillor Atterwill stated that there had been a power outage in Swanton Morley last winter which had caused major disruption to the village over a number of days but felt that this had been handled extremely well and temporary electricity with mobile generators had been provided until the issue had been fixed. He felt that overall, the provision of the service remained excellent but had been let down by the communication with the community. Residents were not aware of what was happening, the only reason that that the community had been kept up to date was that he himself had taken time to speak to the senior engineer on site and then relayed the information via social media and spoke to the residents himself. He asked if such communication could be improved.

Councillor Atterwill explained that he worked in the electricity industry and understood a lot of the challenges and issues faced by UKPN. He said that there were approximately 16,500 homes within the Breckland area that currently used oil central heating which was not sustainable and felt this in time would move to electric sourced heating and together with extra charging for electric vehicles would increase demand for electricity. He felt that UKPN should devise a more proactive programme to upgrade 60amp supply to 100amp, specifically across rural areas so that they all had a minimum of 100amp supply. He asked what communication UKPN had in place with the suppliers and what could be done to streamline that process to make it less stressful for customers.

Mr Turpin stated that UKPN had asked for some funding for an off-grid gas programme of reinforcement work of approximately £50m and were waiting for approval from OFGEM, if this request proved successful, it would enable investment for upgrade over the next 5 years.

Councillor Atterwill asked if UKPN felt that there would be a time when 100amp would be insufficient for household demand. Mr Turpin stated that, depending on the size of the house, 100amp would be sufficient to cope but it remained something that they would monitor.

Councillor Bambridge asked about the capacity and upgrading of networks across the region with the need to bring more industry into the area for growth and more new homes planned. Mr Barros confirmed that upgrades were planned but that there was currently sufficient capacity for residents and business needs. Each request was looked at individually to assess provision and demand. If a customer requested more than could be provided by the network at the time, this could be upgraded or provided by different means. The current regulations were that the customer would pay for any extra work needed to provide sufficient supply.

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Councillor Turner said that there had been a power cut in Shipdham and Yaxham two years ago which had caused a power outage for five days over the Christmas period which had been very unfortunate. However, she thanked UKPN for the work involved to fix the issue as soon as possible, everything that could have been done was done, the communication between all had been good, and UKPN had worked well with the village emergency committee. Councillor Turner also stated that financial compensation had been offered to effected residents along with a donation to the Parish Council which remained held in a fund for future emergencies, and if everyone worked together the best outcome could be achieved.

Councillor Brame asked how flexible UKPN were on the five-year plan they had in place and if they felt they could adapt to changes and increased demand in alternative, ever changing, energy provision. Mr Horwood explained that it had previously been an eight-year plan but had been changed to a five-year plan to ensure relevance. In addition, they also had something in place called 'uncertainty mechanisms' which allowed them to adapt to changes in technologies along the way.

The Chairman pointed out that UKPN was a very profitable business and he asked what could be done to influence UKPN in terms of plans and upgrades if it was felt that something could be done to improve things in the Breckland area. Mr Horwood explained that UKPN were developing a proposal in their business plan to create a Local Area Energy Planning Team which was a mechanism that was being developed with Government to help Local Authorities facilitate decarbonisation in their areas through creating something called a Local Area Energy Plan. This was where the Council, through its visibility of future developments and its own ambitions to achieve targets, could build this into the plan and would subsequently allow UKPN to invest in the infrastructure needed ahead of time to assist in supporting local development to achieve it at the right time. They were very keen to work with Energy Officers from Local Authorities to achieve this.

The Deputy Chief Executive, Rob Walker, introduced Executive Director Steve James, as the best point of contact for UKPN in this area and said that Breckland Council were keen to see economic growth into the district and were perceptive to provision to make this happen and had the necessary requirements in place to invite investors into the area and not lose these investors to other areas that already had the necessary power provision in place.

The Chairman thanked UKPN for their informative presentation and said that he looked forward to working with them as a Council in the future.

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**65/22 EMPTY PROPERTIES**

The Executive Member for Housing and Homelessness, Councillor Gordon Bambridge explained that earlier in 2022 Breckland Council had set up an Empty Properties Steering Group and had started to look at the whole strategy of homes and housing within the Breckland area investigating every part of housing and how Breckland currently dealt with it. He hoped to have some direction on the way forward in Spring next year.

The Private Sector Housing Team Manager, Ellen Spencer explained that Breckland Council did not currently have an Empty Homes Policy. She then provided a presentation on Empty Homes in the Breckland area along with some options on what could be included within a new policy for dealing with empty homes.

Properties left empty for any period of time could become a problem for the following reasons:

- Unsightly
- Nuisance
- Blight to neighbouring houses
- Anti-social behaviour
- Squatting
- Arson

There were 1,333 households on the council's housing register, with over 100 households in temporary accommodation, yet 140 homes had stood empty for 2 years or more.

There were many reasons why a home may be empty:

- Probate
- Too costly to repair
- Negative equity
- Land banking
- Builder investment
- Storage
- Too much to cope with
- Illness
- Memories – good and bad
- Family dynamics – inherited property

The Private Sector Housing Team had tried different approaches, some of which had worked, including friendly persuasion, grants or loans and linking the owner with housing associations, estate agents or letting agents.

As a discouraging measure, Breckland Council currently charged full council tax plus the maximum premium for homes left

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unoccupied/empty. This meant if a property was left empty for over 2 years it incurred a 100% premium which meant a 200% charge, over 5 years empty it incurred a 200% premium which meant a 300% charge and if over 10 years empty it incurred a 300% premium which meant a 400% charge.

A further discouraging measure was continued enforcement which could be dealt with by different teams within Breckland Council including:

- Environmental Protection Act 1990
- Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1948
- Building Act 1984
- Town and Country Planning Act 1990
- Housing Act 2004
- Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982

Furthermore, if a homeowner did not respond to an enforcement notice, Breckland Council could carry out the work and put a charge on the property with the Land Registry.

It also had an option to enforce the sale of a property if there were enforcement debts due to work in default or council tax debts. If the owner did not repay the outstanding debt, a legal charge could be attached to the title deeds of the property and Breckland Council would apply to the Land Registry to enforce the sale of the property according to the Law of Property Act 1925.

The Empty Properties Steering Group, met to look at the worst empty properties in the district and use a scoring matrix to identify which properties had the most blight to neighbourhoods and what options were available, with all departments, as a Council wider issue.

A Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO), although a lengthy and time-consuming process, could also be an option available to Breckland Council. This could be used where owners refused to take action to bring a property back into use or if an owner could not be traced or if a property had been empty for a long period of time and was causing a nuisance or danger to the public. Properties that had a CPO served on them could be sold on via a preferred purchaser or by auction and monitored to ensure they were brought back into use. A property could also be sold with an improvement notice on it, outlining the work required and a legal timescale. If Breckland Council decided that a CPO process could be a viable option, the Council would need to have a policy in place to be able to use such an option.

A further option available to Breckland Council could be an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO). EDMOs would enable Breckland Council to take control of and manage a residential property that had been empty for over 2 years and where the

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following applied:

- All attempts to contact the owner or negotiations to bring the property back into use had failed
- The dwelling had been unoccupied for at least 2 years
- There was no prospect of the dwelling becoming occupied in the near future
- There was a reasonable prospect that the dwelling would become occupied if an EDMO was made
- Breckland Council had complied with all duties in seeking and EDMO

A scoping exercise had been carried out that showed that there were at least 20 empty homes which were suitable to an EDMO and use as accommodation. Most had 3 bedrooms, gardens and were near schools and shops. The properties could be run and managed either by Breckland Council or a private manager, a charity or housing association. EDMOs did carry risks and were resource intensive and would need an officer to be deployed to carry out this work.

Breckland Council could also provide grants or loans to owners of Empty Homes to get them back into use.

The new policy would need to establish the suitability of each option depending on the property involved and there should be a clear reason for intervention – blight or housing need?

The Private Sector Housing Team Manager stated that she would soon be drafting an Empty Homes Policy for Breckland Council and asked for direction on a number of questions:

- Should Breckland Council just concentrate on those empty homes which were a blight on the neighbourhood, whilst also address housing need?
- Were Members broadly supportive for Breckland Council to use Enforced Sale when there were debts secured on an empty home?
- Did Members want the policy to include CPO? If so, this would need to be resourced?
- Did Members want the policy to include EDMO? If so, this would need to be resourced?
- Did Members want owners to be given grants or loans to improve their empty homes? If so, what would the conditions be? Who would manage the properties once they were repaired?

Following some discussion, the Chairman proposed that the Overview and Scrutiny Commission would benefit from further information surrounding the draft policy, incorporating the costs involved before questions could be answered. He suggested that the Cabinet Member take the proposal away and work up the financial and policy implications and bring it back to the

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Commission at that point, this should include three possible choices:

- costings on empty homes back into use
- dilapidated homes back into use; and
- empty and dilapidated properties back into use.

These suggestions were agreed by Members of the Commission.

**66/22 TASK AND FINISH GROUPS**

It had been agreed that the report of the Task & Finish Group – Serco Contract, would be available for the next meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

**67/22 OUTSIDE BODY FEEDBACK (STANDING ITEM)**

None.

**68/22 SCRUTINY CALL-INS (STANDING ITEM)**

None.

**69/22 COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION (STANDING ITEM)**

Councillor Atterwill suggested that it would be beneficial if Primary Care Providers could attend a future Overview and Scrutiny Commission meeting, including dentists with an overview of where the service currently was on provision of care. It seemed extremely difficult to secure a visit to either a dentist or GP and felt it would be good to understand the level of the problems they were facing and to establish whether Breckland, as a Council, could do anything to support them. He also felt that the Ambulance Service should be invited as there were definite problems with wait times outside of hospitals for A & E and reaction times to 999 calls and it would be good to know the issues they were facing and again to ascertain whether Breckland Council could assist at all.

The Executive Director, Steve James suggested that discussions should be had first with his counterparts within the Clinical Commissioning Group to establish who should attend in order to meet the above proposal and report back to the Chairman. The Chairman agreed and also confirmed that this should cover three separate areas, dentistry, Primary Care and the Ambulance Service, including response times.

The Chairman updated Members on a previous call for action in respect of Banham Poultry. The ownership of Banham Poultry had changed hands, and enforcement action did proceed, and it was suggested that Banham Poultry be invited to a future meeting to update Members on the outcome and improvements made.

**70/22 WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chairman drew Members' attention to a referral from full Council on fuel poverty, to the Overview & Scrutiny Commission to report and update on what this Council was undertaking to support those impacted by the cost of living and increased fuel costs. This would enable Members to review the proposed changes from Energy Company obligation (ECO3) (closed 31 March 2022) to ECO4 and how this Council could support the Government changes along with wider activity within the Councils remit.

The Chairman asked for Banham Poultry to be added to the work programme at a future date to update the Commission on changes implemented since the enforcement action and change of ownership.

He also asked for the previous call for action from Councillor Nairn in respect of NCC verges and grass cutting to be added to the work programme for a follow up since the change in contract from BDC to NCC.

The Chairman pointed out that he had seen a recent report by the Inspectorate in terms of the Fire Service that state improvements were needed and felt that it would be useful to request a visit from the Fire service in the future, to provide an update on the improvements made and if they were working.

Councillor Turner requested that an update on the outcomes of the Task and Finish Group report for the Serco Contract should be requested in April 2023 to check progress.

**71/22 NEXT MEETING**

The arrangements for the next meeting on Thursday, 20 October 2022 at 10.00am in the Anglia Room were noted.

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The meeting closed at 12.40 pm

CHAIRMAN