

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held on Thursday, 13 October 2016 at 2.00 pm in the
Anglia Room, The Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke, Dereham

PRESENT

Councillor E. Gould (Chairman)	Mr D R R Oliver
Mr R. F. W. Brame	Mr R. R. Richmond
Mr T. J. Jermy	Mr A.C. Stasiak (Vice-Chairman)
Mr A.P. Joel	Mrs A M Webb
Mrs S.M. Matthews	Mr J Newton (Substitute Member)
Mr T F C Monument	Mr P S Wilkinson (Substitute Member)

Also Present

Mr S.G. Bambridge	Mr P.D. Claussen
Councillor M. Chapman-Allen	Mr F.J. Sharpe
Mr S H Chapman-Allen	Mrs L.S. Turner
Mr H. E. J. Clarke	

In Attendance

Ross Bangs	- Housing Manager
Matthew Hogan	- Strategic Housing Manager (Shared)
Robert Leigh	- Executive Manager People & Information
Helen McAleer	- Senior Democratic Services Officer
Maxine O'Mahony	- Executive Director of Strategy & Governance
Riana Rudland	- Breckland Place Manager
Teresa Smith	- Democratic Services Officer
Simon Taylor-Avery	- Facilities Manager
Rob Walker	- Executive Director Place

68/16 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 September 2016 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

69/16 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies were received from Councillors Bishop and Crawford.

Councillors Wilkinson and Newton were present as their Substitutes.

70/16 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

71/16 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

Councillors Brame, R Richmond and Stasiak declared that they were Landlords and had rental properties in the District.
Councillor M Chapman-Allen declared that she had been in the employ of the Citizens Advice Bureau some years ago.

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72/16 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 5)

Councillors Bambridge, M Chapman-Allen, S Chapman-Allen, Clarke, Claussen, Sharpe and Turner were in attendance.

73/16 PRESENTATION FROM HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS (AGENDA ITEM 6)

Housing Association representatives Stephanie Davis and Andrea Rutterford had been invited to give presentations to the Commission.

Ms Davis, the Registered Housing Manager for Broadland Housing Association advised that they were taking a pro-active approach to minimise the length of time that a property was empty as families were waiting to be housed and void properties produced no income. New procedures had been introduced which included:

- Inspecting properties prior to the tenant leaving
- Providing an in-house repair and maintenance service
- Investing in technology which in future would allow for reporting of problems and booking of appointments on-line.
- Intelligent scheduling to cut down on travelling times
- Convenient appointment times to suit the customer
- Anti-social behaviour policies and procedures had been reviewed
- Pro-active estate management and a team of eight to support tenants in their homes
- Empty properties had a seven day 'turn around' time and they attempted to do all repairs in that time. However, the average time was 11 days and that was the target for the current year.

There were challenges ahead. The two main concerns were there were not enough properties and that the effects of welfare reform and the introduction of Universal Credit were unknown. If the Association could not collect rent it could not provide a service.

Andrea Rutterford, Flagship Homes Head of Housing explained their approach.

- They worked with new tenants to prepare the right home. The viewing process had been extended and expectations were made clear so that the customer was set up to succeed.
- They also had an in-house repairs team and the service was being extended to provide grounds maintenance, etc. Repairs could be logged on-line and appointments were arranged to fit around customer availability.
- Assets were managed over a longer term and asset evaluation, including factors such as crime rate and fuel poverty, was carried out.
- New technology was being used. They were looking at the use of drones for roof inspections for example.
- All Housing Officers had mobile tablets which enabled them to be out and about and more accessible to customers.
- New tenants were visited within six weeks of occupancy and annual inspections were carried out.

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Welfare reform was the key area of focus. They were working in partnership with the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) and Local Authorities to identify customers affected by benefit changes. Home visits were carried out and support and advice was offered. Partnership working was crucial. Flagship was part of the early intervention hub and would be based in Thetford with other agencies.

Members with specific questions were asked to provide the details to the Housing Association representatives so that they could investigate the circumstances and provide a response.

Councillor Jermy raised the issue of void properties as people were desperate for housing. He asked about the target times for getting properties back into use.

Broadland had an 11 day average. They had just carried out a restructure which should result in better performance, but they were unlikely to improve on 11 days in the current year. In a small number of cases where there was a health and safety issue, or where they could not access the property before it was vacated, the turn-around time was longer.

Flagship was very different. The average was about a month. They were working to improve that and were not happy with the current figures. Work to bring some long-term empty properties back into use was affecting figures. They had a longer lead-in time, due to the increased viewing process. The new procedure allowed tenancies to begin on any day of the week; previously they could only start on a Monday.

Councillor Brame was aware of elderly people willing to move into smaller properties, but they had problems with the on-line bidding process and the issue that incoming tenants were expected to clean and decorate their new properties. That did not seem right for elderly people who generally left their properties clean and in good order.

Councillor Wilkinson said that many people were worried about the Government's Finance Bill.

Ms Davis agreed that the Benefit Cap coming in November would decrease people's income. Some would have a huge deficit. Not all details were known yet but it would affect a lot of tenants. It was a difficult time for everyone dealing with very vulnerable people and for the Housing Associations it was a very uncertain time.

Councillor Sharpe asked about modifications for people with health problems.

The Housing Associations had very limited budgets for such modifications but were willing to work with other agencies. If a tenant received a grant they were usually permitted to have the works done.

Councillor Bambridge asked about the percentage of tenants that needed support. That number was not known. Stonham Housing had the contract to support people in social housing.

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Councillor R Richmond asked if there were minimum energy efficiency standards and whether tenants had to pay for vermin control if needed.

Flagship only provided a vermin control service for the vulnerable. They did provide an energy performance certificate with their properties but Ms Rutterford did not have details of actual energy ratings.

Broadland only offered a pest control service for communal areas. If any property was below C energy rating they would consider disposing of it.

Councillor Brame was concerned that with Universal Credit tenants would spend their benefits before paying their rent. He asked what the Housing Associations were doing.

Ms Rutterford said the DWP were advising them as soon as a Universal Credit claimant was identified and they then carried out a home visit to discuss options and give help and support.

Ms Davis said that Broadland was reviewing their tenancy support service to see if it needed to change. They had already had some successful switch backs.

Councillor Oliver asked about rent arrears and evictions policies and whether the Housing Associations had contingency plans to deal with a drop in rent collection.

Ms Davis explained that they already had a bad-debt write-off policy and their Board was working on the business plan. Rent arrears were dealt with on a case by case basis and personal circumstances were taken into account.

Councillor Newton asked if Flagship were able to deal with anti-social behaviour (ASB) problems quickly.

Ms Rutterford said that they tried to. They had dedicated ASB Officers who made visits and devised action plans for both victims and perpetrators. They worked with other support agencies. If tenancy conditions had been broken they were enforced.

Councillor Jermy noted that the Housing Associations always used to have representatives on Residents Groups, but that was not the case now.

Ms Davis said they had a commitment to engage with tenants in the way that the tenants wanted. That could be digitally or through a consumer or other panel. The Housing Association needed customer feedback and Flagship had a Customer Insight team. Housing Managers engaged with local Councillors to find out what was going on.

The Chairman thanked the Housing Association representatives for attending. If Councillors had any further questions they should be forwarded through her. She asked Members to encourage their constituents to speak to the Housing Associations.

74/16 HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY (AGENDA ITEM 7)

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Councillor Bambridge presented the report on behalf of Councillor C Carter, Executive Member for Growth, in his absence. He said it was a key policy document which set out the Council's housing agenda for the next four years.

The Strategic Housing Manager set the national policy context of the document and the consultation process. He gave a presentation (attached) which explained the huge changes in the housing agenda and the significant shifts in Government Policy. There were three priorities: to prevent homelessness; to improve health outcomes through improved housing; and to provide strong support for housing growth.

The next step would be a public consultation for 28 days, after which the strategy would come back to Scrutiny in January/February 2017.

Councillor Jermy was disappointed that the relevant Cabinet member was not present again. He welcomed the report which covered a lot of issues and dealt with a lot of housing problems. It was easy to say that the solution was more houses, but there were other things that could be done. There were numerous empty properties in the District and a large number of single occupant properties with spare rooms. He asked if the Council would have its own version of Right to Buy and Help to Buy. The report did not mention the housing mix. It was important to provide the right sort of housing; there were no small, single storey homes available for instance. He referred to page 40 and said more emphasis needed to be put on the fact that rents were out of control as a percentage of wages.

The Housing Manager agreed that empty properties needed to be looked at. He was seeking a restructure of the housing service to bring in specialised officers, including enforcement officers and they would work to bring properties back into use.

The Strategic Housing Manager would incorporate information about tax changes to empty homes in the report. There could be scope to introduce a rent/wage ratio. He would seek to address that. Some people were trapped in private rented accommodation and ways needed to be found to help them. There was a new Rent to Buy scheme which offered reduced rent for five years giving occupants the opportunity to save and buy. The Council did not have its own Help to Buy scheme.

The Chairman noted that not all areas needed smaller houses some villages had too many.

The Strategic Housing Manager said that he would look at the definition of starter homes to see if it gave scope for influence to meet local needs.

Councillor Webb asked about the Gypsy and Traveller research and was advised that the information would be included in the final document. She thought that Members should be consulted on the full document.

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Councillor Bambridge confirmed that he would ask the Executive Member for Growth to ensure that Members and Town and Parish Councils were consulted on the document.

Councillor Sharpe noted that the demographic analysis on page 39 gave different figures to the Local Plan and the new homes figures did not equate either.

The Strategic Housing Manager said he would ensure the figures were amended before the consultation commenced.

Councillor Clarke asked how the consultation would align with the Local Plan consultation which finished at the end of October. He was advised that the two documents were similar but different.

Councillor M Chapman-Allen was pleased to see that priority would be given to armed forces personnel and hoped that would extend to those suffering from combat stress. She asked about waiting times for occupational therapy.

The Housing Manager said that the waiting list figures for the disabled facilities grant would be amended as they were down to 85 following changes to procedure. Currently there was a 150 day wait. He wanted to remove the waiting list and have a scheduling system working with County Council colleagues.

Councillor M Chapman-Allen asked if the change in legislation regarding homelessness would take up all the housing stock, increase the bed and breakfast costs and reduce the chance of housing other people. She was advised that the Housing Team would work with colleagues in the Housing Associations to prevent homelessness.

Councillor Oliver noted that there were a lot of objectives and focuses in the strategy. He asked what the timelines were, especially with regard to enforcement.

The proposals for enforcement, new ways of working and the housing service redesign would be recommended to Council on 27 October 2016 with the aim of being implemented by the end of the calendar year.

The Chairman thanked the Officers for their report and asked that the Gypsy and Traveller information be sent out to all Members as soon as it was available.

75/16 PRESENTATION FROM THE CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU (AGENDA ITEM 8)

Steve Cheshire, Chief Executive Norfolk Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Melanie Jones, Diss & Thetford CAB and Marie Peck, Mid Norfolk CAB had been invited to address the Commission.

They gave an abridged version of the attached presentation and explained the numbers of people they helped and the range of issues and problems that they were faced with. They worked with other

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agencies to provide a joined-up service and to give the best help to clients that they could. They could offer a range of advice covering such issues as debt, homelessness, fuel poverty and health issues. The quality of the advice they gave was assessed monthly.

The CAB service was staffed mainly by volunteers who were all trained and insured. It took over eight months to fully train a volunteer and on-going costs were over £3,000 per volunteer.

Previously clients could only access advice by visiting the CAB. Now there were on-line facilities available including web-chat. However, face to face consultations could still be arranged.

It was noted that more and more people were presenting with complex issues needing a lot of help with more than one problem. Clients were predominantly families on low income affected by benefits changes.

Councillor R Richmond thought that CAB offered an incredible service and applauded their work. He was aware that they were willing to visit Parish Councils to give a presentation if requested.

Councillor Jermy had attended such a presentation at Thetford Town Council and had been impressed by the quantity and variety of their work. He hoped that CAB was aware that the Council was also working hard to address the same issues. He asked if CAB kept a record of why people needed advice. The food bank in Thetford supplied the local Councillors with information about the numbers of people accessing their service and he thought it would be useful if CAB did the same.

CAB provided an annual report to the Council as part of their grant conditions.

The Chairman asked where CAB got its funding and she was advised that they obtained funding from a variety of sources including the District and County Councils. There were also initiatives such as the Help Through Crisis project which gave lottery funding. Most of the grants were ring-fenced.

Councillor M Chapman-Allen had worked as a volunteer for CAB for six years and thoroughly recommended it as very rewarding work. She asked what the major challenges were in the future and was advised that apart from money shortages it was the constant welfare changes which were hard to keep abreast of.

The Chairman thanked the representatives for coming and asked Members to send any questions to her to pass on.

76/16 ACTION PLAN FOLLOWING RECENT FLOODING OF ELIZABETH HOUSE (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Executive Member for Place introduced the item. Members had received a briefing at the previous meeting from the Facilities Manager. An update was tabled which showed the actions that had been taken, those that were required and others which might be needed in the future.

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The Breckland Place Manager recapped the incidents that had occurred on the night of 23 June 2016 when the Council offices had suffered extensive flooding. Despite that there had been no interruption to service the next day. The problems had been exacerbated by storage tanks being blocked by silt and debris and failure of the pump. The tanks had been cleared, the pump had been serviced and an additional pump had been purchased as a back-up which was not reliant on electricity. A flood barrier had been fitted to the outside door to prevent water ingress.

Councillor R Richmond asked about the tank cleaning and the Breckland Place Manager advised that they would be regularly maintained in future.

The Chairman thanked the Executive Member for her update.

77/16 TASK AND FINISH GROUPS (AGENDA ITEM 11)

Councillor Stasiak (Chairman of the Performance T&FG) told Members that they had had the second of three meetings. The Portfolio was well balanced. They had looked at cost, base rent levels, occupancy levels and had discussed investing outside the District. They would be recommending that the Commission should look at the Corporate Asset Strategy in future.

Councillor Wilkinson (Chairman of the Transformation T&FG) had received a full report on the DWP co-location within the building. Residents were happy and no complaints had been received from them, the DWP or Council staff. They would be looking at office space for future opportunities.

The Chairman asked if it was easier for the Council and DWP staff to work together and the Executive Director Place advised that there had been a meeting the day before attended by the Chief Executive and the Regional Director of DWP looking at how to increase service integration.

Councillor R Richmond said that he had received positive feedback from residents. He asked if there was further floor space available.

The Executive Director Place said the current building was close to capacity. The Transformation Programme was looking at how space was used and there was a long-term piece of work to look at the strategic site as there might be a business case for future expansion.

78/16 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED that under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

79/16 ICT STRATEGY (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Executive Member for People & Information presented the ICT

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Strategy Review which would go to Cabinet and Council. It looked at how the ICT service worked and at the infrastructure.

The current service was provided by Norfolk County Council. Needs had changed and with the digitalisation agenda it was an opportunity to improve the service and make it more fit for purpose. Seven options had been identified.

The Executive Manager Information gave more details in a presentation to Members and outlined the benefits of making improvements.

Members felt that they needed more in-depth information before they could make any recommendation. A full report was requested for the next meeting.

80/16 OUTSIDE BODY FEEDBACK (AGENDA ITEM 12)

Councillor Wilkinson had sent a full report on Norfolk Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee by e-mail to Members.

It was noted that the South Norfolk Community Care Trust were not responsible for recruiting doctors and that Health Education England would be the correct organisation to invite to Scrutiny to discuss that issue.

The Chairman pointed out that Anglian Water had not answered one of the questions raised at the previous meeting and a full response was being sought.

Councillor Wilkinson mentioned that the YAP which had previously received grant funding of £11,500 were hoping to continue under the new Early Help umbrella.

81/16 SCRUTINY CALL-INS (AGENDA ITEM 13)

None.

82/16 COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION (AGENDA ITEM 14)

None.

83/16 WORK PROGRAMME (AGENDA ITEM 15)

The full report on the ICT Strategy would be added to the November meeting. Highways England would not be invited to that meeting to discuss the A47 as that would be an item for the Town & Parish Council Forum.

84/16 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 16)

The arrangements for the next meeting on 24 November 2016 were noted.

The meeting closed at 5.17 pm

CHAIRMAN