

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

**Held on Thursday, 9 September 2021 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 Terry Jermy
Cllr Lynda Turner (Vice-Chairman)	Cllr Robert Kybird
Cllr Timothy Birt	Cllr David Wickerson
Cllr Hilary Bushell	Cllr Peter Wilkinson (Substitute Member)
Cllr Vera Dale	

Also Present

Cllr Roger Atterwill	Cllr Philip Morton
Cllr Gordon Bambridge	Cllr Sarah Suggitt

In Attendance

Rob Walker	- Executive Director Place & Delivery and Monitoring Officer
Ronnie Coutts	- Managing Director, Serco's Environmental Services Business
Emma Windle	- Serco Contract Manager
Peter Aylward	- Serco Senior Management Team
Jason Cole	- Assistant Director Customer and Performance
Riana Rudland	- Assistant Director Contracts & Operations
Rosie Hill	- Digital Project Manager
Adele Newsome	- Customer Experience Manager
Simon Wood	- Director of Planning & Building Control
Teresa Smith	- Democratic Services Team Leader
Ruth Tudge	- Democratic Services Officer

69/21 MINUTES

The minutes and restricted minute from the meeting held on 22 July 2021 were confirmed as a correct record.

70/21 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES

Apologies had been received from Councillors Eagle, Kiddle-Morris, Martin and Nairn.

71/21 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (IF ANY)

None.

72/21 URGENT BUSINESS

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	<u>Action By</u>
None.	
73/21 <u>DECLARATION OF INTERESTS</u>	
None.	
74/21 <u>NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING</u>	
None.	
75/21 <u>SERCO CONTRACT</u>	
<p>The Managing Director for Serco's Environmental Services Business, Ronnie Coutts, introduced his colleagues from Serco, Emma Windle, the Senior Contract Manager and Peter Aylward, part of the Senior Management Team and gave a short presentation.</p> <p>Ronnie Coutts explained that all areas across the UK were now producing far more waste than ever before. This meant that crews were working longer hours, the trucks were filled up quicker which meant more trips to the transfer station sites, which might mean Serco ran out of driver hours which reduced the flexibility across the teams. He went on to explain the success behind the growth in subscribers for the garden waste service and that there had been an increase in subscribers of 15% on the previous year.</p> <p>Emma Windle explained the issues Serco had suffered over the last year with reduced staffing levels due to Covid and driver shortages, vehicle delays and supply chain issues, the move to the new purpose-built depot in Watton and the introduction of the new customer care centre along with some weaknesses in the historic management team.</p> <p>Emma stated that in response to the issues Serco had worked on ensuring that the vehicles had now been delivered and included the addition of some electric vehicles. Staffing levels had improved due to initiatives and better training and that Serco had changed the management team and were now focused on service delivery and leadership of the team.</p> <p>Emma further explained that some drivers had left due to a number of factors. The national shortage of drivers had forced the rate of pay nationally to an increase of 50% in some areas. In addition, drivers were being offered bonuses in the region of £500 to £5,000 to both start and stay with employers which resulted in limited availability of staff from agencies. To address these issues and retain staff Serco had put together a market allowance for drivers, an attendance allowance for all staff, a retention bonus for loaders as a one-off payment and offered LGV training free of charge to those who wanted to train, plus an annual pay increase of 1.75%.</p> <p>Councillor Wickerson asked if the waiting list for the provision of new bins had changed as this had been a 12-week period. The Assistant Director Contracts and Operations, Riana Rudland, explained this had been reduced and was currently around an 8-week delay. Emma Windle explained that Serco had now received stock of the brown garden waste bins and were aiming to deliver as quick as possible and</p>	

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had secured an additional vehicle and driver so now 2 vehicles were out delivering bins daily with over one thousand to be delivered which was hoped to be achieved within the next five to six weeks.

Councillor Birt queried the assisted bin collections and the failure to meet the obligation to return the bins to the properties. Emma Windle explained Serco had now incorporated the importance of this into the induction and continuation training to ensure staff were aware how important it was to return bins to the point of pick up, not only for the assisted bin collection, but all collections. Ronnie Coutts also said it was important that the assisted bin collection records were kept up to date and were working on how to improve to ensure this was captured when people moved properties.

Councillor Jermy said it was important to acknowledge that the service had been poor this year and that Serco had been slow to act when there had been issues. He said that there had been particular issues with the shredding of litter and dead animals where Serco had not litter picked prior to grass cutting. Further issues had been caused with full litter bins not being emptied regularly.

Ronnie Coutts agreed that there had been issues which Serco had now addressed such as the change to the Management team and finding extra resources, but that it would take time to embed with the new contract and that Management were monitoring to ensure the service was improved and stabilised. Emma Windle explained that previously there had been no synergy between the streets team who did the litter pick service and the grounds team who did the grass cutting. Serco would now ensure that the litter picking would be done directly ahead of the grass cutting.

The Chairman asked about the penalty system and if Serco thought it would be effective or prejudice the relationship with the council. He also asked how Serco felt they could meet the grass cutting targets. He further asked if it would be possible for systems to link better to let customers know when an issue had been dealt with for example if a resident reported an issue on-line, could they get real time feedback to their email address with an update, or a notification if this had already been reported.

Ronnie Coutts responded to say that he felt that the penalty system was a good regime and working well with both parties, with Serco recognising the need to solve current issues and work to improve the service long term. He also felt that the contract worked well because both parties understood the current climate, communicated well and regularly and recognised the effects on local residents and what was important to residents in different areas.

He further explained that the reporting system, now through Whitespace, worked very well and on-line forms went direct to the contractor for the area concerned and this was dealt with very quickly however he agreed that there were improvements that could be made on reporting information back to residents. The Assistant Director Contracts and Operations would investigate this with the WebTeam.

Councillor Wilkinson asked Serco if the fleet was up to capacity and the

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target for employing drivers. Emma Windle responded to say that there were insufficient drivers at this current time and that they had traditionally relied on agency staff. As a way forward Serco planned to build up a pool of trained drivers in house to rotate to cover holidays and sickness which would give better continuity and service to residents.

Councillor Atterwill asked about housing growth across the district and how would the Serco contract incorporate this growth and what education could be given to residents to reduce waste wherever possible. The Assistant Director Contracts and Operations explained that the contract had a mechanism in place in that at tender it set the current and forecasted growth level of household waste and that this was rebased each year. Regarding education local authorities had signed up to the Norfolk Waste Partnership which focussed on education campaigns to promote recycling across Norfolk.

Councillor Jermy suggested a visit to the new Watton depot would benefit Members, Councillor Suggitt said that she would organise with The Assistant Director Contract and Operations and Democratic Services and let Members know.

Members of the Commission noted the presentation.

76/21 PRESENTATION ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

The Executive Member for Waste and Environment, Councillor Bambridge introduced the report on Artificial intelligence (AI) and explained how the chatbot would provide an alternative means of communication for residents 24/7.

The Digital Project Manager, Rosie Hill gave a video presentation of how chatbot would work and demonstrated how to select service areas which would help chatbot narrow down the Frequently Asked Questions and increase accuracy and confidence in the responses. There would also be the ability to give feedback and the option to talk to a live assistant within office hours.

The Digital Project Manager explained the building process behind the content of the questions and the dashboard and showed the data that could be collected in order to monitor the performance of the Chatbot and ensure that it was responsive to achieve the goals and outcomes necessary to help residents.

The Customer Experience Manager explained the different phases of the introduction of chatbot to Breckland Council:

- Phase 1 (Oct 2022) – Deploy the online chatbot and start to gather customer use data
- Phase 2 (TBC) – Integrate payments and online forms into the chatbot
- Phase 3 (July 2022) – Add the chatbot to Breckland Council's social media channels after successful introduction on the Breckland Council website
- Phase 4 (Apr 2022) – Deploy the telephony chatbot (on one service area) and start to gather customer use data

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- Phase 5 (TBC) – Deploy the Alexa/Google Home chatbot
- Phase 6 (TBC) – Include the ability to book appointments on the telephony chatbot

The Customer Experience Manager further explained that the introductions of AI would improve efficiency, increase flexibility of contact for residents to 24/7 and free up capacity for officers to provide support for more vulnerable residents using other contact methods such as face-to-face.

Councillors felt that this was a good step in the right direction digitally but showed concerns for residents who were not yet ready or able to take this step and wanted assurance that the choice for residents would still be available.

The Customer Experience Manager confirmed that the choice would remain available for residents, and that Breckland Council would always be working to improve the telephony systems and availability and believed that the addition of chatbot 24/7 would reduce other contact and improve the availability of telephony contact during working hours.

It was agreed that it would be beneficial for this item come back to the Scrutiny Commission in February or March 2022 as it approached future phases in order that the Commission could look into the security of data to ensure it was managed correctly and assist in anticipating any possible future issues.

Members of the Commission noted the presentation.

77/21 SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS

The Director of Planning and Building Control, Simon Wood, introduced the report and explained the key points of the planning obligations surrounding 106 Agreements.

- Legal obligations entered into to mitigate the impact of a development proposal – it could not address existing issues, only issues raised by the impact of a development
- Planning Service manages the process of entering into a S106 Agreement and works with other service areas within the Council to monitor, spend and ensure obligations were complied with working with finance and affordable housing
- Developers can apply to vary a S106 Agreement. May be down to viability or because other circumstances, such as planning policy, may have changed.
- If planning obligations were breached, then it was open to the Council to take formal action against developers – this would be a last resort, it would be more advantageous to seek negotiation
- Council publishes an Annual Infrastructure Funding Statement giving details of infrastructure to be provided, the development it relates to and any trigger points for contributions.
- Planning for the Future White Paper – August 2020 proposes to replace CIL and S106 with a nationally set, value based flat rate charge to be known as the Infrastructure Levy.

Councillors asked about trigger points to highlight when obligations

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were due. The Director of Planning and Building Control said that historically this had not been done but that, after moving documentation to digital access, the Planning Service was now in a better position to monitor contracts and contact developers to advise of trigger points to ensure agreements were complied with.

Councillor Atterwill said that although the monitoring and implementation of Section 106 Agreements had improved, it still needed improvement and had concerns that Breckland Council did not actively monitor this. He also asked if more information could be provided to Members to make them aware of Section 278 and Section 38 legal agreements which might affect their communities. This would normally be dealt with by Norfolk County Council however if a Parish or Town took on lighting responsibilities then this would be useful as further funding could be made available by developers to contribute towards the Town or Parish.

The Director of Planning and Building Control agreed it might be useful to provide information on the Section 278 and Section 38 Agreements to help Members understand the technical aspects and clarify what each authority was responsible for.

Councillor Birt asked if there were ways of improving the engagement between Breckland Council and Town and Parish Councils to enable them to apply for monies within the timescale or have input on the agreement being made.

The Director of Planning and Building Control said it was important that if a Parish or Town Council required infrastructure within their settlement to support development, and could demonstrate the needs and costings, then the Planning Service would be happy to engage when this information was provided.

Members also felt the onus was on the Town and Parish Councils to take responsibility and get more involved with the process from the beginning.

Members of the Commission noted the report.

78/21 PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

The Executive Member for Waste and Environment, Councillor Bambridge, explained that as a result of the end of the Strategic Partnership with South Holland District Council earlier this year, the decision had been taken to review and reposition Breckland Council's performance framework. This framework was intended to help shape the Council's approach to performance and how it would measure performance moving forward. The framework demonstrated what criteria the Council applied to different types of information such as statistics and KPIs to ensure that all stakeholders had an understanding of how the Council would carry out performance management at different levels.

The Assistant Director Customer and Performance, Jason Cole explained that the document was in draft format and welcomed comments and feedback and said that he would put together a

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summary which may help Members. He also said he would ensure that the document would be made available and easily accessible for all to comment before it went live.

Councillor Birt said that on page 36, the Balanced Scorecard, he felt that there had been academic criticism of this particular framework, which was more finance led and questioned why this method had been used; he felt it would be useful to see a comparison as a more results-based system might be more beneficial for local authority performance measurement. Councillor Birt went on to say that the strategic carbon reduction requirements had not been used which should maybe be a scorecard in its own right.

The Assistant Director Customer and Performance explained that Breckland Council had worked with the LGA using best practice documents and used internal and external audit to come up with a suitable framework for this organisation and was confident that this was suitable but was happy to take on any comments.

Councillor Jermy said he would be interested to see that if an area dropped in performance very quickly, that the Council could be more reactive to what was happening rather than wait for a quarterly report.

The Assistant Director Customer and Performance explained that monitoring trends could influence and inform, and that Breckland Council had done a great deal of work about what the Council believed high performance should look like, including behaviours of individuals and how officers could drive a high-performance culture. He explained that Breckland Council reviewed statistics and data constantly and had weekly meetings to report on performance which would highlight any issues early.

The Chairman stated that this document was an ongoing process that could change with time and trends.

Members of the Commission recommended the adoption of the draft performance framework.

79/21 OUTSIDE BODY FEEDBACK (STANDING ITEM)

None.

80/21 SCRUTINY CALL-INS (STANDING ITEM)

None.

81/21 COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION (STANDING ITEM)

None.

82/21 WORK PROGRAMME

Members agreed it would be useful to monitor the introduction of Artificial Intelligence, and that Spring 2022 would be an appropriate time after the chatbot function had been in place from the end of October 2021.

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Members agreed that it would be timely to invite Serco back to monitor the progress of the contract and changes introduced by Serco, date to be decided.

Councillor Atterwill asked if there might be merit in having a task and finish group during the first year of the Serco. The Chairman agreed this might be a valuable exercise and requested that Members email him direct, before the next meeting, if they wished to be a part of this group.

Councillor Wickerson asked if it would be appropriate to have an update on climate change at the October meeting, at the same time as the update on Electrical Charging Points as the two subjects fit well together. It was agreed this item be included in the October agenda.

83/21 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting scheduled for Thursday 28 October at 10.00am were noted.

The meeting closed at 12.52 pm

CHAIRMAN