

MINUTES of a meeting of the CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the Forest Room, Stenson House, London Road, Coalville, LE67 3FN on THURSDAY, 23 NOVEMBER 2023

Present: Councillor S Lambeth (Chair)

Councillors D Bigby, K Horn, A Morley, S Sheahan and J Windram

In Attendance: Councillors A Barker, D Everitt, T Eynon, P Moulton, A C Woodman and M B Wyatt

Portfolio Holders: Councillors A C Woodman and M B Wyatt

Officers: Mr A Barton, Mrs R Wallace, Mr B Walford and Ms J Rochelle

18. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor M Ball, M Burke and M Blair-Park. The Chair expressed his condolences to Councillor Ball on behalf of the committee with regards to his recent bereavement.

19. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no interests declared.

20. PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

There were no questions received.

21. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 31 August 2023.

It was moved by Councillor A Morley, seconded by Councillor J Windram and

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 31 August 2023 be approved as an accurate record of proceedings.

22. ITEMS FOR INCLUSION IN THE FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair advised the Committee that Item 7 – 2023/24 Quarter 2 General Fund and Housing Revenue (HRA) Finance Update – would be considered after item 8 – NWLDC Corporate Sponsorship and Advertising Policy – as this was considered by Officers to make for a more logical discussion.

Consideration was given to the inclusion of any items on the work programme.

The Chair of the Damp and Mould Task and Finish Group gave Members an update on the work so far done by the Task and Finish Group, noted the importance of this work due to the seriousness of the issue, and set out the upcoming work which the Task and Finish Group planned to do.

The Chair requested a short description of each report on future work programmes.

23. REPAIRS PERFORMANCE FOLLOW UP

Chairman's initials

The Strategic Director of Communities presented the report.

The Head of Housing aided the Strategic Director in presenting the report.

A Member asked about the impact of inflation and whether its effects were beginning to soften, and the Head of Housing advised the Committee that regrettably the impacts of inflation continued to put pressure on Housing services.

A Member expressed some queries and concerns around a growing backlog, changes to processes and how it was being measured. The Head of Housing explained to Members how plans to involve a national contractor would contribute to addressing the issue, as well as the plans to triage this backlog to attend to those in the greatest need first.

The Member appreciated the zeal with which the Head of Housing was approaching this task, noted the resource constraints which she was operating within, yet nevertheless remained concerned that the issues would not be tackled speedily enough.

Another Member expressed his concerns with resourcing and staffing. He wanted to know whether there had been an increase in the number of apprenticeships, as he would like to see; how the mixing of agency workers and Council staff worked in practice; and how much the cost of eradicating the backlog would be.

In response, the Head of Housing advised Members that once conditions within the service had been improved, they would look to recruit more apprentices; that the fusion of agency workers and Council staff worked reasonably well; and that it would cost between £3.5 million and £5 million to resolve the backlog issues. The Strategic Director of Communities added that the financial resources were available to do this, it was a question of being able to utilise them. The two Officers also clarified for the Committee that this backlog was mostly related to effects of the Coronavirus pandemic, and also the impact of rolling out a new IT system.

The Chair welcomed the work so far done by the Head of Housing but also noted his own concerns with staffing and resource issues, as well as the impacts of inflation on approaching the backlog. He also emphasised the importance of setting appropriate Key Performance Indicators to measure the success of the Housing department in eradicating the backlog.

By affirmation of the meeting, it was

RESOLVED THAT:

A report on the progress made in tackling the issues discussed be brought back to the Committee in 12 months.

24. NWLDC CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP AND ADVERTISING POLICY

The Economic Development and Regeneration Manager presented the report.

The Chair felt that the structure of the document could be improved.

A Member inquired about how the NWLDC brand was previously managed without this policy and in response, the Economic Development and Regeneration Team Manager advised Members that the aim of the policy was to create a more consistent corporate approach moving forwards which synthesized the good practices of other local authorities which had been examined during the research which went into producing the policy.

Chairman's initials

A Member was concerned about the influence of commercial interests on a democratic institution which was supposed to represent the people of North West Leicestershire. The Economic Development and Regeneration Team Manager advised the Committee that this had been considered and the values and standards of the authority would not be compromised.

A Member hoped that there was appropriate checks and balances but was nevertheless broadly in favour of the policy if it would bring in extra revenue for the organisation. In response, the Economic Development and Regeneration Team Manager assured the Committee that there were clauses which allowed the organisation to review as required agreements which had been agreed as a result of the policy.

A Member was concerned that the report did not adequately detail how much extra revenue the policy would bring in, nor how this issue had previously been handled. The Member was also concerned with who would actually make agreements with the Council, and the reputational damage which could potentially occur. The Member therefore hoped the Cabinet decision would be deferred.

The Chair was supportive of the broad idea but concurred that there was considerable work still to be done and the Cabinet decision should probably be deferred. In response, the Deputy Monitoring Officer clarified that this could only be recommended to Cabinet; deferral could not be enforced.

A Member expressed his firm belief that the policy must benefit the entirety of the District. He was also curious to know whether Leicestershire County Council had a similar scheme and whether it had been proven to work for them.

By affirmation of the meeting, it was

RECOMMENDED THAT:

Cabinet defers consideration of the policy to allow a more detailed version of the policy to be developed.

Councillor J Windram left the meeting at 7:30pm.

25. 2023/24 QUARTER 2 GENERAL FUND AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) FINANCE UPDATE

The Head of Finance presented the report.

A Member expressed various concerns including the impact of inflation eroding the real value of the reserves, a failure to spend capital funds, problems with incomes streams and also the questions of decision-making oversight.

Another Member echoed these concerns and expressed others around a decrease in capital expenditure towards the goal of Zero Carbon. He also wanted to know how over-budget the roll-out of the new finance system would be and when it would actually be rolled out. In response, the Head of Finance said that she would collate this information for the Member, but it should be noted that the system was currently in use as of 1 April 2023 and the extra funding requested in the report was to further improve and finetune the system.

A Member asked for an update on Queensway and Woulds Court and the Head of Finance agreed to provide the Member with this information outside of the meeting.

Chairman's initials

A Member expressed sharp concern and disappointment about the report going to Corporate Scrutiny Committee after it had already been reported to Cabinet. The Chair concurred.

In response, Officers advised the Committee that this had been a request of the Cabinet, that the report was anyhow merely a statement of fact rather than policy, and Officers also set out how the comments of the Committee on this report would be shared with the relevant Portfolio Holder and the Cabinet.

The Chair echoed the concerns of the Committee and particularly highlighted the effects of a lack of staffing and resources to solve the problems of capital underspend on housing. The Director explained that these were the issues already highlighted in the previous reports regarding the HRA.

A Member asked for further information on the nature of the underspend on the HRA and in response the Strategic Director of Communities advised that they did not have the resources to mobilise the capital funding which was available. This was an issue which would be fixed in the medium term. The Strategic Director then suggested, and the Committee agreed, that a report on staffing and resource levels would be put on the Committee Work Plan.

The Chair thanked Members for their comments.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 8.34 pm