



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on 15th December 2022

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL

3rd November 2022 at 2.00 pm

Present:

Councillor Dawkins (in the Chair)
Councillors Batson, Pettigrew, Sandford, Shutt, K Swinburn and Westcott.

Officers in attendance:

- Helen Isaacs (Assistant Chief Executive)
- Eve Richardson Smith (Deputy Monitoring Officer and Legal Team Manager)
- Neil Beeken (Commercial Regulatory Manager)
- Andrew Hudson (Trees and Woodlands Officer)
- Zoe Campbell (Senior Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)
- Jo Paterson (Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)

Also in attendance:

- Councillor Ron Shepherd (Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities)
- Councillor Stewart Swinburn (Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport)

There was one member of the press present.

SPC.28 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Aisthorpe.

SPC.29 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interests were received for any items in this meeting.

SPC.30 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Panel held on 8th September 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

SPC.31 QUESTION TIME

There were no questions from members of the public for this meeting.

SPC.32 FORWARD PLAN

The Panel received the current forward plan and members were asked to identify any items for examination by this panel via the pre-decision call-in procedure.

RESOLVED – That the forward plan be noted.

SPC.33 TRACKING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF SCRUTINY

The Panel received a report from the Statutory Scrutiny Officer tracking the recommendations of the Communities Scrutiny Panel.

Ms Campbell noted that SPC.6 (Tracking) and SPC.8 (Homes for Ukraine/Asylum Dispersal) had now been completed.

Ms Campbell provided an update to members on action taken in relation to empty properties. It was noted that under the contract, EQUANS had an Empty Homes Officer that focussed on working with owners/landlords of properties that had been empty for more than 2 years or less depending on factors such as the situation, property type, location, and condition. The council also worked to to an Empty Property Strategy.

Reference was made to SPC.22, Council Plan Performance Report, and a member asked whether the panel could be provided with a breakdown of the number of empty properties by ward. Members also were concerned that this did not fully answer their question in terms of what specific action was being taken regarding empty homes and asked whether the panel could be provided with some evidence to indicate that there had been some improvement.

Further concerns were raised by a member around the issue of asbestos within empty homes, it was considered that there was a lack of communication with landlords, and this required some improvement. However, it was confirmed that individual cases had been reported to council officers.

Members were advised that work was progressing with regard to completing actions relating to Appendix B, Environmental Street Scene Select Committee and Appendix C, Enforcement Scrutiny Working Group

It was confirmed that once final updates had been provided by officers, these would be brought back to the next Scrutiny Panel for final sign off.

RESOLVED

1. That the report be noted.
2. That a relevant officer be invited to attend a future scrutiny panel to discuss what actions were being taken with empty homes.
3. That a breakdown of figures of empty homes per ward be provided to members of this panel.

SPC.34 DIGITAL INCLUSION

The Panel received a presentation from Ms Isaacs on Digital Inclusion within North East Lincolnshire. The aim of the presentation was to understand and address the digital barriers for business, voluntary and community groups of all ages to improve access to learning, work services and enhance social networks/life skills.

The Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities commented on youths congregating in the town centre, it was hoped that with the new development of Riverhead Square this would prevent young people from gathering in specific areas, and thereby create opportunities for people to gather and use the wi-fi in new areas. In terms of Station Approach, Grimsby, the council was working with partner agencies to try and design out problems in the town centre by offering a more relaxed atmosphere for people to gather. A member queried the timeframe for these plans. Ms Isaacs confirmed there was no fixed timescale, and this was dependent upon budget and regeneration timescales. The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport confirmed to panel members that Cabinet would be discussing Riverhead Square at its meeting on 16th November.

The Chair queried whether there were any plans to assist the elderly population and those living alone to go digital. Ms Isaacs advised that although there was no programme in place at present, the council was working with the Carers Support Service and Age UK around financial inclusion. It was also reported that the council had seen the return of social clubs and were trying to support those groups.

Members asked whether anything could be done to support the over 65 population via signposting on the council's website. Ms Isaacs stated that Connect NEL and LiveWell were available on the council's website and acknowledged that this needed to be encouraged and promoted wider across the borough.

In terms of specific funding for community groups, Ms Issacs confirmed that the council did not have any resource for this but lottery and other funding providers were available.

Members explored the reasons around why residents were not going digital (21% of the population) and how the council would look to engage with these people. Ms Isaacs explained that it was a real challenge as there were different solutions for different groups. For instance, those in work were familiar with ICT for their jobs and younger people had access to smartphones more easily, however, the older generation needed more encouragement. This was about convincing the older generation that digital helped them in terms of accessing the health services or completing their shopping online. Members welcomed the presentation and acknowledged that going completely digital would not work for everyone.

RESOLVED – That the presentation be noted.

SPC.35 PRINCIPLES OF DRAFT TREE STRATEGY

The panel considered a report setting out the principles of the Tree Strategy and inviting panel members to raise any questions and comments prior to Cabinet receiving a draft of the strategy, after which it would be subject to public consultation.

Members queried the reasoning behind planting trees in specific locations. Mr Hudson advised that the approach was around putting the right tree in the right place. Different types of tree species were used depending on location, although tree officers tried to avoid planting them too close to buildings.

In terms of the policy for planting trees, members were advised that the Council had a strategic framework to help meet the Council's aims and objectives in terms of the roadmap around climate change. It was further noted that there would be a Tree Planting Management Guidance set out within the Tree Strategy.

Members queried how the Council would look to combat trees being subjected to vandalism by individuals. Mr Hudson advised that guards were placed around trees when they were planted to help manage this issue. It was also about educating people around protecting trees.

In terms of hedges, members were advised that hedges were protected under the Hedgerows Regulation Act, however, it should be noted that once the hedgerows became part of the curtilage of a property, the regulations did not apply.

Members were advised that in terms of lime trees, these were renowned for epicormic growth, this being one of the reasons for requiring a strategic approach to managing the trees and opting for new species in the long term.

Reference was made by a member to data around North East Lincolnshire's green canopy and whether the borough was effectively 'catching up'. Mr Hudson explained that the national average was 15.8 %

canopy cover. North East Lincolnshire had 10.5% coverage with Grimsby alone having 7.6% coverage and as such Grimsby was below average.

Mr Hudson stated that the council did not have adequate land to plant the required trees, therefore building relationships with our neighbours and landowners was important to see an increase in canopy cover through biodiversity net gain. It was noted that there were further challenges around meeting our net zero targets by 2050 and more information would be available when the Biodiversity Net Gain Register became available. It was highlighted that new housing developments were now required to provide more green space under the Environment Bill.

A further discussion ensued around trees located on private land and what powers the council had regarding these. Members were advised that certain trees that were considered to have an amenity value were protected by the council via Tree Preservation Orders (TPO's). The council had the power to protect these trees and could issue enforcement notices and prosecute owners who sought to prune the trees without prior permission from the council. The council assessed their trees via risk assessments, and this was about balancing risk and retention, noting that those trees located in open fields were at less risk to those in more urban areas.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport assured Members that the council was undertaking a new planting scheme and worked alongside the Woodland Trust to look at schemes to encourage more tree planting in the borough.

A Member wished to clarify the process for members of the public wishing to identify a new location for tree planting. Mr Hudson advised that there were lots of opportunities for grant funding and this could be pursued through the council's Environmental Services department.

The Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities confirmed that the council was now looking at planting more mature trees to help prevent vandalism.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPC.36 UPDATE ON BORDER CONTROL POST

The panel considered a report updating on the Border Control Post prior to expected decision by Cabinet on the 21st December 2022.

There were no questions raised by members of the panel.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPC.37 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

There were no questions for the portfolio holder at this meeting.

SPC.38 CALLING IN OF DECISIONS

There were no formal requests from members of this panel to call in decisions of recent Cabinet and Portfolio Holder meetings.

SPC.39 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED - That the press and public be requested to leave on the grounds that discussion of the following business was likely to disclose exempt information within paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended).

SPC.40 UPDATE ON BORDER CONTROL POST

The panel received on the appendix to the border control post report considered at SPC.36.

RESOLVED – That the appendix be noted

There being no further business, the Chairman declared the meeting closed at 3.09 p.m.