



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on 16th March 2023

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL

5th January 2023 at 2.00 pm

Present:

Councillor Dawkins (in the Chair)
Councillors Aisthorpe, 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)
- Guy Lonsdale (Finance Group Manager/Deputy Section 151 Officer)
- Spencer Hunt (Assistant Director Safer and Partnerships)
- Paul Thorpe (Head of Operations, Equans)
- Emily Scott (Edge of Care Team Manager)
- Victoria Henley (Community Safety Officer)
- 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)
- Paul Windley (Democratic and Scrutiny Team Manager)

There were no Members of the press present.

SPC.41 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received for this meeting.

SPC.42 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

SPC.43 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Panel held on 3rd November 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

SPC.44 QUESTION TIME

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

SPC.45 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.46 TRACKING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF SCRUTINY

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

At SPC.25 (renewal of the ASB and Dog Control PSPO) and SPC.33 (Breakdown of figures of empty homes per ward) Mrs. Paterson noted that these had both now been completed.

Mrs. Paterson referred Members to Appendix B, Environmental Street Scene summary of recommendations, and highlighted that these had been on the tracking report for some time and suggested the panel could agree on mass to close these off.

Furthermore, Mrs Paterson referred to Appendix C Enforcement Scrutiny Working Group highlighting that all recommendations with the exception of Recommendation 2, had now been completed and key updates had been provided against each recommendation. It was therefore suggested the panel also agree on mass to close these off.

Under the Enforcement Scrutiny Working Group one member queried the progress on Recommendation 5 (digital training for elected members) and the current position with the Customer Service Portal. Ms. Isaacs suggested that a briefing paper on the Customer Service Portal be shared with panel members providing an update on timescales for implementation.

Following which it was proposed and seconded that the panel close off all recommendations from the Environmental Street Scene and Enforcement Scrutiny Working Group.

RESOLVED –

1. That all outstanding recommendations from the Environmental Street Scene Select Committee be closed.
2. That all outstanding recommendations from the Enforcement Scrutiny Working Group be closed..
3. That a briefing paper on the Customer Service Portal be shared with panel members providing an update in terms of timescales for implementation.

SPC.48 FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT 2022/23 – QUARTER 2

The panel received a report from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets providing key information and analysis of the Council's position and performance for the first quarter of the 2022/23 financial year

This report was referred to scrutiny by Cabinet at its meeting on 16th November 2022.

A Member enquired whether the Council could make any more savings in terms of its budget given the current economic climate. Mr Lonsdale explained that in terms of the overspend in children's services there were mitigating actions across the organisation that would seek to resolve this.

In relation to reprofiling and re-prioritisation, the Capital Programme had now been reviewed. Within the current economic environment, the Council needed to reassess whether business cases were still viable and members were reassured that this would take place as part of the formal budget setting process for 2023-24 at the end of January where proposals would be brought forward.

It was further noted that inflation was also a significant issue, in particular several projects within the construction industry had shown that tenders were higher than originally planned. Overall, officers were reprofiling to manage the short and medium-term impact of the economic situation.

In response to a member's query, Mr Lonsdale explained that the Council's current sources of income included council tax, business rates and revenue support grants. The Council also received one-off grants such as the Better Care Fund although these were less recurrent in nature, they had allowed officers to balance off this year's budget. With regard to reducing spend and the use of reserves, members were referred to narrative within the report which highlighted that the current position was unsustainable and there was a need to bring spending down to levels

which the Council was funded for. It was confirmed that the Council were not permitted to borrow for revenue purposes.

A member referred to the Council's reserves in particular the Council Tax Hardship Fund and asked how many residents had applied for this. Mr. Lonsdale advised that he did not have the figures to hand but would provide this information back to the panel.

Furthermore, Mr. Lonsdale explained that there was a whole range of packages available and that an additional allocation had been announced as part of the Local Government Provisional Settlement and Autumn budget settlement. Members would recall that the Council Tax Base Report had been through Council in December 2022 where it was agreed to keep council tax support at the same levels.

In terms of the Household Support Fund, Ms Isaacs explained that this was targeted at specific groups within the community. It was further reported that over £4.8m had been paid out over 18 months into the local economy to support household hardship. The current fund is due to finish at the end of March.

A member asked for a ward breakdown of figures for the Household Support Fund. Ms. Isaacs confirmed that this information couldn't be provided but that a full breakdown of spend could be circulated to members after the funding ended in March.

Members raised concerns around the deficit and depleted reserves due to pressures within children's services and asked whether any improvements had been made and assurances around the Council not encountering the same deficit in the next financial year. Mr Lonsdale explained that children's services was not a direct area of concern for this particular panel. However, Mr Lonsdale had been assured by Ms Spencer's comprehensive response to this matter at a previous Children's Scrutiny Panel around plans in place to reduce significant levels of demand within the service.

Further concerns were raised around the use of council reserves particularly should another crisis occur and there were to be no reserves available to support the Council. Mr Lonsdale confirmed that there had been a reduction in the number of children referred into the social care system which would assist with the pressures in children's services.

A member referred to the Rough Sleeper Accommodation Grant of £111k within the Capital Programme and asked how this money was being utilised. Ms Isaacs confirmed that this information would be provided to the panel.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.

2. That a request be made for more information on the Council Tax Hardship Fund and how many residents had applied for this.
4. That a request be made for a breakdown of spend for the Household Support Fund after the end of March 2023.
5. That a request be made for information on how the £111k Rough Sleep Accommodation Grant was being utilised.

SPC.49 COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022/23 – QUARTER 2

The panel considered a report from the Leader of the Council providing oversight of performance against the council plan for the second quarter of the 2022/23 financial year.

This report was referred to scrutiny by Cabinet at its meeting on 16th November 2022.

A Member referred to the number of empty homes being made available for people within the Borough. Mr Thorpe advised that the empty homes that the Council were recording covered 25 different categories and noted that the majority were privately owned and therefore did not impact on the Council.

Mr. Thorpe further advised that a report was being taken to the Economy Scrutiny Panel next week which provided an update on the number of empty homes over the coming year and associated improvements that had been made. Mr. Thorpe assured the Panel that he was committed to working with officers within the Council to look at what more could be done to bring properties back into use.

A Member referred to the fifteen different categories of empty properties and asked whether this information could be provided to the panel. Mr Thorpe would circulate this information via the Scrutiny Officer when it was available. In addition, Mr. Lonsdale assured the panel that the Council continued to make use of empty property surcharging and emphasised that this was something that was on the Council's radar.

Members queried how many of the empty properties were paying the additional council tax premium and asked for a breakdown of this information. Mr. Lonsdale confirmed he would provide this information to the panel via the Scrutiny Officer.

Another Member queried whether for those properties that were empty whether landlords were becoming in debt with council tax arrears. Mr. Lonsdale advised that there was a global figure of 98.2% that was applied to all people including empty properties. In terms of the Councils approach to enforcement and debt collection, this was no different whether it was a normal property or empty property and there was an expectation that debt

was paid. Further reassurance was given that a Central Government Policy had now been drawn up in an attempt for landlords to bring those properties back into use.

In response to queries around enforcement of council tax, it was confirmed there was no difference in the way this was enforced with empty properties, and this primarily related to out-of-town landlords. Mrs Richardson Smith further reiterated that in terms of the enforcement policy the same process was followed for empty properties. Members were assured that this Council had a strict policy on council tax recovery and taking people to court if needed.

Members asked for more information around the number of council tax cases that had gone to court and the number of out-of-town landlords. Mrs Richardson Smith confirmed this information could be provided to the Panel via the Scrutiny Officer.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That a request be made for further information on the fifteen different categories of empty properties.
3. That a request be made for a breakdown of information on the number of empty properties that were paying the additional council tax premium.
4. That a request be made for more information around the number of council tax cases that had gone to court and the number of out-of-town landlords.

SPC.50 MODERN SLAVERY

The panel received a report that set out the current partnership approach to tackling Modern Slavery across North East Lincolnshire.

Mr Hunt advised that prevalence within North East Lincolnshire did not feature to the same extent as large cities in other parts of the country however, there was still issues with young people being criminally exploited through organised crime groups. North East Lincolnshire also needed to be vigilant as exploitation can also occur through various means such as nail bars, car washes and massage parlours all of which were on the radar of Humberside Police.

Furthermore, Mr. Hunt reiterated the importance of a multi-agency approach to help identify potential victims of modern slavery and reinforced the importance of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). It was also noted that NELC were one of ten pilots in the Country to

introduce a local NRM process for young people and were also the first authority in Humberside to establish a Modern Slavery Partnership.

A Member was keen to know more about what the Council was doing regarding modern slavery. Mr Hunt reported that staff had been trained within the Local Authority as first responders to assist with identifying modern slavery through Customer Access Points (CAPs). Members were advised that work over the previous years had focused on raising awareness and training with 450 staff trained across a range of agencies. This had resulted in over 50 Modern Slavery Champions across agencies. More recently a Multi-Agency Operational Group had been established which had made visits to various establishments across the borough.

Mr. Hunt gave a brief presentation on some recent social media campaigns and communications that had taken place. Members expressed thanks to Mr Hunt and his team for the social media campaign that had been undertaken. It was noted that social media was a great platform as this was cost free to the authority.

Moving forward Mr Hunt advised that a community consultation would be undertaken to better understand the community perception of modern slavery.

A member asked whether Modern Slavery training could be offered to members again this year. It was confirmed that there was already online training for members on modern slavery through I-Trent however officers could offer wider bespoke training if required.

In response to further queries, reference was made to 'Operation Aidant'. It was advised that Operation Aidant was a Police lead national campaign that tackled modern slavery and included four key themes set annually by the Home Office. It was explained how visits were undertaken by individual officers who worked closely with the Home Office to ask specific questions and gather data which was then analysed and reported back.

Members were assured that where officers identified themes, they would seek to identify how to target this working alongside the Police to redirect and respond accordingly. Officers also played an active role on the Night-time Economy Group to address issues locally.

A Member noted the importance of gaining the right evidence against traffickers and the risks globally with organised criminal gangs.

In response to a concern around victims of modern slavery Mr. Hunt reassured the panel that these people were automatically placed in safety, at places such as the Salvation Army where they could be properly supported. The Government would also be looking at how modern slavery was linked to Immigration particularly for those migrants entering the UK from across the channel.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted

SPC.51 UPDATE ON CCTV

The panel received an update on progress of the Council's existing Public Space CCTV capital upgrade project which had received an investment of £2.25m.

Mr Thorpe reported that the Council had enabled 128 public space cameras and digitalised 58 new camera locations across the borough. There would also be additional opportunities to introduce three tannoy systems around the borough, and the Council had already seen improvements. The next phase of the project would involve an intelligence led approach by the Anti-Social Behaviour Group to fight crime in the borough and utilise technology better.

Members were interested in the tannoy system however noted that a substantial amount of money had already been spent on the system and queried the cost implications of this. Mr Thorpe advised that a lot of expenditure was around accessing equipment in specific camera locations i.e., at major junctions and additional enforcement activities undertaken.

Members asked about future proofing and being able to link cameras into the control centre. Mr Thorpe advised that the system was cloud based and phase two of the project would involve engaging with Freshney Place and the Police to tackle issues locally. There would also be opportunities to explore feasibility of the system with Town and Parish Councils.

Members asked who they would contact should there be areas of specific concern within their individual wards. Mr Thorpe advised Members to contact Mr Condon in the Anti-Social Behaviour Team who would make an assessment as to whether the area or location warranted a permanent camera. Members were assured that any requests that came through the Self-Service Portal came through to the Anti-Social Behaviour Team.

Members were advised that next week marked the relaunch of the sponsor scheme which allowed officers to sign post and engage more widely.

A Member raised concerns about demand within the control room and the use of back-office staff, and whether there was dedicated staff on hand that could assist with retrieval of old CCTV footage.

In response to further queries, Mr Thorpe advised that in terms of tackling enforcement issues, it was about using resources and technology at different times to maximise the effect. Also, a database had now been introduced to track, audit and record incidents.

A Member asked when the Council would notice improvements as a result of the new upgraded system and how the Council could monitor its

effectiveness. Mr Thorpe advised that his team were still in the process of collating information but hoped that improvements would be seen soon.

A Member queried the maintenance of the system by a third party. Mr Thorpe explained that his team used local engineers who were able to identify and resolve problems more quickly.

A Member asked whether Officers within the CCTV control room received any mental health support given their role reviewing CCTV footage. Mr Thorpe confirmed that an employee referral system arrangement was in place.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport suggested the Council prioritise upgrading CCTV around the Municipal Buildings and Grimsby Town Hall Square given the current issues around the one-way system and rough sleepers. Mr. Thorpe confirmed this formed part of phase 1 and had been costed and paid for.

The Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities reassured the panel how well the upgraded CCTV system worked. It was reported that the use of CCTV on Freeman Street had proved to be a big success, it had also helped to enforce misuse of the blue badge system and potential drink drivers. Further reassurance was given around the new tannoy system being used along Cleethorpes beach to identify people at risk on the beach. There was also further work to be done around merging with Town and Parish Council's and their own CCTV systems to bring everything together.

A Member challenged whether CCTV was as effective as another Member claimed, as it was considered that it did not completely deter the offender. An example of parking offences in Freeman Street was provided. Mr Thorpe assured Members that there were regular Parking Enforcement Patrols along Freeman Street however if parking signage was defaced officers were unable to issue Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) which thereby prevented the Council from enforcing the Traffic Regulation Order (TPO). Further assurance was given that monthly meetings were held with the Highways Maintenance Team to ensure signage and markings were clear.

Mr Hunt reiterated the importance of working with the Police and other partners as effectively as possible. It was further explained that any intelligence was fed into the maintenance meetings which then informed the control room activity. Overall officers had to act on intelligence received and those concerns fed into a new multi-agency group.

In terms of wider investment for staffing within the control room, Mr Hunt advised that this could be costed out and would form part of any future developments.

A Member asked whether there were any plans to place cameras in business parks. Mr Thorpe advised that there were no plans at present however this may warrant further exploration.

A Member asked about technological developments specifically around controlling traffic should a major incident occur on the roads. Mr. Thorpe advised that this could be explored with joint working with engineers and Police intelligence

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPC.52 COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL - WORK PROGRAMME REVIEW

The panel received a report from the Assistant Chief Executive (Statutory Scrutiny Officer) providing panel members with the opportunity to reflect on the progress of the panel's work programme at the half year stage and provide a formal opportunity for the panel to update its work programme.

Mrs Paterson reminded Members that the report formed part of the six-monthly reviews of the scrutiny panel's work programmes and there was the option of an informal workshop to discuss this further if members wished.

Mrs Paterson outlined the key pieces of work that had taken place including site visits and workshops and set out the items still for consideration in the current year.

A discussion ensued around the enforcement item within the Work Programme and officers wished to understand what specifically the panel were looking for within this topic. Members considered enforcement was wide -ranging. Given the panel's previous discussion on CCTV Mr Hunt suggested that Mr Thorpe and his team provide some performance measures relating to CCTV provisions within North East Lincolnshire to monitor its effectiveness.

RESOLVED –

That the panel's Work Programme be noted.

That a request be made for further information performance measures information relating to CCTV provisions within North East Lincolnshire to monitor its effectiveness.

SPC.53 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

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

SPC.54 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.

There being no further business, the Chairman declared the meeting closed at 15.52 p.m.