



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on 28th September 2023

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL

6th July 2023 at 2.00 pm

Present:

Councillor Westcott (in the Chair)

Councillors Aisthorpe, Astbury, Batson, Farren, Sandford and Shutt

Officers in attendance:

- Paul Allen (Strategic Lead Accountancy)
- Spencer Hunt (Assistant Director Safer and Partnerships)
- Helen Isaacs (Assistant Chief Executive)
- Kath Jickells (Assistant Director, Environment)
- Jo Paterson (Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)
- Eve Richardson Smith (Service Manager Consultancy and Deputy Monitoring Officer)
- Paul Windley (Democratic and Scrutiny Team Manager)

Also in attendance:

- Councillor Ron Shepherd (Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities)
- Councillor Hayden Dawkins (Portfolio Holder for Culture, Heritage and the Visitor Economy)

There were no members of the press present.

SPC.1 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN AND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN

It was noted that at the Annual General Meeting of the Council held on 25th May, 2023, Councillor Westcott had been appointed the Chair and Councillor Sandford the Deputy Chair of the Communities Scrutiny Panel for the ensuing Municipal Year.

SPC.2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from this meeting were received from Councillor K. Swinburn.

SPC.3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Sandford declared a non-registrable interest in any discussion relating to Freshney Place as his partner owned a business there.

SPC.4 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Panel held on 23rd February 2023 be agreed as a correct record.

SPC.5 QUESTION TIME

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

SPC.6 PROPOSAL TO CHANGE START TIME OF FUTURE PANEL MEETINGS.

The panel received a proposal from the Chair and Deputy Chair to propose that the start time of panel meetings be moved to 10.00am for the remainder of the municipal year.

Mr. Windley highlighted that any change to the start time would be subject to room availability at the Grimsby Town Hall.

RESOLVED – That the start time for the Communities Scrutiny Panel meetings be changed to 10.00am for the remainder of the municipal year, subject to room availability.

SPC.7 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.8 TRACKING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF SCRUTINY

The panel received a report from the Statutory Scrutiny Officer tracking the recommendations of the Communities Scrutiny Panel. Ms Paterson noted that all actions were complete and asked Ms Isaacs to provide a further update on the Household Support Fund.

Ms. Isaacs advised that a report had been received by Cabinet in April 2023 which included the delivery plan, and the council would be working with the DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) to meet statutory guidelines. Ms. Issacs gave members a brief outline of the allocation details and referral arrangements.

A member asked whether the panel could receive a breakdown per ward. Ms Issacs stated that the grant was divided into different elements and officers did not necessarily have the data in ward format.

Councillor Astbury asked if a further update on play areas could be provided back to the panel. Ms. Paterson advised that this topic could be added to the work programme or alternatively members could be provided with a briefing note.

Under JSPCTVE.4 (Introduction of Resort Public Space Protection Order), reference was made to the management of Homestead Park. Ms Richardson Smith responded that if Homestead Park was to be included within the PSPO (Public Space Protection Order) the council would need agreement from Immingham Town Council. Officers advised that this would be followed up and a further update provided to the panel.

Under SPC.48 (Household Support Fund) the Chair queried whether the grants could be applied for by community groups. Ms. Issacs explained the process that was followed through the council, including the referral route and how the grants were funded.

Under JSPCTVE. 4 (Introduction of Resort PSPO) a member queried the PSPO statistics previously circulated by the Scrutiny Advisor, relating to the number of fines issued. Ms. Jickells stated that this was likely due to out of town visitors who were not aware of local byelaws.

Ms. Richardson Smith added that new signage had now been put in place.

A small debate ensued around the PSPO's with the Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities assuring members that a new beach safety banner had been placed near the leisure centre in Cleethorpes. The Chair asked whether any communication brief could be distributed regarding the issue of dogs not on leads. Ms Jickells confirmed that a PSPO was currently in place for this issue and highlighted the difficulties in enforcing this.

Mr. Hunt suggested that it may be useful for members to receive a map that defined exactly where the prohibitions were in place for each PSPO. Mr. Hunt confirmed he would circulate a weblink signposting members to this information.

In response to a query around fishing permits, Ms. Jickells clarified that the PSPO set out the areas where people needed a licence. However more specific details on where the permits were located would need to be obtained from relevant officers. Ms Richardson Smith advised that maps were available on the council's website which highlight the location of areas covered by the PSPO prohibitions.

RESOLVED

1. That the tracking report be noted.

2. That further information be provided to this panel on the management of Homestead Park in relation to the fishing PSPO.
3. That further information be provided to this panel on defined areas for the PSPO prohibitions.

SPC.9 PROVISIONAL FINANCIAL OUTTURN REPORT 2022/23

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 at the end of the 2022/23 financial year. It was noted that this report was considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 14th June 2023 and was now referred to all scrutiny panels.

Members raised the following queries around the use of reserves: -

- The ongoing use of reserves highlighting that they had remained low for a considerable amount of time.
- What specific provisions were being reviewed?
- Drawing down on reserves and funding sources.

In response to queries raised, Mr. Allen confirmed that the council did top up some of its reserves and set its financial plan each year. He further outlined some of the income sources the council held. With regard to efficiencies, there were corporate contingencies in place to manage things such as pay award changes. In terms of reserves and provisions this was being reviewed on an ongoing basis. Mr. Allen agreed to provide the panel with further information on reserve and provisions balances held by the council.

A detailed debate ensued with members raising a number of queries around contingency plans if the council faced another emergency, and how the general fund reserves were calculated. Members were assured that should there be another national emergency, the council would receive support from Central Government. Ms. Isaacs further added that every local authority was required to make provision in their budget for a certain level of reserves, and this was shared with external auditors who managed the council's accounts.

Further discussion took place around interest rates and how this affected the level of borrowing and some of the council's contracts.

Further concerns were raised around council tax collection, it was confirmed that an assumption was made around the level of collectability which had to be regularly monitored. Members explored the reasoning behind the increase in council tax collection, and whether the increase had been due to direct debit arrangements. The panel asked for further information around take up of direct debit payments.

Reference was made to the LGA (Local Government Association) Report and what mitigation was in place to tackle the ongoing financial challenges faced by the council. It was confirmed that the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) process had already commenced, and officers were looking at things such as commissioning plans and how they could reduce demand in service areas. In terms of staffing costs, Mr. Allen confirmed he would circulate to the panel the total staffing costs for the previous year.

RESOLVED

1. That further information be provided to this panel on reserve and provisions balances held by the Council.
2. That further information be provided to this panel on the take up of direct debit payments for council tax collection.
3. That further information be provided to this panel on the total staffing costs for the previous year.

SPC.10 COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022/23 – QUARTER 4

The panel considered a report from the Leader of the Council providing oversight of performance against the council plan for the fourth quarter of the 2022/23 financial year. It was noted that this report was considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 14th June 2023 and was now referred to all scrutiny panels.

A member made reference to the number of rough sleepers identified in the borough and asked how this figure had been calculated. Ms. Isaacs confirmed that this number was calculated based on the number of audits undertaken across the borough, however it was noted that they did vary from time to time.

A member asked how the council planned to tackle those rough sleepers that were unwilling to receive help. Ms. Isaacs explained that the council had a statutory duty to prevent homelessness and highlighted that some really good outreach work was currently taking place.

Another member highlighted the number of fly-tipping jobs logged in the current year and asked how this figure compared with other neighbouring councils. Ms. Jickells responded that there was data on the number of fly tips per capita and confirmed this information could be circulated to members. Ms Isaacs added that on the council's dashboard members were able to drill down into more specific trends.

A member asked what plans were being put in place to deal with illegal fly tipping activity. Ms Jickells confirmed that the council had access to Community Recycling Centres which allowed them to lawfully dispose of waste. In terms of regulation, a number of tools could be used to identify hot spots and officers could use regulation as the main deterrent. Ms.

Jickells acknowledged that fly tipping was a priority for the panel and as such this was included on the panel's work programme for this year.

Members considered a more targeted approach to hotspots was needed to tackle this problem, including working closely with street cleansing and using a combination of education and enforcement.

Under the topic of housing, a member queried the temporary accommodation placements figure, and asked if the panel could have a breakdown of this figure and the associated costs. Ms. Isaacs confirmed she could provide some information back to the panel.

A further query was raised around empty properties with a member asking whether the council were making progress to improve this.

Ms. Isaacs assured members that the council were aware of the challenges with empty properties and were seeing to work with its partners to bring empty houses back into use. It was noted there was a piece of work due to commence next month with Equans to ensure the current list of recorded empty properties was accurate and up to date. Mr. Windley added that the matter was being monitored closely by the Economy Scrutiny Panel.

A member was concerned that a large number of these empty properties were owned by out of town landlords and the need to focus on these. The panel asked to be informed of any progress with empty homes via the Economy Scrutiny Panel.

A member asked for more information around the suspension of the Food Waste Recycling Pilot. Ms. Jickells explained that the scheme was not sustainable in terms of staff resources and the council was unable to continue with it due to funding.

A brief discussion ensued around food waste and what further work could be done around this including various communications activities.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That further information be provided to this panel on the number of fly tips per capita.
3. That further information be provided to this panel on a breakdown of the temporary accommodation placements figure and associated costs.

SPC.11 BROADCASTING OF MEETINGS

The panel received a report from the Monitoring Officer providing an evaluation on the practicality and cost of the live broadcasting of Full

Council meetings. It was noted that this report was referred to Communities Scrutiny Panel following a decision of Full Council on 16th March 2023.

Mr. Windley introduced the report and reminded members that this matter was referred to this panel for a more detailed evaluation, and for the panel's findings and recommendations to be reported to Council as soon as possible.

Mr. Windley stated that some additional benchmarking information had been circulated to the panel highlighting the current position across the country noting that there was currently an approximate 75/25% split.

Members were invited to put forward any questions.

A member supported the proposals and suggested that a public consultation be undertaken thereby allowing the council to determine how many people would be in favour of this before it was introduced.

Another member considered that this would be a positive move as it allowed more transparency in local decision making. It was noted that the current microphones were no longer fit for purpose, and this was an ideal opportunity to upgrade further to an audio-visual alternative. It was noted that savings could be made through the sharing of microphones.

Mr. Windley reminded members that any additional capital financing costs would need to come out of the council's revenue budget which currently there was no budget for, and therefore additional funding would be required.

A brief discussion ensued with members debating the various costs aspects. Some members supported a public consultation allowing the public to decide where their money should be spent. One member noted that current public participation in face-to-face meetings was low.

Mr. Windley highlighted that the costings for the equipment within the report were obtained a year ago and were likely to be out of date. Members were provided with more detail around costs of providing both audio and audio-visual options. It was noted that an audio-visual option was not as portable between different rooms.

One member considered that this was not the right time to invest in a new system given that we were living through a cost of living crisis and given other challenges within the council.

Other members did not think there was a 'right time' for this and considered that an audio-visual system allowed opportunities for residents to engage in local decision making when it was convenient for them, providing more flexibility. Also, the council needed to revolutionise and become more forward-thinking. The Council Chamber was a good place

to start to understand how much interest there was before being rolled out further.

Another member considered it beneficial to have hearing loops in all meeting rooms within the building. Mr Windley noted that the cost of hearing loops would be an additional cost to those costings outlined within the report.

The Chair proposed that the system be upgraded as it was currently not fit for purpose and to undertake a consultation exercise around whether to go the extra step to live stream meetings. This was not seconded.

The Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities highlighted the poor acoustics in some of the rooms within the Grimsby Town Hall which was not conducive for council meetings. The council needed to address this and upgrade its technology appropriately.

The Chair considered that it would be more beneficial to have one room fully equipped with audio visual technology and that the Council Chamber needed to be utilised more effectively for all council meetings.

A proposal was made to defer the decision for another year. This was not seconded.

It was proposed by Councillor Shutt and seconded by Councillor Astbury that the council upgrade to an audio and visual system with 1 microphone per 2 members just for the Council Chamber, with any technical decision to be determined by officers.

Upon being put to the vote this was carried by a majority.

Councillor Aisthorpe asked that it be recorded that she had voted against the proposal on the basis that this decision needed to be deferred for a year due to the council's financial situation.

Councillor Sandford also asked that it be recorded that he had voted against the proposal.

The Chair highlighted that there was a number of councillors with hearing impediments and therefore suggested a system that could assist with this would be highly beneficial.

RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL -

That an audio and visual system be introduced with 1 microphone for 2 members just for the Council Chamber in Grimsby Town Hall, with any technical decisions to be delegated to officers.

SPC.12 COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24

The panel considered a report from the Statutory Scrutiny Officer (Assistant Chief Executive) summarising the panel's agreed 2023/24 work programme and the timetable of activities to undertake this work. The panel also considered any issues it may wish to retain in or add to its work programme for 2023/24.

A member highlighted that there were currently no agenda items scheduled for the January 2024 meeting. Ms. Paterson confirmed that an item had been added to the work programme for the January meeting on PSPO Performance and this would be updated on the work programme.

RESOLVED – That the Communities Scrutiny Panel work programme for 2023/24 be approved.

SPC.13 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

There were no questions for the Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities at this meeting.

SPC.14 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 3.44 p.m.