

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20 & 2020/21

Summary: This report aims to provide the Council with an outline of the role of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and a summary of the work undertaken throughout both the 2019-20 and 2020-21 municipal years, as a result of reporting delays caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Options considered: N/a.

Conclusions: Throughout 2019/20 and 2020/21, the Committee fulfilled its obligation to provide oversight of Council business and hold Cabinet to account. Whilst Covid-19 had a significant impact on the Committee's 2020-21 Work Programme, the Committee adapted quickly to remote working and continued to deliver effective scrutiny.

Recommendations:

- 1. It is recommended that Council notes the report, affirms the work of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and considers the following concerns raised within the report:**
 - Additional Committee substitutes required to adequately address the number of apologies given.**
 - Late submission of reports has caused ongoing volatility in the Work Programme.**
 - Better communication on business planning required to maintain Work Programme stability.**

Reasons for Recommendations: To inform Council of the work of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in 2019/20 and 2020/21 and address the concerns raised.

Cabinet Member(s): N/a
Ward(s) affected: All

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1. Introduction – Role of the Committee

1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is the Council's primary oversight Committee, that seeks to ensure that Cabinet is held to account and that

reliable services are provided, whilst best value for money is achieved. Introduced by the Local Government Act 2000, Scrutiny Committees are able to monitor internal Council affairs, and also review the work of external bodies such as the Police, health providers, utility companies and the voluntary sector.

1.2 As outlined in the Constitution, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's terms of reference are as follows:

- To scrutinise and review decisions or other actions taken with respect to non-executive functions.
- To make reports or recommendations to the Full Council or to the Cabinet about one or more particular issue(s), service(s) or matter(s), which affects North Norfolk and its residents. Reports or recommendations may be carried out on whatever issue, service or matter the Scrutiny Committee thinks fit and may be carried out on any subject if the Full Council or the Cabinet requests it to do so.
- To carry out best value reviews.
- To act as the Council's Crime and Disorder Committee.
- To produce an annual report to Council on the work of the Committee over the year.
- To ensure effective scrutiny of the treasury management strategy and policies.

1.3 The remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee also includes undertaking policy review and development, monitoring performance management, promoting community well-being and improving the quality of life in the District. Scrutiny is Member-led and independent of party political arrangements. At North Norfolk District Council, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is chaired by a member of the opposition. Scrutiny should always be viewed as a function which belongs to and benefits the whole council.

2. Committee Background

2.1 Subsequent to minor changes following appointments made in May 2019, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee was comprised of the following Members at the end of the 2020/21 municipal year:

Chairman - Cllr N Dixon
Cllr H Blathwayt
Cllr P Heinrich
Cllr G Mancini-Boyle
Cllr A Varley
Cllr A Brown

Vice Chair - Cllr E Withington
Cllr W Fredericks
Cllr N Housden
Cllr E Spagnola
Cllr C Cushing
Cllr P Fisher

2.2 Who participates in Scrutiny:

- The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee take a pro-active role throughout the process, attending pre-agenda meetings and steering and scoping the direction of questioning and investigation.
- Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members – Scrutiny is different from other committees in that it calls for Members with investigative and creative minds who are prepared to “do their homework” out of the

Council Chamber and think outside of the usual committee framework, tailoring the method of review to suit the topic.

- Cabinet Portfolio Members are invited to attend meetings of the Committee to present and answer questions on Reports relevant to their portfolio. The aim is that the Portfolio Member should have an opportunity to contribute to any issues relating to their portfolio.
- All non-Executive Members of the Council are routinely invited to attend Committee Meetings and offered the opportunity to ask questions on issues that matter to the residents they represent.
- Officers are involved in a number of ways – those directly involved in supporting the scrutiny process and those who are called to compile Reports for the Committee.
- Invitees and Witnesses can be called not just from within the Council, but from partners and service providers.
- The public are welcome to attend meetings of the Committee with a provision to submit questions up to 24 hours in advance, in order to raise issues of concern that they would like the Committee to consider.

3. Committee Role and Responsibilities

3.1 Scrutiny of decisions made by Cabinet - The Overview and Scrutiny Committee routinely reviews decisions made by Cabinet to ensure they are appropriate and provide best value for money.

3.2 Pre-Scrutiny - This enables greater co-ordination between the Cabinet and Scrutiny work programmes, whereby the Committee can provide input into policy and decisions prior to their approval. This process ensures that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and wider Members can provide meaningful input into key issues, reducing the likelihood of call-ins. Some examples include:

- Commenting and providing input into corporate projects.
- Providing input during the Policy development process.
- Considering key strategies prior to approval by Cabinet.

3.3 Call-ins - All decisions made by Cabinet that have not been pre-scrutinised are subject to a five day 'call-in' period, prior to implementation. This enables the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider whether any contentious decisions are appropriate, and provides the opportunity to recommend to Cabinet that the decision be reconsidered, if necessary.

3.4 Financial Scrutiny – This allows the Committee and wider Members the opportunity to review and comment on draft budget proposals, budget monitoring reports, the Medium Term Financial Strategy, and other financial strategies. Consideration of financial reports is a statutory requirement for the Overview & Scrutiny Committee's work programme.

3.5 Performance Monitoring - This is a quarterly item for the Committee that provides an opportunity to ensure that service areas are meeting performance targets, or highlighting issues where further investigation may be required. It is also important for holding the Cabinet to account, by considering whether the administration are meeting the objectives set within their Corporate Plan and subsequent Delivery Plans.

- 3.6 External Organisations - The Committee may request briefings on matters of concern from external organisations. These are usually followed by a Q&A session to gain further insight into the chosen subject. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has a statutory obligation to oversee crime and disorder in the District, and this is usually achieved by a briefing from the Police and Crime Commissioner, accompanied by senior Police Officers.
- 3.7 Focused/Rapid Reviews - The Committee may choose to look at a topic in depth over a specific period of time to consider whether it is achieving the necessary outcomes. This could be undertaken by the whole Committee as a rapid review in a single day, or as a smaller review by a Task and Finish Group, usually lasting six months.
- 3.8 Petitions - The Committee has an obligation to consider petitions received from members of the public, which can be submitted electronically or by hard copy. There is a threshold of 750 signatures required from within the District in order for the petition to subject of a full debate by the Committee.

4. Work of the Committee 2019/20

4.1 2019/20 was a fresh start for many on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee following the May 2019 elections, which saw a very limited number of returning Members appointed to the Committee. A new Chairman and Vice Chair were appointed that have sought to push the Committee in a more outcome focused direction, making greater use pre-scrutiny opportunities and working more closely with Cabinet on policy development. Nine formal Committee meetings were held in total, with one meeting missed during the induction period, and one cancelled as a result of the initial outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Highlights from the 2019/20 Work Programme are listed below:

- The Executive-Scrutiny Protocol: Following best practise, an Executive-Scrutiny Protocol was developed and agreed by both the Committee and Cabinet to clearly outline the relationship and expectations for cooperative working. The Protocol itself fostered a new way of working for both the Committee and Cabinet, to encourage greater participation in the development of policy and service delivery from wider Members. The benefits of the Protocol continue to deliver as the Committee remains actively involved in pre-scrutiny and policy development.
- Pre-scrutiny of the Corporate and Delivery Plans: As a result of developing a more cooperative relationship with the Executive, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were given the opportunity to pre-scrutinise the Corporate Plan. This work resulted in a range of well received recommendations and an increased awareness of the priorities of the new administration.
- Sheringham Leisure Centre Project Monitoring: From the outset of the Sheringham Leisure Centre project, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee played an important role in receiving regular monitoring reports to observe progress of the project and maintain oversight of the project budget.

- **Market Town Initiative Working Group:** The MTI Working Group met twice in 2019 to continue to monitor first and second round applications, alongside making funding recommendations on the third and final round of applications. The Scrutiny Officer provided an overarching update for the Committee in July 2019, and will continue to monitor projects until completion, at which point a process review will be undertaken for consideration by the Committee.
- **Crime and Disorder:** The Committee received a briefing on the challenges of tackling rural crime throughout the District from the Police and Crime Commissioner for Norfolk, with assistance from the District Superintendent.
- **Budget Scrutiny/Monitoring & Financial Strategies:** Throughout 2019/20, the Committee reviewed Budget Monitoring, Treasury Management Strategy, Capital Strategy, Investment Strategy, and Medium Term Financial Strategy Reports in line with its statutory responsibility to provide financial oversight of the Council. In addition to finance training provided as part of the induction for new Members, budget training was also arranged in advance of scrutinising the draft budget.
- **Consideration of Ambulance Response Times:** A motion from Full Council requested that the Committee undertake a review of ambulance response times in rural parts of the District. This review resulted in the Committee making recommendations to the NCC NHOSC who continue to monitor the issue as an ongoing concern. Whilst a briefing from the NCCG and EEAST was scheduled to take place in late 2019/20, the outbreak of the Pandemic caused this to be cancelled.
- **Combined Waste Contract Procurement Briefing:** Prior to approval, the Committee received a full briefing on the anticipated joint waste contract that would see a shared services arrangement with two neighbouring authorities. The briefing also addressed the substantial changes expected, which sought to make the collection services more environmentally friendly, by reducing carbon emissions and encouraging great re-use of large waste items.

4.2 In summary, the Committee reviewed approximately forty topics, though this number includes recurring items such as performance and budget monitoring. Six of these topics could be defined as pre-scrutiny, in that they were reviewed by the Committee in advance of approval by Cabinet or Council. In total, the Committee made over thirty recommendations to Cabinet and Council, the vast majority of which were accepted and implemented, with several more made to senior officers to request further information or additional reports. No new Task and Finish or Working Groups were formed, as the newly appointed Committee focused on finding its feet in its first year following the election. Overall, given its new membership, the Committee adapted quickly to deliver a more outcome focused and considered approach to providing the overview and scrutiny function of the Council.

5. Work of the Committee 2020/21

5.1 2020/21 was an unusual year for the Committee, as the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic placed significant restrictions on available resources, staffing

availability, physical meetings and the range of topics on the Committee's Work Programme. Despite these issues, the Committee soon adapted to working remotely to consider important matters relating to the impact of, and response to the Pandemic, until time became available for more routine business to return to the Work Programme in the second half of the year. Eleven formal Committee meetings were held in total, though several of these meetings took place later than expected, as a result of the ongoing impact of the Pandemic. In a first for the Committee most of these meetings also took place remotely, and were live streamed for public viewing. Highlights from the 2020/21 Work Programme are listed below:

- **Coronavirus related reports:** Once remote meetings were established to allow Committee's to meet in compliance with Covid restrictions, regular reports were received on both the ongoing impact of the Pandemic, and the Council's ongoing response and mitigation efforts. As relief efforts continued, the Committee also monitored the implementation of Covid relief grants, and decisions taken under delegated authority which had been taken to facilitate the ongoing Covid-19 response.
- **Budget Scrutiny/Monitoring & Financial Strategies:** The effects of Covid-19 made scrutiny of the budget, the MTFs and budget monitoring especially important in 2020/21, due to the significant impact placed on Council revenue streams. Fortunately, Covid support grants were made available to mitigate substantial losses, though the fragility of Local Government funding was made abundantly clear.
- **Pre-scrutiny of the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Policy:** Following a Full Council motion to adopt the HRA definition of anti-Semitism, it was determined that a full overhaul of the existing Equality and Diversity Policy was required with the Committee asked to review its replacement. Whilst the impact of Covid-19 and the management restructure caused significant delays to the development of this Policy, the Committee continued to monitor its development and provide feedback via the pre-scrutiny process. It is anticipated that subject to final review, the Policy will be approved in the 2021/22 municipal year.
- **Crime and Disorder:** The Committee requested a briefing on policing during the Covid-19 Pandemic and tackling the relative increases in domestic abuse. Whilst the Police and Crime Commissioner for Norfolk and District Superintendent were unable to attend, a remote briefing was provided by the Chief Inspector and local Police Sergeant.
- **Sheringham Leisure Centre Project Monitoring:** Starting in 2019, the Committee continued its regular monitoring of the Sheringham Leisure Centre project. Whilst the project remains mostly on-track despite the impact of Covid-19, continual restrictions placed on public venues led the Committee to request a consideration of an early demolition of the existing facility.
- **Digital by Design Briefing:** Following an initial briefing on proposed changes to the way residents interact with the Council, concerns were raised by the Committee that led to an all-Member briefing on the proposals. This subsequent briefing provided an opportunity for a full

explanation of the proposals and provided Members with an opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback on the project.

- **Pre-Scrutiny of the Communications Strategy:** The arrival of a new Communications Manager signalled a change in the direction and strategy for communications of NNDC. As a result, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were given the opportunity to pre-scrutinise the draft Strategy document prior to its approval and suggest that consideration be given to the way in which the Council interacts with the public and whether advertising revenue could be generated to support discretionary services.
- **Pre-Scrutiny of the Environmental Charter:** Following the May 2019 local elections, the new administration made its environmental ambitions clear, which it sought to outline in its Environmental Charter. Pre-scrutiny of the charter allowed the Committee to make recommendations on improving the educational and public engagement aspects of the Charter, and developing a marking system to encourage and promote better environmental practices throughout the District.
- **Review of NNDC Public Car Park Usage:** Following the fluctuating impacts of Covid-19 on the Council's public car parks and reductions in visitor numbers to the Districts high streets, a review of car usage was undertaken. The review considered capacity and revenue throughout 2020/21 year, with a view to gain insights from this information. The scrutiny review resulted in several recommendations including a request for greater promotion of parking permits, consideration of creating new parking facilities in high tourism areas, and maintaining an annual review.

5.2 In summary, the Committee reviewed approximately forty seven topics, though this includes several recurring items such as the Sheringham Leisure Centre project updates, quarterly performance and budget monitoring reports. Whilst a substantial portion of the Work Programme was devoted to Covid-19 related reports, this resulted in only five items of pre-scrutiny. In total, the Committee made over forty recommendations to Cabinet and Council, with almost all accepted and implemented, whilst further recommendations were made to senior officers to request further information, reports or briefings. As a result of the significant impact of Covid-19 on working practices, no new Task and Finish or Working Groups were formed, though draft terms of reference were agreed for Scrutiny Panels that will mirror the Council's corporate priorities in the year ahead. Overall, despite the impact on working practices, the Committee remained effective in monitoring the Council's Covid-19 response and continuing to hold the administration to account.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Both 2019/20 and 2020/21 were exciting and productive years for the Committee. Whilst Covid-19 unquestionably had a significant impact on all Council business, it also allowed the Council to take stock of a number of issues that might otherwise have been ignored. Most importantly, despite the challenges faced, the Committee continued to provide valuable and effective oversight for the Council, whilst providing input into policy development and service delivery, without need for 'call-in'.

- 6.2 The agreement and adherence to the Executive-Scrutiny Protocol was a substantial achievement for the Committee that has significantly improved working practices, and led to increased opportunities for pre-scrutiny or more 'rapid reviews' by improving cooperation with Cabinet.
- 6.3 The May 2019 Local Elections saw major changes to the political makeup of the Council, which resulted in significant changes to the membership of the Committee. Despite these changes, a new found enthusiasm for Scrutiny has resulted in major improvements to the Committees working practices and productivity.
- 6.4 Whilst the Committee has remained effective despite the impact of Covid-19, there have been issues and difficulties faced that both Members and Officers must look to address in the year ahead. These issues include:
- Ten instances in 2019/20 and thirteen in 2020/21 where apologies were given but no substitute was available. This could in-part be the result of short notice, and/or increased childcare responsibilities during the Pandemic. Consideration could be given to increasing the number of substitutes available to address this issue, as well as ensuring Committee Members approach substitutes with as much notice as possible, when required.
 - Instances where a lack of communication on project implementation or policy development has caused concern and/or led to delays in process. Whilst issues are often quickly resolved, maintaining regular communication between the Committee, CLT and the Executive on matters of business planning is imperative, to ensure that effective work scheduling is maintained, and that both Members and Officers are aware and prepared for upcoming topics of concern.
- 6.5 Looking forward, whilst the ongoing impact of Covid-19 has delayed Government spending reviews and pushed back the Council's forecasted deficits, it is crucially important that the Committee remains vigilant in proving financial oversight for the Council. Similarly, it must maintain its effective oversight and scrutiny of the Council's existing services, projects and policies, to ensure that resident's needs and expectations are met, and that value for money is maintained.