

Unconfirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**
held in the Deben Conference Room, East Suffolk House,
on **Thursday, 21 March 2024 at 6.30pm**

Members of the Committee present:

Councillor Edward Back, Councillor Dan Clery, Councillor Mike Deacon, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Mark Jepson, Councillor Geoff Lynch, Councillor Sarah Plummer, Councillor Ed Thompson

Other Members present:

Councillor Paul Ashton, Councillor Peter Byatt, Councillor Lee Reeves, Councillor Rachel Smith-Lyte

Others present: Councillor Sally Noble (Assistant Cabinet Member for the Environment)

Officers present: Kerry Blair (Head of Operations), Kate Blakemore (Strategic Director), Sarah Davis (Democratic Services Officer), Laura Hack (Public Realm Contract Manager), Jeanette Hollingsworth (Environmental Protection Manager), Ben Hunter (Senior Environmental Protection Officer), Nick Khan (Strategic Director), Sandra Lewis (Head of Digital, Programme Management and Customer Services), Paul Mackie (Lead Officer, Climate Change and Environment), Agnes Ogundiran (Conservative Political Group Support Officer), Fiona Quinn (Head of Environmental Services and Port Health) and Amie Skeet (HR and Workforce Development Manager).

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bennett, Folley, Grey and Noble. Councillor Byatt attended as Councillor Folley's substitute and Councillor Reeves attended as Councillor Noble's substitute because she was present in her capacity as Assistant Cabinet Member for the Environment.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 18 January 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Review of Partnership Working To Tackle Environmental Issues

The Committee received report ES/1895 of Councillor Smith-Lyte, the Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment who explained that the term "environmental" had been taken in the context of the public realm such as litter, weeds, fly tipping and pollution eg water, smoke, noise and dust. She added that there were many reporting mechanisms to tackle environmental issues between the Council and other partner agencies such as the Environment Agency, Highways England, as well as Town and Parish Councils. She reported that:

- The Greenprint Forum was a good example of successful partnership working and was key to enabling community groups to take positive environmental action and deliver our environment core programme.
- The Council was involved in developing and delivering the Suffolk County Council led Local Nature Recovery Strategy which linked to Biodiversity Net Gain.
- The Council was working with Suffolk Waste Partnership on a Recycling and Waste Strategy which included how food waste would be collected and, although the final details had yet to be agreed, it would possibly involve recycled food caddies.
- A development plan for the use of glyphosate for spraying in the 2025 season was being worked on but the use of this was a very complicated issue.
- East Suffolk's Amazing had started to focus in on local volunteering networks and how the Council could support them, both in terms of providing equipment but also co-ordinating their activity with ESSL activity.
- The Council was plugging into the County Council's "self help" scheme for Town and Parish Councils to encourage them to take a more active role in managing local areas.
- The Council was also trying to recruit a Kittiwake Partnerships Officer who would liaise with the community to find the best way forward.
- Given funding was tight, the Council needed to work with partner organisations to get the most from the money available for front line services.
- If there were additional expectations around the street scene then more funding would be needed to deliver on them.

Councillor Ashton, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Corporate Services, who led on East Suffolk's Amazing, gave more details on the main workstreams of this initiative. The first was working with the County Council in relation to potholes, weeds on the pavements and roads, and road signs. Some of these were also the Council's responsibility so discussions were taking place with ESSL on the schedules. He suggested that, at some point, Councillors would need to decide whether to invest in more kit and employees to get a better street appearance, however, at the moment, he was not confident ESSL would be able to deliver value for money due to their constraints around kit and resources, although it was clear through discussions that the Council and ESSL were aligned as to where we wanted to get to. Another workstream was working in partnership to make it easier for residents to engage with the Council and partners, including updating the website to tell people what East Suffolk's Amazing was, how matters could be reported, how volunteer groups etc could

access help and encouraging communities to get involved. It was noted that the amount of litter pickers had doubled with some registering and some just getting on with it, however, the Council would be able to support them more effectively if they were identified. The Council also worked with Community Action Suffolk on general volunteering not just specifically on the street scene and the Council wanted to celebrate all volunteers so, whilst acknowledging some might not want recognition, it was hoped to hold some kind of awards ceremony to celebrate them. The final piece, which was very comms heavy, was about discouraging the poor behaviour that led to a poor street scene, eg littering, fly tipping and not picking up dog poo but that also encouraged and celebrated the work of volunteer groups which hopefully would discourage poor behaviour. There would be a gentle comms launch on East Suffolk's Amazing possibly starting next week.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment continued her report:

- There was a balance between need versus nurture eg a number of residents had expressed concerned about the use of glyphosate herbicide spray in car parks to tackle the weeds which were breaking up the surfaces but this needed to be married with allowing the verges around the car parks to flourish so it was complicated. It was likely there would be some small pilot areas to see if these genuine issues and problems could be harmonised.
- There had been lots of discussions regarding bins for example steamlining and making them more sophisticated possibly by having solar powered bins so they could be tracked to see when they were full.
- The Council was also plugged in to the County Council's Joint Nature Partnership which had to develop their plans by 2025.
- Discussions were also being held with the Environment Agency regarding bathing water status on the Deben and in other areas and supporting local action groups.
- In relation to flytipping, there had been a review of the processes which had resulted in simplified reporting mechanisms including digitalisation of forms, a process for investigating land ownership from the start and clearer guidance on removal procedures.
- With regard to large commercial sites, noise and dust complaints for a particular multi agency site had been moved forward through a multi agency group which included residents and councillors.
- The Council was liaising more with the Police on flytipping to ensure prosecutions took place where applicable.
- Multi agency days to reduce criminal activity took place regularly at specific points across the district.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Corporate Services stressed that customer service was not just about how phones were answered but about the experience a resident had when reporting anything to the Council. He reiterated that part of East Suffolk's Amazing workstreams was about reviewing the website to make it easier for people to see how they should report issues but he cautioned that the Council would not be able to give them a progress update if their issue was a partner's responsibility eg on potholes. Significant system changes were required which would take a long time so, in the meantime, small changes would be made so it was simpler for residents to report issues. He stressed that, whether it was a resident direct, a councillor on their behalf or a member of staff in the call centre, the mechanism by which an issue was

raised needed to be consistent but he acknowledged there were some challenges eg consistency across IT, generating KPI's and tracking them, and prioritising issues eg it was not about who shouted the loudest. He concluded that he wanted to address issues strategically and focus on the customer experience.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment continued her report:

- A cross organisational spreadsheet on flytipping had now been developed to keep track of tips and clearances so all the teams involved had immediate information. It could be used for KPI reporting, to aid service delivery and the data was submitted to Government as part of the Council's report on waste clearance from flytips and waste of all types which allowed the Government to collect statistics and map trends.
- Environmental Health used Uniform to track cases, however, this system was not used by the Strategic Waste Team so the only way cases were tracked was through reports via Customer Services caseloads. Environmental Health were actively working with IT to map the location of flytips for internal use, which were updated on a monthly basis.
- The Council was also working with ESSL on the implementation of a software system which would provide real time updates on when bins were collected and offered the potential for people to self serve and access up to date information.
- In relation to civic pride and working with residents and towns and parish councils to tackle environmental issues in their communities, the Council's approach was currently under development, however, an online form was available to register picks and request equipment. More litter pickers had been purchased by the Strategic Waste Team and the next stage was to register pickers to ensure that groups were covered by insurance.
- Quarterly drop in sessions were being set up with Felixstowe Town Council regarding key issues in the town in terms of litter and grounds maintenance.
- The Street Scene Officers gave Town and Parish Councils as well as other organisations including BIDs a lot of support so they could raise issues that needed to be addressed.
- Multi agency impact days were being planned for Lowestoft, Beccles and Leiston in 2024 to provide information and advice to the public on key areas such as safeguarding, waste management, grounds clearance, licensing etc.
- The Council organised beach watch activities with a number of local community groups on behalf of the Greenprint Forum and data was captured about marine pollution for the Marine Society, as well as the beaches being cleared.
- A working Group had been established to promote civic pride and improve environmental standards.
- The Council was also working with ESSL to get the most out of the contract and foster district wide community pride.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Members for their report and the following responses were received to Members questions:

- ESSL were struggling to recruit to some roles such as street cleaning operatives and there was also an issue with equipment. Both the Council and ESSL were under pressure and this would be added to by Sizewell C during different stages of its development.

- There were currently 26 operatives in the team covering an area of over 400 miles so the majority were based in urban centres. Volunteers picked up in areas not on the schedules so it was part of East Suffolk's Amazing's work to ensure they were supported and the area was not then visited by ESSL staff to avoid duplication. The Council also wanted to ensure that volunteers were constrained to only do safe activities.
- Relationships that had been in place with Norse were fairly ad hoc and East Suffolk's Amazing wanted to make arrangements more formalised across the whole district so picks were not completely dependent on local agreements and to ensure volunteer groups were not carrying out picks a week before ESSL visited.
- The Strategic Waste Team managed community litter picks and groups were asked to complete an online form at least five working days before a pick to register it. Equipment could also be supplied on request such as bags, hoops, pickers etc.
- The Council wanted to take a lead on communication and make everyone aware of what was going on to get activities consolidated and achieve transformation.
- The Council was quite influential within the Suffolk Waste Partnership but some things had not yet been decided regarding bin collections etc and still needed to go through Cabinet, although it was clear that purchasing anything with the other authorities would be best to achieve economies of scale.
- The Council wanted to look at the safety and wildlife ramifications of glyphosate spraying as well as whether we had the human and financial resources to do something different and stop spraying altogether, however, this would need to be consulted upon.
- ESSL should be able to collect tyres to stop them being flytipped. Flytips were monitored through Environmental Health and ESSL but they had been slower than we wanted to remove tips which should be dealt with within 48 hours.
- The Environmental Health Team wanted to identify evidence first so an Officer would visit but if it could be taken forward then it would and a report would be made to ESSL and the Strategic Waste Team.
- The County Council led on bio diversity and the infrequency of meetings were a weakness which needed to be addressed.
- There were a number of tools available to the Council for dealing with detritus on private land and Environmental Health and the Strategic Waste Team were working together to set up a number of procedures with a view to enforcement action being taken where necessary.
- It was agreed that more joined up working was needed with Highways to ensure litter was cleared before verges were strimmed.
- It was also agreed that more joined up working was needed between different agencies to ensure that, regardless of where an issue was reported, it was dealt with and progress could be tracked by residents.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Members and Officers for their participation and invited Members to debate what they heard.

Councillor Jepson suggested that it would be useful to look at what outcomes would come from this report eg what was trying to be achieved, whilst accepting it was not just this Council's responsibility. The Chair suggested that perhaps this would become clearer when the Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment reported back to this Committee in September on her top three priorities from the Our Direction 2028 Environmental Theme.

Councillor Lynch pointed out that there was a need to communicate to other Councillors and Town/Parish Councillors the process for arranging litter picks and the equipment available. Councillor Byatt commented that he hoped East Suffolk's Amazing would help address these issues.

In response to Councillor Plummer's question, the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Corporate Services stated that he was conscious East Suffolk's Amazing was a project that was trying to achieve some very specific things but it was not a vehicle to resolve environmental issues which was the Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment's domain. He added that he had included the County Council in the scope for the street scene because they had already had discussions but most of his portfolio was about improving communication through the Council's website.

Councillor Noble, Assistant Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment, pointed out that this portfolio was huge and they were a new administration trying to get to grips with it. In addition, ESSL was new and it might be that a review on ESSL would be done separately. She reassured Councillor Jepson that they did have visions on what they wanted to do but had thought this meeting was more strategic. She added that they were also working with the Environment Agency on flooding and with farmers to change their methods, however, she agreed that they needed to communicate their activities better. She concluded that litter on highways and verges was a complicated issue but the Council was working with the County Council on this.

Councillor Gooch expressed concern that there were different reporting systems in place across the authority and the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Corporate Services stated that he was looking at how this could be addressed.

Councillors Jepson and Byatt stated that it was useful to understand if any progress was being made by working in partnership with other authorities to address these issues or if there were any challenges/barriers in the way.

On the proposition of Councillor Jepson, seconded by Councillor Back it was:

RESOLVED

That, as agreed at the last meeting, the Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment report back to the 19 September 2024 Committee on any barriers to working in partnership to tackle environmental issues.

The meeting adjourned at 7.50pm and reconvened at 8pm.

5 Cabinet Member Scrutiny Session

The Chair invited Councillor Ashton, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Corporate Services to give details of the direction of travel for the services within his portfolio. The Cabinet Member stated that he welcomed the opportunity to present to the Committee as he felt that scrutinising services was really helpful and constructive and he wanted to engage with it to achieve the best outcome for residents. He gave details of the different sections of his portfolio including:

Corporate Services, which included East Suffolk's Amazing.

HR

- The Team had dealt with the transfer of staff to ESSL and were now managing a lot of staffing issues.
- The Council's People Strategy which represented the views of staff had been launched and whilst it was not ESSL's strategy, the Cabinet Member hoped it would influence them.
- Cabinet had recently approved a strategic recruitment partner which would help with hard to recruit posts - it was likely Sizewell C would impact on staffing levels across the whole district as it drew people to work there, and to reduce the number of temporary staff.
- Flexible working and office accommodation were being reviewed post covid to ensure people and teams came into the office when they needed to and had the right accommodation, including the provision of more ad hoc 1:1 meeting spaces.
- The My Conversation process which set objectives and managed poor performance etc had been reviewed and would be rolled out shortly.
- A recruitment drive for particularly hard to recruit positions was being held shortly and career grades had been introduced so the Council could grow their own and retain them.

In response to Members queries, it was noted that:

- Career grades gave staff training and promotion opportunities.
- Anyone who left voluntarily was booked in for an exit interview with an HR adviser with any information being sent on to the relevant director. Most feedback was positive and they were leaving for promotional reasons.
- All agency requests would now be dealt with by HR and triaged by the preferred provider and if they could not assign anyone then they would go to another agency. This approach enabled HR to manage the spend and the IR35 status risk and would be kept under review to ensure it reduced costs.
- There was always the risk of another pandemic, however, people were encouraged not to come into the office or work when they were unwell and flexible working helped. All the offices still had wipes and people were encouraged to use them and wash their hands. The majority of those on critical lists continued to work from home and when they did attend the office they made sure they wiped their equipment down and did not sit near poorly people. If someone was unwell but needed to come in they were encouraged to book a meeting room so they were out of the way.

In relation to comments made earlier in the meeting, it was confirmed that the public were able to upload a photo to the website of flytipping for example and the issue would be dealt with. The point was also made that, whilst digital exclusion was an issue, it was not about getting everyone online and residents would be able to continue to contact the Council by telephone or face to face. The aspiration was to grow community hubs to help residents access services.

Assets

- The Council had many assets ranging from lots of open space, bins, toilets, a pontoon, camp sites, a harbour, flag poles, clock towers etc.

- £4.2m revenue had been generated so far this financial year so they made a significant contribution to the Council's finances.
- Nexus would be completed next year and the aspirations of the previous administration for Power Park would continue.
- The pontoon had been replaced, the Ravine bridge renovations had been completed and the Pavilion model had been modified so hopefully it was now a cost neutral project.
- Lease and rent renewals had been reviewed, with processes and procedures improved although more needed to be done and it was hoped to be caught up by the end of the year. The Council was likely to receive at least £1/4m p/a more in rent than before, however, the Council was also interested in community benefits not just revenue.
- The Asset Management Strategy had been refreshed and would capture the procedures and framework for how assets were assessed and policies for how they were classed etc. There was a huge opportunity to use the Council's open spaces to provide more Bio Diversity Net Gain, although communities would need to be consulted on what they wanted to happen with them. All Councillors would be consulted on the Strategy. The Head of Operations stated that the team had been restructured and additional resources had led to improvements, including an inspection and land surveying team which was really important for public safety. He added that whilst it was a bigger team with more resources available, the changes had realised financial benefits for the Council.

The following responses were given to Councillor's queries:

- ESSL employed tree inspectors and the Cabinet Member would look at whether they could be hired out to Town and Parish Councils who might want to engage them.
- A review of all the Council's assets had taken place and nothing appeared to have any links to the slave trade, although it was unclear about the assets that had been divested to Lowestoft Town Council.
- The Council had a single contact number and the Cabinet Member stated he was committed to providing channel choice to ensure no-one was excluded.

Customer Services

- The team had approximately 80 staff with many part time and were located at East Suffolk House, the Marina and at walk-in centres across the district. The Cabinet Member reiterated his desire to expand community hubs and co-locate with other agencies to provide more walk-in locations in future.
- At the end of the 2023 financial year, the team had received 175,000 calls, 4,300 regarding Southwold campsite and almost 50,000 related to Council Tax etc. Some calls were really complex and the Cabinet Member stated that he hoped to make it a better experience for the customers eg being clear about what happened next and it actually happening.
- Customer experience principles were currently being developed for how all Council departments dealt with customers and would be consulted on. In September 2023 an external agency had listened to 1000 calls focussing on the call experience and the key finding was that most were pretty good with advisers understanding what the customer wanted even if they were not expressing it well. However, it was clear that there was an issue between the advisers and those who actually provided the service so it was hoped the principles would show how everyone

could work together as well as highlight where teams were struggling to enable work to be prioritised.

- Councillors who wished to shadow an adviser were invited to get in touch.
- The Cabinet Member added that he wanted to think about Councillors as a channel to support them strategically and prioritise them to avoid the "shout the loudest" syndrome.
- End to end service reviews would take place from the point of view of residents and business and although these would take a long time, improvements would be put in place along the way.

The following responses were given to Members' queries:

- The Council had considered whether there might be some benefits in using the skills and knowledge of Town and Parish Council staff within the community hubs.
- The aim was for the call taker to deal with the call rather than putting the customer through to somebody else. Transaction times were being reviewed to see how many times it "broke".
- Ideally customers were not left on hold but if they were then the Council did advertise on there such as the Tour of Britain, to maximise any contact with residents.

IT

- The integration of ESSL had been a big piece of work.
- The team included the Project and Programme Management Team.
- A main priority was replacing Idox (document management system).
- Uniform was a system used across multiple services but as they were so diverse there was not just one system that everyone could use.
- A priority was to ensure that the Council's systems talked to the ESSL BARTEC waste management system to enable information to be relayed backwards and forwards.
- The website would be reviewed and service reviews would create prioritisation and might alter the Customer Services Plans
- Cyber Security was always a risk but the Council had been tested externally with a 360 review by the LGA - the biggest risk was people using IT.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for their informative presentation.

6 Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme

The Chair reminded Members that the review at the next meeting on 18 April 2024 was the Review of Rural Transport Provision in East Suffolk. In addition, there would be the Cabinet Member Scrutiny Session with Councillor Toby Hammond, Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Transport.

Councillor Jepson stated that, on behalf of Committee, he wanted to thank Councillor Ashton for his Cabinet Member Session and it was reassuring that he really knew his subject.

The Committee was reminded that the Workshop had been moved from 4 April to 6 June 2024 to determine the Work Programme topics for 2024/25.

The meeting concluded at 9.17pm

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Chair