



**Riverside, 4 Canning Road, Lowestoft, Suffolk,  
NR33 0EQ**

# Scrutiny Committee

## **Members:**

Councillor Stuart Bird (Chairman)  
Councillor Mike Deacon (Vice-Chairman)  
Councillor Edward Back  
Councillor David Beavan  
Councillor Judy Cloke  
Councillor Linda Coulam  
Councillor Andree Gee  
Councillor Louise Gooch  
Councillor Tracey Green  
Councillor Colin Hedgley  
Councillor Geoff Lynch  
Councillor Keith Robinson  
Councillor Caroline Topping

Members are invited to a **Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee**  
to be held in the Conference Room, Riverside,  
on **Thursday, 21 October 2021 at 6.30pm**

This meeting is being held in person in order to comply with the Local Government Act 1972. In order to comply with East Suffolk Council's coronavirus arrangements and guidance, the number of people at this meeting will have to be restricted to only those whose attendance is reasonably necessary.

Ordinarily, East Suffolk Council encourages members of the public to attend its meetings but on this occasion would encourage the public to watch the livestream, via the East Suffolk Council YouTube channel instead at <https://youtu.be/zDLTDmYCAxo>

If you do believe it is necessary for you to be in attendance we encourage you to notify Democratic Services, by email to [democraticservices@eastsoffolk.gov.uk](mailto:democraticservices@eastsoffolk.gov.uk),

of your intention to do so no later than 12 noon on the working day before the meeting so that the meeting can be managed in a COVID secure way and the Team can endeavour to accommodate you and advise of the necessary health and safety precautions.

However, we are not able to guarantee you a space/seat and you are advised that it may be that, regrettably, we are not able to admit you to the meeting room.

An Agenda is set out below.

## **Part One – Open to the Public**

**Pages**

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**1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions**

**2 Declarations of Interest**

Members and Officers are invited to make any declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Local Non-Pecuniary Interests that they may have in relation to items on the Agenda and are also reminded to make any declarations at any stage during the Meeting if it becomes apparent that this may be required when a particular item or issue is considered.

**3 Minutes**

**1 - 12**

To confirm as a correct record the Minutes of the Meeting held on 16 September 2021.

**4 Review of NHS Dental Provision in East Suffolk**

The Committee will review the current situation and challenges with regards to the access of dental provision across the district with evidence being heard from:

1. Jason Stokes - Norfolk Local Dental Committee
2. Paul Rolfe - Suffolk Local Dental Committee
3. Tom Norfolk - Dental Practitioner, Joint Chairman of the Local Dental Network (East of England), Local Dental Clinical Adviser (NHS England), Executive Member of the National Association of Dental Advisers
4. Alex Stewart - CEO, Healthwatch Norfolk
5. Kerry Overton - Community Development Officer, Healthwatch Suffolk
6. David Barter - Head of Commissioning NHS England (East of England)
7. Peter Aldous - MP
8. Mary Rudd & Nicole Rickard - East Suffolk Council Cabinet Member with responsibility for Community Health & Head of Communities

**5 Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme**

To consider the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

There are no Exempt or Confidential items for this Agenda.

**Close**



Stephen Baker, Chief Executive

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<b>Unconfirmed</b>
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Minutes of a Meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held in the Deben Conference Room, East Suffolk House, on **Thursday, 16 September 2021 at 6.30pm**

**Members of the Committee present:**

Councillor Edward Back, Councillor David Beavan, Councillor Stuart Bird, Councillor Judy Cloke, Councillor Linda Coulam, Councillor Mike Deacon, Councillor Andree Gee, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Tracey Green, Councillor Colin Hedgley, Councillor Geoff Lynch, Councillor Caroline Topping

**Other Members present:**

Councillor Peter Byatt, Councillor Richard Kerry

**Officers present:** Karen Cook (Democratic Services Manager), Sarah Davis (Democratic Services Officer), Teresa Howarth (Principal Environmental Health Officer), Andy Jarvis (Strategic Director), Bridget Law (Programme Manager) and Brian Mew (Chief Finance Officer & Section 151 Officer).

**1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions**

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillor Robinson.

**2 Declarations of Interest**

There were no Declarations of Interest.

**3 Minutes - 17 June 21**

**RESOLVED**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**4 Minutes - 15 July 2021**

**RESOLVED**

That, subject to the heading of those present being amended to read "Members of the Committee present" instead of "Cabinet", the minutes of the meeting held on 15 July 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**5 Housing Development Programme Update**

The Committee received the report of the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing. Following the Cabinet Member's confirmation that he had nothing further to add to the report, the Chairman invited questions from Members.

Councillor Beavan referred to the data analysis being undertaken and queried when this would be ready and if it would be by Ward. The Programme Manager responded that she was unsure as the Housing Transformation Team were leading on this but the information would be made available shortly. Councillor Beavan also referred to the Government's suggestion that 32,000 social homes were needed, which included 133 social homes being built in East Suffolk per year and he queried if this Affordable Homes Programme was on the Cabinet Member's radar. The Cabinet Member responded that it was and that regular dialogue was held with the Ministry. He stressed that the Council wanted to develop as many affordable homes as possible and any boost to the funding set out in the HRA in the 4 year term programme was welcomed. He added that a budget was set aside for development and the Council was always looking at ways to increase this if possible. The Programme Manager confirmed that Officers were exploring funding for larger sites and were in discussion with Homes England specifically about their new Affordable Homes Programme and a bid would be submitted in due course.

Councillor Beavan referred to 1.2 of the report relating to shared ownership and also referred to a specific property in Southwold, and he queried whether this was classified as Affordable Housing. The Cabinet Member responded that affordability was classed as 20% of the market rate but, unfortunately, the house prices in Southwold were considerably higher than the rest of the district. The Chairman clarified that it was "affordable" in accordance with the legislation but perhaps not as far as residents viewed it. Councillor Beavan pointed out that if it was for rent, affordable rent would be capped by the Local Housing Allowance so it would be the same or a lot lower, rather than 80% of the market rate. The Programme Manager confirmed that shared ownership was not capped in any way like affordable rent.

Councillor Beavan queried the last column of the table on 2.1 which showed the percentage of the likelihood that the new build might not happen. The Programme Manager explained that the affordable percentage was slightly less than the total, partly due to the fact that some might not happen but also because some were due to cross subsidy as some of the larger schemes included a percentage of open market sale units eg the Deben site.

In relation to 3.1 which stated that good progress was being made on the Housing Strategy 2017-23, Councillor Beavan highlighted that it said the number of homes would increase from 4700 to over 5000 but he pointed out that the number of homes had in fact decreased since then. The Cabinet Member confirmed that the number of homes the Council currently had was 4459. The Strategic Director pointed out that the stock level varied with new stock coming on stream or reducing due to Right to Buy. Councillor Beavan clarified that the Strategy stated that there would be an increase from 4479 to more than 5100 but in March 2020 there were 4457 which was less than the initial figure. The Cabinet Member reiterated that those figures had been correct at the time the Strategy had been written but that Right to Buy had impacted on them. He stressed, however, that the receipts were then put in to the development programme to try to get more homes.

Councillor Beavan again referred to the Housing Strategy which stated that the housing waiting list was 4 times the number of lets and the aspiration was to reduce that, but

he pointed out that this was now 4.7 times which meant it had gone up, so the aspiration had not been met. The Cabinet Member confirmed this and stated that one of the reasons was that a lot of people on the list were only interested in certain houses and never actually bid so this was something he was discussing with Officers to try and reduce the list, possibly with a view to writing to everyone to ensure the list was only being used for those in genuine need. The Chairman queried if the Cabinet Member was saying the Gateway to Home Choice Scheme should be reviewed. The Cabinet Member reiterated that a lot of people did not bid and were simply on the list. He stressed that if the Scheme was reviewed and policy changed, the other Scheme partners would need to be on board. The Strategic Director echoed the comments that the list was not a Register of Need but was a Register of Want as there were some people in genuine need but others just wanted certain properties so discussions had started on how the list could be reviewed. He added, however, that having just a Register of Need posed other questions such as what to do with properties in certain locations that no-one bid on. He stressed that it was not straight forward and required a lot of thinking about the issues and further discussions with the Scheme's partners. Councillor Beavan suggested that the new data analysis might help identify those not bidding rather than changing the Scheme.

Councillor Beavan expressed confusion as the table in report showed East Suffolk had built 36 social homes in 2019/20 but the Government's Affordable Housing Supply statistics and the LGA comparison of Local Authorities said none had been built, therefore, he suggested more transparency was needed. The Programme Manager agreed it was confusing and she explained that a number of returns were submitted to Government but they all asked similar questions in a slightly different way which excluded certain types of housing built with certain types of funding.

In response to Councillor Deacon's question, the Cabinet Member clarified that the target was to complete 50+ houses per year rather than just start them. Councillor Deacon also referred to the Town Centre Housing Development in Lowestoft and the Programme Manager explained that this was a regeneration acquisition that would be used for two affordable homes. It was noted that the planning application had recently been submitted and should be live on the planning portal in the next few days. Councillor Gooch queried the reference on page 22 to the property not reaching a zero carbon standard and she asked what the barriers were that prevented this. The Programme Manager reported that the building was extremely complex and had certain challenges eg the age of the property and voids that were difficult to insulate with different levels of walls so, although the building could be wrapped in a better way than Building Regulations required, it was physically very challenging to upgrade it completely. The Cabinet Member pointed out that, whilst the zero carbon standard could not be achieved, the property would have been left as a derelict building so it was better for it to be brought back into use and providing affordable housing.

Councillor Deacon asked if there were any plans for the Government to scrap the Right to Buy Scheme and the Cabinet Member responded that he was not aware of any proposals at the moment, although there had been trials involving some RPs introducing Right to Buy. The Chairman pointed out that the relevant Ministry had a new Minister from yesterday. Councillor Deacon expressed concern that Right to Buy meant that stock was lost. The Cabinet Member explained that whilst East Suffolk could not stop Right to Buy there was a caveat that the discount was not favourable at

the beginning. The Chairman stated that the percentage of Right to Buy receipts East Suffolk could use for new builds had now gone up from 30 to 40%. The Cabinet Member confirmed this and added that the receipts were factored in to the Council's work and were being used.

The Chairman referred to the table at 2.1 and queried if the target of building 50 houses per year was challenging or ambitious enough given the target was set against the net loss in stock due to Right to Buys, the fact that the target had not always been achieved, and needed to be balanced against the demand. The Cabinet Member stated that there was a very small Development Team at the moment and compatible Registered Providers (RPs) had resources that far exceeded those that Councils had so he suggested that if Scrutiny wanted to recommend additional resources for the Development Team he would be pleased to receive them but in the meantime he stressed that the Team was doing a good job with the resources they had. The Chairman acknowledged this but pointed out that the table showed that even if the target was met in 2022/23 that would only make up the shortfall of previous years when the target had not been met so he queried if the target was ambitious enough.

Councillor Topping pointed out that there was a national shortage of building materials and queried if this was having an impact. The Cabinet Member agreed that the availability and cost of materials such as timber, as well as a shortage of tradesmen, all had an impact. The Strategic Director stated that 50 new builds was a challenging target but realistic. He explained that the Housing Revenue Account was driven by money the existing tenants paid in rent and, out of that, the Council had a build budget of approximately £2m per annum so that was one of the challenges. He agreed that one option would be to increase the budget to build more but then there was the challenge of Right to Buys. He added that the HRA budget cap had recently been removed and as East Suffolk's share of debt was now around £60m down from £80m, the Council could borrow more for development if it wanted eg to employ more staff, build more houses and acquire more land, but the other factor that needed to be borne in mind was where would the resource be spent eg to build more or to increase the energy efficiency and sustainability of the existing stock. He also agreed that another challenge was the lack of and price of building materials which he thought would last for another 12 months or so. The Cabinet Member agreed stating that the Council needed to decide what it wanted to do about meeting the net zero carbon target. He explained that the average price of a heat pump in a single property was £25k which meant that to put a pump in every house would cost the Council approximately £112.5m and that cost had to come from those that paid rent or the Council had to borrow more money. He added that insulating a house would mean a tenant's energy bills would reduce but putting in a heat pump would increase it again. Another example was using hydrogen ready boilers but these cost more money. He concluded that the Council needed to decide where the money was coming from to make properties net zero.

The Chairman referred to statistics from several nearby Local Authorities on the number of new builds they had achieved and their targets up to 2024, pointing out that these were far higher than East Suffolk's. The Strategic Director pointed out that these authorities were building houses although not necessarily affordable housing but were private open market housing for sale for income. He queried, therefore, if the Council wanted to build houses or affordable houses or social houses for social rent. He

clarified that the target of 50 houses was to build affordable housing to be added to our stock at affordable rent and some would be done via the LATCO but the main drive was for affordable housing. The Chairman suggested that even building 200 houses per year with a mixture of some for affordable housing and some for open market sale would be better. The Strategic Director agreed stating that was one of the reasons that East Suffolk was buying land but that they wanted to ensure the builds were of the best quality.

Councillor Hedgley queried what provisions were in place to get value for money on the open market for buying land. The Cabinet Member stated that the price of real estate differed across the district and the value for money would probably be in the north because the Council would get more land for the money in Lowestoft. He added that the Council had been lucky to get the Felixstowe site from the County Council and to be able to deliver 41 Council houses on the site with some properties for the open market. His opinion was that the HRA was there to build Council houses and not open market or shared ownership schemes but the main issue was the value of the land.

Councillor Beavan asked if it needed to be social rent because if affordable rent was capped at the Local Housing Allowance it did not matter if it was produced by the Council or the RPs. He also queried if RPs were having the same problem in finding resources to refurbish their stock to hit zero carbon targets. He also queried about generally having a 30 year term to pay back the finance. He suggested that it should not be an either/or in terms of paying for refurbishing existing stock or building new houses. The Strategic Director stated that the new build target could be raised but the costs would need to be paid for from the HRA. He clarified that some sites had a pay back of less than 30 years and some longer up to 40 years but he pointed out that this could only be stretched so far. He agreed that it should not be a case of either reducing carbon or building houses but suggested waiting until the cost to improve the energy efficiency of the whole stock was known, adding that there would need to be some hard decisions taken about where to spend the money.

Councillor Gooch queried if discussions were held with developers regarding environmental improvements to properties bought through a third party. The Cabinet Member stated that the Planners met with developers frequently regarding the type of houses being delivered but developers did not have to put in air source or heat pumps. The Programme Manager reported that with some of the recent S106 acquisitions they had agreed improvements with the developers for a small fee eg minor environmental upgrades to the recent Melton properties. She added that Officers were developing an East Suffolk Housing Design Guide for Council led developments and would consult internal and external stakeholders. The Cabinet Member explained that if a Section 106 house was purchased a contingency sum was now included for environmental improvements eg EV chargers. The Strategic Director stated that the Programme Manager and the Planning Development Manager were working together to submit a funding bid to help develop the Design Guide and if successful this would be used as a pilot that other Local Authorities could adopt. The Programme Manager confirmed that the Design Guide included a wish list that would be used as part of tender information or when purchasing properties so that discussions were held at an early stage to ensure that the price agreed reflected the specification the Council expected to achieve.



Councillor Coulam queried if it would be possible to have a similar development to the Deben High School on the Sanyo site in Lowestoft. The Programme Manager confirmed that the Design Guide would be used but stressed that it was still extremely early days for this site and whatever was put on the site would be driven by the need and housing requirements of the area. The Cabinet Member stated that lessons learnt from the ready made modular homes being installed near St Peter's Court would also be taken into account.

Councillor Gooch queried how much support tenants would be given in terms of digital inclusion and the assistive technology to be rolled out. The Cabinet Member stated that the sign up was not as hoped and other RPs were having a similar experience but it was hoped that once people had positive experiences that would spread the word and more would sign up. The Strategic Director acknowledged that it was an issue as many tenants tended to be more disadvantaged and perhaps going digital was more difficult for them, however, he reassured Members that the Council would not say that on-line was the only way that tenants could make contact. Councillor Gooch commented that she was pleased to see that traditional methods of contact would still remain available. She also asked if HOBITs meetings were still being held. The Cabinet Member confirmed that these would be resuming following their suspension due to Covid.

Councillor Gooch also queried whether there was any proposal for integrated housing to enable multi-generational families to live together. The Cabinet Member stated that the Deben School site was an integrated scheme with all homes the same irrespective of whether they were social or for private sale to ensure that people had a sense of pride and place where they lived.

At the Chairman's suggestion, it was agreed that the Committee would move on to the next item before debating and agreeing any recommendations to Cabinet for this item. Following a lengthy debate as detailed in the minutes of the Empty Homes item, it was then duly:

## **RESOLVED**

That Cabinet be asked to support this Committee's recommendation for Officers to draw up a Business Case within 3 months of the Cabinet decision on the resources required in order to increase the existing target of delivering 50 new build Council houses per annum to 100 new build per annum.

## **6 Empty Homes Update**

In response to the Chairman's query, the Cabinet Member confirmed that he did not wish to add anything further to the report. The Chairman invited questions from Members.

Councillor Topping referred to the table at 2.2 of the report showing the number of empty properties by Council Tax band and queried the definition of Empty Homes and in particular the difference between unfurnished and substantially furnished. The Principal Environmental Health Officer explained that the definition of unfurnished was for Council Tax purposes so it was under their legislation that unfurnished homes were not counted. However, as far as the Private Sector Housing Team were concerned, she

explained that the Team did get involved with empty but furnished homes if they caused problems, although they were not counted in the statistics. Councillor Topping expressed concern that if no-one was sleeping in the property then it was an empty home so she suggested that the definition needed to change. The Principal Environmental Health Officer agreed it was difficult and pointed out that it was also hard to define second homes as they tended to be empty but furnished.

Councillor Topping referred to the report and sought clarification on whether the Council received New Homes Bonus for bringing back properties into use and this was confirmed by the Cabinet Member.

Councillor Beavan suggested that the Council ask the Government about the definition as that was clearly causing problems. The Cabinet Member stated that the LGA had had some success with lobbying in respect of Council Tax for second homes and he suggested that any further lobbying be undertaken by the LGA. The Chief Finance Officer acknowledged that the issue was the definition and phraseology of "substantially unfurnished" which was not helpful and that the Council would continue to make representations and lobby on this and press for clarity.

Councillor Topping again referred to the report which stated that the Council did not necessarily get New Homes Bonus for properties being brought back into use. The Chief Finance Officer clarified that the Bonus was calculated by comparing the movement of the number of properties in the Council Tax system, which was used as the data source. Therefore, bringing a property back into use counted the same as a new house being built. Average Council Tax levels were also used as the basis of calculation for the amount awarded per house. For 2021/22 this amounted to around £1800 per property with East Suffolk receiving 80% (around £1400 per property) and 20% going to the County Council. These amounts were only received if the increase in properties in total went over a threshold of 0.4% growth of new properties or properties brought back into use. He further explained that the objective of the Bonus was both to compensate councils for the cost of providing services in respect of new homes and to incentivise them to develop more homes and bring them back into use.

Councillor Green referred to 2.4 in the report which stated that no resources had been identified to follow up on the annual exercise of reviewing empty homes and she queried how many staff worked on empty properties. The Principal Environmental Health Officer responded that there was an officer that had many years experience in bringing properties back into use but unfortunately she was currently seconded to another project and so there was no dedicated resource. She added that this meant that the only resource available in the Team was to deal with those properties identified through complaints such as rats, overgrown trees etc.

The Chairman referred to press articles detailing the number of empty properties brought back into use across several nearby Local Authorities and in particular the results of Great Yarmouth which had resulted in them bringing 525 properties back into use in one year, whereas East Suffolk had only reduced their number of empty properties by 47 over five years. He suggested, therefore, that a targeted and adequately resourced approach like the one taken at Great Yarmouth clearly yielded results. The Strategic Director responded that the Private Sector Housing Team had the skills and experience to deal with this but owners needed to be pushed and

assisted with bringing properties into use and the Council had to be willing to compulsory purchase properties as a last resort. He stressed that East Suffolk was not being passive in doing the bare minimum but the resource had been diverted to Disabled Facilities Grants which had been brought back inhouse. He stated that if the Council wished to resource a robust Empty Property Strategy then he would be happy to work with the Principal Environmental Health Officer to develop one but stressed the need to resource it and follow through.

The Chairman stated that the figures clearly showed that East Suffolk's current approach was not working and queried why East Suffolk was not adopting similar approaches to other Councils who had a more successful approach. The Strategic Director pointed out that some of the other Local Authorities mentioned like South Norfolk did not have the same challenges as East Suffolk but he acknowledged that the Council either had to change their priorities or increase resource. The Chairman stressed that he wanted this Council to do absolutely everything they could to provide the most possible houses for East Suffolk residents that most needed them. The Cabinet Member pointed out that this was not a statutory requirement and those properties that were brought back into use could be sold on the open market. He stated that currently the Team was working on prioritising people getting out of hospital by adapting homes after the service was brought back inhouse. He concluded that his choice was to spend the limited resources available on Disabled Facilities Grants and build Council houses.

Councillor Topping referred to a house in Beccles that was still empty following a fire several years ago and highlighted the fact that limited officer resources was clearly impacting on the speed that these properties could be brought back into use. She also referred to the report which contained an option for developing a business case for additional resource for dealing with problematic empty homes and suggested that this should be one of the Committee's recommendations to Cabinet.

Councillor Gooch reported that the Scottish Government aspired to have a designated Empty Homes Officer in every Local Authority and she added that England had a designated empty homes day on 9 October.

Councillor Deacon referred to properties D and E in the report and commented that this demonstrated work could be done. The Cabinet Member agreed but pointed out that work was still ongoing in the form of the annual review and also arrangements had been made with an auctioneer to take a reduced cut. He added that, if this Committee chose to make a recommendation to Cabinet that a business case be put forward to increase resources then he would support that.

Councillor Byatt asked who Councillors could contact if they identified empty properties in their own wards that could be investigated. The Principal Environmental Health Officer responded that her Team were happy to check properties identified by Councillors to see if they were on the Council Tax list of properties defined as long term empty, or were just classed as unfurnished properties. She added that they also liaised with the ARP for fraud purposes and the Team could deal with properties that had issues such as rats, mice etc.

The Chairman then asked the Committee to identify potential recommendations for both this item and the previous one in relation to Housing Development.

With regard to the previous item, Councillor Beavan recommended that the affordable home ownership target be doubled to 600 given there were 4000 on the waiting list with 2000 of those in need. The Chairman pointed out that the Council had no jurisdiction over Registered Providers and suggested, therefore, that it would be better to focus on the target for building Council houses which was within the Council's control. Councillor Beavan pointed out that the Council already had a target of 250 affordable homes and he was merely suggesting doubling that. The Cabinet Member reiterated the Chairman's point suggesting that the Committee should only make recommendations to Cabinet about what the Council could do eg building Council houses. The Strategic Director stated that it would not be helpful to just raise the target number of properties as there was a need to think about the environment and resources that would facilitate this increase eg whether the HRA should increase the amount of borrowing. The Chairman acknowledged the Director's point and suggested that the recommendation could be that Cabinet consider a substantial increase facilitated by sufficient resources eg staffing or financial resources. The Cabinet Member reminded the Committee that the only source of income was from tenants so if Cabinet was recommended to increase resources then this meant the Council would need to borrow from the Public Works Loan Board and increase the debt of the HRA. Following a question from Councillor Lynch, the Cabinet Member clarified that if funds were borrowed it would be from the HRA and not from the General Fund, therefore, there would not be any impact on Council Tax. The Strategic Director stated that, in most cases, the pay back was 30 years although some were longer, so it would be possible to see what the impact would be if the business case was set to be longer.

The Chairman pointed out that the comments made by Members and officers seemed to be heading in the same direction with a willingness to see what was needed to achieve more Council houses. Following further discussion, the Strategic Director suggested that the Committee might want to recommend to Cabinet that a business case be drawn up to explore what resources it would take to deliver 100 Council houses per annum.

With regard to recommendations relating to Empty Homes, Councillor Topping suggested that a business case be developed to employ additional resources to bring back problematic long term empty homes and to liaise with other Local Authorities to ensure best practice. Councillor Lynch suggested that a better way should be sought on how empty houses could be reported.

Councillor Green referred to the challenging process followed for an empty property in Felixstowe including serving legal notices etc and, at her suggestion, the Strategic Director agreed that guidance notes could be provided for Members to help them deal with such cases.

## **RESOLVED**

1. That Officers produce guidance notes to help Members when dealing with empty homes cases.

2. That Cabinet be asked to support this Committee's recommendation that the process for tackling long term empty homes in East Suffolk be reviewed within 3 months of the Cabinet decision, including liaising with other Local Authorities to ensure best practice and a Business Case being drawn up to provide resources in order for us to engage a dedicated Empty Homes Officer.

**The meeting adjourned at 8.42pm for a comfort break and reconvened at 8.50pm.**

## **7 Cabinet Member Update - Housing**

Councillor Kerry, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing, gave a brief update on his recent trip to a Housing Conference which had focussed his mind in particular on achieving carbon net zero in the housing stock. He stated that he had spoken to many people who owned thousands of Council homes or social housing and, although answers were available, he stressed that they had to be adapted to the housing that the Council had. To that end, an evaluation of all the Council's properties was being undertaken but he stressed that some might not be suitable to have any works on them at all. He explained that, in the north, 20% hydrogen had been introduced into the gas main but this would cost people more because it was more expensive than methane. He added that heat pumps also cost more for people to run so the message was that, although the Council wanted to get to net zero, everyone needed to realise the costs involved for both the Council and tenants. He added that insulation was generally looked at first then what could be put in, however, he pointed out that a lot of the Council's houses were not on the gas grid so heat pumps would be needed and the Council then needed to decide if they should be air or ground source heat pumps. He concluded that this was the main issue he would be focussing on for the remainder of the current term of office.

The Chairman asked if this meant that the existing stock did not have any energy efficient products such as solar panels etc. The Cabinet Member stated that East Suffolk had the most certificates for having the best Council house stock of any Local Authority, with most properties having a C EPC rating with only a few below that, although he acknowledged that the Council had to get them above C to carbon net zero. He explained that most properties were of a good standard but some were not, therefore, a decision would need to be made about whether we could do the work, if it was worth doing the work or if a capital receipt should be taken to build new houses. The Chairman asked if there was an approximate cost or time to get the stock down to net zero. The Cabinet Member responded that hydrogen ready boilers could be used for those properties on the gas main and when the National Grid got down to it's net zero that would also help to reduce the Council's carbon rating. He added that heat pumps cost £25K so multiplying that by 4.5K it would cost approximately £112m.

Councillor Deacon referred to a communal Flagship development in Felixstowe that had retrospectively fitted ground source heat pumps resulting in tenants saving money. The Cabinet Member stated that there needed to be sufficient ground available to install these so at the moment the Council used air source pumps but all options would be looked at to see what was feasible. Councillor Lynch commented that ground source heating was more expensive to run than gas.

Councillor Topping pointed out that some of the Council's stock were listed buildings which were very expensive to run and maintain. The Cabinet Member agreed stating

that they did not tend to be air tight so the heating could not be switched off as an ambient temperature was needed.

Councillor Gooch asked if there were any safeguards against Councils installing these at a very high cost against then losing the property under Right to Buy. The Cabinet Member stated that there was not, pointing out that the cost of any improvements was lost if a tenant chose to exercise their Right to Buy. Councillor Gooch pointed out that the difference was the scale of the cost and the fact that this had to be done statutorily. The Chairman asked if these were added to a house, if that would increase the value of the property. The Cabinet Member stated that he did not think these were likely to increase the value, pointing out that a new buyer might not want a hydrogen boiler.

Councillor Lynch asked if solar panels could be added to stock to enable the Council to get an income. The Cabinet Member responded that they were not added due to Right to Buy but they were put on sheltered accommodation.

Councillor Topping asked what the time period was if the tenant wanted to re-sell the property on as they were supposed to offer it back to the Council. The Cabinet Member admitted he was unsure but explained that they would also need to pay back a percentage of their discount too.

Councillor Beavan referred to rents and land value being very high in Southwold which meant there were few affordable homes available and he asked when he would get the breakdown of the Housing Gateway figures by ward that he had requested to enable him to see the housing need in that area. He also suggested an option would be to look at differentiating Local Housing Allowances so it was different between Southwold and say Lowestoft as well as possibly introducing intermediate rents. The Chairman clarified that Officers had only had a few days to respond to Members' questions so Officers had been given a longer deadline for those questions not directly related to the review but these would be made available to Members as soon as they were received. It was agreed that Councillor Beavan would liaise with the Cabinet Member once he received the figures.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for their attendance.

## **8 Appointment to Outside Bodies 2021-22 (Scrutiny)**

Members were reminded that Councillor Hedgley had previously been appointed as this Committee's representative on the Suffolk County Council Health Scrutiny Committee with Councillor Back as the nominated substitute. Councillor Hedgley explained that with all his other responsibilities he had not been able to attend as many meetings as he would have liked which necessitated Councillor Back attending in his stead and, therefore, he suggested that they formally swap roles.

On the proposition of Councillor Bird, seconded by Councillor Coulam, it was

**RESOLVED**

That Councillor Back be appointed as this Committee's representative on the Suffolk County Council Health Scrutiny Committee with Councillor Hedgley as his nominated substitute.

**9 Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme**

The Scrutiny Committee received and reviewed its current forward work programme. The Chairman suggested that Councillor Beavan's scoping form on the Review of the Covid Emergency be considered at the October meeting with a view to possibly being scheduled in for February and, if completed, the Climate Emergency Scoping Form be considered in November possibly for the March meeting. He added that he had agreed that Officers did not need to submit a written report for the Review on Accessing Dental Services taking place on 21 October given the subject was not within the Council's remit.

In relation to the rest of the Work Programme, it was agreed that it would be useful to hold space available for any topical issues that arose.

The meeting concluded at 9.15pm.

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Chairman