

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Commission

At 7.00 pm on Tuesday 23 November 2021

Held in the Council Chamber, Cedar Drive, Thrapston

Present:-

Members

Councillor Wendy Brackenbury (Chair)	Councillor Kevin Watt (Vice Chair)
Councillor Matt Binley	Councillor Philip Irwin
Councillor Robin Carter	Councillor John McGhee
Councillor John Currall	Councillor Elliot Prentice
Councillor Mark Dearing	Councillor Kevin Watt
Councillor Jim Hakewill	Councillor Lee Wilkes

Officers

George Candler – Executive Director of Place & Economy
Rob Harbour – Assistant Director of Growth & Regeneration
David Watts – Executive Director of Adults, Communities & Wellbeing
Adele Wylie – Director of Legal & Democratic
Louise Tyers – Senior Democratic Services Officer

In attendance:

Councillor David Brackenbury - Executive Member for Growth and Regeneration
Councillor Zoe McGhee – Chair, Levelling Up Communities Scrutiny Review Group

15 Apologies for non-attendance

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillor Simon Rielly. Councillor Lyn Buckingham, who was due to be substitute for Councillor Rielly, also sent apologies.

16 Members' Declarations of Interest

The Chair invited those who wished to do so to declare interests in respect of items on the agenda.

No declarations were made.

17 Notification of requests to address the meeting

There were no requests to address the meeting.

18 Minutes of the meeting held on 24 August 2021

RESOLVED:

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 August 2021 were approved as a correct record.

19 Review of the Planning Service

The Chair welcomed Councillor David Brackenbury, Executive Member for Growth & Regeneration to the meeting.

The Scrutiny Commission considered a report of the Assistant Director of Growth & Regeneration which provided an update on the work that had been and continued to be undertaken to review the planning service within North Northamptonshire. The report was marked as item 5 on the agenda.

Prior to 1 April 2021, a considerable amount of work had been undertaken by the North Northamptonshire Chief Planning Officers group to ensure that the planning function would be in a position to operate safely and legally when the transition to North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) occurred.

It is now evident that NNC had inherited significant disparities between the capacity available across each of the area planning teams and that the performance of the teams and their working practices varied. Further work was required to bring together the former planning teams to ensure that they operated in a consistent manner and could deliver similar levels of performance.

During discussion, the following principal points were noted:

- i. Whilst performance across the teams would mean that NNC was unlikely to be in the top quartile in the short-term, it would still be above average. In the first six months of the new Council, around 2000 planning decisions had been issued, which was more than in the history of the four sovereign councils.
- ii. It was a credit to staff that this level of service was being maintained whilst the integration of services was taking place. It was acknowledged that this would take time, investment and effort. However, some members expressed disappointment that with an extra year of the Shadow Authority we were not further forward in the transformation process and the expected conclusion date of 2024/25 was a long time away. The Executive Member pointed out that the final year of Future Northants in the lead-up to vesting day had taken place in the midst of a national pandemic and a number of lockdowns. He also advised that the Administration were aware of the remaining issues that needed to be addressed within the planning service and that work was ongoing to complete this and he would be happy to report back regularly to Scrutiny.
- iii. Staffing was an issue on a national basis as the market around planning professionals was currently difficult. The aim was to reduce the reliance on contractors, but we needed to be clear on how the teams would be structured. Planning enforcement particularly had a weak jobs market and whilst it was

accepted more staff were needed, this needed to be considered carefully. Future restructures had to be undertaken within a budget envelope and the aim was to deliver the best services within that envelope.

- iv. The proposal for a S106 Team was welcomed. There was great concern that if we did not spend these monies, developers could take them back as not being required. It was not possible at this time to provide details of every S106 agreement as they were stored in a number of different databases, monitored in different ways and the resources were not the same in each area. An internal audit report on S106 had been commissioned and was now awaiting a management response, which was expected in December. It was suggested that the Commission examine the report when it was available to understand the recommendations which would help to scope any future work.
- v. Officers acknowledged that Covid had had an impact on the amount of work which had been able to be undertaken so the focus had been changed to ensure that a safe and legal service was in place. A significant amount of business as usual work was still taking place including starting a review of the Joint Core Strategy and other planning policy work.
- vi. The digitalisation of the planning service along with the rationalisation of back-office IT systems was expected to achieve savings, but this would be a large project with the five existing systems needing to be transferred into a new system. There were a number of back-office systems available in the market that we would need to consider, as well as scoping how digitalisation of some of the planning processes could be achieved and the hardware and software necessary to deliver this. Purchasing an off the shelf product would not in itself deliver digitalisation but needed to be a part of the overall ICT solution for planning.
- vii. It was noted that the County Council's former CMIS website had now been switched off, so members and the public were unable to see previous planning applications. Officers advised that NNC were not able to host the previous website due to security issues, however discussions were being held with the Leader and Chief Executive about how to proceed.

The Commission identified a number of possible future areas of work including performance, redesign of services, enforcement and S106. Officers would come back with more definitive timelines.

RESOLVED to note the report and the areas the Scrutiny Commission would like to examine in the future.

20 Levelling up Communities Scrutiny Review - Update Report

The Chair welcomed Councillor Zoe McGhee, Chair of the Levelling Up Communities Scrutiny Review Group to the meeting.

The Scrutiny Commission considered a report of the Executive Director for Adults, Communities and Wellbeing which provided an update on the progress to date with the Levelling Up Communities Scrutiny Review. The report was marked as item 6 on the agenda.

Kingswood in Corby, Avondale Grange in Kettering and Queensway in Wellingborough were among those neighbourhoods identified across the country as 'left behind'. The scrutiny review was seeking to:

- Review and understand the underlying data and report relating to areas highlighted as 'left behind'
- Engage with and explore the views of people within those neighbourhoods to understand the challenges and opportunities
- Engage with and explore the view of partner agencies and voluntary and charitable organisations to understand the challenges and opportunities
- Understand and learn from the Big Local programme in Kingswood, identifying both good practice and challenges that can help shape future proposals
- Make recommendations to Council around a potential plan

Councillor Zoe McGhee thanked members, officers and especially David Watts for all of the work undertaken to date. A number of community workshops would be held over the next three Saturdays and these were important as the community should be at the heart of this work. An interim report would be developed during December and would be brought to the Scrutiny Commission in the New Year.

During discussion, the following principal points were noted:

- i. The community sessions were welcomed. These sessions would be looking to explore quick wins which could improve a community quickly. The Review was looking to use existing resources and existing networks in local communities. Various pots of funding were also available, and we would look to help enable local communities to source funding for future projects.
- ii. It was noted that the Review Group's focus in December would be on anti-social behaviour and knife crime and members explained that they were struggling to get police engagement in this area as they seemed reluctant to deal with this type of crime. A big push needed to be had with the police to ensure a visible police presence which engaged with local communities.
- iii. Knife crime was a driver for the motion to Council as that was what the focus had been on at the time, so the Review Group wanted to look at this type of crime earlier in the process. The local police teams would be encouraged to be involved in the workshops.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That the progress of the Levelling Up Communities Review Group (SRWG) be noted.
- (ii) That the intention of the SRWG to compile an interim progress report be noted.

21 Scrutiny Work Programme

The Scrutiny Commission considered a report of the Director of Legal and Democratic which provided a draft workplan for consideration and agreement. The report was marked as item 7 on the agenda.

The workplan had been developed following a Scrutiny Conference held by Scrutiny members in October 2021 where they identified key areas that they wanted to scrutinise. Since the conference, members had developed more detailed proposals in relation to the identified areas and a draft workplan had been drafted as a result of those proposals.

During discussion, the following principal points were noted:

- i. The Corporate Plan and performance indicators would be a standing item on future agendas.
- ii. Different methods of scrutiny could be utilised including the use of Task and Finish Groups as well as informal scrutiny outside of formal meetings and these approaches were encouraged.
- iii. Members were reminded of the constitutional remit of the Finance and Resources Committee and that it was the role of this Commission to set up any scrutiny reviews or panels.
- iv. An Executive/Scrutiny protocol would be important in managing that relationship. It was suggested that this could be an area that the two scrutiny chairs could work with the Leader and Deputy Leader.

Other items suggested for the workplan included the development of community hubs, aged debt and the costs and quality of care and whether best value was being achieved. Members were reminded that if items were to be added to the workplan then consideration needed to be given to what would be taken out to accommodate it.

RESOLVED:

- (i) To note that the workplan had been drafted as a result of:
 - (a) Members identification of topics at the Scrutiny Conference
 - (b) Members prioritisation of topics at the Scrutiny Conference
 - (c) Members considering the long list of topics and providing further detail about what they wanted to scrutinise that would have an impact.
- (ii) To approve the workplan.
- (iii) To note that the workplan is a living document and shall be reviewed at each Scrutiny Commission meeting.

22 Executive Forward Plan - October 2021 to January 2022

The Scrutiny Commission received the Executive Forward Plan which showed the key and significant decisions the Executive would be making over the next few months.

RESOLVED to note the Executive Forward Plan.

23 Close of Meeting

The meeting closed at 9.50pm.

Chair

Date