



# Scrutiny Committee

## Minutes

Tuesday, 19 September 2023 at 18:30

### PRESENT:-

Councillor Williamson (in the Chair); Councillors Cordiner-Achenbach, Freeman, Grant Galer, Hammond, Jeal, Mogford, Robinson-Payne, Thompson, Wainwright & Waters-Bunn.

Mrs K Sly (Executive Director - Resources), Mr J Wedon (Information Governance Lead & Data Protection Officer), Mrs J Bowgen (Senior Accountant), Mrs N Turner (Head of Housing Assets), Mr C Furlong (Director of Housing Assets), Ms C Whatling (Monitoring Officer), Mr T Williams (Media & Communications Manager), Mr M Burns (Consultant) & Mrs C Webb (Democratic Services Officer).

### **1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Murray-Smith & Lorna Snow, Financial Services Manager.

### **2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest given at the meeting.

The Chairman referred the Committee to paragraph 16.8 of the Council's Constitution and reminded the Committee that they could:-

- (i) if the matter is a simple one, to resolve it forthwith,
- (ii) to request Officers to prepare a report for the next convenient meeting,
- (iii) To set up a task & Finish Group to investigate and report back to the committee,
- (iv) to make recommendations to the Cabinet or Council, as appropriate; and

(v) to decide to take no further action upon the request, for stated reasons.

### **3 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 June 2023 were confirmed.

### **4 MATTERS ARISING**

Councillor Jeal referred to minute number 3(i) on page 6 of the agenda pack and asked when a report on Communal Rooms would be presented to the committee. The Chairman informed the committee that this item was on the Forward Plan but would not be considered until next year.

### **5 Q1 2023-24 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The Committee received and considered the report from the Information Governance Lead & Data Protection Officer.

The Information Governance Lead & Data Protection Officer reported the performance for the first quarter of 2023/24 (April to June), where progress is assessed against targets which were set at the start of the financial year.

The report also provided an update on the position of key projects that were linked to the corporate priorities from "The Plan 2020-2025". A summary of progress for the suite of key projects and individual highlight reports for each of the key projects were presented in Appendix 1 of the report.

The performance measures, at Appendix 2, gave a comprehensive overview of how the authority as a whole was performing and covered most Council functions.

The Chairman referred to PR13, on page 46 of the agenda pack and he highlighted the number of outstanding audit recommendations. The Information Governance Lead & Data Protection Officer reported that he had received an update on the 13 September 2023, detailing that there had been an improvement in the statistics. To date, there were now 13 Priority 1 and 33 Priority 2 outstanding and officers had provided revised implementation dates for 23 of the outstanding audit recommendations. The responsible officers would also have to report to ELT until the matter was resolved.

The Chairman reported that the Committee needed to fully understand what the outstanding audit actions related to, and how they would be addressed. The Finance Director reported that these were regularly reported to the Audit, Risk & Standards Committee for scrutiny.

The Chairman referred to EN06, on page 49 of the agenda pack and asked the officer to find out for the Committee, the expected collection rate for the contamination of dry recycling material for the next quarter, as the current figure exceeded targets and what measures GYS would be putting into place to improve this. The Information

Lead & Data Protection Officer reported that GYS staff were expected to check recycling bins by lifting the lid and if contaminated, give information sheets to the "offending residents" to help educate the public and reduce contamination.

Councillor Cordiner-Achenbach asked if this would impact on the time the GYS operatives were allotted to carry out their rounds. The Executive Director - People assured Members that checking for contamination formed part of their normal duties and this was mitigated.

The Chairman referred to page 41 of the agenda pack, KP17, the Sculpture Trail and asked how the project was progressing. The Executive Director - People reported that a Public Arts Member Working Group had been set up to consider the draft design phase and a detailed update report would be available to the Scrutiny Committee in the next quarter, if requested. The Chairman requested that an update report on the Sculpture Trail be given to the Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Jeal questioned the RAG status of the Covered Market project highlight report and reminded Members that they were still awaiting the results of the investigation as to who was responsible for the signing of the contract. The Leader of the Council assured the Committee that a confidential investigation was ongoing and that he would update the committee as to when the report would be available.

Councillor Hammond asked for clarification as to whether the cost of lost rental income was included in the cost of voids. The Information Governance Lead & Data Protection Officer informed the committee that it was just the cost of the work.

#### RESOLVED:-

(i) That the Committee note the content of the Cabinet report which was approved by Cabinet at its meeting on the 11 September 2023, providing feedback and recommendations where appropriate.

(ii) That the Committee request that the Finance Director provide an update report on PR16 to enable the Committee to understand the exact nature of the outstanding Priority 1 & 2 audit recommendations and the actions which would be undertaken to mitigate them.

(iii) That an update report be presented to the Committee in regard of KP17, the Sculpture Trail; and

(iv) That an update report be provided on EP06, improvement for the collection rate of non-contaminated dry recyclable goods.

## **6 2023-24 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT PERIOD 3**

The Committee received and considered the report from the Finance Services Manager.

The Finance Director reported the month 3 budget monitoring position for the financial year 2023/24 for both the General Fund & Housing Revenue Account (HRA) including the respective capital programmes and financing. The Finance Director reported that the agenda report contained explanations for the significant variances to the budgets

currently forecast for the full year.

The Chairman asked how this Council was faring in respect of some Council's whose financial position was so precarious that they had had to issue a Section 114 Notice. The Finance Director informed the Committee that as we were a stock-holding Local Authority which had a Housing Revenue Account we would not be in that position.

Councillor Wainwright asked if Greyfriars House had been put on the market yet. Cabinet had made the decision in June to dispose of this building under the remit of building rationalisation to realise a significant saving of £250k. If this was not the case, then why. The Finance Director reported that the projected saving had now been reduced to £215k which was a reduction of £58k in savings for 2024/25.

Councillor Wainwright also highlighted a significant saving of £180k which could be made by the introduction of communal waste collections. He informed the Committee that he had been briefed on this matter by Councillor Wells who had assured him that all Members would be kept in the loop in regard to this matter.

Councillor Wainwright then highlighted various other budget lines, the Tearoom at the Crematorium which had lost £3k, the Splashpad which generated no income but at a loss of £27k, Easter Fair lost £8.5k and the Market had lost £139k, totalling losses of £282k which was unsustainable.

The Leader of the Council reported that Councillor Wainwright had been part of a Budget Workshop which had made the budgets moving forwards. Cabinet would be closely examining each and every budget line to achieve savings and it would be in the best interests of all parties to work together for the residents of the borough. The Easter Fair was ingrained in our Town Charter and the Splashpad was a fantastic facility for Gorleston.

Councillor Grant suggested that the Council should consider the implementation of a zero based budget; i.e. looking at what services we need to provide and building up from there. The Finance Director reported that this could not be undertaken lightly and would take several years to formulate. The Chairman suggested that this option might be viable for certain Council service provision.

Councillor Cordiner-Achenbach asked for clarification in regard to paragraph 4.17 Homes Upgrade Grant in respect of the underspend and the return of the grant funding and what plans would be put in place to ensure that this did not happen again. The Head of Housing Assets reported that we were awaiting further clarification in relation to the underspend and repayment of grant. As the Council was successful in obtaining Homes Upgrade Grant 2 funding, the Homes Upgrade Grant (1) delivery had to finish to allow HUG2 to commence. We are looking at eligibility of any householders who were not able to proceed via HUG1 for HUG2.

The Chairman highlighted that the Council would be fiscally challenged in every area in the next financial year but we would have a clearer picture at the end of Quarter 2.

Councillor Jeal raised concerns that the Council would not be able to maintain the required £3.5m in the Reserves Fund next year. The Finance Director assured Members that at present, the Council could maintain the required £3.5m Reserves in the Medium Term. The Council would take funds out of the Earmarked Reserves Fund to bolster the Reserves Fund.

The Chairman reported that we were in a very difficult financial position, as were a

number of Council's up and down the country, with very little help from Central Government on the horizon. The Chairman reported that although the committee noted the financial forecast, he stressed the need for any savings to be taken as soon as possible.

RESOLVED:-

(i) That the Committee note the contents of the Cabinet report which was approved by Cabinet on 11 September 2023 and the revised forecast for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account for 2023/24, including feedback and recommendations where appropriate and

(ii) The Committee noted the financial forecast but stressed the need for any action for savings to be undertaken as soon as possible.

## **7 HOUSING INVESTMENT PLAN & SHELTERED HOUSING ASSET REVIEW**

Councillor Plant, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Operational Property & Asset Management introduced the report to the Committee.

The Committee then received a high-level presentation from Mark Burns, Consultant, and the Head of Housing Assets on the Repairs and Maintenance of the Housing Stock on the following themes:-

- (i) Stock Condition Survey Update
- (ii) Draft Housing Investment Plan
- (iii) Sheltered Housing Asset Review
- (iv) Approach to capital Programming; and
- (v) Damp & Mould Policy Update.

The Chairman reported that the majority of tenant complaints were in regard to the quality of the repairs they received to their homes and the timescales involved. The Chairman requested to see sight of a plan as to how this service would be improved to alley the concerns of the Committee. The Director of Housing Assets assured the Committee that a further report would be submitted in regard to the detail and timeline, quality and costings and scope of works which would form the basis of the Transformation Plan. This would map out repairs and maintenance in more detail and in the context of the report.

Councillor Wainwright agreed that this was a very ambitious presentation and looked good on paper but would it translate in practice. In regard to Cyclical Maintenance, the Magdalen Estate had received no works for 10 years and Councillor Wainwright was pleased to see cyclical maintenance reinstated. He was pleased that tenants had been consulted but he still mourned the abolishment of the Tenant's Forum.

The Head of Housing Assets informed Members that information would be produced for tenants and members so they were aware of where/when the proposed capital improvement works would be carried out to enable them to be proactively engaged with tenants.

Councillor Jeal asked if an Instruction Manuel could be developed for tenants to help

them understand how they could help themselves avoid mould and damp issues in their homes. Councillor Galer reported that he agreed with Councillor Jeal and that tenant education was key in helping the eradication of mould and damp.

Councillor Cordiner-Achenbach asked for clarification in the success rate of gaining entry to tenants homes to undertake a survey. The Head of Housing Assets reported that this had got off to a slow start in June due to a capacity issue but that Saturday appointments were now being offered in an effort to catch up.

Councillor Cordiner-Achenbach also raised the issue of the costs associated with using consultants to undertake the work on the Sheltered Housing Quality Standards workstream. Mark Burns explained that an experienced officer in this field of expertise had been used and not a consultant.

Councillor Cordiner-Achenbach asked whether the Council had considered linking in to other service providers such as Age UK to ensure our standards tallied with other stakeholder provision. The Head of Housing Assets agreed to look into this matter and report back.

Councillor Grant reported that he was concerned with the number of refusals for entry into a property to survey which was approximately 500. The Head of Housing Assets informed the Committee that 3 appointments would be offered to every tenant, and Saturday appointments are now available.

Councillor Grant was concerned that tenants who refused entry to their property might be concealing serious issues, for example, mental health issues and that these tenants needed to be identified and helped.

The Chairman reported that many Council properties had been built pre-building regulations in the 1970's and had cold walls which needed a vast amount of renovation to cure damp and mould issues.

Councillor Galer reiterated the need for the Council to educate its tenants on how to prevent damp and mould in their properties. This could be undertaken by the production of a leaflet or by posting a video on a social media channel such as YouTube. The Head of Housing Assets assured the committee that they the Council would keep having this conversation with existing and future tenants.

The Chairman reported that the committee would wish to see and discuss the findings of the final report which was currently being undertaken. This report would be placed on the Work Programme after being reviewed by the Audit, Risk & Standards Committee.

The Chairman thanked the officers for their presentation.

RESOLVED:-

(i) That the Committee note the update report, and

(ii) That the Committee to see and discuss the findings of the final report following review by the Audit, Risk & Standards Committee.

## **8 SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee received and considered the Work Programme.

The Chairman reported that the Committee had been asked to consider the addition of an item to the Work Programme from the Head of Customer Services in regard to the Council Tax Support Scheme 2023-24.

The Committee were offered 3 options:-

- (i) To hold an additional meeting on Tuesday, 7 November to consider this one item of business,
- (ii) To receive feedback from the committee via email; and
- (iii) To add the item to the 24 October 2023 meeting.

Councillor Jeal requested that the Committee adhere to the Work Programme to ensure that items did not slip in the future. The Chairman assured the Committee that the Work Programme would be strictly adhered to with additional meetings held to consider urgent items to prevent slippage.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) That the Committee note the Work Programme; and
- (ii) That the Committee agree to consider the Council Tax Support Scheme 2023-24 at an additional Scrutiny Committee meeting on Tuesday, 7 November 2023 at 18:30 in the Council Chamber, Town Hall.

## **9 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Chairman requested that this item be deleted from all future agenda packs as there would be no other business raised due to the agreed Work Programme.

The meeting ended at: 20:00