



Scrutiny Committee

Minutes

Tuesday, 12 December 2023 at 18:30

PRESENT:-

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

Councillor Lawn attended as a substitute for Councillor Grant.

Councillor Capewell attended as a substitute for Councillor Cordiner-Achenbach.

Councillor Flaxman-Taylor, Cabinet Member for Housing, Health & Communities attended as an observer.

Mrs P Boyce (Executive Director - People), Mrs K Sly (Finance Director), Ms C Whatling (Monitoring Officer), Ms K Price (Head of Health Integration & Communities), Mrs M Lee (Head of Customer Services), Mr J Wedon (Information Governance Lead & Data Protection Officer), Mrs N Turner (Head of Housing Assets), Mr M Brett (IT Support) & Mrs C Webb (Democratic Services Officer).

Mr J Dunning (Unison Representative).

01 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cordiner-Achenbach & Grant.

Councillor Capewell attended as a substitute for Councillor Cordiner-Achenbach.

Councillor Lawn attended as a substitute for Councillor Grant.

02 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest declared at the meeting.

03 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 November 2023 were confirmed.

04 MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising from the above minutes which were not covered elsewhere on the agenda.

05 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered the Work Programme.

RESOLVED:-

That the Committee approve the Work Programme.

06 CONSIDERATION OF ITEMS REQUESTED TO BE ADDED TO THE WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair reported that a request had been received from Councillor Rundle requesting that an item on Coastal Erosion at Hemsby be added to the Work Programme.

The Chair suggested that as this would be a large topic to scrutinise, that a Task & Finish Group be set up to carry out the initial work and to report back to the full committee.

The Chair requested that Terms of Reference be created with in consultation with the Monitoring Officer.

RESOLVED:-

(i) That Coastal Erosion at Hemsby, based around the queries set out in Councillor Rundle's request, be added to the Work Programme,

(ii) That a Task & Finish Group be set up comprising of five members; Councillors Freeman, Galer, Hammond, Thompson & Wainwright; and

(iii) That Terms of Reference be created based around the queries set out in Councillors Rundle's request.

07 23-185 - QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT 2023-24

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

The Information Governance Lead & Data Protection Officer reported that the report presented an update on performance for the second quarter of 2023/24 (July to September) where progress was 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 these key projects were presented in Appendix 1 of the report. The key performance indicators, were highlighted in Appendix 2, and gave a comprehensive overview of how the authority was performing as a whole, and covered most Council functions.

Councillor Wainwright referred to PR06 page 46 of the agenda report, and that this had been highlighted at Audit & Risk Committee on the previous day. Councillor Wainwright asked what date this information had been submitted and would the return of the two staff members who had been on long term sick ensure that the Q3 target would be met. The Information Governance Lead & Data Protection Officer reported that the data was supplied in October for the period 01/01/23 to 30/09/23 and confirmed that the return of the staff would rectify the position in Q3.

The Head of Customer Services advised that this data related to the Customer Services Contact Centre and not the Out of Hours Call Centre at Wherry Way. Councillor Wainwright asked where the KPI's relating to the Wherry Way Call Centre could be located. The Executive Director - People explained that these KPI's could be found on the Corporate Risk Register and that this was the data which had been reported to the Audit & Risk Committee.

RESOLVED:-

That the Committee note the contents of the report which was approved by Cabinet on the 4 December 2023.

08 23-051 - COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2024-25

The Committee received and considered the report from the Head of Customer Services.

The Head of Customer Services reported that as part of the consultation process, the report detailing the proposed options was considered by Scrutiny Committee on the 24 October 2023. The Committee had recognised that the Council was facing ongoing financial challenges in the years ahead, however, there was concern that any changes to the existing scheme would affect vulnerable families who were already struggling with the cost of living. There were some assurances that should a change go ahead a hardship fund would be available to protect the most vulnerable, however, there was a preference to retain the current scheme.

The Head of Customer Services informed the Committee that the impact of any change had been considered by undertaking an Equality Impact Assessment on the recommended option. The equality impact assessment provided Members with more information on how a change to the Council Tax Support Scheme would affect individuals/households already in receipt of Council Tax Support or those that could be eligible, in particular, those with protected characteristics. The document explained why the Council was considering a change to the scheme and included mitigation that could be in place to protect those most vulnerable to any change.

The Head of Customer Services reported that in recognition of the Council's financial position, it was recommended that a change to the existing scheme was made to reduce the overall cost to the Council. However, it was also important that a hardship fund would be available to help mitigate the impact of the change on vulnerable households. It was proposed that the maximum award of Council Tax Support for working age was amended to 80% of the Council Tax Liability, however, Members may wish to consider the other options consulted on.

The Head of Customer Services reported that this change would affect all working age recipients with no protections in place for certain groups except for Care Leavers. The Equality Impact Assessment recognised the impact of this change on individuals and households, however, also concluded that working age households on low income eligible for Council Tax Support were likely to be similarly impacted to those with additional disability financial support to help with day to day living. It was recommended that a hardship scheme was put in place in the sum of £200,000 to help support individuals and households who might be in more financial difficulty. The scheme would only be eligible to working age recipients of Council Tax Support with an eligibility criteria prioritising the most vulnerable groups.

Councillor Waters-Bunn asked for confirmation that the Hardship Fund would be ongoing year on year for the amount of £200k and whether this level of funding would be sufficient.

The Head of Customer Services reported that the Council was seeking to make the Hardship Fund recurring but a decision would need to be taken by the Council on an annual basis.

Councillor Wainwright reported that he understood that a Memorandum of Understanding would be signed by the Council and the County Council to ensure that the Hardship Fund would be on a recurring basis before Council was asked to make a decision on the matter. The Executive Director - Resources confirmed that the intention of the Council was to seek a long term settlement.

The Chair asked if the amount would be inclusive of any rise in Council Tax. The Executive Director - Resources confirmed that this was correct.

Councillor Jeal reported that he strongly supported the views of the Chair & Councillor Wainwright in this matter.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) That the Committee note the recommendations to Council; and
- (ii) That further consideration be given to the £200k Hardship Fund to ensure that a Memorandum of Understanding was secured with Norfolk County Council providing for the fund to be established on an ongoing yearly basis and to rise in line with the Council Tax increase.

09 23-155 -SAVINGS 2024-25 - MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Committee received and considered the report from the Executive Director - Resources.

The Executive Director - Resources reported that Cabinet had received the updated Medium Term Financial strategy for the period 2024 to 2027 in November 2023 which included the latest forecast financial position. Prior to this, work had already commenced on the 2024/25 period and the identification of savings and additional income against the target of £2million to be delivered for the 2024/25 budget to mitigate the forecast funding gap. This report provided an update on this work, identified work that was ongoing to deliver savings and income for the 2024/25 and future years and made recommendations for proposals that would assist in reducing the forecast funding gap and be used to deliver the budget for 2024/25.

Councillor Wainwright reported that he was disappointed that the Council was considering cutting the funding of £58,675 for the lifeguard provision across the Borough (Great Yarmouth, Hemsby and Gorleston) and that consideration should be given to it being funded by another service provider for example GYTABIA (Visit GY), which would be a much better use of resources than funding firework displays during the peak weeks of the summer season. If one death resulted as a lack of lifeguard provision it would have a resounding effect on our tourism economy.

Councillor Waters-Bunn asked for clarification as to what were the vacant posts/structural changes referred to in the report and why were these posts vacant. The Executive Director - Resources reported that these posts had been unable to be recruited to or will have become vacant due to such reasons as retirement.

Councillor Waters-Bunn asked if there were any planned structural changes to the organisation. The Executive Director - Resources reported that these might be undertaken as part of the need to identify savings within teams but that HR & Unison were fully involved in the process.

Councillor Robinson-Payne highlighted the need to talk to staff at the earliest opportunity if their job was at risk and that, in her opinion, some managers did not treat their staff correctly during this process. The Executive Director - Resources reported that a consultation process formed part of any restructure.

The Chair asked which Cabinet Portfolio Member was responsible for this. The Executive Director - Resources reported that Cabinet did hold responsibility for an operational decision. The Chair reported that this was of concern to him as, in his view, this formed part of the effective running of the Council's business model.

RESOLVED:-

(i) That Scrutiny Committee note the recommendation to Council; and

(ii) That Scrutiny Committee would recommend to Council that Cabinet/Council withdraw the proposed saving of £58,675 for the lifeguard provision across the Borough (Great Yarmouth, Hemsby and Gorleston) and that consideration be given to this being funded by another service provider for example GYTABIA (Visit GY).

10 22-161 - CONTROL CENTRE AND COMMUNITY ALARM SERVICES EMERGENCY CONTRACT DECISION

The Committee considered the report from the Head of Health Integration & Communities.

The Chair informed the Committee that this item had been referred to Scrutiny Committee by the Leader of the Council.

The report to Cabinet had highlighted that the Council currently operated an in-house Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) which took calls from sheltered housing resident alarms, dispersed community alarms and provided the Councils' Out of Hours call response service. After charges to residents and tenants for paid-for alarm services, the cost of the ARC was approximately £200,000 in subsidies from the Council's budgets. With the national switching of phonelines from analogue to digital, which was already underway and was due for completion by 2025, the current software and hardware used by the in-house service would require significant investment to maintain this service going forwards. In addition, there was a current service risk associated with the digitalisation of phone lines which required prompt action to resolve, and additional issues related to this were emerging weekly together with difficulties

caused by recent IT changes.

This, combined with significant risk to the service from a lack of resilience in the staffing capacity, which increased in likelihood in November 2023 when the Options Appraisal work began and staff were informed and with limited ability to draw on shift cover from our existing partnership arrangement meant the Council had a significant risk that this service could become undeliverable at short notice, which would put the lives of those relying on the alarm monitoring service at risk.

The Chair reiterated that this item had been referred to Scrutiny Committee by the Leader of the Cabinet. Neither the Leader of the Labour Group nor the Chair of Scrutiny had any knowledge that this work had been taking place culminating in the report this evening.

The Chair asked why this issue had not been raised through the Housing and Neighbourhoods Committee in 2022 following the audit committee ratings report. This had been reported to ELT twice in March 2023 and on 22nd November 2023, and following the meeting, officers were instructed to contact the Chair of Scrutiny, who was offered a briefing between 22 and 27 November 2023, and again by email on 29 November 2023.

The Chair informed the Committee that this issue had been looked into since March and should have been reported through normal channels and not via emergency powers. The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that ELT had treated this item as a matter of urgency as it posed a risk to life.

The Chair informed the Committee that he had taken the decision to not receive the officer's presentation slides this evening and asked that the Committee refer to them for information purposes only.

The Chair asked the following question:-

In regard to paragraph 2.10.5 Operational emergency (a) Subject to any legal limitations, the Head of Paid Service, the s151 Officer or an Executive Director, having consulted the Monitoring Officer (or their nominated deputy), may approve an exemption to any part of these Contract Standing Orders that is necessary because of an Operational Emergency creating immediate risk to life, persons or property within the Borough or causing serious disruption to Council services (including any emergency or disruption under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004). An Operational Emergency is a situation that is the result of an unforeseen event over which the Council has no control. This procedure must not be used when a requirement has become late due to lack of planning on the part of the council.

(i) What are the risks and consequences of the council facing legal action due to using the operational emergency clause and bypassing the proper procurement rules and how will the council mitigate these risks.

The Chair asked the following questions in regard to the Equality Impact Assessment:-

(i) Has the council carried out an assessment. If yes, the committee wishes to have sight and if no why not.

The Chair asked if an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) had been undertaken. The Strategic Director - People reported that an EIA had been undertaken which was in the process of being checked by NCC and would be circulated in due course. The Chair reported that he would expect a Cabinet Member to receive an EIA as part of the report and not as an afterthought. The Strategic Director - People reiterated that an EIA would be shared with Members at the point of a decision being taken and to date, no decision had been taken. Members asked a number of questions relating to risks and consequences of the Council facing legal action due to using the operational emergency clause, the known digital switchover timeline, and the Council's apparent failure to act in a timely and responsible manner regarding the PSTN switchover and recruitment of staff and evidence to support the Council's claim that it had been difficult to recruit and retain staff for the in-house service. Questions were also asked regarding what due diligence had been undertaken regarding the proposed outsourced provider including how the Council will ensure the transparency, accountability, and tax compliance of CareLine365 and its affiliates when it is indirectly owned by a company in Jersey.

(ii) In regard to Community Alarms and other users of service, has any consultation taken place with all users. If not why not.

Councillor Jeal asked the following questions in regard to the Digital Switch-Over:-

(i) Why did the council fail to act in a timely and responsible manner regarding the PSTN switchover, which was announced by BT as early as 2017 and reconfirmed in 2021.

(ii) Why did the council not commence the digital switchover well before the current year of 2023, to ensure a smooth and efficient transition of the Service.

(iii) How do the council explain this serious lapse of judgement and accountability when clearly enough time has been given from BT and third parties about this change.

Councillor Jeal reported that this issue should have been managed by senior officers and that it was unacceptable that it had been allowed to reach crisis point.

Councillor Thompson asked when the risk relating to the staffing levels had increased and then returned to normal. The Head of Service reported that this had been on the 16 November 2023 but that the same risks and issues still remained.

Councillor Thompson reported that it was imperative that the services for our elderly and vulnerable residents were kept in-house and this would also retain jobs in the borough. Councillor Thompson urged the Committee not to rush their decision.

The Chair asked if a consultation process had been undertaken with the service users. The Head of Service advised that no consultation had taken place because of the stage of the process, this will be a positive opt in for customers of community alarms and we need to be clear on what the offer is. A letter to sheltered residents had been sent to advise them of the proposal, but no formal consultation was required as there will not be a material change in the service by outsourcing.

Councillor Wainwright asked the following questions:-

(i) In the Cabinet papers 1.3 on page 177 it states that in house staffing is made up of 13 posts. Please confirm number of vacant posts today.

The Head of Service reported that this time last year there were 2 vacancies and as of October 2023, there were 5 vacancies, leaving 8 staff to cover the two services.

(ii) When did the council first come aware of the low levels of staff for the in- house ARC service.

The Head of Service reported that this was in July 2022 when Careline 365 was brought in as resilience to cover some shifts.

(iii) What evidence or data is the council using to support your claim that it is difficult to recruit and retain staff for the service.

(iv) I am unable to see any roles advertised externally for in house ARC service on the council website currently, when was the last time the job adverts were placed on council websites for these roles.

Specifically, Councillor Capewell asked had the Council tried other approaches to recruit staff such as recruitment fairs or agencies. The Executive Director explained that information would be provided to members on staff turnover and recruitment and that there had been occasions when recruitment had been undertaken but failed to secure new staff.

The Head of Service reported that she would check this data and email Members following the meeting. In June 2023, 3 candidates had been interviewed for a vacant role, one candidate was offered the position but did not take the job offer up.

(v) I am led to believe that critical roles such as the "Control Centre Operator" have not been advertised since March 2023, and the "Relief" role has not been advertised at all in 2023.

The Strategic Director - People confirmed that the last recruitment drive took place in March 2023.

(vi) When was the last time the job adverts were placed on online job boards such as LinkedIn, Indeed, Jobsite, for these roles.

The Strategic Director - People confirmed that the council places its vacancies on these websites, it places each council job on its own website and these external companies lift the vacancies off it and place on their own websites and social media channels as a matter of course.

(vii) When was the last time the job adverts were placed via the job centre for these roles.

(viii) When was the last time the job adverts were placed on social media for these roles.

The Strategic Director People reported that this was March 2023.

(ix) If it has been a long time or the council have not used some of these methods which are free, why is the council not using these methods to try and recruit staff, when the council states the service is currently at risk.

(x) Has the council tried other approaches to recruit staff such as recruitment fairs or agencies.

(xi) Councillor Capewell asked if the council looked at offering apprenticeships for these roles.

The Head of Service reported that this was an excellent idea but staffing levels were too low to be able to set aside time to train new starters which usually takes 8 to 12 weeks.

(xii) Are you aware that latest ONS data shows Great Yarmouth has a high unemployment rate of 6.4%, which is much higher than the average in East of England of 3.5% therefore recruiting staff should be easier.

The Strategic Director - People reported that our residents had a choice as to where they contracted their alarms. Whilst our alarm system was the most expensive, the council has a good client base and the council has a duty to protect those clients. This is a competitive market and the cost of TSA accreditation was also high.

(xiii) How do you explain the discrepancy between your claims that it is difficult to recruit and retain staff for the service and the latest ONS unemployment statistics for Great Yarmouth.

(xiv) How will you ensure the safety and satisfaction of the service users and the staff.

The Strategic Director - People reported that there was two years until the service needed to go digital in 2025. The analogue system had failed this summer but the staff had been able to patch the system up which did mean the council was carrying a severe level of risk and this had been reported to Audit & Risk Committee and more recently, Cabinet as a risk, given the service provides for vulnerable residents.

(xv) How will you consider the welfare and dignity of the vulnerable and elderly residents who rely on the current service for their safety and independence.

The Head of Service reported that Sheltered Housing Tenants paid £1.90 a week for their monitoring service, non Sheltered Housing tenants paid £17.58 a month and Careline 365 charged £11.99 a month for the same service.

Councillor Murray-Smith reported that he had heard the concerns of Members and felt that this was a catastrophic failure of risk management and had been presented to Members as a *fait accompli* - do this or someone will die which was unacceptable.

The Strategic Director - People disagreed that there had been such a failure to manage risk. She reported that this had been added to the Operational Risk Register in April 2022 and closely monitored since then via the Corporate Risk Register which had then been reported to the Audit & Risk Committee whereby the risk had dropped from high to medium when the council had secured the services of Careline 365 as risk mitigation. Then rising levels of staff vacancies and sickness levels has since raised the risk to very high once more and it was then reported to Cabinet. Officers had been managing the risk, there had been no catastrophic failure.

Councillor Hammond asked if the current staff would be TUPE'd across to the new service provider, thus securing their employment. The Head of Service reported that the jobs would go across to the new service provider and would be TUPE'd across and the council would fully support the staff during this transition period.

Councillor Hammond asked how many shifts had Careline 365 covered for the Council. The Head of Service reported that Careline 365 had covered pre-prepared shifts to cover periods such as annual leave which involved a handful of their staff who were trained on our system. This involved lone working on all shifts. This amounted to 18% of our shifts in the last 12 months - 218 out of 1195 available.

Councillor Waters-Bunn asked the following questions regarding risk:-

(i) Risk 5.2 States missing alarm calls could lead to the council being held responsible for negligence in the case of a tenant or resident's death should the alarm not connect due to the digital upgrade of telephone exchanges and phone lines which is a known risk.

(ii) BT has announced they are not be proactively switching customers who fall under any of the below criteria:

Customers with a healthcare pendant

Customers who are over 70

Customers who only use landlines

Customers with no mobile signal

Customers who have disclosed any additional needs

BT will delay switching these customers while it engages with stakeholder groups to share more about its new solutions, shape the ones it's building, and better understand the support available to help customers.

All other switches will be done in due course but with notification. BT customers are contacted at least four weeks in advance currently before making the switch, to ensure that they are ready to move to Digital Voice.

How did the council fail to take into account the measures I have mentioned and that BT has put in place to assist with the digital upgrade of telephone exchanges and phone lines when assessing this as a risk.

Councillor Capewell asked the following questions:-

(i) Risk 5.5 states Ongoing issues with our own IT services are already posing issues with our VPN regularly causing periods of non-coverage when external call monitoring is used which would not be required with a direct service, reducing risk significantly. When did the council first become aware of the VPN issues.

The Head of Service reported that this was in November 2023.

(ii) Has the council's IT provider raised the VPN issue as a "problem", this is IT terminology for known issues, and if so, what actions have been taken by the council's IT provider to resolve it. If not, why has the council not escalated this risk with its IT provider and demanded a solution.

The Head of Service reported that the council was not set up to deliver this service and was IT dependant which was a risk to the service.

(iii) How can the council justify using the IT issues as one of the pretexts to outsource the service, when the council has the responsibility and the ability to mitigate the risk by its own actions.

(iii) How will the council ensure that outsourcing the service will not worsen the IT issues and create more risks for the service especially when the staff being transferred over will be given access to work remotely as stated in cabinet meeting on 05/12/2023, and how does council know the IT system of Careline365 are in better state and whether their staff have similar problems when working remotely.

The Head of Service reported that the council would employ TSA who were experts in this field to sign-off the new contract.

(iv) How will the council ensure that the Provider meets the necessary standards of cybersecurity and information security management. The Head of Service reiterated that the contract would adhere to TSA Accreditation.

(v) I am concerned that TSA only ask TSA accredited providers to be Cyber Essentials accredited, which is a self-assessment option that does not involve any independent verification of the technical controls.

(vi) As you may be aware, Cyber Essentials is a government-backed scheme that helps organisations defend themselves against the most common cyber threats and reduce their online vulnerability. However, Cyber Essentials is a basic verified self-assessment option, which means that the providers can certify themselves by answering a questionnaire. This may not be sufficient to ensure that the providers have implemented the controls effectively and consistently, and that they are meeting the minimum standards and expectations of the council and the service users.

Therefore, I would like to ask you whether the council is satisfied with the level of assurance that TSA accredited companies provides, and whether the council have considered the potential cybersecurity risks of TSA minimal requirement of relying on a Cyber Essentials self-assessment option.

The Strategic Director - People reported that an IMT Manager provides cyber security advice in this matter and that all necessary IT and Data protocols would be followed.

(vii) Given that the council has not imposed a requirement for the provider to put in place basic cyber security around its business and has bypassed conducting a full tender process, what other requirements and risks might the council overlook and assume to be covered by the TSA (TEC) accreditation of the supplier.

Councillor Freeman reported that any Call Centre had operational difficulties and Members needed to forget the past and move forwards. He asked for an assurance that no service user would be at risk over the Christmas period. The Head of Service reported that this issue kept her awake at night because of the level of risk involved and that she hoped for a resolution in a speedy manner. The Head of Service reported that staff had been asked to be on stand-by to further mitigate the risk over the Christmas period but officers could not, at this time, give Members that full reassurance.

Councillor Capewell asked what communication had been undertaken with existing staff in the service. Specifically, how were employees notified about the decision to TIPE to an external provider, namely CareLine365. The Head of Service explained that face-to-face staff meetings had been undertaken and continue to be ongoing. However, at the point an emergency decision was to be taken, owing to the short time between the recommendation to implement the decision, the business case being prepared, and the papers published, staff were notified of the accelerated timeline via email. This was followed up by a team meeting and one-to-one meetings shortly after.

Councillor Waters-Bunn asked why staff had left the service as securing a job in the Council was an excellent outcome and she was baffled why these posts had been unable to be filled. The Head of Service reported that this was for a number of reasons, the last one being through retirement.

Councillor Robinson-Payne asked the following questions:-

(i) How are you going to evaluate the quality and reliability of Careline365 in such a small timeframe.

(ii) Are you aware that the company has received many negative reviews from its

customers and staff on Trustpilot and Glassdoor, indicating that the service is not dependable and that the work environment is toxic.

(iii) How do you plan to conduct due diligence and risk assessment on Careline365 in such a small timeframe.

(iv) Are you aware that the company is indirectly owned by a company registered in Jersey, a well-known tax haven and therefore the actual owners of the company are now unknown.

(v) How are you going to ensure the transparency, accountability, and tax compliance of Careline365 and its affiliates when it is indirectly owned by a company in Jersey.

(vi) How does the council justify its decision to use a company that is indirectly owned and registered in Jersey, a well-known tax haven and How does the council ensure that this decision is in line with its legal and ethical obligations, and the public interest.

The Chair asked a final question:-

(i) Given the evidence and answers to questions that have been presented today, on what grounds do you justify the invocation of section 42.10.5 "Operational emergency" of the council's constitution. As It seems to me that this risk is a result of inadequate planning by the council, rather than an unforeseen circumstance and therefore would not be valid reason to use section 42.10.5. of the council's constitution

The Chair asked Jonathan Dunning from Unison to give an overview to the committee. JD reported that the call centre offered a personalised service and most sheltered housing tenants felt comfortable and reassured using it. Some tenants were in sheltered accommodation and were vulnerable and would call and ask the team to do things for them like pass on repairs requests or requests to speak with the tenancy support officers. There was comfort in knowing that this service was part of the council for sheltered tenants and other customers alike.

JD reported that staff were struggling with the process and were concerned what had triggered the process to become an urgent item posing a risk to life. He urged the committee to adhere to the proposed 14 month consultation period whereby a business case would be produced and staff would be part of a full consultation process. The financial aspects of the report were also concerning as it was felt that certain information was being withheld by the Council.

JD informed the Committee that a relief staff member had informed him that they had worked 18 shifts in the last few months but was being given only 2 shifts in January 2024. The Council had had no dialogue with Unison as to how they might recruit to these hard to fill posts. The new service was proposed to go live on 1 April 2024 which was a very tight timescale. JD urged the Council to cost and evaluate the existing service and asked for additional time to ensure the proper processes were undertaken by Cabinet & Council.

Councillor Robinson-Payne thanked Jonathan for his advice which, in her mind, was common sense.

Councillor Robinson-Payne asked whether a company which was registered in Jersey would operate within the parameters of legality and ethically expected by our Council. The Strategic Director - People reported that Careline 365 was a Norfolk-based company and was part of the Appello Group, which could offer local based jobs with staff working remotely from Great Yarmouth as and when required post initial training. This would avoid a 14 month procurement process which would carry high risks for the safety of our residents which relied on the service. The Council could not wait any longer and was recommending a fast track solution which did not cut any corners and the Council was using nplaw and procurement advisors to ensure this. The Council did not have a policy precluding it from using the services of offshore companies. She assured the Committee that full financial and legal due diligence would be undertaken should a direct award situation be the way forward.

Councillor Robinson-Payne reported that the Council had got rid of the Warden Service and out-sourced the CPE's to Kings Lynn and was now proposing to outsource the community alarm service whilst bringing other services back in-house because they did not offer VFM.

The Chair summarised the discussions and recommended the following recommendations to Cabinet:-

(i) Taking time to develop a full Business Case, undertaking a procurement process and any relevant consultations during the proposed 14 month consultation period; and

(ii) Addressing any immediate risk by undertaking a recruitment campaign and increasing the number of shifts given to relief staff.

RESOLVED:-

That Scrutiny Committee request that Cabinet consider:-

(i) Taking time to develop a full Business Case, undertaking a procurement process and any relevant consultations during the proposed 14 month consultation period; and

(ii) Addressing any immediate risk by undertaking a recruitment campaign and increasing the number of shifts given to relief staff.

The meeting ended at: TBC