

Minutes

Rural and Communities Overview
and Scrutiny Committee
Thursday, 16 January 2020



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Committee members present

Councillor Ray Wootten (Chairman)
Councillor Sarah Trotter (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Mike Exton
Councillor Penny Milnes
Councillor Ashley Baxter
Councillor Linda Wootten

Other Members

Councillor Bob Adams

Cabinet Members

Councillor Robert Reid, Cabinet Member for Communities and HR
Councillor Adam Stokes, Cabinet Member for Finance

Officers

Interim Strategic Director Growth (Harry Rai)
Assistant Chief Executive Housing (Ken Lyon)
Head of Repairs and Improvements (Andrew Sweeney)
Head of Customer Experience and IT (Nova Roberts)
Democratic Officer (Lucy Bonshor)

27. Healthy Conversation

The Chairman welcomed John Turner, Chief Officer Lincolnshire Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) (East, South, South West & West), to the Committee.

Mr Turner introduced the Healthy Conversation item which looked at health through the district and Lincolnshire.

Background information

He then gave the Committee some background information. There were approximately three quarters of million people in the county of Lincolnshire which is currently covered by four Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), which from 1st April 2020 were being merged to one CCG, which was to be known as NHS Lincolnshire CCG, which was to be known as NHS Lincolnshire CCG. The NHS was regarded as a vital and important institute across the Country and was a defining part of the UK. As the Committee were aware the NHS had been struggling in recent years, notwithstanding the brilliant work carried out on a day to day basis in Lincolnshire (and across the country) the quality of care was not always what we would wish it to be.

Current key issues nationally include recruitment challenges, with 100,000 vacancies (including approximately 50,000 for nurses and 6,000 GPs), alongside the ongoing financial challenges. With specific issues for Lincolnshire being the size of the areas covered, population dispersal and significant areas of deprivation.

Nationally the long-term plan for the NHS was to work collaboratively with partners and in the coming months it was anticipated the long term plan for Lincolnshire would be published, which was consistent with the national plan.

Healthy Conversation Consultation

The Healthy Conversation took place between March and October 2019. Engagement took place with staff, residents and partners looking at the direction of travel for the health and care system in the County. Events had taken place in Grantham and Sleaford and a range of meetings that had taken place across the County, alongside consultation via Facebook and Twitter. The findings would be written up and presented to the governing bodies and the County Council Scrutiny body in the coming weeks.

In broad terms the document looked at the health of the population in the County and South Kesteven area and what could be done to help and support people most effectively. Key themes from the document are a focus on prevention – enabling people to remain within their own homes, better integration of services (both NHS and partner provision) and a focus on reduction of health inequalities.

The strategy recognised that to achieve its aims a more combined, integrated and proactive effort was required.

The average life expectancy (and therefore age of the population) was increasing together with a range of conditions such as diabetes, asthma, multiple myeloma hypertension and early on set dementia. Specialist staff would always be required in hospital, but proactive ways were needed with a reshaping of the health sector – particularly through prevention work to reduce hospital admissions.

In relation to Grantham Hospital, there were a number of options currently under consideration, which include a 24/7 urgent treatment centre and the creation of a surgical centre of excellence with broader thoughts on the location of hospitals.

The use of digital technology across the generations had increased and some areas within the health sectors were already using the technology to confirm appointments and get test results and it was technology could be used further to improve outcomes.

The findings from the Healthy Conversation were being written up during the following weeks and would be available in a public document.

A question was asked about how far down the CCG's covered. The South Lincolnshire CCG covered a population of 165,000 across the south of the county, with most people from the area including Stamford and the Deepings accessing hospital care at Peterborough City Hospital. Mr Turner stated that he did work closely with the other health trusts and held regular meetings with the Chief Executive of the North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust (which runs Peterborough, Stamford and Hinchingsbrooke Hospitals).

A further question was asked about GP Hubs. GP practices were contractors with the NHS, they were independent, and it was for practices to come together similar to the Lakeside practice at Stamford to offer a wider range of services and have a more sustainable approach. Unfortunately, there was a well-documented shortage nationally of GP's.

A discussion followed on computer systems software that failed to integrate with other software which caused fragmentation and frustration – work was being done on looking at a more integrated system, Lincolnshire was taking the lead in the Midlands Region on having a care portal in place but this was some way from completion. More discussion followed on 24/7 care provision, services at Grantham, building condition and new hospitals, land value and proceeds.

A Member asked if there was a timetable to which Mr Turner replied that there was not a precise timetable, but the new CCG would be in place from 1 April 2020.

One Member referred to his GP surgery in the Deepings which already used technology. It was noted that many larger GP surgeries benefitted from the technology which had been utilised to improve their approach to appointments, however as individual businesses it was for each practice to decided how best to utilise technology. It was noted, however there were a lot of GP surgeries helping with digital innovation work.

Another Member questioned about the links with the District Council in relation to strategies and NHS/CCG input specially in relation to a leisure strategy. Mr Turner stated that he met regularly with District Chief Executives and certain areas such as housing and use of the public sector estate had more joined up working but he felt that a lot more could be done with more integration between partners.

The Chairman thanked Mr Turner for taking the time out of his busy schedule to attend the meeting and for an interesting presentation and the Committee looked forward to an update in the future at a time convenient to Mr Turner.

An adjournment took place between 1:23pm and 1:28pm.

28. Membership

The Committee were notified that Councillor Linda Wootten was substituting for Councillor Ian Stokes and Councillor Baxter was substituting for Councillor Wheeler.

29. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Kaberry-Brown.

30. Disclosure of Interest

The Chairman stated for clarity that he sat on the Lincolnshire Health Scrutiny Committee.

31. Action Notes from the meeting held on 21 November 2019

The notes from the meeting held on 21 November 2019 were noted.

32. Updates from the previous meeting

At the last meeting waiting list figures had been requested, these had been circulated by e-mail to Member's, but the Chairman confirmed the numbers again. (Band 1, 2 and 3 total 782 people, Band 4 & 5 total 1089). The slides from the voids update had also been circulated.

The Cabinet Member for Communities and HR gave a brief update on the work that was being undertaken in relation to physical wellbeing following on from what John Turner has alluded to in his presentation about prevention and partnership working. Previously there had been no budget for community interaction, however a small budget was proposed for the forthcoming year to help promote community interaction and reach out to communities with work being done in relation to loneliness, rural isolation and mental wellbeing.

The Head of Repairs and Improvements briefly updated Members on the condensate pipes that had been discussed at the last meeting. Of the 215 properties affected, 162 had the work completed. Access to the remaining 53 properties was proving more

difficult, but appointments were being rearranged. A protocol was also being put together in relation for the use of back up heating systems and hot water.

A question was asked in relation to compensation payments and it was stated that, compensation payments were in relation to the Riverside properties and this would be given at the full council meeting at the end of January.

In relation to the Tenancy Agreement a question had been asked about what clause 13 stood for on page 34 of the document. The Assistant Director Housing said that this clause had been deleted from the document.

33. Housing Strategy Refresh

The Interim Strategic Director Growth presented the report which dealt with the refresh of the Housing Strategy adopted in April 2018. A midterm review of the Strategy had been undertaken and had identified areas which needed to be changed although the key themes were still relevant and up to date. Changes that had been identified for enhancement were:

- Supporting Housing Independence for older people and other vulnerable groups – remodelling and technology – this looked at housing being fit for purpose and being able to be adapted to meet people’s needs which changed over time.
- Provide the conditions for Tenant Involvement – this related to improving the conditions to engage in a more meaningful way and be fit for the tenants needs going forward and supports the approved Tenant Involvement Strategy.
- Improve Housing Services and Options – this related to making sure the service was adequate and flexible and included choice based lettings.
- Regenerate our Priority Neighbourhoods – this related primarily to estates in Grantham, Harrowby and Earlesfield and how it was recognised that quality of life was affected by the surrounding physical environment and how this could be regenerated.
- Energy Efficiency – Tackling Fuel Poverty/Climate Change in new developments and current Housing – this was looking at efficiencies and what funds, grants and technology were available both in relation to existing stock and new developments to reduce costs for tenants.

Another area that had been enhanced in the Strategy was the development of new housing across all tenures to prioritise a balanced housing market as there was a clear housing shortage and need.

A discussion on the Strategy followed with the following points being made:

- The difference between the dates in the report and Strategy – date should be from 2020.
- Page 220 reference to 502 affordable homes created – were these through Section 106’s – not all were, there was a mixture of 106 and direct builds

- What was a healthy house? A healthy house definition related to having a more than 'asset' approach when looking at how our homes supported residents who lived in them and lead to a direct impact on the quality of life and included the environment, efficiencies and internal changes.
- Page 22 facts and figures stated needed to be checked.
- Page 24 figures shown for new homes per annum had been increased needed amending (625 to 650).
- Under occupancy charge was still in operation.

A Member asked about the differences between the two documents as there seemed to be little difference other than the figures and reference was made to building targets that had been raised at a recent Companies Committee. It was stated that the main changes to the document were shown within the key outcomes on page 17 of the document. The refresh showed that the majority of the outcomes and priority themes were still valid and so only the additional priorities were highlighted as material changes. The document had been done in a strategic context it was not an implementation document. For example the delivery of new housing, the document would stipulate how many the HRA, Gravitas or any other vehicle would deliver, but the update on the action plan would outline what had been delivered through those and any other mechanism.

A further question was asked about where information on the number of houses built and targets could be found. It was stated that following adoption a six month update report would be submitted.

The Cabinet Member for Communities and HR stated that the Strategy was an ongoing document and part of a toolkit used in housing delivery. He felt that there was a strong connection between planning and housing delivery and had spoken to the Leader recently in connection with these issues. Going forward his portfolio would cover both Planning and Housing. It was looking at how housing delivery could be rolled out and he saw two areas for focus, the improvement to council stock and the delivery of new homes.

Further discussion then followed in relation to Theme 3 specifically 3.6 and Theme 4, 4.2 and 4.4 to which the Strategic Director replied. More discussion on technology and the elderly, location and remodelling, provision of services and independent living as well as assisted care to enable people to stay in their homes and flexible and fix term tenancies followed. It was proposed and seconded that the Strategy was recommended to Cabinet subjected to the amendments highlighted during the Committee and on being put to the vote this was agreed.

Recommendation:

That the Housing Strategy refresh was recommended to Cabinet subject to the amendments highlighted during the meeting.

34. Customer Experience Strategy

The Cabinet Member for Communities and HR briefly introduced the item and referred to the need to modernise and make changes to ensure that the customer service delivery was fit for purpose. The Strategic Director, Transformation and Change then gave an overview of how customer access had changed significantly over the last few years. There had been an increase in online demand with people moving away from using a desktop PC to using mobile phones, although there was a vast array of digital ways to access services. It was vital that the Council created a modern, flexible customer experience which offered a choice and delivery which was convenient to all customers, businesses and visitors. To do this services needed to maximise the use of all channels available, face to face, via the telephone, web, chat and Skype using language that gave a consistency of offer across all channels. Changes would continue in technology over the next three to four years and it was vital that the Council had the flexibility to embrace them and engage in a different way. Currently 87% of retail purchases were made online, people wanted the convenience of doing things 24/7. The skills required by a customer service officer five years ago were based on telephony skills, now the skills required were based more on digital skills.

Interactions with the Council during 2018/19 could be split as follows:

39,133 telephone calls handled by switchboard operators
95,547 telephone contacts through the customer service centre
461,171 visits to the Council website home page

On line demand had grown significantly. The average cost of interactions using the latest industry benchmarks put face to face at £8.62, compared with £0.15 for online, although the Councils costs (face to face) were slightly higher.

The vision contained within the Customer Experience Strategy was split into four key themes. Theme one was the Operating Model which covered accessibility and sustainability. Theme two covered Technology, how operating systems could be integrated, how the 150 services could be joined together. Theme three covered Customer Ethos, how a customer first ethos is embedded within the organisation so it could act as one. Theme four covered the measurement and management of the customers voice and how information could be used to continue to modernise customers experience across all services. Understanding the types of transactions and how these can be managed in a different way.

The Committee then discussed the Strategy and the following comments/questions followed;

- What was the difference between webchats (person) and chatbots (through a virtual worker with a different level of functionality, using knowledge based frequent questions to respond to a question not a person)? Webchats have the benefit going forward where you could request an email copy of the “conversation” for your records. As services are built, allows to detect if people aren’t getting the information correctly the first time by use of the web pages.

- It was felt that not enough promotion was given in relation to Ward Councillors and how they could help their constituents – it was recognised that people sought information in different ways, all Councillors were listed on the website and people were directed to services with other sources of help. A new website design was currently being progressed.
- One Member felt there were “too many” words within the document and it contained too much jargon, it was not clear what the Strategy was about, were services being changed. It was the interaction with the service, not the service itself that would change.
- The same Member felt that the inference from the report was that the Market Deeping and Stamford office would close, if this was the case it should be made clear in the report. Work was being done to look at the best way to deliver the service in these areas. Any proposal would involve public consultation, it was how services at these locations could be managed in a different way. High volume payment transactions could be dealt with via a kiosk using a self-service checkout. A phone line to a customer service advisor could be made available for more in depth questions and computer provision to enable people to go on line and carryout transactions for those without that provision at home.
- Further comments were made about the language contained within the report specifically sections 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5.
- It was stressed that any proposal would be consulted on and no decision had been made to date, the challenge was understanding the impact of the proposals and how services could be delivered in a different way and how that was facilitated.

Further comments were made about people who were hard of hearing and it was recognised that everyone had different needs, however the quality of the service given needed to be the same high standard however and whoever accessed it. The use of technology, upskilling, required support and wording contained within the document specifically the word ‘breed’ on page 62 were all commented on. Comments on how interaction could be stimulated were also mentioned.

The Cabinet Member acknowledged the comments made by the Committee and felt that the word change should be used rather than remove reference 2.3 of the report. He also indicated that there would always be a level of face to face within the service, modernisation of the service was needed to fit in with how people interacted with council services and cost savings being used to help the more vulnerable of the districts residents when contacting the Council.

The Chairman read out the recommendation and on being put to the vote this was agreed.

Recommendation

The Rural and Communities OSC notes the development and progress to date in relation to the Customer Experience Strategy and the comments made during the meeting of the Committee, ahead of it going to Cabinet and recommends to Cabinet that the Strategy be adopted.

An adjournment took place between 3:20pm – 3:33pm

35. Stop the Knock

The item had been placed on the agenda following a motion which was submitted to Council on 28th November 2020. Due to purdah no motions were debated at the November meeting and they were rolled over to the January meeting of Council. The Chairman of the Rural and Communities OSC agreed for the issue to go on the agenda for the next meeting of this Committee.

The Head of Customer Experience and IT gave a presentation to the meeting on the current practices in relation to debt collection for Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates (NDR) both of which were governed by a legal framework.

In South Kesteven there were in the region of 64,800 dwellings and 4,600 non domestic rate properties. During 17/18 in year enforcement agents had been used on 2,044 occasions for Council Tax (3% of dwellings) and 71 occasions for NDR (2% of properties). There had been a 0.5% reduction from the previous year for Council Tax but a rise of 2.9% for NDR.

The Head of Customer Experience and IT then gave details of how officers dealt with customers in relation to enforcement agents. All officers were trained in how to deal with customers including where there was a vulnerability and the steps they could consider when dealing with an application. All officers were hands on and supportive and worked with individuals to try and find ways to make payments wherever possible including directing them to Citizens Advice or making appointments on their behalf. Once a debt was the subject of a liability order software was used to process each case with the most effective recovery option. Where no other option was considered appropriate, a notice letter was sent seeking payment or inviting the client to contact the Council. The instruction of enforcement agents was taken as a last resort after a manual check had been carried out. The manual check enabled officers to take a different recovery path if it was considered appropriate.

A case study was then given where a vulnerability was found by an enforcement agent who immediately ceased action and contacted the revenues and benefits team of his concerns. The revenues and benefits officer then contacted the relevant people (social services, wellbeing team, environmental services) to ensure the appropriate support was provided outside of her work hours to ensure the necessary support was in place. Without the intervention of the agent the resident's circumstances may not have improved.

The "Stop the Knock" initiative and objectives came out of the Money Advice Trust, a charity run by the National Debtline that recommended six steps for lower tier authorities to implement in order to improve debt collection practices.

The six steps were;

1. Make a clear public commitment to reduce the council's use of bailiffs over time.
2. Review the council's signposting to free debt advice, including phone/online channels
3. Adopt the Standard Financial Statement (SFS) to objectively assess affordability
4. Put in place a formal policy covering residents in vulnerable circumstances
5. Exempt council tax support recipients from bailiff action
6. Sign the Council Tax Protocol and review the authority's current practice against the 'Supportive Council Tax Recovery' toolkit

Each heading was then discussed, and the Committee informed what currently happened. The Head of Customer Experience and IT stated that currently officers did offer advice and where additional help and support could be found and residents were signposted accordingly. This information was reviewed regularly especially with the introduction of Universal Credit. Officers had developed their own income and expenditure form which they used to objectively assess affordability and this was reviewed frequently. As circumstances changed any policy on the definition of vulnerability needed to address both temporary or permanent vulnerability, there was no statutory definition of vulnerability. A vulnerable person's guidance/policy had been drafted so it could be progressed through scrutiny. Council tax support recipients were not necessarily unable to pay their council tax, to some it was a choice whether or not to pay. Exempting recipients of CTS could lead to an equalities issue with other residents. The Supportive Council Tax Recovery toolkit had been signed up to by 61 authorities to date, however a local protocol with other local agencies may be more preferable to South Kesteven rather than a "one size" fits all document.

Members were reassured that South Kesteven was a caring council and that action was taken where possible to stop debt recovery.

The Member who had submitted the motion gave a brief background as to why he had brought it forward. From the figures circulated at least one referral was being made per week and he felt that if a clear commitment could be made to reduce the use of bailiffs this would reduce figures more.

Further discussion followed on protecting the vulnerable and the need to recognise when debt could become an issue. A behavioural response from the team was always sought wherever possible, open questions were asked to help obtain more information to enable officers to see what income and out goings applicants had. Officers had training so that they could see the whole picture and they took a broad view to include all aspects including Universal Credit. One Member asked if text messaging was used and it was stated that with the introduction of GDPR, applicants were asked how they wished to be contacted both privately and publicly. It was confirmed that the Senior Revenues Officers did have named contacts at the Citizens Advice Bureau to enable appointments to be made on behalf of customers.

More discussion on Universal Credit, arrears and right offs and early interventions followed. The Cabinet Member for Finance confirmed that a lot of work was carried out in relation to debt recovery but there were always improvements to be made, contacting vulnerable people was one of them.

It was proposed that of the six initiatives before Members the Committee proposed that Cabinet made a clear public commitment to reduce the Council's use of bailiffs overtime, that a formal policy covering residents in vulnerable circumstances was put in place and that a local Council Tax Protocol be developed with other local agencies such as CAB and adopted. On being put to the vote these were seconded and agreed.

Recommendation;

The Rural and Communities OSC recommends that Cabinet:

- 1. Makes a clear public commitment to reduce the Council's use of bailiffs over time.***
- 2. Put in place a formal policy covering residents in vulnerable circumstances.***
- 3. Develops and adopts a local Council Tax Protocol rather than the National Council Tax protocol.***

36. Close of Meeting

The meeting closed at 4:16pm.