SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council held at South Norfolk House, Long Stratton on 18 November 2015 at 9.30 am.

Committee Members Present:

Councillors: L Neal (Chairman), B Bernard, B Duffin, D Fulcher, C Gould, K Kiddie, T Lewis, G Minshull and J Wilby

Cabinet Members in Attendance:

Councillors: J Fuller, L Hornby, Y Bendle, M Wilby

Other Members in Attendance:

Councillor: F Ellis

Others in Attendance:

Mr I Carstairs (Harleston Town Team), Mr N Hart (Harleston Town Team) Mr T Holden (Wymondham Town Team)

Officers in Attendance:

The Chief Executive (S Dinneen), the Director of Community Services (P Boyce), the Director of Growth and Localism (T Horspole), the Market Towns Coordinator (D Disney), the Strategy and Corporate Development Officer (H Ralph), the Corporate Business Officer (C Lawrie) and the Scrutiny and Information Rights Officer (E Goddard)

1150 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following members declared “other” interests in the matters listed below.
Subject to a minor amendment, the minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 30 September 2015, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Arising from minute 1147, the Chairman confirmed that a meeting had been held for the Scrutiny Committee Chairman, the Vice Chairman and chairmen and lead officers of the policy committees to discuss their work programmes. At this meeting it was agreed to hold the meetings on an annual basis to keep a clear idea of the boundaries between the policy and scrutiny committees.

MARKET TOWNS INITIATIVE

Following a brief introduction from Cllr M Wilby, the Market Town Coordinator provided members with a presentation which detailed the ongoing work and the future plans of the Market Towns Initiative (MTI).

The Committee was informed of discussions that had taken place between the Council and Barclays Bank PLC regarding branch closures and the ability of the Council to mitigate the effects of any similar developments in the future. Members were informed of the progress to date and the successes of Phase 2 of the MTI and were provided with examples of this including the establishment of strong town teams that had shaped the programme of events in the market towns. Building on the success of the initiative, the Market Town Coordinator detailed further development needed in Phase 2 to address a number of issues identified. Amongst these was the need to deliver growth and ensure the town teams were sustainable so that they could start ‘future proofing’ which would contribute to the self-sustainability of the market towns.
Members considered the revised objectives of Phase 2 which it was indicated, would run until March 2016. It was pointed out to the Committee that there were doubts as to whether the New Homes Bonus (NHB) would be available in future years.

The Committee heard from Mr T Holden and Mr I Carstairs regarding the success of the MTI in Wymondham and Harleston, respectively. Mr Holden acknowledged the efforts of the Market Towns Coordinator and the MTI programme and expressed his thanks. He detailed the regeneration in Wymondham that was directly attributable to the MTI and highlighted several current and future projects coming into place stemming from this intervention. Amongst these was a new bi-monthly publication which would be sent to all households in Wymondham providing details of events for two months. Reference was also made to the events highlighted in the report.

Mr Carstairs gave a short presentation to the Committee, highlighting the success of events in Harleston that had resulted from the MTI. Flag Force and the Festival of Food were key elements that had boosted involvement in the town. Praise was given to South Norfolk Council for lending support to the Easter Market. Mr Carstairs requested that a feasibility study be conducted in Harleston to look into the possibility of changing the routes through town to the car parks. He also requested that members liaise with Norfolk County Council Highways to make progress on acquiring new signage for the town. Members were informed that Highways were receptive to having such a study. There was general agreement from members over this point and they thanked Mr Carstairs and Mr Holden for their input.

Responding to a question from the Chairman concerning recruitment to the reorganised Economic Development team, the Market Towns Coordinator confirmed that steps were being taken and that posts would be filled within the next week. In response to further questions regarding the footfall figures detailed in the report, he clarified that the figures before members should be viewed with an awareness of their limitations. Officers had tried to replicate a survey count from a company that was no longer in existence, thereby making it difficult to replicate their methodology exactly. Members were reassured that more accurate figures could be ascertained the following year when a direct comparison could be made with current figures. In response to a request from Cllr T Lewis, the Market Towns Coordinator agreed to forward him a fully copy of the footfall report.

Members raised additional concerns surrounding the need to ‘future-proof’ the market towns. The Market Towns Coordinator pointed to the new business lounge at the Rosebery Park development as an example of where these solutions would be generated. The ability of the lounge to provide a cohesive working environment for entrepreneurs and businesses to come together to create new ideas to re-generate and strengthen the market towns was highlighted as a key part of this element of the MTI.

After considerable discussion, members formally thanked the Market Town Coordinator for his presentation and his work. The Chairman added her thanks and it was

RESOLVED
1. note the contents of the report
2. request that officers liaise with Norfolk County Council to investigate improving signage in Harleston and to conduct a feasibility study to close exchange street (except for deliveries) to change the route to the main car park.

1153 CORPORATE PLAN 2016-19

Following a brief introduction by Cllr J Fuller, the Strategy and Corporate Development Officer and the Corporate Business Officer made a presentation to the Committee, which reviewed the proposed Corporate Plan for 2016-19.

Officers stressed to members that the new Corporate Plan would be digitised and available online. The use of tabs and hyperlinks throughout was a new feature which would add to the user-friendly nature of the document and increase its accessibility for members of the public and businesses interested in investing in South Norfolk. In response to a query about accessibility for those without computers, members were reassured by the Chief Executive that if a member of the public was unable to access it and had requested the plan, it would be sent out to them.

Members expressed general agreement with much of the content and design and were minded that owing to the external nature of the document, it was important that the Corporate Plan focussed on economic growth in the District. It was pointed out to officers that there were a couple of typographical errors that would be corrected. The Chief Executive assured members that any risks which might arise would be dealt with in future business plans. A specific question was raised asking if figures could be made available to members detailing the number of times the Corporate Plan was viewed on-line. The Chairman agreed that this was a good idea. Officers would monitor the number of times the plans were downloaded and this information would be available to Members.

Officers suggested that if this proved to be a successful means of presenting information to the public it would be possible to extend its design to other documents.

The Committee welcomed the overall design and content of the Corporate Plan and it was

RESOLVED

To commend the Corporate Plan to Cabinet and recommend it to Council.
Cllr Wilby briefly introduced the report after which the Director of Community Services delivered a presentation to the Committee providing an update on the progress being made concerning Council run public conveniences. Members were reminded that the provision of public conveniences was a discretionary service but that members had taken a decision to invest in local public conveniences by making available a capital sum in 2015/16 to modernise and ensure toilet blocks in South Norfolk are Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant and fit for purpose.

Members were informed of the progress being made on Phase 1 of the refurbishment works and were updated on the proposed changes to the public conveniences in Loddon. A member raised concern about the proposal in Loddon in relation to the toilets at Church Plain. The Director of Community Services reassured the Committee that all options were being explored to transfer ownership, re-develop or otherwise re-use the existing toilet block. In relation to the Staithe block the most favourable option was for the Parish Council to take on the running of the facility with the support from SNC of a 5 year commuted sum to oversee running costs. It was noted that Harleston’s automated toilet block had experienced issues at the point of installation but that it was now fully-functioning and would provide an estimated saving of 40% on yearly running costs.

In response to questions, it was noted that the plan for the re-development of the old toilet block in Harleston represented an opportunity to improve access to local community-based services. Officers are in discussion with the Town Council and Harleston Information Plus in relation to converting the old building into a second information point and heritage centre with a view to supporting the Council’s early help approach. In Hingham, it was hoped that the Town Council or another suitable local organisation would take on the running of the facility in exchange for a commuted sum coupled with the Council undertaking a needs-based refurbishment of the existing facility.

Phase 2 of the modernisation programme was predicted to begin by the year’s end to encompass the public conveniences at Diss, Wymondham and Long Stratton. The Diss toilets were highlighted as being in need of refurbishment. In each case conversations were planned with the Parish or Town Council in the first instance with a view to taking over responsibility for the public conveniences. Members queried if the Council had the budget to enable such steps to be implemented. The Director for Community Services suggested that if members were happy to support officers’ recommendation for the refurbishment of each viable public convenience block on a case by case basis, then the budget should be sufficient.

The Chairman thanked officers for the report and the presentation and commented that it was encouraging to learn that most of the public conveniences could be refurbished with the relevant town and parish councils considering operating them locally.

RESOLVED
To note the Council’s approach as highlighted in the report and to encourage local members to work to ensure the viability of each asset on a case by case basis to support local prosperity.

1155 SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny and Information Rights Officer informed the Committee that since the last meeting one item had been added to the work programme concerning the speed of processing benefits claims and would be considered at the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on the 2 February 2016. Members were also informed that a review of the Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) would be added to the agenda for the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee in March 2016.

The Committee expressed their satisfaction with these developments and it was

RESOLVED

To note the work programme, scrutiny tracker and core agenda.

(The meeting concluded at 12:00pm)

Chairman