

Minutes

Meeting name	Scrutiny Committee
Date	Thursday, 21 March 2024
Start time	6.30 pm
Venue	Parkside, Station Approach, Burton Street, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. LE13 1GH

Present:

Chair Councillor M. Brown (Chair)

Councillors A. Thwaites (Vice-Chair) S. Atherton
R. Child H. Cliff
M. Gordon S. Lumley
R. Sharp

In Attendance Councillor P. Allnatt – Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Landlord Services
Councillor M. Glancy – Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Governance, Environment and Regulatory Services

Officers Chief Executive
Director for Housing and Communities (Deputy Chief Executive)
Legal Services Manager
Corporate Policy and Communications Manager
Housing Asset Manager
Senior Democratic Services and Scrutiny Officer
Democratic Services Officer (CB)

Minute No.	Minute
41	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE Apologies were received from Councillors Evans and Webster.</p>
42	<p>MINUTES The Minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 January 2024 were approved, subject to the following amendments.</p> <p>That the following is added to Minute Number 32:</p> <p><i>‘Councillor Gordon declared that her sister has a second home that it is rented out.’</i></p> <p>That the following is added to Minute Number 36:</p> <p><i>‘Councillor Cox mentioned that there is an app for young people to view a list of activities within their area.’</i></p>
43	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST Councillor Gordon declared an interest in Minute Number 47 as she is a council tenant. However, she was advised that as no decision would be taken she could stay for the consideration of the item.</p>
44	<p>REVIEW OF THE FORWARD PLAN The Chairman introduced the Cabinet Forward Plan and invited Members to comment.</p>
45	<p>REVIEW OF THE SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24 The Chairman introduced the Scrutiny Work Programme 2023/24 and invited Members to comment on the document.</p> <p>It was queried why the Social Allocation item wasn't on the agenda, in response Members were advised that the Chair had agreed to move this item to later in the year.</p> <p>A request was made to scrutinise the Senior Leadership Team pay structure.</p>
46	<p>THE LEADER'S ANNUAL PRESENTATION The Leader delivered his annual presentation and in doing so he stated that he was going to cover three areas. The following points were raised.</p> <p>The process of Governance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will be taking a considered and sedate approach; • As the trend is not going back to a Committee system, a more of a hybrid system, with the aim for more Members to be involved at early stages of policy development, is being reviewed.

- A single policy decision can affect several Members of the Cabinet, so need to have a flexible approach. Members have been invited to Cabinet briefings and Cabinet and has met with Conservative Members to discuss any items of concern.
- High point of Scrutiny was the consideration of the housing support review. It was noted that this was achieved with the crucial involvement of Officers.
- It was suggested that the Corporate Plan could be addressed in the work programme.

Legacy issues:

- The new administration inherited 16 issues and some have posed practical problems;
- The Levelling Up Fund is a complex matter, opportunities are there but not without issues, it is not just about the town, but the Borough and Rutland.

The Future:

- The upcoming General Election creates uncertainty and hiatus.
- As Leicestershire does not receive its fair share of assistance and support, this means that Higher and Further Education is at a disadvantage when compared to neighbouring areas, which in turn impacts on employment opportunities and anti-social behaviour.
- Regarding the Climate Emergency, the Leaders stated that the Council needs to grab the issue firmly and get on with the job. With the new legislation on food waste collection the Council suffers from underfunding from central government. In addition, the weather has been affected which has seen increased risks of flooding.
- Financial position, there are significant problems and nationally we are not in a good position.

Following the Leaders presentation Members were invited to comment and ask questions.

A Member commented that they agreed that there should be more shade, especially on the park and in light of the extreme weather that has been experienced, e.g. heat, heavy showers, and hailstones. The Leader stated that the Town Estate are in favour of more trees to provide shading.

The Leader was asked for his stance on flooding and the support that has been provided for villages affected. The Leader reminded Members that the Council has a limited role in assisting people affected from flooding. The Leader has engaged with the Severn Trent Water Authority regarding historic planning applications and objections about flooding, which weren't supported by Severn Trent but were then subsequently flooded. He added that the County wide Flood Defence Strategy is now up to date and a review is due to take place.

In response to a query on whether the Council were proactive in getting sandbags out, the Leader stated that within the resources available the Council were proactive as could be.

Following a query regarding the recent layoffs at locally based businesses and what the Council are doing to assist affected workers, the Leader stated that the Director for Growth and Regeneration and the Director for Housing and Communities and their teams are preparing assistance for individuals. Members were reminded that the Council can't do much either legally or budgetary and assistance is more along the lines of sign posting. Members were informed that the Chief Executive recently attended a national event in Leeds in order to attract businesses to the area and the Leader confirmed that he had direct conversations with two employers. The Committee was reminded that employers have stated that there are still strong opportunities within the East Midlands, locally and for those able to commute. In addition, employers have not said that Melton the location is the issue rather it is national trading factors.

Following a query regarding the land at Holwell Works, the Leader confirmed the intention of it to remain as employment land but stated that it is a planning issue. If it was to be classified as residential land, then there would be an issue with contamination.

The Leader and Deputy Leader were thanked for their leadership on town centre improvements. The town centre meetings and asset meeting have been productive and have gotten to the root of the issues. Previously some streets were looking tired however, through the meetings and the subsequent action taken, those streets have improved.

A couple of queries were raised regarding the cost of garden waste collection and how other Leicestershire Areas have cheaper collections and whether the Council could combine collections. The Leader cautioned comparisons with neighbouring Local Authorities as you are not comparing like with like. The Leader stated that the Council would consider innovative ways of reducing waste collection costs. He reminded Members that the Council has to be realistic on how it can improve waste services and that collaboration with neighbouring authorities or Countywide is probably the way forward.

Following a query on food waste collections, the Leader stated that he would like to do it on a cost neutral basis.

A query was raised regarding the move away from the Cabinet system. In response the Leader stated that a workshop was held, which was well received. Members were informed that the Monitoring Officer is currently making housekeeping amendments to the Constitution, which are scheduled to be reviewed by Council in September. The aim is to operate in a way that encourages collaboration within the system.

The Leader and other Group Leaders were thanked for their approach to the Policy Development Groups. The comment was made that they appeared to be working well and collaboration is improving, although it was noted that not all groups had taken part.

In addition, the Chair commented that the Scrutiny Workshop on the Housing Support Review was a cross-party workshop and was an example of successful collaboration between Cabinet and Scrutiny.

A comment was raised that there is a perception that there are problems with customer services and the Leader committed to review the service and make any necessary improvements.

A few Members of the Committee raised the issue of the green agenda. It was noted that, whilst there are external factors affecting the climate, it is important for the Council to do its part. In response, the Leader stated that the Council had to make sure it is getting a grip on it.

In response to a comment about greening the urban areas of the Borough and the scope to accelerate the process. Members were informed that currently the whips come from the woodland trust and will take a long time to grow and the only way to speed it up is to plant mature trees.

The comments and questions part of the discussion concluded and then the Chair thanked the Leader for his presentation.

At 7:11pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor Child left the meeting and did not return.

At 7:36pm, upon the conclusion of the item, Councillor Allnatt left the meeting and did not return.

47

COMPLAINTS UPDATE

The Director for Housing and Communities, Michelle Howard, and the Corporate Policy and Communications Manager, Martin Guest, gave a joint presentation with an update on Complaints.

The report also set out future improvements to systems and processes that will further enhance how the Council responds to complaints and feedback from residents, tracks the implementation of associated actions and strengthens capacity for insight and analysis.

Activity, performance, and trends between 1 April 2023 up to the end of December 2023 were also covered within the report. It was also noted that the Housing Ombudsman complaints handling code was to become statutory from 1 April 2024, and that some minor policy amendments were being made to reflect some required changes. A self-assessment to confirm compliance with the complaints handling code had been carried out in December 2023 and an updated self-assessment would be completed by June 2024.

Following the presentation the Committee provided comments and asked questions.

Officers were thanked for their hard work on processing complaints as they come in and investigating them to resolve issues identified. The importance of customers / tenants knowing how to complain and being empowered to complain was noted.

It was commented that the report presented to the Committee did not cover the beginning of the process (i.e. the interface and how easy it was for people to make a complaint). Members wanted assurance that there were a range of ways in which customers and tenants can complain to the Council, e.g. phone call, letter, reception, or email. It was explained to the Committee that the policy sets out the ways that people can complain and that complaints received through any of the methods available are logged through a central complaint log.

A query was raised about how the Council supports people who don't have the means or ability to complain via technology. It was explained that people may receive support to make a complaint via a trusted person and be supported by council officers to complain or be supported during the complaints process for example by the community support hub. Some recent changes to the Parkside reception area were also outlined, which had been implemented in response to customer and member feedback, meaning that there is now a customer liaison officer located in one of the customer meeting rooms in order to assist when people come in and ask for advice.

Members were requested to bring to Officer's attention anyone they know who is struggling to access Council services or is dissatisfied with council services, so that this can be looked into and investigated.

The Committee felt that the Council could better publicise its policy and also the ways in which residents can be supported to have their service requests resolved including to contact ward councillors who can provide advice and connect residents to the relevant council teams. A comment was made that a residents may not always know that they can contact their ward Councillor to assist them with issues.

It was explained that figures provided in the report were the number of complaints received and not the total number of interactions with complainants or overall contact to the Council. Moving slightly away from the subject of complaints, a suggestion was made that the Council could automatically allocate a reference number for each interaction with the council. It was confirmed that currently, every complaint or online request receives a reference number.

Members shared anonymous case examples of complaints over recent years, with some recalling positive experiences and others less positive experiences. Officers confirmed that learning from complaints is important and that internal consideration of complaints resolution, trends and analysis takes place. The Committee suggested that the Council report more on the ways in which complaints are resolved.

A Member cautioned that just because people contact the Council, it doesn't mean that it is a complaint. It was noted that in February, 82% of enquiries (via the switchboard) were dealt with at the first point of contact.

A query was raised about how the Council handles unreasonably persistent complainants. It was explained that the process and criteria are outlined in the policy and that steps to restrict contact with the council to specified arrangements are only used where necessary. It was confirmed that there is certain criteria within the policy that the Council has to satisfy in order to label a complainant as unreasonably persistent.

In summing up the Chairman noted that:

- 1) The Council should consider how it could raise awareness of the complaints policy and ways on which people can complain and be supported to complain.
- 2) There are things that will be requested that are not complaints – for instance of a missed bin collection.
- 3) The Council should at all times, focus on giving the best service in the first instance.

48

URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at: 8.36 pm

Chair