OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the proceedings at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in the Bindloss Room, Kendal Town Hall, on Friday, 17 August 2018, at 2.00 p.m.

Present

Councillors

Vicky Hughes (Chairman)
Doug Rathbone (Vice-Chairman)
Anne Hall
Hazel Hodgson
Anne Hutton
Janette Jenkinson
Vivienne Rees
Mark Wilson

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Robin Ashcroft, Pat Bell and Brian Cooper.

Officers

Una Bell Assistant Committee Services Officer
John Davies Performance and Risk Officer
Jemma Fells Project Support Officer
Jason Habbershon Committee Services/Scrutiny Officer
Sean Hall Principal Environmental Protection Officer
Peter Holland Senior Communications Officer
Joe Marriott Environmental Protection Officer
Debbie Storr Director of Policy and Resources (Monitoring Officer)
David Sykes Director People and Places

Also in attendance were Councillors Jonathan Brook (Deputy Leader and Housing, People and Innovation Portfolio Holder), Dyan Jones (Environment Portfolio Holder) and Graham Vincent (Economy and Assets Portfolio Holder).

O&S/14 MINUTES

Members felt that, despite assurances offered at the Committee’s last meeting by the Interim Regional Director of Northern Rail, concerns remained regarding the rail service on both the Furness and Lakes Lines. At the Committee’s meeting of 13 July 2018, Northern Rail’s Interim Regional Director had stated that the full timetable would not be put in place until reliability of service and accurate station information could be guaranteed. However, following reinstatement of the timetable cancellations had continued, with ten being experienced on the Lakes Line in just one day, with inadequate information being provided to customers. Members did not feel that this was acceptable, and expressed a view that Northern Rail had not held to their franchise agreement or to the commitments made to this Committee in July. No further information had been received regarding the marketing funds, nor on the discussions which the Interim Regional Director had stated he would arrange with Virgin Trains to discuss the co-ordination of offers. The Committee felt that the Council should be included within the circulation of the findings and recommendations of the independent assessment being conducted by the Office of Rail and Road, and would seek reassurance regarding the organisation’s planned mitigation of the risks to the effective operation of rail services within the South
Lakeland area. It was highlighted that the compensation scheme for season ticket holders was due to come to an end in mid-September, and Members felt that this required extension and greater advertisement to ensure all customers had the opportunity to make use of the offer. Members agreed that a letter should be written, on behalf of the Committee, to the Interim Regional Director of Northern Rail setting out the concerns above.

The Economy and Assets Portfolio Holder offered to include updates from the Cumbria Better Connected group as part of his portfolio holder reports to both full Council and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee later in the year.

RESOLVED – That

(1) the Chairman be authorised to sign, as a correct record, the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 13 July 2018; and

(2) a letter be written to the Interim Regional Director of Northern Rail on behalf of the Committee, highlighting its continuing concerns and inviting him to attend and provide an update at the meeting of the Committee in January 2019.

O&S/15 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

RESOLVED – That it be noted that no declarations of interest were raised.

O&S/16 DECLARATION OF THE PARTY WHIP

RESOLVED – That it be noted that no declarations of the party whip were raised.

O&S/17 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 - EXCLUDED ITEMS

RESOLVED – That it be noted that there are no excluded items on the agenda.

O&S/18 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

RESOLVED – That it be noted that no questions, representations, deputations or petitions have been received in respect of this meeting.

O&S/19 WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Committee Services/Scrutiny Officer introduced the latest version of the Forward Plan and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee’s 2018/19 Work Programme. He explained that, following the despatch of the agenda for this meeting, a new version of the Forward Plan had been published on 10 August 2018, and set out the changes which had arisen.

In relation to the Update on Tackling Poverty Together item scheduled for January 2019, a suggestion was made that the Building Financial Resilience Group could give consideration to the work of the Red Box Project, a nationwide project to provide free sanitary wear within schools. The Project Support Officer explained that this had also been raised during a recent Strategic Child Poverty Group meeting and that there were plans to roll out a project across Cumbria.
A suggestion was made to ask Cumbria County Council to deliver a briefing session for all district councillors on the County’s Rural Transport Policy. It was felt that rural transport needs were ever-changing and more information was needed about the policies, services and opportunities available at present and the plans for the future. The Economy and Assets Portfolio Holder added that there were many areas of the District without established transport routes which could go unrecognised and requested that efforts be made to ensure that information was made available as widely as possible.

RESOLVED – That

(1) the latest Forward Plan published on 24 July 2018 be received and the verbal update regarding that published on 10 August 2018 be noted;

(2) the Overview and Scrutiny Committee’s current work programme be noted; and

(3) a briefing be organised for all Members on the Cumbria County Council Rural Transport Policy.

O&S/20 COST RECOVERY AND HARDSHIP POLICY

The draft Cost Recovery and Hardship Policy was presented by the Environmental Protection Officer. The Policy, which was required by statutory guidance to be adopted in support of the Council’s Contaminated Land Strategy, would provide a framework for the Council to apply when recovering costs of remediation of contaminated land and prevent hardship on decisions made. The Environmental Protection Officer provided additional wording to the Legal Implications section of the covering report which would be included within the version presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 10 September.

In response to a query, the Principal Environmental Protection Officer confirmed that the Council held a list of sites which could potentially contain contaminants due to prior usage. However, it was emphasised that the primary means of remediation for contaminated land was through the planning process, during which the Public Protection Team would be consulted to ensure suitability for the type of development proposed.

It was queried whether paragraph 11.1 of the draft Policy would cover contaminants introduced through the unauthorised burning of waste materials such as carpet rolls or debris. The Principal Environmental Protection Officer explained that due to the variety of circumstances that could apply a written response would be provided following the meeting.

Members thanked officers for their work in producing the draft Policy.

RESOLVED – That the Cost Recovery and Hardship Policy, as attached at Appendix 1 to the report, be noted and recommended to Cabinet for adoption.

O&S/21 COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE MONITORING QUARTER 1 2018/19

The Deputy Leader and Housing, People and Innovation Portfolio Holder introduced the Council Plan Performance Monitoring report for quarter one of 2018/19 on behalf of the Leader and Promoting South Lakeland Portfolio Holder. The report highlighted areas of significantly good or poor performance relating to the measures of success set out in the current Council Plan. The report also included the latest Strategic Risk Register and benchmarking information using the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy’s Nearest Neighbours Model.
Concern was raised regarding the large variation in the number of long-term empty homes between 2011 and 2017. The Deputy Leader and Housing, People and Innovation Portfolio Holder explained that the number of long-term empty properties fluctuated due to a variety of reasons and the Performance and Risk Officer highlighted that the report contained only maximum and minimum figures which made the changes appear more extreme than they actually were.

It was queried whether the Council encouraged housing associations to build new affordable homes. The Deputy Leader and Housing, People and Innovation Portfolio Holder explained that the Council had a very good relationship with South Lakes Housing and that there were various ongoing conversations with them regarding the delivery of affordable homes. The Council had a long history of grant funding to provide additional affordable housing, and regular meetings took place with a group of preferred local providers. The Economy and Assets Portfolio Holder added that he had recently been involved in meetings between officers within the Council’s Strategic Housing and Economic Development teams which would result in a sharing of information regarding both economic goals and housing ambitions for areas of South Lakeland, allowing both services to better promote further development.

The effectiveness of using the Quality of Life Survey 2017 as a measure of health within South Lakeland was questioned and it was suggested that its findings did not reflect statistics used by Public Health England. In response to a suggestion that Public Health England statistics be incorporated within future iterations of the report, the Director People and Places suggested that a good starting point for the upcoming Strategic Review of Health and Wellbeing Task and Finish Group would be to compare the figures held by the Council and by Public Health England and to make recommendations regarding which are more meaningful and appropriate.

The Committee felt that there would be value in organising further briefing sessions for councillors and parish and town councils to provide information on how communities could utilise the Community Housing Fund in their area, particularly considering the number of new councillors following the local elections in May 2018. The Deputy Leader and Housing, People and Innovation Portfolio Holder agreed that this would be beneficial and undertook to make the necessary arrangements.

The importance of Strategic Risk 9 “Essential strategic partnerships required to deliver the Council Plan do not operate effectively” was raised, particularly in relation to the Council’s strategic partnerships with local health service organisations. It was suggested that, in addition to the briefing sessions being held for councillors, it was important that events be organised to inform members of the public about the changes to health services in the area. The Committee Services/Scrutiny Officer undertook to investigate the most appropriate way to progress this.

With reference to the benchmarking data contained within Appendix 2 to the report, it was highlighted that previous versions of the report had contained more detailed information which had been useful in comparing differences between groups of residents, for example the variation between male and female workers’ median weekly pay. It was requested that this be considered for inclusion within future reports.

RESOLVED – That the following be noted:-

(1) the Summary of Performance, as detailed within the report; and

(2) the detailed risks information contained within Appendix 1 to the report.
O&S/22 PORTFOLIO HOLDER REPORT - HOUSING, PEOPLE AND INNOVATION

The Deputy Leader and Housing, People and Innovation Portfolio Holder presented his annual report on progress made and plans for the future within the portfolio area. He reported the key focuses relating to Strategic Housing and set out the changes within the Development Management and Building Control Services arising from Customer Connect. The effect of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018 on the Council’s Housing Options Service was highlighted, and the Portfolio Holder reported on the progress being made on the Customer Connect Programme.

Members discussed the decision to move Development Management to a ‘paperlight’ method of working, and particularly on the impact that this had had on local parish and town councils. Concern was raised by some Members that a move to make planning application documents available online only would disenfranchise some residents. The Director People and Places suggested that there could be merit in communities linking up with professional planning specialists from outside of the Council to help residents and businesses understand planning applications affecting their area. Similar schemes had been used previously in relation to Local Plans, and the Director People and Places undertook to speak to officers following the meeting.

Following a request from the Committee, the Deputy Leader and Housing, People and Innovation Portfolio Holder undertook to provide a short briefing paper regarding the upcoming review of Town View Fields Hostel.

It was suggested that all Members should encourage residents to register for the Cumbria Choice-Based Lettings scheme. The Deputy Leader and Housing, People and Innovation Portfolio Holder undertook to speak to officers about how best to progress this.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

O&S/23 CUMBRIA HEALTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE UPDATE

The Committee Services/Scrutiny Officer introduced a written report that had been produced by the Council’s representative to the Cumbria Health Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Vivienne Rees. Councillor Rees had reported that progress was beginning to be made in bringing focus to the health and service needs of rural areas.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

The meeting ended at 4.05 p.m.