

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY - ENVIRONMENT & PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

21 March 2023

Present: Councillor Judith Skinner (Chairman), Councillor Judy Welbourn (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Tom Ashton, Alison Austin, Anton Dani and Yvonne Stevens

In attendance:

Officers –

Assistant Director - Regulation, Climate Change and Environment Officer, Assistant Director – Strategic Growth and Development, Scrutiny, Safeguarding & Executive Support Assistant, Housing, Homelessness and Wellbeing Service Manager and Democratic Services Officer

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies were tabled for Councillors Tom Ashton and Paul Goodale. No substitute members.

2 MINUTES

With the agreement of the committee the Chairman signed the minutes of the previous meeting.

3 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Alison Austin declared that she is a Trustee Director of Centrepoint Outreach

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None.

5 INTERIM JOINT SCRUTINY OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN THE S&ELCP AREA

Councillor Brewis Chairman of the Scrutiny Panel presented the report supported by the Assistant Director - Strategic Growth and Development.

A joint Scrutiny Task & Finish Panel had been established between the three authorities to undertake a review of public transport provision in Boston, South Holland, and East Lindsey. The first topic identified had been to focus on Public Transport.

Whilst public transport was not a subject matter that district authorities had any statutory functions for, it was a public service function which acted as a key determinant of outcomes in areas where the three district councils (and its wider partnership) have a direct role to play in influencing change, including;

- Economic growth, access to employment and skills development
- Supporting the social mobility and increasing life opportunities for residents
- Addressing health inequalities
- Access to high streets and town centres, including support for the night-time economy
- Carbon reduction, sustainability, and air quality management
- Encouraging and supporting the visitor economy

However, the wider matter of rural mobility and alternative forms of transportation beyond the car is an area where the SELCP could bring direct intervention and influence.

The group identified the following key areas for scrutiny;

- Developing a more detailed understanding of the policies and approaches that govern the delivery of public transport at a national, regional, and local level
- Gathering qualitative and quantitative evidence concerning the current provision of public transport across the SELCP area
- Understanding the relationships between existing public transport provision and wider agenda of importance to the SELCP area
- Understanding the matter of Public Transport from the perspectives of both operators and commissioners
- Exploring innovation and best practice around public transport, rural mobility and alternative solutions to personal and shared transportation that could inform future strategy for the SELCP area

Wide ranging interviews were held with 13 witnesses from across 12 different organisations and agencies. Written evidence had also been provided by both Suffolk County Council, and Babergh and Mid Suffolk Council. Lincolnshire County Council (LCC) had also been invited to attend a meeting of the committee in their capacity as the Local Transport Authority but had declined any direct involvement with the group, They had however agreed to provide information in writing to the group, and had offered members of the panel the opportunity to attend the county's Highways and Transport Scrutiny Committee.

Committee were referred to Appendix A of the report which provided a detailed account of the review together with the recommendations identified.

In conclusion Councillor Brewis stated that it had been an honour to Chair the review over nearly ten months.

The Assistant Director – Strategic Growth and Development address the meeting at this point and advised that the logic used in approaching the review had been to look at what areas the Councils' could potentially make a change in, being mindful that they had no direct control on Public Transport.

The recommendations identified for consideration were in two principle areas, the first in how the partnership could seek to influence others people in that area and how they might better focus their influence within our areas and the secondly should the Councils be minded, to work alongside other District Councils in addressing the issues of real mobility.

Committee deliberation followed which included:

Concerns were noted at the lack of transport for the residents on the fringe of Boston, with local bus services only covering the area of the town centre or serving the villages. Further concern noted the lack of any service to Marsh Lane Industrial Estate which was a key employer for the borough, but with no bus service for the employees.

The Assistant Director - Strategic Growth and Development noted that it was an opportune time to better coordinate with employers in how they get their employees to work, with the possibility of a potential commercial opportunity for anyone wishes to run a mini-bus and provide a service. Various charitable organisation were already running successful similar services elsewhere.

Referencing the current operators grant of 15p per mile a member questioned how this could be increased in such a rural area as it seemed very unfair and was advised that the Bus Services Operators Grant (BSOG) had been based on London routes when agreed, which were predominantly short distance routes and lobbying of BSOG by the Partnership and other rural authorities was required to get a fairer playing field with the grant to increase it substantially for the rural services.

Concern was also noted at the reduction in voluntary car schemes with ageing drivers and new recruitment proving difficult due to the cost of fuel and increase in pension age, leading to people working longer.

Addressing the impact on the local economy of not have regular services from the villages into the town, a member noted that impact on both local business and also on residents social lives where their only form of transport was to use the existing service but being restricted to one service a day. Further comment also noted the impact on town centre business with no Sunday service for staff.

The Portfolio Holder addressed the meeting and advised that the logistics department as Boston College were training drivers to meet the ongoing shortage.

Referencing the large employers who worked 24/ 7 with shift patterns a member noted that even extending the service from 7am to pm would not have any impact on transporting their employees with another member noted concern at the regular overcrowding he observed of mini-buses and cars for workers going to the pack houses.

Addressing the existing Into Town bus service a member voiced strong concerns at the impact it had in respect of damaging the paved road where the vehicles parked up in Wide Bargate which was sinking in parts, and further stated that the existing routes needed to be re-routed out of Narrow Bargate where they caused significant pollution being fuelled by diesel and also caused safety issues for residents in what should be a pedestrianised area. The member sought an immediate review of the service due to the ongoing issues.

Congratulating Councillor Brewis on the review a member referenced the lack of input from LCC and stated that until such a when a devolution deal was agreed, they would not be interested. He further advised that during his time as a Councillor he had been involved in setting up the Call Connect service through Spilsby during which time the Parish Councils' had contributed to the funding of the service but had not been able to sustain the funding.

Councillor Brewis advised that he had written to both the Leader of the Council and the respective Portfolio Holder and had received a fairly optimistic reply.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Brewis for the presentation.

6 DRAFT PARTNERSHIP SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 23/24

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report advising members that it was for information only to provide an idea of some potential topics for the new Council. An indicative plan with more detail and scope would be presented once officers received advice from the new Council

Two topics had been carried over as it had been agreed to move slowly through the programme during the first year.

An extra item had been suggested for the programme to be agreed by the new Council which was a review of Environmental Crime.

Committee noted the report.

7 CARBON FOOTPRINT FY21/22

Boston Borough Council had agreed an ambitious target to reduce their carbon emissions to net zero by 2040, with a minimum reduction of 45% by 2027, in line with the Carbon Reduction Plan and the strategic aim of the Corporate Strategy. This report and accompanying analysis sought to provide an annual update on our progress towards these targets. Climate Change remains one of our greatest challenges, and local authorities have a crucial role to play in driving forward change and leading by example, to do what they can to effectively tackle this challenge and achieve a more sustainable future. As part of Boston Borough Council's commitment to reducing their carbon emissions, its' annual Carbon Footprint had been recorded to enable monitoring of emissions and guide the authority as it worked towards its' net zero ambition.

Key data was referenced which included:

Notification that in FY21/22, Boston Borough Council's total emissions had decreased by 32% compared to the baseline year (FY2018/19), however they had increased compared to the previous year by 13%, going from 2,382 tCO₂e in FY20/21 to 2,688.85 tCO₂e in FY21/22.

In the FY20/21 Carbon Footprint significant reductions had been made to emissions, largely as a result of impacts of the COVID pandemic such as reduced occupancy of buildings and agile working. Whilst the Council hoped to maintain these gains as far as possible, re-opening of leisure facilities and offices had resulted in an increase in electricity and in particular gas emissions this year.

In FY21/22, electricity emissions of 339.8 tCO₂e had been recorded and represented a 25% increase from the previous year. These increases arose primarily from the Geoff Moulder Leisure Centre (GMLC), Municipal Buildings and Crematorium. Gas emissions of 698.1 tCO₂e were recorded and represent an 87% increase from the previous year. This has largely been caused by emissions from GMLC.

Gains have been retained however, and the behavioural shift towards online meetings and working from home has led to a further 10.5% reduction in emissions from business travel which were recorded as 5.1 tCO₂e, and a further 21% reduction in emissions from Commuter Travel which were recorded as 95.4 tCO₂e. This is a positive indicator that a long-term change to working behaviours has been achieved and should continue to be encouraged and supported through communications and training opportunities.

Water emissions for FY21/22 had been recorded as 5.3 tCO₂e which represented a 60% reduction.

Committee comment followed which included:

Referencing the GMLP, discussion noted the project to redevelop the site and officers confirmed they were in negotiation with the project team to ensure a good understanding of what was needed. Voicing concerns in respect of the problems with the Biomass a member questioned what was happening as when it had been installed, it had been done so on the understanding that it would reduce emissions with the Biomass itself being sourced from a local supplier to reduce the is travel footprint. In response to a question about the maintenance contract officers advised they would feed the information back, but noted that at the point of installation when it had been thought to be sustainable, it had maybe not been as sustainable as had been expected.

The Assistant Director – Regulatory (and Lead Officer for the committee) noted that had the Council not installed the Biomass and Solar Panels when it did, then the Councils' carbon footprint would be significantly higher. It had worked but with new and improved technologies since that time, then alternative options needed to be looked at.

Referencing the Solar Panels officers advised that they had been productive but a number were not operating as they should be, with issues around access to get the repairs carried out.

The Portfolio Holder advised that current day solar panels produced twice the output of those initially installed and stated that any repairs or replacement / renewables needed to be undertaken at the time of the redevelopment and not retrospectively which would be extremely costly.

Commenting on the current footprint of the Municipal Buildings and the probable significant costs of upgrading it, a member questioned relocation to a more suitable building and disposing of the asset of the Municipal Buildings. Officers advised that in terms of their work in identifying the investment needed and payback, upgrading the heating system at the Municipal Buildings would be significant and discussions on the viability of retaining the building would be needed.

Whilst congratulating the officers on the work to date a member stated that they would have hoped for more, being mindful that as 2040 came ever nearer it would be increasingly harder to make savings.

Committee noted the report.

8 HOMELESSNESS IN BOSTON

The Safeguarding Service Manager tabled a presentation offering an update on the position of Boston Borough and East Lindsey Rough Sleeper Service 2022-25. Members were advised that the current service was funded until 31st March 2025. The team comprised of the Manager, Team Leader, Senior Officer and 4 Tenancy Support and resettlement Officer along with a Life Skills Officer working across both BBC and ELDC.

The funding could be used for Tenancy Support and Resettlement; Flexible Prevention Budget; Mental Health Support; Non UK National Support; PRS Access Scheme and Resettlement, Life Skills and Support along with Short term emergency access accommodation alongside Supported Leased Accommodation

Referencing the Rough Sleepers for 2022, the Manager advised that annual counts took place every year with the last one in Lincolnshire being on the 4th November 2022. People sleeping rough were defined as those sleeping or about to bed down in open air locations and other places including tents and makeshift shelters. The snapshot can take place on a single date chosen by the local authority between 1 October to 30 November. The snapshot recorded only those people seen, or thought to be sleeping rough on a single night.

For Boston and East Lindsey an evidence-based estimate with a spotlight count had been carried out. Accurately estimating the number of people sleeping rough was difficult given the hidden nature of rough sleeping. The figures were independently verified by Homeless Link and Members and organisations from within the borough were welcome to assist on annual counts and outreach sessions.

The latest figures from the 2022 count showed a 26% increase since 2021 with a 74% increase against the figures for 2010.

Advising on the Outreach Session, members were advised they were usually carried out twice a week checking hotspots and the area of any specific reports. Recent outreach numbers had identified that on the 21st March 25 had been checked for with 7 found, on the 7th March 24 were checked for with 7 found and on the 22nd February 20 had been checked for with 8 being found.

A lot of people who have said they are rough sleeping are never found. They are asked to provide an exact location and officers will check those locations. Sometimes the location provided is vague such as the river Witham or Witham Country Park. If not found, the rough sleeper will be contacted by phone where possible and encouraged to come into Centrepont or the Council offices.

Support was offered by a number of agencies and services:

Centrepont - anyone approaching Centrepont directly who stated they were rough sleeping were referred into the Council service and would then be seen by our team.

We are with You – there will soon be new substance misuse posts to work directly with the Rough Sleeper service and local hostels

Neighbourhoods MDT – rough sleepers can be referred into the weekly health related meetings

Housing and Homelessness – joint work happens on a daily basis to prevent homelessness and to find housing solutions for those that become homeless

Immigration and Police – provide advice and support to the team as required

Lincolnshire County Council – commission hostel accommodation and floating support. Fund addiction services and manage the Team around the Adult service.

Accommodation was from a number of providers within the borough and the team had access to a range of accommodation albeit more accommodation was urgently needed.

- Accommodation leased from LHP – 3 properties in Boston
- Framework Hostel – referrals via LCC
- Framework RSAP accommodation – 9 properties in Boston
- P3 – 6 bed property
- Restore Church – nominate rough sleepers for their vacancies
- Restore Church – funding 1 bed space for people who have NRPF
- B&Bs
- Will be leasing or renting more accommodation during 23/24

The team continually faced a number of ongoing challenges in their endeavours to provide support including:

- Non engagement
- Unwillingness to follow rules
- No local connection and refusal to reconnect
- No recourse to public funds
- Lack of affordable accommodation
- Lack of supported accommodation
- Refused by all accommodation providers
- Lack of rehab accommodation
- Complex Needs
- Too high risk

Equally it was challenging to help a rough sleeper who has “No recourse to Public funds”. Many rough sleepers in Boston were not eligible for housing or benefits which

made it very difficult to help them off the streets. The team did offer advice and support about their options, advice about gaining employment, help in a voluntary return and deportation.

Rough sleeping would not end until the Government did something to resolve this issue. The team does discuss this issue with the Government specialist advisor for the area and would also be exploring opportunities to provide additional grant funding to non-publicly funded organisations to enable them to provide short term accommodation.

It was not uncommon for rough sleepers to move to different areas of the country or into an adjoining council area. There could be a range of reasons for this including fleeing drug debts, exhausted all housing options or wanting to make a new start in a different area. Most people who slept rough in Boston borough had been living in the area for quite some time whereas in East Lindsey a lot had no connection and had moved to the coast for a fresh start. Without any local connection, housing options were very limited.

Referencing the Severe Weather emergency Protocol, members were advised that all rough sleepers should be offered accommodation when the protocol is activated which was zero or below for three consecutive nights.

Providing accommodation could often be challenging if the rough sleeper was known to cause damage or pose a risk to people.

Equally in extreme heat, shelter, water and sun tan lotion would be offered. Homelessness was likely to increase because accommodation was becoming less affordable especially with the cost of living crisis.

Members were advised that social housing was often the only affordable option but demand was high and increasing. There were over 1100 households on the housing register for Boston Borough with 289 being single people under the age of 60 including 114 under 35. Only 29 x 1 bed houses or first floor flats were advertised in Boston borough during 2022 and the social housing providers were likely to decline some rough sleepers because of their complex needs and poor tenancy history.

Committee deliberation followed which included:

Significant concerns were tabled at the ongoing anti-social activity of migrants who had no recourse to public funds, and also those who did receive funding via the tax payer, leading to stealing, shop lifting and begging which was very intimidating with incidents of people being fronted as they parked their cars. There was concern on the impact of the economy of the town. It was evident that the crowds of migrants had increased who hung about the market place throughout the day, as often they shared accommodation with others and slept in beds on a rotational basis in line with the shift patterns. There were also clear and open acts of personal and unpleasant anti-social behaviour which went un-punished and significantly deterred residents from visiting the town.

Whilst those who had no recourse to funds used the food banks, and clothing banks and felt it their right to be given everything, put nothing whatsoever back into the community and simply took and expected everything on a plate. A member suggested that they be encouraged to help the town and to gain some self-respect and give something back to a place which gave everything.

The figures were questioned with members agreeing that it was now a very serious problem in Boston and homelessness was clearly visible throughout the town. Issues of alcohol and drug dependency were rife in the town where alcohol was available to buy 24/7 and the impacts of such abuse on the NHS and other services was onerous.

The Safeguarding Service Manager advised at this point that any person causing an issue in the community should be report to the police to allow an ASB record to be invoked on them which would help in any future deportation consideration. He further

stressed that not all homeless people/migrants with no recourse to funding would accept help and officer could not force it. There were those who chose to sleep on the streets and refused any attempt to help them.

Begging was increasing across the town with those begging having the belief that the local residents were a soft touch and a member advised that many of those not in receipt of funding, did find shelter by squatting in empty buildings and as such they were not classed as being homeless.

Stressing the need for both the Borough and County Councils to lobby Government for funding for the true population of the Borough, a member responded by reassuring committee that it had been going on from 2011 with various changes in Ministers and the Portfolio Holder agreed the sentiment of ongoing changes in officers and Ministers.

Concern was noted at the Licensing Regulations currently in place which allowed 24/7 access to alcohol in a town with such high numbers of drunkenness and misuse of alcohol.

It was also noted that historically deportation had taken place within the Borough and the officers in charge at that time would be contacted by the Safeguarding Service Manager after the meeting.

A member advised that Centrepont Outreach within its activity programme were actively encouraging people who used the centre to volunteer around the town which had proved successful and enabled them to keep busy and feel valued at their acts of volunteering.

The Safeguarding Service Manager agreed the importance of keeping people active in order get them away from the market place and advised that part of the funding the team had would pay for them to join and visit leisure facilities around the Borough and concluded by saying it was important to remember all the positives of so many people / migrants being helped and but to focus on the few causing problems.

Committee noted the report.

9 WORK PROGRAMME

Members noted the work programme over the previous year and the items carried forward to the next scheduled meeting.

The Meeting Closed at 9.00 pm