

Boston Borough Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Overview & Scrutiny - Corporate & Community Committee** held in the Committee Room - Municipal Buildings, West Street, Boston, PE21 8QR on Thursday, 25th July, 2024 at 6.30 pm.

Present:

Councillor Paul Gleeson, in the Chair.
Councillor Suzanne Welberry Vice Chair.
Councillors Alison Austin, David Brown, Neil Drayton, Andy Izard, Chris Mountain, David Scoot and Helen Staples.

In attendance:

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Officers:

Interim Deputy Chief Executive – Programme Delivery and Assistant Director - Assets, Assistant Director - Wellbeing and Community Leadership, Empowering Healthy Communities Programme Coordinator, Group Manager - Insights & Transformation, Business Intelligence and Change Manager and Democratic Services Officer.

103 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were tabled by Councillor Richard Austin with Councillor Alison Austin substituting. Further apologies were tabled by Councillor Jyothi Arayambath with Councillor David Scoot substituting and by Councillor Barrie Pierpoint. Portfolio Holder Councillor Sandeep Ghosh also tabled his apologies.

104 Minutes

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

105 Declarations of Interest

106 Public Questions

No questions tabled.

107 South and East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership Artificial Intelligence Policy

The Business Intelligence and Change Manager presented the report supported by the Group Manager for Insights and Transformation. Committee were advised that the policy for the partnership had been drafted in consultation with Portfolio Holders, Senior leadership team, the Transformation department, ICT, the Monitoring Officer, and the Data Protection team.

This policy would ensure that AI applications would be aligned with ethical standards, regulatory requirements, and public interest. It would provide a framework for transparency, accountability, and fairness in AI deployment, addressing concerns related to privacy, bias, and security.

By proactively establishing an AI policy across the partnership, its councils could foster innovation while safeguarding community trust, ultimately enhancing service delivery and decision-making processes for the benefit of all citizens. The policy would further benefit the partnership with a consistency across the Partnership workforces which was important as officer teams worked more closely together. In the future the Councils might look to also source single ICT systems to support the delivery of services which common ICT policies facilitated.

Committee deliberation followed which included:

Responding to a question on how much AI was currently in use, a member was advised that it was minimal but was starting to creep into the systems, hence the need for the policy. There were minor AI suites within Teams and PSPS also used some within their services, with a minimal use within the Council.

Voicing concern at the potential drawbacks of AI, a member questioned the lack of AI being able to assess any personality traits. It would not identify any tone of voice and not be able to differentiate, as such it would treat each person in the same way. Committee were advised that there had to be a degree of human oversight. AI used language-based learning and could identify when language became negative or frustrative and could show some form of empathy. Anything generated via AI would need human overview to cover any concerns. Members were further reassured that whilst there was opinion that AI would replace jobs, it was not about replacing jobs. What it would do would be to improve efficiency and as a result, enable vulnerable residents to access operators in person a lot quicker.

On questioning what safeguards were in place to avoid any problems for the Council, officers advised that if a query was not answered in the first one or two attempts, Chatbot would automatically push the call out to a human traditional channel, and there would be rigorous testing across all capacities before any implementation.

Summarising the Chairman noted that the report had been well written and that he agreed the concerns noted that a more constant review would be required during the first five years. The Business Intelligence and Change Manager confirmed that he would amend the review cycle in line with the request of the committee.

108 Working in Partnership with the Voluntary and Community Sector

The Portfolio Holder presented the report supported by the Assistant Director for Wellbeing and the Community Leadership Manager. Members were advised that the sovereign councils and the 'South and East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership' recognised the important work of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). That included supporting the communities in South and East Lincolnshire to lead longer, safer, and healthier lives. What has contributed to making South and East Lincolnshire great, was its people and its communities. Notably, the communities played a significant part in providing an active volunteering role in their localities.

The reasons for that could be for community or personal advantage, with volunteering showing positive physical and mental health benefits to participatory individuals. The report provided an overview of activity that had taken place in the last year with the Voluntary and Community Sector. It included a summary of the South and East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership 'Trusted Volunteer Scheme' funded through UK Shared Prosperity Funding, forming part of the Partnership's strategic approach to working with the VCS within the Sub-Region. In addition, the report sought the committees' views on the approach taken to working with the Voluntary and Community Sector in Boston and across the South and East Lincolnshire Councils area, and further included the promotion of a Volunteer Charter for Members consideration.

Committee deliberation followed which included:

Members commended the report which they felt to be balanced but questioned what mechanisms were in place for the safety of volunteers who were often seen litter picking on main roads without any safety wear and as such, were putting themselves at risk. A further question asked what training, if any, was provided in respect of any physical activity required by volunteers.

Officers advised that the Charter was explicit in identifying the support needed for volunteers to undertake their activities, including provision of safety wear and also any manual handling of items. Members were also reassured that volunteers would not be undertaking any work previously carried out by paid employees, but they could claim out of pocket expenses for training and PPE and furthermore they were covered under the Council's insurance.

On noting the number of single volunteers who were active within the town a member questioned how the Council would make them aware of the Charter and the support they could receive and was advised that the Council would ensure inclusion as part of its role was to support individuals alongside the groups.

On referencing the implementation of the warm hubs programme, activated to provide a shelter for warmth over the winter months, a member noted that one parish had opted not to continue with the facility due to a low uptake, and questioned if other sites would be open through the forthcoming winter months. Officers advised that a number of hubs had extended their initial time lines and become activity driven 'clubs' to both address the stigma that was often attached to the 'warm hubs' name and to also help combat social isolation, especially in rural areas. There was recognition of the hard work of the core groups of volunteers across the borough that facilitated such clubs, with many of the volunteers providing a variety of support throughout the year. Members further agreed the need to make volunteering more attractive to a cross section of the population and the importance of encouraging younger people to become involved.

It is recorded that a member of the public addressed the meeting at this part in the proceedings and voiced their concerns at the condition of the waterways within the borough which were blocked with weeds, and the negative effect it was having on businesses which both operated on the water, and also the impact on various sporting groups who used the rivers for both training and eventing. The Chairman advised they had noted the concerns raised and reassured the member of the public that whilst the Council itself had no jurisdiction on the waterways, the concerns would be taken through the to relevant authority.

In summary the Chairman noted that the report was comprehensive in detail and clearly identified the intent to progress further the support of volunteers within the borough, and committee agreed their support and recognition of the outstanding work undertaken by all the volunteers and the need to encourage and promote the role of volunteering wider to attract a range of volunteers moving forward.

109 Work Programme

Members were advised that a review of the Council Tax Support Scheme would be tabled at the next scheduled meeting, and that a form of pre-scrutiny for the budget would be scheduled ahead of the budget to allow members to understand the formula and structuring of the budget.

On questioning reviewing the decisions taken on previous reports for HMO's and fly Tipping, a member was advised that an update to the 2013 report on the Social Impact of Immigration had been provided at an earlier meeting of the committee, which had considered the outcomes from the original 27 recommendations, identifying which had been taken forward and which for whatever reason, had not been possible. It was agreed to schedule a report on HMO's at a future meeting. On requesting a report on the economy of the town, a member was advised it was a report for the sister scrutiny committee Environment and Performance.

The Meeting ended at 7.40 pm.