

Committee: Scrutiny

Date:

Title: Annual Report 2021/22

Thursday, 26 May
2022

Report Author Richard Auty, Assistant Director – Corporate Services

Summary

1. There is a requirement under the Council's Constitution for the Chair of the Committee to report annually to Full Council.
2. The information below will form the report the Chair will give to the meeting and summarises the key work of the Committee in the 2021/22 year.

Recommendations

3. The Committee approves the content of the Annual Report.

Financial Implications

4. There are no direct financial implications associated with this report.

Background Papers

5. None

Impact

- 6.

Communication/Consultation	The report will provide a summary of the committee's work for all members
Community Safety	None
Equalities	None
Health and Safety	None
Human Rights/Legal Implications	None
Sustainability	None
Ward-specific impacts	None
Workforce/Workplace	None

Situation

7. Despite the continued disruption caused by the Covid 19 pandemic on the Council during 2021/21, the Scrutiny Committee has continued to make a positive difference. The Committee has benefitted from being able to meet in person from the start of the year and has continued to progress workstreams, including bringing one major piece of work to conclusion.
8. The Committee continued its practice of splitting its scrutiny of the Local Plan process from the rest of its workload and has again held separate Local Plan-specific meetings.
9. The sections of the report below summarise the main areas of discussion and activity during the year.

Planning Obligations

10. Scrutiny Committee began the first meeting of 2021/22 with the final report of the task and finish group set up to look at the Council's approach to planning obligations. The review was established to look at whether the Council is achieving the best outcomes for the district with regard to planning conditions obtained under S106 agreements.
11. The group, which comprised Cllrs Criscione and Jones, was set up in 2019 initially with Cllr Evans also a member until he was appointed to the Cabinet.
12. Following research, discussion and stakeholder consultation, the task and finish group compiled a series of recommendations which included formalising procedures for town and parish councils to provide input into planning obligations and clearer and consistent reporting of planning obligations through the Planning Committee.
13. The recommendations were endorsed by the Committee and subsequently approved by Cabinet. They have now been incorporated into the workstreams emanating from the planning review conducted by East of England Local Government Association-appointed consultants.

Economic Recovery Action Plan

14. Towards the end of the previous year, Cllr Reeve as Portfolio Holder for the Economy, had presented the Economic Recovery Plan to the Scrutiny Committee, which set out how a £1 million budget would be spent over three years to support economic recovery and growth in the district. The Committee supported the plan and considered it a well thought out piece of work, noting it had clear and measurable objectives.
15. A one-year action plan was then brought to Committee in May 2021, setting out the detail of how the aims of the Recovery Plan would be delivered in 2021/22.

16. The Committee endorsed the proposed spend of £347,000 and the priorities of the action plan, which were:
 - Business engagement and support
 - Information, advice and guidance
 - Skills and training
 - Creating jobs and inward investment
 - Creating a greener local economy
17. Areas of economic development activity that attracted particular questioning by the Committee included tourism, the availability and types of business support grants, the way data was being used to inform decisions and inward investment.
18. The Committee discussed economic development activity at two subsequent meetings during 2021/22 and noted substantial progress against all the key objectives.

Review of the Planning Service

19. The Council commissioned a review of the planning service in 2020 from the East of England Local Government Association (EELGA). This work was in three strands, the first two addressing the preparation for the development of a local plan and the third strand covering the Council's Development Management service.
20. The review of the Development Management service was undertaken by two Associates of EELGA. This report relates to the third strand review and its subsequent report. The review of the development management service was undertaken by two Associates of the East of England LGA in late 2020 and early 2021 and the results were presented to the Scrutiny Committee ahead of their adoption by Cabinet.
21. The Scrutiny Committee considered it important to focus on how to move forward rather than spending time discussing what had happened in the past. The Committee heard from the Portfolio Holder Cllr Evans how there were eight main recommendations from the review and that an outline of the work already underway to address these.
22. Committee members expressed concern at the proposed timescales for reporting further progress and sought agreement from Cllr Evans that an update would be brought back to the Committee more quickly than initially proposed. Members also sought assurances around budgetary commitments to ensure the recommendations could be properly financed and matters including customer service and enforcement.
23. The Committee further considered the planning review in November 2021 and February 2022, so by the end of the 2021/22 year had received a

detailed progress report setting out 85 actions, of which 35 were complete and a further 40 underway. Matters particularly highlighted through discussion between the Portfolio Holder and Committee members at these meetings included recruitment challenges, plans to standardise Planning Performance Agreements and timescales for improvement.

Stansted Airport Appeal

24. In June 2021, the Scrutiny Committee agreed to a request from Full Council to review the Stansted Airport appeal process. The Committee opted to appoint a Task and Finish Group chaired by the Committee's Vice-Chair Cllr LeCount, albeit with the work conducted by independent professional advisors, using the appointed councillors as a reference group
25. The review was able to progress off-line while appeal cost negotiations were ongoing through much of 2021/22, and it is hoped to bring the final report to the committee and Full Council in the first half of 2022/23.

Climate Change Action Plan

26. The Climate Change Action Plan was presented to the Scrutiny Committee in November 2021 prior to it going to Cabinet. This Action Plan provided detail to the broad aims set out in the Climate Change Strategy, which the committee had endorsed the previous year along with a series of interim climate change planning policies.
27. At the meeting, the Portfolio Holder Cllr Pepper set out some of the progress to date, including energy efficiency improvements to council houses, the commissioning of a cycling strategy and the completion of a biodiversity study to map environmentally important areas.
28. While welcoming the production of the action plan, which had been delayed by some months from its original publication date, a majority of Committee Members were concerned it was too aspirational and did not contain sufficient measurable outcomes. They voted not to recommend it to Cabinet but instead requested it was further reviewed and brought back to the Committee.
29. An amended action plan was re-presented at a meeting the following month, having incorporated some of the commentary from the Scrutiny Committee and this version was duly recommended to Cabinet for approval.

Corporate Plan and Delivery Plan

30. The Scrutiny Committee considers the Corporate Plan and the one-year Delivery plan which sits underneath it annually. These are key Council documents which set out the priorities for the organisation and some of the major projects and workstreams that will be done each year in order to meet those priorities.
31. The Corporate Plan is presented along with the Budget papers in February, with the Delivery Plan following in March.

32. In 2021/22 the Committee also conducted a mid-year review of the Delivery Plan after expressing concerns in previous years of a lack of specificity in some parts of the document. They felt there were insufficient measurable targets and concerns were also expressed that their views had not been sufficiently taken into account when Cabinet approved the 2020/21 Delivery Plan.
33. At this review in October 2021, the Committee noted that business as usual items had been removed from the Delivery Plan and while some concerns remained about a disparity in the way different parts of the document were written, it was nonetheless in their view, an improvement on previous iterations.
34. A new Delivery Plan, for the 2022/23 year, was then taken to the March 2022 meeting. The Committee noted that actions had costed, measurable objectives and recommended the document to Cabinet for approval.

Medium Term Financial Strategy and Budget

35. The full suite of budget papers were presented to the Committee in February 2022, prior to Cabinet and full Council. These papers included the Medium term Financial Strategy, Commercial Strategy, Housing Revenue Account, Capital Programme and General Fund Budget.
36. Among the key matters Committee Members discussed with the Portfolio Holder Cllr Hargreaves and senior officers were staff recruitment and resilience issues, proposed Council Tax and rent increases and the need to increase income and reduce expenditure in the coming years. The Committee voted to recommend the budget to Cabinet.

Local Plan

37. In 2021/22 the Committee continued to scrutinise the process of getting a new Local Plan in place. Quarterly meetings consider project management progress reports to ensure the process is on track as well as feeding into the update to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.
38. The Scrutiny Committee reviews the four elements of the Project Management system at each quarterly meeting and asks questions of the Local Plan Manager. This process then allows the Committee the opportunity consider each quarterly update to Government about progress. The approach also enables the Committee to suggest any further action that the Council may wish to take to ensure the local plan is delivered on time in accordance with the Council's objectives. In this respect the Committee has adopted the style of a 'critical friend' in overseeing the Local Plan process.

39. The Local Plan Project Management system was agreed by Scrutiny Committee in early October 2021. The four quarterly meetings this year are summarised below:
- In June 2021, the Quarter 1 Project Management Report was considered. At that time there were 389 live tasks in the Project Plan and the overall status of the project was assessed as 'amber' subject to the successful procurement of the evidence base to support the plan and action being taken to address staff recruitment (posts which were later successfully filled). The Committee also noted the LPLG and Cabinet actions to consider the emerging vision, objectives, and preliminary outline strategy for the plan.
 - In September 2021, the Quarter 2 Project Management Report was considered. At that time live tasks had increased to 559 with overall status assessed as 'amber'. At that time, the main risks related to changes in senior staff at the Council (these posts were subsequently filled) and the appropriate briefing of members. At this time, a minor (8 week) change to the Local Plan timetable was agreed by the committee. This related to allowing members more time to review the emerging regulation 18 Local Plan.
 - In December 2021, the Quarter 3 Project Management Report was considered. At that time live tasks had increased to 831 with overall status assessed as 'amber'. At that time, Council budget pressures, had increased the risks of plan delivery (these subsequently reduced as increased budgetary certainty for the Local Plan was achieved) and risks around the work on the development options to inform the plan were discussed.
 - In March 2022, the Quarter 4 Project Management Report was considered. At that time live tasks had reduced to 722, as more tasks were completed than started while approaching the regulation 18 consultation. The overall status was assessed as 'amber', with the main risks being identified around the identification of the preferred option(s) for inclusion in the plan, completion of evidence in a timely manner, and recruitment to posts in the team. A further minor adjustment to the Local Plan timetable was agreed, of approximately 4 weeks, this was to allow time to explore variations on the emerging strategy and to ensure that the Council had the time to produce the best Local Plan it could.
40. Scrutiny Committee is intended to focus on the process elements of the Local Plan, while the Local Plan Leadership Group makes recommendations to Cabinet on the policy content of the plan.