

Members Report to Council

16th January 2026

Councillor – Jo Rust Cabinet Member for – People and Communities

For the period - 14th January – 16th March 2026

Progress on Portfolio Matters. –

Creating Communities

There's often a strong focus on our urban communities and our rural communities are left with an impression that their residents are less important, which is, of course, not true. So, I was pleased to take part in a Rural Communities Grant Panel where decision were made about which rural communities would benefit from the fund. The fund successful application had to demonstrate how they provided some new and not merely a like for like replacement and how it contributed towards building their community and what gap it might fill. Sports for women and girls were a part of the focus for some bids – the men and boys' element having been covered for many years. As were accessibility to widen participation. Providing facilities to enable rural residents to get out, active and socialising were also popular. The applications were well written and I'm grateful to have been able to take part and help decide which would be the successful bids and know that they were going to help improve lives for those in the rural communities and their visitors.

I attended some really interesting and thought-provoking training at the end of January which was called Communicating for Cohesion. It looked at the breakdown in expression over how we talk about people who weren't born in our country and trying to understand why those who use unkind references might do that. As well as understanding why for some, erecting flags on lampposts was considered the right thing to do. There were no simple or straightforward answers, but it was useful to give greater consideration to the views of those who one might not agree with. For me, and my learning style, I missed not being able to take notes! It was a very interactive session, designed to get us up and moving and using post it notes to capture our thoughts, which left me no opportunity to write them down for me to refer back to!

We held a joint away day with the cabinet and exec team of Breckland council. If we do succeed in being granted a three unitary model, we'll be working together to create a new community across the districts and so this was a much needed gathering. While their cabinet is less independent minded than ours I got the strong impression that their focus is the same – in

getting the very best results for their residents regardless of what model we have.

Food for thought has been commissioned by the Hanseatic Union to run a series of courses for the migrant community in our area. I attended one session at the Beacon Church which was well attended and well received. This really helps to bring people together over food and builds community cohesion. Later that evening I attended a service to commemorate the anniversary of the start of the war in Ukraine and saw some of the same people in attendance.

Partnerships with Health

We received an update from the North West Anglia Acute Hospitals Trust exec – Micheel Arrowsmith and Lesley Dwyer. Unfortunately, we know now that the QEH will enter the National Provider Improvement Programme to help structure the improvement and support programme for the most challenged trusts. Escalation was expected given the scale and the duration of the QEH's operational and governance challenges. In addition to this, the maternity and neonatal department have been reviewed, and the interim report reflects the national themes. The full report is due in Spring 2026. The staff survey will be released on the 12th March and the expectation is that the results will be poor.

Housing and Homelessness

I attended an online event called Homes and Health. We already know the link between poor quality housing and poor health and that declining health and health inequality is an existential threat to the NHS. It's in part, for these reasons that our area took the step to become a Marmot place to try to address this. I learnt that the proportion of households in non-decent homes is higher in poorer areas, but surely that would come as no surprise to anyone. Private renters are more likely to live in non-decent homes, which is why building our own stock of homes for the PRS is so important, because those that we've built in partnership with Lovells are of a very high standard and will enable our residents to have a better quality of life. Our housing system was built to be inherently racist and this now means that people from a minority group are more likely to live in poorer housing and thus have more hospital admissions. 15 million people in the UK live in home with damp and mould and 80% of older owner occupiers live in non-decent homes. Only 8% of older owner occupiers have adaptations, which highlights the importance of the work that our care and repair team undertake for residents. This can make a difference between one of our residents living comfortably and in good health independently or being forced to go into care. Decent homes have been shown to save the NHS £780 million a year. So, the more our own council can do in this regard, the more our residents and our struggling QEH will reap rewards. It was observed that too few new builds are built to the M4(2) Category 2 (Accessible and Adaptable Dwellings) standard. This standard for new builds requires features that allow for easy, long-term adaptation for people with reduced mobility. They include step-free access, 850mm minimum door widths, reinforced bathroom walls for wall grab rails

and wheelchair accessible, entrance levels. Currently just ¼ of new homes have been built to that standard. It reinforces the need for us to work in partnership with the developers in our area and bring pressure to bear on them to get it right. But as it'll add extra costs, and developers run on making money, it's not easy. This makes our positive working relationship with Lovells, even more important.

The average asking price for homes in the east of England now stands at £371,699 and only 99 properties available to let are affordable at LHA.

I attended an LGA round table event on getting ready for bids for the social and affordable homes programme which provided information about the £27.3 billion allocated to Homes England over a 10-year programme to deliver 300,000 homes across the country. 60% of these homes will be for social rent tackling the needs for a continued mixed tenure approach. The programme has 2 national priorities – to maximise the delivery of social and affordable homes in order to support the gov'n's commitment of 1.5 million homes over this parliament and to maximise the delivery of social rent with at least 70% of the homes. This programme will hopefully support our own local aims to eradicate homelessness. While we can build homes at pace, we also need to ensure that we get the design right so that homes which are built now are fit to use in 30 years' time – referring back to earlier in my report about needing more M4(2) category house that can be adapted for the needs of elderly residents. It was also acknowledged that sometimes social rents aren't actually affordable at the LHA rate because they're 80% of the market rate for rent.

Housing Standards

Our housing standards team are currently assessing the impact that the Renter's Rights Act will have on them and how many new burdens it will bring with it. This Act is designed to improve the situation for those in the PRS, which ties directly into the work we're doing around Marmot. While we always need and want to work positively with landlords to support them to improve below parr properties, we can prosecute and even enforce sale if need be. Introducing a Tenancy Relations Officer is important for both Housing Standards and Housing Options. There can be a considerable amount of work needed when undertaking inspections, whether that's for homes for the PRS or renewing HMO licences or for those applying for the first time. Housing Standards are the only housing team which undertake enforcement. The HS team delivered some training for us all as it's inevitable that we will be contacted by residents who are affected by the Act, whether they're tenants or landlords.

Beat Your Bills

Anglian Water gave councillors a briefing on the customer service line of work that they offer to vulnerable customers and how they can help and support them; either with financial struggles to pay their bills or the practical side of the service. There are discounted tariffs, assistance schemes and affordable payment plans available if people are finding it difficult to pay. There are also free priority services register which means AW can provide free practical

support such as help if your water goes off, bills in different formats, language preferences noted and used and help to nominate someone to manage your account. Please let your residents know and go to anglianwater.co.uk/priority or call on 0800 232 1951 or whatsapp on 01522 341 343.

I have been to several, very well attended, Beat Your Bills sessions where the local residents expressed their appreciation of the information that they were given. All these is designed to assist our residents with managing their finances, remain in their own homes, and stay warm and healthy. The sessions have been held in a variety of different village locations including East Winch, Feltwell and Bridge for Heroes.

Assets of Community Value and Bus Shelters

Nothing to report

Healthier Lives strategy

I link our recent tour with the STARS team with healthier lives because this is about sustainable transport and regeneration to encourage more people to walk and cycle into town and to achieve net zero goals by 2030. By creating better and more direct links for pedestrians and cyclists the hope is to improve the environment for them making it easier to walk or bike. Encouraging people out of their cars will be hard, but we all know it needs to be done, well, you do if you ever get stuck in one of our frequent gridlocked traffic jams. This will also reduce the carbon emissions blighting our atmosphere. It's been proven that doing more physical activity of any sort and enjoying better air quality sees us less likely to need to use the NHS so there's less stress on the system. I'm a long-standing cyclist but this winter I've been using my car for more frequently. Now spring is on the way I look forward to going back to my bike.

I attended an online event called Introduction to Systems Leadership. It sounds very dry but essentially looked at how we can change the current system that we operate under to encourage more people to get up and to be active in any way, shape or form because currently 30% of adults are inactive. 10% of adults in Breckland live in 20% of the most deprived communities, meaning that doing things differently is vital to improve the life chances of our communities. For years we've been investing in physical activity, but nothing has changed, so we've wasted millions of pounds. Another reason we need to operate a different type of system. We're working with stubborn inequalities that affect the least active areas in our communities. We need to create the conditions that will enable things to change by understanding and considering all the layers or factors that affect the situation we're hoping to influence. Locally, we've got LGR, a new QEH on the horizon (as distant as that might seem right now) an amazing new library (which some residents are getting inexplicably angry and irate about!) and residents blame "the council" for everything. We also have poverty, climate change, polarisation, town centre decline (although we've got a plan to help reverse that!) and some people are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer.

Rather than looking at the government and their decisions, we're blaming others for the problems – effectively punching down. To make changes we need to consider who it is that our communities trust, what's happening in my area right now and what does it feel like. We know that there are layers in a system – the individual, their social environment, organisations and institutions, the physical environment, policies and then the outer layers are focused on cultural norms and ideologies. These all shape what we do and how we access things like physical activity and even, if we want to! For example, while we, an organisation, want people to use buses – public transport, not every bus stop has a bus shelter. If we provided more bus shelters (we're working on it with BSIP money) and better timetable information (we now use QR codes for those who have phones) we might change the underuse of buses. Even better would be to offer free bus passes or reduced bus fares. Following on from this training I also attended a Life Course Approach to Tackling Inequality. We know that this is a significant issue in our area, with those in North Wootton living 10 years more than their neighbours in North Lynn. We also know that women have lower levels of physical activity than men, with many dropping out of formal sports in their teenage years and then not taking it up again due to periods, childbirth, childcare, then menopause. We discussed the need for health visitors to discuss the physical activity needs of Mother's and not solely focus on the health of the newborn. If that interaction was changed maybe mothers would feel encouraged to do some activity. In a Lancashire job centre the staff changed to interaction. The layout was redesigned, making tea and coffee available for claimants and reducing the form filling. The focus moved to wellbeing, and they did walking coach sessions. It improved the wellbeing of the job seekers and fewer people became long term unemployed as a result. In another area they establish an active Madrassah and embedded physical activity into the curriculum enabling 10,000 children to become active. These examples demonstrate that by changing our approach – not doing what we've always done in the way we've always done it, produces different results. I'm confident that our area can also adopt a different approach, so we no longer waste millions of pounds on unsuccessful activity programmes. If you have ideas for new approaches which support the specific needs of your communities, please let me know.

Youth

I attended an event at the Corn Exchange hosted by the DWP to showcase all the apprenticeship, learning and training opportunities that there are in our community for young adults. It was attended by over 800 people and there were over 50 stalls showing business and organisations and what they have to offer. The event had a real buzz and the people looking for those opportunities gave such positive feedback on the event. I know that Sam and Hayley from the DWP put in so much effort, supported by other team members and those participating organisations. This all helps to increase aspiration by providing information about chance that they didn't know about.

I attended a scooter event at Lynnsport, where YouTube sensation Spanner, showed of this scootering skills. The place was packed full of young people on their own scooters homing in their own talents and skills. It was genuinely an amazing event with over 400 young people, along with their parents, present. The young people were using huge amounts of energy on their tricks and it demonstrates that if you can find the right interest, physical activity is for everyone.

Safeguarding

While our White Ribbon accreditation doesn't sit fully under safeguarding, it is one of the steps our council is taking to ensure that our staff and our residents can live free from fear of domestic abuse and violence. We are introducing more training, toolkits and programme to support eradicating this and it's far more than merely wearing the pin on our lanyards. Suffice to say our organisation is actively looking to strengthen the action we're taking regarding this.

Customer relations and CIC

It was good to see and to take part in the launch of our values and behaviours, following some training recently. This was launched at the staff conference with staff and elected members being able to participate in what our behaviours should now look like following on from agreement over what our values are. This will help further strengthen our internal working relationships and enable us to deliver better services to our residents, which is that whole purpose of what we do.

The CIC team gave us an excellent briefing before full council at the end of January. We could clearly see how some of our systems make accessing information or services so much harder for our residents. And some of it is absolutely unnecessary.

I attended some scrutiny training in March. We have a further session n booked for April 2nd and I urge you all to attend. Thew fist session was so well delivered and incredibly clear that it really helped me focus on why effective scrutiny is a fundamental part of what we do. We all want to drive improvement in public services and impactful recommendation that will shape what we do to the benefit of our communities and residents are the way to do this.

Forthcoming Activities and Developments.

RISE update
Health and Wellbeing Partnership meeting
KLAC
Active Norfolk Meeting

Meetings Attended and Meetings Scheduled

Portfolio briefings – Health and Wellbeing

Portfolio Briefings – CIC
Portfolio Briefing - Housing
Full Council
Lynnsport Kaset event with YouTube sensation - Spanner
Health and wellbeing partnership meetings (monthly)
E&C
Freebridge briefing
Communicating for Cohesion & follow up meeting online
Joint Group Meetings
Cabinet/special cabinet/cabinet sifting/Cabinet Briefings
Food for Thought
Homelessness and housing delivery briefing
ICB at NCC
ICS District Meeting
ICS Conference
KLAC
West Norfolk Community Transport meeting
Health and Wellbeing Board event
Housing standards and ASB portfolio meeting
Leisure facilities meeting
LGA training - various
Planning Training
West Norfolk Community Transport
Raising Skills and Aspirations
CIL Briefing
Values and Behaviours briefing
Active Norfolk
QEH management meeting
Apprenticeship event planning meeting
PMO briefing.
Transformation Board
Launch of Five Dinners
Rural Communities Grants Panel
Homes and Health Briefing
Tours of Stars
Budget Scrutiny Training
Scrutiny Training
CMR – meeting and school performance
Staff conference
Staff awards ceremony
All member briefing from Anglian Water
KLCF
YAB meeting
Tour of new Library
Mayor's Award Evening
Housing delivery strategy meeting
North Lynn boxing club visit
Carer's Voice
QEH briefing
Beat Your Bills

Ground-breaking ceremony
Housing Standards training on the RRA
Renter's Rights briefing
Joint Cabinet away day
Audit
Planning Training
LGA roundtable SAHP