

**MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Minutes of the Meeting of the **MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held at the Council Chamber, Mid Suffolk District Council Offices, High Street, Needham Market on Thursday, 14 September 2017

**PRESENT:**

Councillors:	Rachel Eburne - Chair	Elizabeth Gibson-Harries
	Derek Osborne - Vice Chairman	Wendy Marchant*
	James Caston	Kevin Welsby
	Lavinia Hadingham	

\*denotes a substitute

**In attendance:**

Councillor Jill Wilshaw  
Assistant Director – Law and Governance  
Corporate Manager – BMBS  
Corporate Manager – Housing Options  
Project and Research Officer  
Governance Support Officer

37 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/SUBSTITUTIONS**

An apology of absence was received from Councillors John Field and Lesley Mayes.

Councillor Wendy Marchant was substituting for Councillor Mayes.

38 **TO RECEIVE ANY DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY OR NON-PECUNIARY INTEREST BY MEMBERS**

There were no declarations of interests.

39 **TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 17 AUGUST 2017**

The minutes of the meeting held on the 17 August 2017 be confirmed as a correct record with the following amendment:

Page 4, paragraph two from the bottom of the page to read: .....The Strategic Director said that it was not possible to make this comparison, as the Council was not a profit- making operation and worked within different parameters than an organisation in the private sector.

40 **TO RECEIVE NOTIFICATION OF PETITIONS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE COUNCIL'S PETITION SCHEME**

None received.

## MOS/17/12 REVIEW OF VOIDS

Councillor Rachel Eburne informed Members that voids had been before the Committee in February 2016, but there had been substantial changes to the voids procedures and processes, including the formation of Babergh and Mid Suffolk Maintenance Service (BMBS), and that the Committee was now scrutinising these to ensure they benefitted the void management process.

Sue Lister, Corporate Manager – Housing Options, began by saying that the void management for Mid Suffolk District Councils in 2015 – 2016 had been 42 days, but that this had improved to 35 days in 2016 -2017, including major repairs and hard to let properties. To continue to reduce void times improvements and operational changes had been made, including:

- An integrated IT system;
- Continuity in the working process for the trade teams for both Councils;
- A single IT platform for both Councils in December 2016.
- The introduction of Babergh and Mid Suffolk Maintenance Service (BMBS) in April 2017;

To implement all operational process and procedures would take time, to ensure that the working practices across both Councils were fully implemented and streamline.

Justin Newton-Wright, Corporate Manager for BMBS then explained that the complete overhaul of the procedures and processes for voids should have been put in place before BMBS was operational, however as this had not been the case the teams were working on updating these and provided a full repair service to both councils at the same time.

In response to Members' questions regarding the differences between the Target Reduction of Voids Times in Days (Appendix A) for Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, the Officers explained that there existed differences in the workings of the teams and supervisory impetus, but also locations of depots and distances in the community had an impact on the Target Reduction.

It was established that currently the Mid Suffolk District team was working from Stowmarket but once the Council Offices were closed the main depots were to be at Creting Road in Stowmarket and Great Wenham in Babergh District

Table 8, page 8 in the report, was clarified by the Corporate Manager – Housing Options. Each figure represented the time it took for a property with a particular kind of repair to be re-let, and the blue column was the average for all voids to be re-let.

The Corporate Manager – BMBS, then informed Members of the process of dealing with asbestos in an empty property in accordance with the Health and Safety procedures. It involved the co-ordination of outside contractors to conduct the survey, testing for asbestos and the possible removal of asbestos, which lengthen the time it took to re-let the property.

Once a property was empty a pre-determination review was conducted and this

currently took longer than the target time of 48 hours. This area was identified as the prime reason for the increase for void times in the first quarter of 2017 – 2018 and work was ongoing to reduce the time to organise this aspect of the void process. Members were advised that two surveys were conducted as part of the pre-determination review, a Repair and Demolish survey (R & D survey) and a management survey. These surveys were kept on record and could provide information for other similar houses, but new surveys always had to be conducted in accordance with Health and Safety Regulations.

Members then asked if the purchases of private properties had any effect on voids and if it was possible for BMBS to maintain the standard required for tenants in these properties. The Officer explained that the Property Service team only purchased houses that met with the required standards for tenant housing. Some private houses had fittings, which were acceptable and these were left until repairs were necessary and then replaced with standard fittings.

Clarification regarding voids for Sheltered Houses was made as the location and circumstances of these properties sometimes determined the time it took to re-let them.

The officers continued to answer questions and said that records were kept of each stage in the void process and that the new void management system would improve the record keeping for the team. This would help to reduce the time properties were left empty or 'dwell' time before they could be re-let. The combination of the new voids management system and the establishment of effective processes for pre-determination period would improve the turn-around time for voids.

The Committees then asked if examples from other Councils and Housing Associations were being examined, for example that repair work could be carried out before a tenant moved out. The response was that this could only be done in agreement with the tenant and that Health and Safety Regulations dictate that an inspection could only be completed once a property was empty. The Council agreed with the tenant any repair work to be completed prior to the termination of the lease and the tenancy would only be terminated once the repair work was considered completed. Tenants had to remove any unauthorised changes or pay for the repair of unauthorised changes made to the property. Tenant alterations approved and inspected by the council, remained in the property after the termination of the tenant lease.

Some councils made agreements with new tenants about the repairs or improvements to be made before the tenant moved into a property and then completed these after the tenant had moved in. The Flagship Group had recently introduced this process as a new idea. This could improve voids but was not currently being operated in Mid Suffolk District Council, as it was considered more important to improve the timing of the pre-determination reviews.

Members asked how confident the officers were in achieving the targets set out on page 13 of the report and the Committee was assured that the target of 21 days for re-letting a property was achievable for 2019- 2020. All the changes currently taking place had a significant impact on void times. The Corporate Manager – Housing

Options enforced this, and said The Senior Leadership Team was of aware of the current increases in voids times in the first quarter of 2017- 2018, but that the Housing Revenue Account and the Business Plan included the predicted savings made by the introduction of BMBS and the changes to operations, processes and procedures which were reducing voids times.

Councillors Derek Osborne proposed and Councillor Elizabeth Gibson – Harries seconded the recommendations.

By a unanimous vote

### **RESOLVED**

1. *That the Committee has received assurances that appropriate steps are being taken to reduce void times and that the position be reported to Cabinet;*
2. *That the approach to reducing void times be endorsed;*
3. *That the performance against voids targets be monitored and that any underperformance be reported back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.*

#### 42 **MOS/17/13 INFORMATION BULLETIN**

The Information Bulletin is a document that is made available to the public with the published agenda papers. It can include update information requested by the committee as well as information that is service considers should be made known to the Committee.

This Information Bulletin contains updates on the following subjects:

1. Community Engagement

In the absence of Mike Evans – Strategic Director, Emily Yule – Assistant Director for Law and Governance, said that valuable lessons had been learnt from the recent projects.

#### 43 **MOS/17/14 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST**

Members were advised that the Forthcoming Decisions List had been updated to include a new report, 100% Business Retention Rates – Pilot, which was to go to Cabinet in October.

#### 44 **MOS/17/15 MSDC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY FORWARD PLAN**

Members discussed various new topics for the forward Plan including:

- Local plan in relation to the lack of suitable land for housing and the over availability of employment land;
- Staff welfare in relation to whether the Cabinet were to discuss this.

The topic of Community Grants was moved to November.

The business of the meeting concluded at 10.45 a.m.

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Chair