

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD IN COUNCIL CHAMBER, COUNCIL OFFICES, CORKS LANE, HADLEIGH ON MONDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2017

PRESENT: Barry Gasper (Chairman)

Clive Arthey
Peter Burgoyne
Bryn Hurren

Alastair McCraw
Fenella Swan

24 **SUBSTITUTES AND APOLOGIES**

An apology of absence was received from Councillor Melanie Barrett.

25 **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

Councillors Barry Gasper and Clive Arthey declared non-pecuniary interests for Item 5 as they were both landlords.

26 **CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 24 JULY 2017 - TO FOLLOW**

The minutes for the meeting held on 24 July 2017 had been forwarded to Members prior to the meeting.

The minutes for the meeting held on the 24 July 2017 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

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

None received.

28 **BOS/17/8 VOID TIMES IN COUNCIL PROPERTIES**

Sue Lister, Corporate Manager – Housing Options, introduced Paper BOS/17/18 and began by informing Members that void times in 2015/16 were 43 days, but they were reduced 29 days in 2016/17. The void times included both major and standard repairs.

She continued that recently there had been some substantial changes, which included the integration of IT systems, a review of the trade teams, the introduction of a single IT platform in December 2016 and Babergh and Mid Suffolk Building Services (BMBS) in April. Continuity in working practices across the two councils were also being established, along with allocation of new roles within the teams, and therefore it was taking time for the teams to be fully operational.

Members asked where the BMBS teams were to be based and Justin Newton – Wright, Corporate Manager – BMBS, said the main depot in Babergh District would be at Great Wenham, which maximised efficiency for the teams working in this area, although teams could also be sent to other locations if needed. The base for Mid Suffolk District was to be situated at Creting Road in Stowmarket.

Some Members asked if BMBS' vans were leased and if this was more cost efficient than for the Council to maintain its own vans. The officer responded that it was far more cost effective to lease the fleet, and that the cost was included in the business plan for the Housing Revenue Account. The cost was also detailed in the business plans for BMBS, which was currently undergoing a revision, but once completed the Corporate Manager would provide the cost for leasing the vans to the Committee.

Members wanted to know why properties selected for sale took so long to be sold. The response was that this depended on the property market and that properties put on the property market were often in need of substantial repair, which could make them less attractive to potential buyers. However, until recently the main reason had been the committee cycle process, which had delayed the sales. Further questioning on the average time, it took to sell a property, resulted in that the officer was to provide this information to Members.

It was established that the 2016/17 void times of 29 days had not been possible to maintain in the first quarter of 2017/18 and were likely to remain higher in the second quarter of 2017/18 too. This was due to the lengthy process of conducting asbestos surveys for properties, which could take up to 2 – 3 weeks to organise for the initial inspection. The Corporate Manager – BMBS explained that once a property became vacant, a predetermination survey for Refurbishment and Demolishing (R and D survey) was conducted in the empty property to determine if any asbestos was present. This was the correct Health and Safety procedure, and only proper sampling and testing of potential asbestos could determine if the property was safe.

The Corporate Manager – BMBS said that the Flagship Group had produced new voids procedures and at the end of a tenancy lease, the Council made a visit to determine which repairs the tenant was responsible for. Once an agreement was reached, a deadline was set for the tenant to complete repairs. Minor repair work to be completed by the Council was conducted, whilst the new tenant was living in the property. This part of the process reduced void times considerably because the property was only likely to be empty for a short time. Only the Health and Safety checks were conducted in an empty property as stipulated by the Health and Safety law. It was noted that not all properties were suitable for the new procedure.

The Corporate Manager – BMBS, informed the Committee that the challenge with this new procedure was to manage tenants' expectations, as many new tenants expected all repair work to be finished by the time they moved in.

Councillor Jan Osborne, Cabinet Member for Housing, confirmed the expectations of tenants. It was the priority for not just BMBS and the Housing Options team but also for Gavin Fisk, Assistant Director – Housing, and herself to identify ways to reduce both voids times and tenants' expectations.

She ensured the Committee that the void figures would be reduced, but that the services needed some time to adjust to all the recent changes.

Some Members felt that to be confident that void times were going to be reduced, they needed all the questions answered, which had been generated in the scoping exercise. They felt that they needed to be able to understand the process for the current void times and that the processes and procedures put in place for voids were going to reduce the void times. They requested that the void times were reviewed in six months' time.

Members continued to debate voids times and the officers explained what kind of actions were being taken to reduce voids times including:

- A business analysis undertaken in co-operation with Suffolk County Council;
- Evaluation of the outcome from various void working groups;
- The new IT system on which process mapping was logging the void process with detail and accuracy;
- Reduction of the time it took asbestos surveys to be conducted.

Both members and officers agreed that the target time for voids of 21 days, was manageable.

Emily Yule, Assistant Director - Law and Governance, advised the Committee they could propose an amended set of recommendations if the Committee felt that reduction of void times was an on-going process.

New recommendations were proposed by Councillor Bryn Hurren and seconded by Councillor Alastair McCraw.

By a unanimous vote.

RESOLVED

1.1 That the Committee has received assurances that appropriate steps are still being taken to reduce void times and that the position be reported to Cabinet.

1.2 That the performance against void targets be monitored and be reported back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

1.3 That a member of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be appointed to work with the Cabinet Member for Housing and the Assistant Director for Housing to monitor progress with developing the process documents for reducing void times.

BOS/17/9 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

Mike Evans, Strategic Director, was unable to attend the meeting.

Members discussed the Community Engagement bulletin and it was generally felt that the 0300 number's response time of one to two minutes was still too long, although it was improving, and that more training for the staff was required.

Some Members thought that Members were becoming disengaged with their electors due to the move to Endeavour House and the new ways of engaging with the public.

It was generally agreed by Members that the website had improved.

Members requested that quarterly updates on Community Engagement be provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee under the Information Bulletin.

Councillor Peter Burgoyne provided a response to an action taken concerning a deficit in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), which then became a surplus at the end of the four-year period for the HRA. The action was raised at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 19 June 2017 for The Housing Revenue Account 30 Year Business and Finance Plan Update 2017. He said that the business model used for the four-year business plan had created a surplus at the end of that period, as the production of Council properties was terminated at the end of the same period in the business model. It was this, which created the surplus. However, once the building of Council properties continued this surplus in the HRA would disappear by 2020.

Councillor Barry Gasper provided an update on the Council's risk assessments provided in reports. To provide an auditable trail for these the Senior Leadership Team had agreed to provide agendas and minutes from their meetings and make these available internally to Members and staff.

BOS/17/10 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST

Emily Yule, Assistant Director – Law and Governance, advised Members that the purpose of including the Forthcoming Decisions List in the Overview and Scrutiny Agenda was to enable the Committee to decide on which forthcoming decisions to scrutinise before they went to Cabinet.

She also explained the procedure for Call-ins for Cabinet decisions and that an item on the Forthcoming Decisions List could be delayed, if the Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested an item be scrutinised.

Members decided that the Public Realm Transformation Project report should be added to the Overview and Scrutiny Forward Plan for October and that Councillor Alastair McCraw should undertake a scoping exercise with Peter Garratt, Corporate Manager – Public Realm.

By a unanimous vote

RESOLVED

- 1. That the Public Realm and Transformation Project be added to the Overview and Scrutiny Forward Plan in October.**
- 2. That Councillor Alastair McCraw together with the Corporate Manager – Public Realm undertake a scoping exercise of the Public Realm and Transformation Project prior to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 23 October 2017**

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BOS/17/11 BDC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY FORWARD PLAN

Ben Staines, Project and Research Officer presented the Overview and Scrutiny Forward Plan and the following changes were noted:

- The report on Community Grants was moved to December and the item was to be presented as an Information Bulletin;
- A new report from the Assistant Director – Corporate Resources on the use of temporary and interim staff was added to the Forward Plan in November;
- The report on Supporting Business Growth was moved to December and to include the results from Business Survey conducted in 2016;
- A review of CIFCO was added to the Forward Plan for January 2018;
- Suggestion for two reports from the SLT on staff welfare, absences, sick leave and the cost of moving to Endeavour House were added to the Forward Plan in March 2018, but the Chairman would discuss these reports with the Chairman for Overview and Scrutiny for Mid Suffolk District Council at the next Joint Chair and Vice-Chair Meeting on 25 October 2017.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 11.42 a.m.

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Chairman