

MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of the **MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held at the Council Chamber, Council Offices, High Street, Needham Market on Thursday, 20 July 2017

PRESENT:

Chairman: Councillor Rachel Eburne
Vice Chairman: Councillor Derek Osborne

Councillors: James Caston
Suzie Morley
Kevin Welsby

In attendance:

Assistant Director – Governance and Law
Corporate Manager – Tenant Services
Corporate manager – Homeless Prevention and Older Persons
Corporate Manager – Business Improvement (Corporate)
Corporate Manager – Internal Audit
Homelessness Officer Leader
Project Officer (BS)
Governance Support Officer (VL/RC)

19 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Suzie Morley was substituting for Councillor Lavinia Hadingham. An apology for absence was received from Councillors John Field, Elizabeth Gibson-Harries and Lesley Mayes.

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

There were no declarations of interests.

21 MOS/17/5 TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 15 JUNE 2017

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 June 2017 be confirmed as a correct record.

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

None received.

23 MOS/17/6 OUTSTANDING ITEMS FROM JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETINGS 2016/17

The Project and Research Officer updated the Committee on the current status of items reviewed previously but not marked complete so that a decision could be made on whether they should be added to the Forward Plan for further consideration.

Fuel Poverty – he advised that Suffolk County Council (SCC) had accessed two funds, one targeting those who would benefit from central heating and the Green Deals Communities Fund. Information regarding who would benefit from central heating installation was provided by partner organisations, eg GP practices and hospitals, and the criteria for eligibility assessed. He understood that a number of households in Mid Suffolk had received a grant from this source but SCC, who was administering the scheme in Suffolk, had not provided details. The Green Deals Fund focused less on fuel poverty but had been accessed by some for better, cheaper heating and could be used as a gateway to various sources of funding. It was noted that the issue should be a consideration in all Council policies and steps should be taken to ensure that those in fuel poverty were considered in all new policies and steps taken re mitigation. Although the Scrutiny Committee recommendations had been delegated to the Programme Steering Boards (PSB) by the Executive Committee it had not been possible to find out any outcomes. It was agreed that an update should be provided by the appropriate PSB Lead Member or Officer.

Supporting Business Growth – It was noted that this issue was not currently moving forward or being dealt with elsewhere in the Council. The Corporate Manager – Open for Business had given an insight into the Open for Business Plan but it was felt that more time was needed to assess how this was working. It was agreed that an item should be added to the Forward Plan for the Committee to look at how Business Rate retention could be maximised and how growth of micro-businesses could be supported.

Community Grants – the Corporate Manager – Strong Communities was unable to attend the meeting to give an update. Members felt that grants had been considered on several occasions and that there was no need for a further review.

Planning Appeals – The Corporate Manager – Planning and Sustainable Growth was unable to attend the meeting and Members requested an update at the next meeting.

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SCOPING FOR HOMELESS/ BED AND BREAKFAST ACCOMMODATION REVIEW

The Corporate Manager – Homeless Prevention and Older Persons gave a detailed presentation on the work undertaken by the Team dealing with the homeless issue. She clarified the legal statutes that the Council had to work within and the timescale for dealing with an application for homelessness.

She advised the Committee that the major concern was the proposed introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018 which was likely to increase the workload significantly. Although the Council would not have to provide accommodation for all those claiming homelessness it would have to draw up a

meaningful action plan to mitigate the situation and then have regular contact with the person(s) and review the plan. Following a set period of time if the situation was not resolved then the person(s) would be deemed homeless and the Council would be expected to find them accommodation, if it is believed they met the threshold for the interim accommodation duty.

There is a new 'refer' duty under the Homeless Reduction Act, which potentially increases the workload further as a number of statutory organisations (a definitive list is still to be confirmed) would have to refer cases where they believed they were at risk of becoming homeless.

The benefit cap and introduction of Universal Credit, which was to be rolled out to all claimants in Mid Suffolk in February next year, was expected to result in a major increase in those unable to pay their rent. The freezing of the Local Housing Allowance (Housing Benefit) rates was already having an adverse impact on households trying to access the private rented sector.

The team was actively working to minimise the effects of the introduction of the Act in various ways including looking at ways to increase the private sector rental offer; trying to increase the temporary accommodation offer; and introduction of a scheme where a single person could rent a room in a house, with the tenant matched to the landlord, and with the rent assessed to ensure it was tax free.

A joint bid with West Suffolk had resulted in funding that was being used to employ an Officer who worked with rough sleepers to try and help find them suitable and sustainable accommodation and also to prevent the situation occurring. Some of the funding would also be used to look at how the Council could 'map' a pathway with other agencies for rough sleepers and review what was offered to clients under the 'Severe Weather Emergency Protocol'.

A County wide bid for monies to help those suffering from domestic abuse would enable the Councils to identify three properties from within its own stock (across Babergh and Mid Suffolk) to use as emergency accommodation for those feeling domestic abuse. The person or household would be offered intensive support from Anglia Care Trust and Bury St Edmunds Women's Aid.

She tabled homeless statistics for the years 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17 together with details of the numbers of families placed in bed and breakfast accommodation and the costs, and cases where homelessness was prevented by appropriate intervention. In respect of the use of bed and breakfast accommodation it was noted that overall the figures for the last three years had gone down and that the Mid Suffolk figures were much lower than the national average. It was noted that bed and breakfast accommodation was only used as a last resort.

Concern was expressed regarding the team's ability to cope with the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act. The Officer advised that a business case was being prepared to increase the team by 4.5 full time equivalent posts. The team was also currently undertaking additional work managing temporary accommodation which could actually be managed more effectively by a specific post, which would free up more time for Officers to work on homelessness prevention.

Members discussed the information provided and questioned Officers on various aspects including:

- How more short term accommodation could be procured eg hostel – A number of temporary accommodations were available. A balance had to be achieved between providing sufficient accommodation and costs eg hostel accommodation or flats/houses might not be filled permanently against bed and breakfast which was only paid for when necessary
- Location of bed and breakfast accommodation – None was available in Mid Suffolk. Ipswich accommodation was used when necessary.
- Number of beds available in temporary accommodation – Sufficient to accommodate thirteen households
- Duration of stay in temporary accommodation – Time varied but the number of vacancies arising through the Gateway to Homechoice affected this
- Expected increase in homeless cases following introduction of the Bill – Previously only those whose homelessness was prevented or if a homeless application was taken were recorded for statistical purposes rather than the actual number of cases the team dealt with. The team has started to record this though and would have a more accurate figure later in the year

The Committee discussed the information provided and agreed that it was confident that the work being undertaken to reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation was good and no review was necessary and this would be reported to the Cabinet.

It was felt that a more worthwhile piece of work would be to pre-scrutinise the steps being taken to prepare for the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act. It was proposed a review be undertaken in November and that other organisations who worked with Mid Suffolk residents, eg Citizens' Advice Bureau, should also be brought in to gain their views.

RESOLUTION

That a review of the work being undertaken in preparation for the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act be brought to the 16 November meeting

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DISCUSSION ON RISK AND PERFORMANCE AND WHERE THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE CAN ADD VALUE

Members were asked to consider whether there were any areas of performance and risk that they felt should be reviewed by the Scrutiny Committee.

The Corporate Manager – Business Improvement said that Programme Officers were working with the Assistant Directors and Portfolio Holders to refine the tracking and influencing performance measures and develop robust targets.

She advised that there were two areas that Scrutiny might like to consider: the process regarding the development of the performance framework and the content within the performance reports. It was necessary to ensure the process was robust;

that chosen indicators measured delivery of the Strategic Plan, that there were no gaps of significant information and appropriate targets were set. In addition the quarterly performance information on Connect, the published Facts and Stats and the half yearly reports to Cabinet could be used to identify any areas the Committee had concerns about. The highest areas on the Risk Register could be used as a focus to identify actions to mitigate risks. The relationship between performance and risk would be enhanced with this approach.

The Corporate Manager – Internal Audit said there was a clear correlation between risk and performance. As the Risk Register was refined the Audit Team would work with the Corporate Manager – Business Improvement to enhance the correlation between the two.

It was noted that Babergh District Council had allocated areas of interest to each Overview and Scrutiny Committee Member, who would then look at the Risk Register and advise the appropriate Cabinet Member if they felt an area should be scrutinised. It was suggested that the Red, Amber, Green ratings could be used with only red rated areas being looked at with a pre-scrutiny of the measures being used to address the problem.

Further suggestions of issues the Committee might look at included:

- How performance measures were determined
- Areas of poor performance and the connected risk
- Refining the tracking and performance indicators
- Comparison of the Risk Register and performance figures.

It was felt that as the Terms of reference for the Joint Audit and Standards Committee included ensuring robust risk management was in place the Overview and Scrutiny Committee could concentrate on performance.

Following discussion it was agreed that the Committee should monitor Cabinet decisions and put forward any issues it was felt required scrutiny. Also where an area was designated 'red' the Committee could decide if it required examination taking into account the risk level.

It was agreed that the Officers should report to the Committee again when the performance measures had been refined to ensure the correct measures were being monitored.

RESOLUTION

That a further report be brought to Committee when the performance measures had been refined

TRAINING UPDATE

The Assistant Director – Governance and Law advised that the draft training programme previously circulated to Members had now been given more detail by the Centre for Public Scrutiny and a full programme was now being drawn up. A 'toolkit'

was also being developed. It was noted that the estimated cost was less than expected and so well within the planned budget.

RESOLUTION

That the training programme be agreed

27 MOS/17/7 MSDC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY FORWARD PLAN

The Chairman advised that she had met with the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chairman and the following items had been raised for potential inclusion on the Forward Plan:

- Crime Prevention Strategy
- Investment Strategy
- Shared Legal Service
- Business Rates Retention.

The following items to be added to the Forward Plan:

Homelessness Reduction Act and associated issues – November
Process for Performance Management - October