

BABERGH AND MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCILS

Minutes of the meeting of the **JOINT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in the King Edmund Chamber, Endeavour House, 8 Russell Road, Ipswich on Monday, 20 December 2021

PRESENT:

Councillor: Keith Welham (Co-Chair)

Councillors: Melanie Barrett
John Field
David Muller
Keith Scarff

James Caston
Mary McLaren (Co-Chair)
Adrian Osborne

In attendance:

Councillor(s): Julie Flatman

Witness(es): Simon Clifton (Chief Officer – Citizens Advice Mid Suffolk)
Colleen Sweeny (Chief Officer – Sudbury and District Citizens Advice)

Officers: Communities Officer – Grant and Funding Practitioner (RE)
Senior Governance Officer (HH)
Governance Officer (BW)

Apologies:

Councillors: Terence Carter
Paul Ekpenyong
Jane Gould
Kathryn Grandon

116 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Dave Muller declared a local non-pecuniary interest in his capacity as a Trustee for Mid Suffolk Local Citizens Advice.

Councillor Keith Scarff declared a local non-pecuniary interest in his capacity as Mayor of Stowmarket.

117 JOS/21/19 TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 22 NOVEMBER 2021

It was RESOLVED: -

That the minutes of the meeting held on the 22 of November 2021 be confirmed as a true record.

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

None received.

119 QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

None received.

120 QUESTIONS BY COUNCILLORS

None received.

121 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST

The Forthcoming Decisions List was noted.

122 JOS/21/20 REVIEW OF LOCAL CITIZENS ADVICE

122.1 The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Sudbury) and The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Mid Suffolk) presented to the Committee outlining how the Local Citizens Advice (LCA) had adapted their services over the Covid-19 Pandemic.

122.2 Councillor Keith Scarff questioned the relationship between the LCA and the foodbanks and how the holistic approach of the LCA factored in. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Sudbury) responded that when the LCA made foodbank referrals they reviewed the individual's wider situation to determine what may be causing the issue. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Mid Suffolk) replied that details of individuals from the foodbanks could be passed to the LCA, so that they could follow up with the individual and do a review.

122.3 Councillor Keith Scarff queried the household support fund and how it was allocated. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Mid Suffolk) replied that during the pandemic emergency funding had been made available and the LCA had used this to help aid families. However, all funding from central Government had a timescale.

122.4 Councillor Keith Scarff queried whether Mid Suffolk District Council were doing anything about the timescales placed on funding. Councillor Julie Flatman responded that she would take this up with the Leader of the Council.

122.5 Councillor Melanie Barrett queried whether Sudbury LCA received any funding from Essex, as it was on the Essex Suffolk border and served Essex clients. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Sudbury) responded that the Sudbury LCA did not receive funding from Essex, however, the LCA was available to anyone and the LCAs saw people outside of their district area.

- 122.6 Councillor Melanie Barrett queried what other services the LCA provided to food bank referrals. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Sudbury) responded that the LCA provided budgeting advice and benefit checks to those referred by foodbanks.
- 122.7 Councillor John Field questioned how referrals between the LCA, and foodbanks dealt with potential data protection issues. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Mid Suffolk) replied that the LCA had a data sharing agreement with the foodbanks and received consent from the people using the LCA.
- 122.8 Councillor James Caston queried how regularly resource sharing had occurred. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Sudbury) responded that resource sharing was a rare occurrence, however, due to staff leaving during the pandemic Sudbury LCA had outsourced debt supervision to Ipswich LCA.
- 122.9 Councillor Mary McLaren queried how residents from rural areas accessed LCA services. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Sudbury) responded that LCA services had been in place in GP surgeries across the District before the pandemic, however the current way for greater access had been through digital access and email advice.
- 122.10 Councillor Melanie Barrett queried the maximum wait times for contact in relation to phone calls and emails. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Sudbury) responded that people had been called back and responded to on the same day, however, if an appointment was needed it was usually scheduled in the same week. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Mid Suffolk) replied that 83% of callers were answered on the first call and different queries have different time frames. First call for debt advice would be in the same week and calls for benefits advice would be in same week or the following week depending on the number of debt cases. Emails were responded to on the same day.
- 122.11 Councillor John Field questioned when the Virtual Services Project was likely to be delivered. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Mid Suffolk) responded that the project had been running in two locations in Mid Suffolk and that strategies had been developed based on what had worked. The virtual devices in parishes had helped residents to get online and allowed the LCA to monitor district data to see where there was a need for further support/advice
- 122.12 Councillor Keith Welham questioned the process for people who owed debts to multiple sources. The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Mid Suffolk) responded that the LCA found financial aid where possible. Also the LCA had been working with the Shared Revenue Partnership (SRP) to allow Council tax and housing benefit issued by SRP to be viewed jointly under a single view of debt, to see what an individual owed the Council as a whole.
- 122.13 Councillor Keith Welham queried whether the recommendation from the

previous Joint Overview and Scrutiny review of a rolling indexation funding of LCA had been discussed by Cabinet. Councillor Julie Flatman responded that this had not been adopted however, Mid Suffolk LCA had been given additional funding that had been redirected from the Citizens Advice Diss, Thetford and District LCA.

- 122.14 Councillor Keith Scarff queried the table on page 8 of the report referring to the three-year rolling funding programme and asked whether the discussion of funding for Citizens Advice Diss, Thetford and District had taken place. The Communities Officer - Grants and Funding Practitioner responded whilst there had been discussions earlier in the year there had not been any further updates. However, it had been determined that Citizens Advice Diss, Thetford and District no longer served Mid Suffolk.
- 122.15 Councillor John Field commented LCA provided a valuable service, however the issue of the SRP in relations to council tax debt and rent debt not being available collectively needed to be addressed rapidly.
- 122.16 Councillor Keith Scarff commented that the LCA presentation had been sufficient reassurance that there was help for residents to access services. However, the joint way of working for a single view of debt needed to be introduced at the earliest opportunity. He also suggested that an inflation increase for the funding for the LCA should go to Cabinet as part of the 3-year rolling plan. In addition, that the funding previously allocated to Diss, and Thetford went to the Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice instead. Further that that Overview and Scrutiny should review the LCA next year.
- 122.17 Councillor Melanie Barrett agreed with Councillor John Filed and commented that foodbanks needed resources for educational advice on nutrition, budgeting, and cookery skills classes.
- 122.18 Councillor Mary McLaren commented that Babergh should improve the level of debt advice, as it might not have been accessible to the whole district. She suggested an increase in funding to make debt advice more accessible, as it was specialist position.
- 122.19 Councillor James Caston commented that different funding and different areas were a concern, but that the LCA was extremely effective and well managed. He thought that Mid Suffolk District Council received value for money and taught people to make the most of what they had.
- 122.20 Members thanked the LCA officers for their work over the pandemic.
- 122.21 A short break was taken between 11:31-11:55am.
- 122.22 Members debated the issues, and the following suggestions were made:
- To thank the LCA Chief officers and their respective staff for the work that they have carried out in the last year. Particularly during the pandemic.

- That the Committee was reassured that both LCAs were operating effectively and efficiently.
- That the Councils took a single view of debt and implement an integrated system for dealing with housing rent, and council tax debt.
- That contact be made to foodbanks with a request that their clients were referred to the LCA for advice on nutrition and budgeting and cookery skills classes.
- That remote virtual operation capability for LCA and other bodies should be provided on an accelerated programme as a matter of urgency defining locations, IT equipment and applications, training, and connectivity.
- That Cabinets be asked to consider the previous resolution of Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee that the 3 year rolling funding arrangements review be subject to indexation on an annual review basis.
- That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the Local Citizens Advice in December 2022

122.23 Councillor Keith Scarff proposed the recommendations.

122.24 Councillor Dave Muller seconded this motion.

By a unanimous vote.

It was RESOLVED: -

- 1.1 To thank the LCA Chief officers and their respective staff for the work that they have carried out in the last year. Particularly during the pandemic.**
- 1.2 The Committee are reassured that both LCAs are operating effectively and efficiently and responded well to all questioning from Members.**
- 1.3 That the Councils take a single view of debt and implement an integrated system for dealing with housing rent, and council tax debt.**
- 1.4 That contact be made to foodbanks with a request that their clients are referred to the LCA for advice on nutrition and budgeting and cookery skills classes.**
- 1.5 Remote virtual operation capability for LCA and other bodies should be provided on an accelerated programme as a matter of urgency defining locations, IT equipment and applications, training, and connectivity.**
- 1.6 That Cabinets be asked to consider the previous resolution of Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee that the 3 year rolling funding arrangements review be subject to indexation on an annual review basis.**
- 1.7 That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the Local Citizens Advice in December 2022**

122.25 Councillor Keith Scarff proposed for the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee only:

Mid Suffolk Cabinet to confirm that funding previously allocated to Thetford and Diss LCA be allocated to Mid Suffolk LCA.

122.26 Councillor Dave Muller seconded this motion

122.27 The vote was put to the Mid Suffolk Members only

By a unanimous MSDC vote

It was RESOLVED : -

Mid Suffolk Cabinet to confirm that funding previously allocated to Thetford and Diss LCA be allocated to Mid Suffolk LCA.

122.28 Councillor Mary McLaren proposed for the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee only:

Recommendation to Babergh Cabinet that extra funding be provided to Sudbury Citizens Advice to enable greater provision for debt advice across the whole district.

122.29 Councillor Melanie Barrett seconded this motion.

122.30 The vote was put to the Babergh Members only:

By a unanimous BDC vote

It was RESOLVED : -

Recommendation to Babergh Cabinet that extra funding be provided to Sudbury Citizens Advice to enable greater provision for debt advice across the whole district.

123 JOS/21/22 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

It was RESOLVED: -

That with the following amendment the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan be noted and updated:

Information Bulletin on the cost of maintenance of tenanted properties.

124 JOS/21/23 MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

It was RESOLVED: -

That with the following amendment the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan be noted and updated

Information Bulletin on the cost of maintenance of tenanted properties.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 12:23pm.

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Chair