

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, 21 November 2022.

PRESENT:

Councillors:	Melanie Barrett	Terence Carter
	James Caston	Siân Dawson
	Paul Ekpenyong	Kathryn Grandon
	John Hinton (Co-Chair)	Robert Lindsay
	David Muller BA (Open) MCM	Adrian Osborne
	RAFA (Councillor)	
	Keith Scarff	Keith Welham (Co-Chair)

In attendance:

Councillor(s): Mary McLaren – Babergh Cabinet Member for Communities
Julie Flatman – Mid Suffolk Cabinet Member for Communities
Jan Osborne – Babergh Cabinet Member for Housing

Officers: Interim Director for Communities (DR)
Corporate Manager for Communities (VM)
Corporate Manager for Customer Services (SL)
Cost of Living Coordinator (ED)
Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Officer (JR)

Guests: Colleen Sweeney – Chief Officer for Sudbury Citizens Advice
Simon Clifton – Chief Officer for Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice

37 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTION

37.1 None received.

38 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

38.1 Councillor Muller declared an Other Registrable Interest in respect of Item Number JOS/22/23 due to being a member of the Trustee Board at Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice. However, the item under discussion did not directly relate to the finances or wellbeing of that interest or affect the finances or wellbeing of that interest to a greater extent than the majority of inhabitants. Therefore, Councillor Muller was not prevented from participating in the debate and vote in respect of this item.

38.2 Councillor Osborne declared that he was Babergh District Council's appointed observer for Sudbury Citizens Advice.

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

39.1 None received.

40 JOS/22/22 TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 24 OCTOBER 2022

40.1 It was resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on the 24th October were confirmed and signed as a true record.

41 QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

41.1 None received.

42 QUESTIONS BY COUNCILLORS

42.1 None received.

43 JOS/22/23 REVIEW OF LOCAL CITIZENS ADVICE AND THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

43.1 Councillor Mary McLaren - Babergh District Council's Cabinet Member for Communities – introduced the report to the Committee outlining before Members the role of the Communities department, the input from internal stakeholders, and thanked all Officers involved in the response to the Cost of Living Crisis.

43.2 The Interim Director for Communities presented the report to the Committee outlining before Members the progress made on the 5-Point Action Plan, including the employment of a Cost of Living Coordinator, that the 30% uplift to both Citizens Advice had been delivered, and that 66 referrals had been made and received via the Suffolk Warm Handover Scheme, the need for the 5-Point Action Plan to be iterative and flexible for the short-term future, and the future priorities to enhance community resilience.

43.3 The Chief Officers for Sudbury and Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice gave a short presentation to Members detailing the work undertaken by Citizens Advice in response to the Cost of Living Crisis, the overall increase in demand on their services, the types of short term support provided, the differences between the number of unique clients and the issues reported, increase in demand for support on benefits, tax credits, debt, utilities and food, the reduction in volunteer numbers, and the need to progress to a more integrated support system.

- 43.4 Councillor Welham questioned what the 30% uplift to both Citizens Advice had been spent on. The Chief Officer for Sudbury Citizens Advice responded that, for both Citizens Advice, the 30% uplift had been used to hire additional paid staff in order to meet increased demand on the service and that all spending is indexed regularly in a monitoring report.
- 43.5 Councillor Welham further questioned what 30% equated to for both Citizens Advice. The Chief Officers responded that for Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice this equated to £30,000 and for Sudbury Citizens Advice £20,000.
- 43.6 Councillor Welham queried if the amount of volunteer hours had decreased in line with the reduction in the number of volunteers. The Chief Officer for Sudbury Citizens Advice responded that both staff and volunteers are working increased hours in order to meet current demands and that overall, there has not been a decrease.
- 43.7 Councillor Ekpenyong questioned what the reason was for the decrease in the number of volunteers and what could be done to encourage more people to volunteer. The Chief Officer for Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice responded that there was a national reduction in the number of people volunteering due to the need to prioritise paid work and that attempts had been made to advertise volunteering for Citizens Advice.
- 43.8 Councillor Scarff raised whether it would be possible for a select few BMSDC Officers to also work for Citizens Advice to strengthen the integration between the two. The Chief Officer for Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice responded that integration is a top priority but that both Citizens Advice are limited financially and would not be able to fund such the concept themselves.
- 43.9 Councillor Muller questioned what support Citizens Advice were receiving from the Department for Work and Pensions. The Chief Officer for Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice responded that both Mid Suffolk and Sudbury are receiving very little support and that no statutory organisation has the responsibility to help people navigate the welfare benefits system.
- 43.10 Councillor Caston questioned how Citizens Advice ensured that users of their service are in receipt of all financial benefits they are eligible for. The Chief Officer for Sudbury Citizens Advice responded that a benefits check is offered and provided for every single client that uses Citizens Advice and they are then advised on what support they are potentially eligible for.
- 43.11 Councillor Carter queried what more Councillors and external bodies could do to support Citizens Advice. The Chief Officer for Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice responded that integrated working and the sharing of community intelligence would be crucial for the services that Citizens Advice provides to be effective.
- 43.12 Councillor Grandon queried the reasons for the increased number of people under 25 years old contacting Citizens Advice. The Chief Officer for Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice responded that post-COVID the demographic of people using the service had dramatically changed which was influenced by

an increase in care leavers, low minimum wages, and more difficulties accessing the benefits system. Single men under 25 years old were more disproportionately affected than any other group.

- 43.13 Councillor Lindsay questioned what “community supermarkets” entailed. The Corporate Manager for Communities responded that community supermarkets act as a stepping stone for users who no longer used food banks but using traditional supermarkets was not financially viable for them. The Councils had applied for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to set up a community supermarket in both Babergh and Mid Suffolk.
- 43.14 Councillor Ekpenyong questioned if Citizens Advice and the Councils could pre-empt issues, identify those at risk and provide them with proactive rather than reactive support. The Interim Director for Communities responded that the communities department analysed trends and worked closely with internal partners, such as housing and customer services, to identify individuals or groups who may potentially be at risk.
- 43.15 Councillor Dawson queried about the access to funding for people on pre-paid meters. The Chief Officer for Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice responded that vouchers are provided for people with pre-paid meters but that these cannot be used on non-smart meters or if you were a British Gas customer and that the vouchers can only be redeemed at Co-Op branches.
- 43.16 Councillor Dawson asked a further question concerning how residents accessed the vouchers and the funding they were entitled to. The Chief Officer for Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice responded that people could access funding through a local welfare assistance application and that a single person would receive £100 over a 6 month period.
- 43.17 Councillor Carter questioned the possibility of a mobile community supermarket to improve the accessibility of the service. The Corporate Manager from Communities responded that research would be undertaken into what has worked well for other districts and that the needs of residents across both districts would be assessed and taken into account.
- 43.18 Councillor Scarff questioned how much money would be distributed through the third allocation of the Household Support Grant and what this money would be spent on. The Cost of Living Coordinator responded that each district would receive £50,000 through the grant and this would be provided to our Tenant Support Officers who would distribute it on a discretionary basis.
- 43.19 Councillor Welham questioned what support was provided to those struggling with mortgages. The Cost of Living Coordinator responded that those with mortgages cannot be supported through the Household Support Grant but they were encouraged to contact Citizens Advice.
- 43.20 Councillor Carter queried if Ward Members should be contacted by Citizens Advice to facilitate an integrated approach for providing support. The Chief Officer for Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice responded that each client is

considered on a case by case basis and that if consent was given information could be provided to the appropriate Ward Member.

43.21 A short break was taken between 11:30am and 11:40am.

43.22 Members debated the item and discussed the following issues:

- The need for a more integrated approach between the Councils and Citizens Advice.
- The 30% uplift to Citizens Advice and the need to continue providing this funding.
- The proposed locations for community supermarkets and the potential lack of access for a majority of residents.
- Concerns for men under 25 who are contacting Citizens Advice.
- The need for more liaison between the Department for Work and Pensions, Job Centre Plus, and Citizens Advice.

43.23 Councillor Caston proposed the following recommendations:

- 1.1. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of the report and commends the work being undertaken in response to the Cost of Living crisis.
- 1.2. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee supports the 30% uplift to Local Citizens Advice and the work being conducted as a result and recommends that this support continues for a further 2 years.
- 1.3. That the Councils facilitate a more collaborative approach between organisations by encouraging the promotion of joint working.
- 1.4. That Officers work with relevant agencies to understand the situation for young people under 25, specifically men, to build a proactive response to support them as an at-risk group.
- 1.5. That Cabinet and Officers explore how we can embed the Cost of Living into the culture of the organisation for all staff when working with residents across all departments as part of a more integrated system of support.
- 1.6. That a Joint All Member Briefing be arranged for all Councillors on the Cost of Living crisis with input from Local Citizens Advice.

43.24 Councillor Welham seconded the recommendations.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED:

1.1. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of

the report and commends the work being undertaken in response to the Cost of Living crisis.

- 1.2. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee supports the 30% uplift to Local Citizens Advice and the work being conducted as a result and recommends that this support continues for a further 2 years.**
- 1.3. That the Councils facilitate a more collaborative approach between organisations by encouraging the promotion of joint working.**
- 1.4. That Officers work with relevant agencies to understand the situation for young people under 25, specifically men, to build a proactive response to support them as an at-risk group.**
- 1.5. That Cabinet and Officers explore how we can embed the Cost of Living into the culture of the organisation for all staff when working with residents across all departments as part of a more integrated system of support.**
- 1.6. That a Joint All Member Briefing be arranged for all Councillors on the Cost of Living crisis with input from Local Citizens Advice.**

44 JOS/22/24 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY AND CABINET PROTOCOL

- 44.1 The Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Office introduced the report to the committee outlining that the protocol had been formulated in response to the Corporate Peer Review, that the aim was to promote a culture of accountability, openness, and transparency within the Councils, and that the protocol would also be going to Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team for approval.
- 44.2 Councillor Grandon questioned whether Cabinet would be informed of what is expected of them within the protocol. The Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Office responded that the protocol would be going to Cabinet for formal approval and that the Senior Leadership Team had already endorsed the document.
- 44.3 Councillor Grandon further questioned whether the protocol would require Cabinet to review the recommendations made by Overview and Scrutiny. The Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Office responded that Overview and Scrutiny's recommendations would go to Cabinet for review and that the Chairs make frequent updates on the recommendations reached by the Committee at Full Council.
- 44.4 Councillor Barrett raised that the regular training offered to members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should also include training on the call-in procedure. The Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Office responded that training on the call-in procedure would be included and that this will also be covered extensively in the upcoming Councillor induction training programme scheduled for May 2023.
- 44.5 Councillor Osborne proposed the recommendation as set out in the report.

44.6 Councillor Grandon seconded the proposal.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED:

1.1 That Overview and Scrutiny approves the Scrutiny/Cabinet protocol.

45 JOS/22/25 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST

45.1 The Forthcoming Decisions List was noted.

46 JOS/22/26 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ACTION TRACKER

46.1 Councillor Barrett raised that a note of clarity be added to Recommendation 1.2 for Item Ref JOS/22/8 to ensure that Cabinet looks at ways to reduce car parking demands.

46.2 Councillor Welham suggested that, in reference to Recommendations 1.3 and 1.4 for Item Ref JOS/21/25, progress on these recommendations be chased by the Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny and implemented by the Key Officer in time to train Councillors after the May 2023 election.

46.3 The Action Tracker was noted.

47 JOS/22/27 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

47.1 Councillors from both Councils raised concerns with the number of items due to be considered at the January committee meetings.

47.2 The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny responded that the work programme would be reviewed by the Chairs at the Joint Chairs Briefing on 29th November and that the final work plan would be distributed to Members ahead of the next committee.

47.3 The Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan was noted.

48 JOS/22/28 MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

48.1 The Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan was noted.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 12:50pm.

.....
Chair

