

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT TO BABERGH COUNCIL

SEPTEMBER 25TH, 2018

Babergh & Mid Suffolk Joint Scrutiny Committee met on the 23rd July.

SCOPING OF THE PRE-PLANNING APPLICATION FEE

The fee charge service for pre-planning had been in place for approximately a year. An extensive Customer Service Questionnaire, and its results, were closely examined. Overall, the survey results were positive, but questions about consistency and the timeliness of advice were highlighted. There seemed to be a significant correlation between the numbers of adverse results in the eventual Planning decision and the number of negative comments provided. It was difficult to draw conclusions in areas, such as Highways, Heritage and Flooding, where a small sample size was involved.

In scoping the reports and questioning officers the committee asked for the following to be added.

- That 60% to 70% of customers were fairly satisfied with the service;
- That the timing needed to be improved and was to be addressed in the report;
- That the apparent difference between the advice provided at the site visits and the written advice produced by the Planning Department;
- A request for Suffolk County Council Highways to be invited as witness to the Committee meeting;
- A copy of the pre-application form to be attached;
- Analysis of how many responses included other departments such as flooding and heritage;
- The Planning Department was to invite professional agents for larger developments if possible and inform the Chairs of their attendance;
- Investigate if customers were discouraged by having to pay a fee for pre-planning advice. The outcome was to be split between the percentage of private customers and professional agents;
- Resource requirements in relation to site visits for householder applications.

The Corporate Manager – Growth and Sustainable Planning explained that the department was in the process to of evaluating the responses to make improvements to the service. **This item would be scrutinised fully, with the points raised at the next meeting.**

REVIEW OF THE SHARED LEGAL SERVICE

The Assistant Director – Law and Governance introduced the report and pointed to the list of recommendations made by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2017. The report included responses to the points made by the Committee in December and data on the progress on workloads, case management and arrangements for instructing the legal team.

57% of the cost of the Service falling to Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Council, there was detailed questioning on the following key areas:

Cost allocation (and recovery of costs in the event of a won case), staff recruitment and retention, the new Case Management System, the Client Portal (for our departments as clients), Key Performance Indicators, and data gathering. In the last case there were concerns on the committee that the data given was too detailed, in raw form and required refinement and clarity.

Members generally felt that the Shared Legal Service had responded to the recommendations made in December 2017 and that the Service was improving the Service it provided to clients. There was anecdotal evidence from members and observers that the service had improved.

The committee noted the report and thanked officers for their efforts and successes. It was resolved that an Information Bulletin be provided by the Finance Department to clarify Appendix 2 of the report and that the case data in Appendix 3 be analysed and clarified. Both to be presented to the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 19 November 2018.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE JOINT HOUSING STRATEGY 2018- 2036

Councillor Osborne, Cabinet Member – Housing, and Robert Hobbs, Corporate Manager – Strategic Planning, provided the context for this emerging strategy. It included the provisions under the legal requirements to have a Homelessness Reduction Strategy. A Housing Strategy itself is not a legal requirement, but its importance might be measured in the comprehensive range of members questions on every aspect of housing provision. These included: energy efficiency, flexibility in the event of any changes to Government Policy, home ownership, staffing in the Housing Department, stalled sites, Housing Associations, Council Housing, Voids, and population changes and demographics.

The Housing Strategy Officer – Strategic Planning explained that the document in front of Members provided the general lines of what the finished Housing Strategy would look like. Detailed work on the finished document would have to be presented to the Cabinets in September. She said that the Action Plan would contain more detail of local needs. There was also to be an annual review and monitoring of the Action Plan.

The action plan was to be in place for the next five years and was to be presented to the Cabinets in December 2018.

The committee endorsed the context and development process described in the report.

INFORMATION BULLETIN

This was supplied to describe some of the recent changes to the Five-Year Land Supply, the committee having previously examined methodology. The Planning team were thanked for the work conducted to achieve the supply and the bulletin was noted.

Babergh & Mid Suffolk Joint Scrutiny Committee met on the 3rd September.

VOID RELET TIMES IN COUNCIL PROPERTIES

This subject had been considered by the committee(s) monthly over the course of the last year. Void times had risen to dizzying heights of 50-70+ days at some points. An extensive project, driven in part by Overview and Scrutiny interest and concern had been undertaken to reduce void times to a year end average of 21 days. The June figures of 23 days (BDC) and 19 days (MSDC) had since been further improved with Babergh at 17 days and Mid Suffolk at 21 days.

Likewise, the number of void properties had been massively reduced. It was true that there was a cost involved in this in the use of outside contractors, but that it would be a diminishing one in line with the workload left.

Members made multiple comments on the excellent quality of the report and it was pointed out that this was directly related to the work undertaken on the project and the clarity of the analysis and planning. Speaking personally, I felt it was one of the best reports that I've seen here.

From subsequent reports and updates, it appears that the key targets for next year are within reach already. A quarterly report will be received by O & S to monitor this.

There were other related matters discussed concerning stock condition and definitions (which had been a key part of the process).

Both O & S committees voted separately, and both resolved as follows:

- 1.1 That the Committee notes the improved performance for re-let times and commends Officers for their work in achieving this improvement.**
- 1.2 That the Committee endorses the actions contained within the long-term plan. (Paragraph 4.13 and Appendix F)**

A further update was provided in an INFORMATION BULLETIN. This is reflected in the more recent figures referred to in the above section.

REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CHARGED PRE-APPLICATION FEES FOR PLANNING ADVICE

Councillor Nick Ridley and Councillor Glen Horn as respective Cabinet Members for Planning introduced the report, with Phil Isbell, Corporate Manager – Growth and Sustainable Planning taking queries from the committee.

A considerable amount of further detail, that had been asked for in the scoping process was supplied. A very complete report, as requested, was therefore supplied.

Members asked questions about the reduced uptake of pre-planning advice, compared to when it was supplied free. This was lower than anticipated and many householder enquiries were being dealt with successfully through the self-service portal on the website. Basic enquiries could be dealt with by the service team.

There was considerable discussion about survey timing and method. The point was returned to later, but it was felt that a repeat survey was essential.

A variety of witnesses were available.

James Tanner from Hollins Architects, Surveyors and Planning Consultants and Phil Cobbold from Phil Cobbold Planning Ltd were present as agents and users of the Pre-Planning Service. Steve Merry and Julia Cox from SCC Growth, Highways and Infrastructure as consultants and providers.

The agents found the charging structure a small cost but held concerns over consistency and timeliness. These they attributed to staff turnover and inexperience. In general, though they could both support good, timely and beneficial advice and were happy to recommend such a service to their clients. A site visit being carried out by the relevant case officer was highly desirable. The Corporate Manager was able to report that new software would aid in this and it was intended to be future practice.

The Highways witnesses were questioned on the advice they could supply. This was generally in the form of the requirements of a planning application, it being impossible to assess traffic flow etc, so early in the process.

Further discussion about survey timing took place, but the matter was left open as in the resolutions below.

There was also mention of our Risk Analysis system. Some very undesirable Likelihood Outcomes of our Pre-Planning Advice were described as Probable (3) rather than Unlikely (2). This could be a flaw, where a realistic (and desirable) approach might be 'Possible' (2.5). This will be further examined by Audit managers.

An extensive list of recommendations was examined item by item, with further discussion and some wording changes to produce the resolutions.

It was RESOLVED: -

- 1.1 **That the contents of the report be scrutinised by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee for review and**
- 1.2 **That the Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee agree that the recommendations below are robust enough to promote the continued improvement of the charged pre-application service:**
 - Embed a “right first time, on time” approach to pre-application advice offer through consistent use of Enterprise and 1-2-1s.
 - Establish management monitoring and intervention measures to achieve nil rate of refunds in the forthcoming year.
 - Review charging arrangements for site visit elements of pre-application advice services to better reflect time and resource costs.
 - Review pre-application charge exemptions or discounts for community groups or other organisations where relevant support is already being provided by the Councils.
 - Introduce cancellation administration charge where meetings are cancelled by the enquirer at short notice.
 - Repeat customer satisfaction survey mid-2019 and to evaluate when the best time will be for conducting this survey.
 - Review potential for and introduce as appropriate additional service offers and cost recovery associated with other internal stakeholders (including Housing Enabling, Communities, Public Realm, CIL, Planning Policy) with appropriate Service Level Agreements to underpin delivery.

Overview and Scrutiny may wish to review this in the future.

More complete details are available within the Babergh & Joint Scrutiny Committee Minutes and within the reports themselves.

This report is much lengthier than previously promised. A simple summary of subjects and resolutions would not suffice, in my opinion. The aim is to provide context for the sort of detailed examination that is not always possible in Council or Cabinet meetings. Overview and Scrutiny can fulfil that role and should seek to do so.

I'm happy to take any questions, within or without, the meeting.

Alastair McCraw

Chairman, Overview & Scrutiny Committee, Babergh District Council