

## **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, 3 September 2018

### **PRESENT:**

Councillors:	Sue Ayres	Melanie Barrett
	John Field	Barry Gasper
	Elizabeth Gibson-Harries	Lavinia Hadingham
	Bryn Hurren	Lesley Mayes
	Alastair McCraw	Adrian Osborne
	Derek Osborne	Fenella Swan
	Keith Welham - Chair	

### **In attendance:**

Cabinet Members	Glen Horn – MSDC Planning
	Nick Ridley – BDC Planning
	Jan Osborne – BDC Housing
	Jill Wilshaw – MSDC

Witnesses	Phil Cobbold – Phil Cobbold Planning Ltd.
	Julie Cox – Development Management Engineer – SCC Growth, Highways and Infrastructure
	Steve Merry – Transport Policy and Development Manager – SCC Growth, highways and Infrastructure
	James Tanner – Hollins Architects, Surveys and Planning Consultant
	Strategic Director (KN)
	Assistant Director – Law and Governance (EY)
	Tenant Service Corporate Manager (LC)
	Corporate Manager - BMBS (JRW)
	Corporate Manager – Growth and Sustainable Planning (PI)
	Governance Support Officer (HH)

## **15 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES**

Apologies were received from Councillors James Caston and Stephen Williams.

## **16 JOS/18/13 CONFIRMATION OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 23 JULY 2018**

**It was RESOLVED: -**

**That the minutes of the meeting held on the 23 July 2018 be confirmed as a true record**

**17 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of interests.

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

None received.

**19 JOS/18/14 BABERGH - VOID RELET TIMES IN COUNCIL PROPERTIES**

19.1 The Chair began by informing Members that Item 5,6 and 7 on the Agenda were all related and would therefore be discussed together. However, Members were to vote on the Items for their respective Council separately.

19.2 Councillor Jan Osborne then introduced report JOS/18/14 which detailed the improved re-let times over the past eight months and that the Voids team had undergone changes to procedures and processes, re-allocation of resources, co- working and culture changes to deliver improve performance. She thanked the team for the work they had undertaken to achieve the improved working practices and voids times. She was confident that Babergh District Council was in a good position to ensure that the housing stock would be ready to re-let to tenants within a reasonable time

19.3 Councillor Jill Wilshaw agreed with Councillor Osborne.

19.4 The Tenant Service Corporate Manager provided an update on the average re-let in days on Standard Voids for August 2018, they were as follows:

Babergh Standard Voids 23 days

Mid Suffolk Standard Voids 19 days

This was an average of 21 days across both Councils and that this had been the year-end target for the service.

19.5 Councillor Gasper said it was a comprehensive report, and that especially the risk assessment was good. The improved management changes would benefit the residents and help to reduce the back log of work and still maintain the housing stock.

19.6 Councillor Hurren asked how many employees were working within the team. He continued to enquire further about the process for purchasing new properties and if considerations were made to the state of the property for the purpose of planning repairs before a property was being purchased.

19.7 In response to the first question, the Corporate Manager – Babergh and Mid Suffolk Building Services (BMBS), informed Members that there were 40

tradesmen, 3 apprentices and 4 team leaders employed in the team, 25 tradesmen were working on the maintenance and 15 were working on Voids project,

19.8 He continued that the acquisition process was currently being reviewed to ensure that the right properties were being purchased and that a mini project in co-operation with the Asset Management team was being undertaken to implement regimented procedures for this process

19.9 Councillor Barrett asked for a clarification of the cost element in the report, in particular how sub-contractors were employed and how these were retained.

19.10 Officers responded that originally there had been 117 Voids properties but that this had now been reduced to 24 properties. All standard Voids had been retained at 100%, whilst at the same time major Voids had initially been repaired by sub-contractors. Currently there were nine major projects of these, five were being retained in-house and four were being repaired by outside contractors. Sub-contractors were only considered if there was a significant amount of work, and this would depend on the type of project and what kind of repairs were required when a property was returned the Housing team. It was important to understand the work required to help plan the repair project.

19.11 Councillor Field asked the following questions:

- How many staff could have responded to the staff survey (page 5, bullet point 4.15);
- In relation to the reduction in Voids from 55 days to 20 void days; how did this compare with other similar organisations;
- Did all the calculation of Investment Appraisal for Void Improvement include council tax or only the 10-day improvement.
- Could officers clarify the definition of standard and major Voids for Item 7, page 17.

19.12 It was clarified that there had been a return rate of 50% on the staff survey.

19.13 The officers did not have a comparison to similar organisations, but several local housing associations did not often manage a turn-around time of 20 days.

19.14 The Tenant Service Corporate Manager had only considered the rent gain and rent loss in the financial aspect of the report that looked at the financial

implications beyond the original 10 days targets.

- 19.15 The calculation for the Investment Appraisal had included Council Tax for the 10-day calculation.
- 19.16 The Voids definition on page 17 did not include major Voids project. Voids were now defined as standard and major Voids, and that the high figure had included the major Voids.
- 19.17 Members continued to question the officers and it was established that the Voids team was catching up on the modernisation of properties, which was funded by the capital investment.
- 19.18 There was minimal adaptation to sheltered housing properties and therefore these properties were often included in the standard Voids. Properties requiring major work were still turned around within 48 days.
- 19.19 It was established that regular inspections of all properties were a challenge and that currently this was not achievable due to resources. A system of working was currently being developed, so that when a resident applied to the Housing Register, officers would conduct a visit, which would enable them to plan the work required before re-letting the property.
- 19.20 It was the intention to have a 100% stock condition completed in a few years.
- 19.21 Councillor Alastair McCraw said that the report was the best report on the issue to date and he drew Members attention to the Draft Void Improvement – Long Term Action Plan (Appendix F) and said that it was now possible to achieve the key targets as detailed in bullet point 7.1 to 7.4 in the plan.
- 19.22 Members noted the improved performance and they commended the officers for their work. It was agreed that this was to be added to the recommendations.
- 19.23 The Babergh Members discussed the amendment, which was proposed and seconded

By a unanimous vote

**It was RESOLVED: -**

- 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)**

19.24 The Mid Suffolk Members debated the amendment which was proposed and seconded

By 4 votes to 1

**It was RESOLVED**

**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)**

**20 JOS/18/15 MID SUFFOLK - VOID RELET TIMES IN COUNCIL PROPERTIES**

Please refer to the minute JOS/18/15.

**21 JOS/18/16 REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CHARGED PRE-APPLICATION FEES FOR PLANNING ADVICE**

21.1 The Chair began by welcoming and introducing the witnesses attending the Committee, they were:

James Tanner	Hollins Architects, Surveyors and Planning Consultants
Phil Cobbold	Phil Cobbold Planning Ltd.
Steve Merry	Transport Policy and Development Manager – Growth, Highways and Infrastructure
Julia Cox	Development Management Engineer – Growth, Highways and Infrastructure

21.2 Councillor Nick Ridley, Babergh Cabinet Member for Planning, introduced Report JOS/18/16 and pointed Members' attention to the main points in the report. He said that there were comments in the report, which the Planning department were to address.

21.3 Councillor Glen Horn, Mid Suffolk Cabinet Member for Planning, agreed with Cllr Ridley and added that the summary of the Charge Pre-planning Application survey had been useful and had resulted in a plan on how to improve the service. He drew Members' attention to bullet point 3.2 under the Recommendation, which detailed an action plan for improvement to the Charged Pre-planning Application.

- 21.4 Phil Isbell, Corporate Manager – Growth and Sustainable Planning, provided a verbal update in relation to bullet point 4.19 and said the figure was 0.2, which did not provide enough evidence for a correlation between fee exception and refusals of planning applications.
- 21.5 Councillor Field questioned the reduction in enquiries (bullet point 4.4, page 45) and the response was that previously householder enquiries had been serviced by free pre-applications advice. However, these enquiries were now mainly being direct to the self-service portal on the website. This had been predicted and did not have any influence on the predicted income for the Charged Pre-application income. There was no evidence that applications were rejected due to applicants using the self-service application. The exception was for applications for listed buildings, which were free. Some agents did not use the pre-application advice for these, as officers were to conduct a site visit anyway.
- 21.6 Members enquired for clarification for bullet point 7.2, page 50 and officers responded that the service team provided a basic sign posting response and advice to enquiries.
- 21.7 Councillor Lavinia Hadingham ask how the survey had been conducted and how the feedback had been collected and if it was to be considered to have an on-going survey when an application had been completed. The Corporate Manager said that the survey had been an on-line survey conducted during the whole of May 2018, and that the team had invited everybody, who had used the pre-application service to respond. This had been considered to be the most effective way to capture customer satisfaction at this stage of the Charged Pre-application implementation.
- 21.8 Consideration was given to introducing a customer satisfaction survey in relation to planning application and pre-application advice. Members were advised that it should be taken into consideration that if applicants were to respond at the end of their applications, some may be influenced by the outcome of the application.
- 21.9 The Chair invited the Witnesses to make comments.
- 21.10 Steve Merry, Transport Policy and Development Manager – Growth, Highways and Infrastructure to comment. He said the paid pre-application service had overall been a success and had resulted in improved planning applications. There were still a few issues to address such as timing for responses to applications.
- 21.11 Phil Cobbold, Phil Cobbold Planning Ltd, said that as an agent he was more concerned with the level of advice and that the charge for the pre-application advice was a small cost to pay. He believed that for agents, timing was important but that agents would rather wait to receive good advice which would support planning applications. In his experience there was often an inconsistency in the advice received on site visits and the written advice.

Recently he had received three refusals on applications which had received positive advice. This he contributed to staff turnover and the inexperience of some staff.

- 21.12 James Tanner, Hollins Architects, Surveyors and Planning Consultants, agreed with Mr Cobbold. He added that the pre-planning advice was much more robust now. He said that site visits were a good opportunity to resolve initial queries. He felt that the officer attending the site visit should also be the designated planning officer. However, this was not currently the case. He continued that it was important to manage client expectations and that he recommended pre-application advice to his clients as he felt the advice was good. He believed that clients were happy to pay for the pre-planning advice if the service was beneficial to them.
- 21.13 Members asked further questions in relation to the inconsistency discussed above and the work flow detained in paragraph 4.26 – 4.28 and the Corporate Manager responded that it was intended that in the future the officer, who conducted the site visits would also be the designated planning officer. This would be supported by the new software, which was currently being implemented in the department.
- 21.14 Members then discussed application for listed buildings and the responses received in the survey on page 79 – 81. It was established that planning applications for listed buildings received free pre-planning advice and that the survey indicated that applicants were generally satisfied with the service they received.
- 21.15 Mr Cobbold added that he had received one pre-application advice on a listed building in the last few months and that the advice had been reasonable and on time.
- 21.16 Mr Tanner said that the architectural survey involved more for listed buildings. In his experience the Suffolk Heritage struggled with response times for advice on proposals before the planning application. He added that recently there had been inconsistency in getting heritages officers on sites to comment on proposals, and this area warrant more attention due to the nature of listed buildings.
- 21.17 The corporate Manager informed Members that the management of the Planning department and the Heritage team were meeting later in the months to take advice on how to improve and resolved some of the issues discussed.
- 21.18 Councillor Elizabeth Gibson – Harries asked the officer from Suffolk County Highways to comment on why it appeared that the Highways department failed to respond to the Parish Councils on planning applications.
- 21.19 Councillor Field asked what kind of advice applicants received at the pre-planning stage of an application.

21.20 Mr Merry responded that usually this involved a site visit, which took the form of a scoping and early warning of potential issues but did not include any discussion of the impact of traffic flow or potential accidents as it was not possible to assess this in the early stage of applications. Officers provided a steer to the applicant as to what information the Highways department required for the application.

21.21 Councillor McCraw referred to the risk analysis on page 50 to page 54 as he was concerned that the risk was 'probable' and the Corporate Manager said he agreed and that this had been discussed with the Corporate Manager for Internal Audit.

21.22 The Chair thank the witnesses for attending the Committee

21.23 Members were informed of the fees charged for the Pre-planning Advice as detailed in Appendix A.

21.24 Members were concerned about the timing of when customers would be able to provide feedback on the service received from the Planning Department. Some felt that it should be conducted after the pre-planning advice had been provided and others felt it should be on completion of the planning applications.

21.25 Members made the following suggestions to the recommendations:

- 3.2 to replace the word 'ensure' to 'promote'
- Replace 'ensure' with the word to 'achieve' in the third bullet point
- to change 'Repeat customer satisfaction survey mid-2019' to 'Repeat customer satisfaction survey mid-2019 and to evaluate when the best time will be for conducting this survey'.

21.26 The amendments were proposed and seconded.

By a unanimous vote

**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.

## **22 JOS/18/17 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST**

**It was RESOLVED: -**

**That the Forthcoming Decisions List be noted**

## **23 JOS/18/18 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN**

23.1 Members discussed the Babergh Work Plan and it was generally felt that the start times should be changed for all Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committees and all Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committees to start at 9.30 am, which was proposed and seconded.

By a unanimous vote

**It was RESOLVED: -**

**1.1 That all future Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committees and all Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committees to start at 9.30 am.**

**1.2 That the Babergh Work Plan be noted**

## **24 JOS/18/19 MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PLAN**

**It was RESOLVED: -**

**That the Mid Suffolk Work Plan be noted**

**25 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC (WHICH INCLUDED THE PRESS)**

The resolution was proposed and seconded.

By a unanimous vote

**It was RESOLVED: -**

**That pursuant to Part 1 of Schedule 12AA of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for the business specified below on the grounds that if the public were present during this item, it is likely that there would be the disclosure of them of exempt information as indicated against the item.**

**The Committee was also satisfied that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.**

**26 JOS/18/20 CONFIRMATION OF THE CONFIDENTIAL MINUTE OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 23 JULY 2018**

**It was RESOLVED: -**

**That the confidential minute of the meeting held on the 23 July be confirmed as a true record**

The business of the meeting was concluded at 1.05 pm

.....

The Chair (& Date)