

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT TO BABERGH COUNCIL

OCTOBER 23RD, 2018

Babergh & Mid Suffolk Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee met on the 20th September.

REVIEW OF THE WESTERN SUFFOLK COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP (WSCSP)

This was the principal item on the agenda. The WSCSP is made up of statutory representatives from Babergh, Mid Suffolk, Forest Heath, St Edmundsbury District Councils, Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Police, Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service, West Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), Ipswich and East CCG, National Probation Service, Norfolk & Suffolk Community Rehabilitation Company and elected members from all five local authorities.

The aim of the Partnership is to prevent & reduce crime, working with each other to promote community safety, share a wider understanding of the issues and support communities and concerned organisations. The assessments made by WSCSP contribute towards overall strategy for Suffolk and the Police and Crime Plan. Operational matters will normally remain the preserve of the Police and the other bodies.

The Committee had a wide selection of witnesses available from the major partners.

Cllr Joanna Spicer (SCC), the Chair of the WSCSP.

Claire Harvey, Community Safety Lead for SCC.

Paul Goodman, Protection and Prevention Manager for Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service.

Superintendent Kim Warner, Western Area Commander for Suffolk Police.

Eugene Staunton, Associate Director of Transformation for the East/West Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), supporting NHS services.

Lois Wreathall, Head of Primary Care for West Suffolk CCG.

Cllr Maybury, Cabinet Member for Communities & Babergh Rep on WSCSP.

Cllr Elizabeth Gibson-Harries, Mid Suffolk Rep on WSCSP was a member of the committee.

Each of the above outlined their role and that of their organisation.

Paul Goodman of the Fire Service described their role within the WSCSP as providing support in fire safety and prevention, although arson and fire related crimes had sometimes resulted from gang & drug violence generated by 'County Lines'.

Eugene Staunton explained the increasing focus in emotional health and well being on top of traditional mental health services. This had particular relevance for children and young persons.

Ann Hunter, Interim Corporate Manager for Communities presented a fully comprehensive report covering the scope of the WSCSP.

Scope

There are four identified priorities that WSCSP are focussing on in 2018/2019. The committee examined each of these in turn, questioning the witnesses throughout.

Tackling County Lines

County Lines is the term used to describe the supply of drugs from the cities to the county towns and villages. Supt Warner described how, using mobile phones, and changing numbers with cheap disposable phones (burners), drugs can be ordered and then delivered by young and vulnerable couriers. These operations are run as businesses and can involve the use of extreme, even fatal, violence. Locations for selling, phones and couriers are all considered disposable. The Police are actively responding in a constantly changing environment. He concluded that Members could do much to support them by raising awareness, knowing what to look for and reporting to appropriate authorities. There was no evidence of any reprisals on Members of the public providing information and drug use was a concern amongst residents.

Members questioned further on the tactical plan, but the draft plan was restricted for obvious reasons. Schools, phone monitoring, use of the 101 number and youth support were asked about. Eugene Staunton (CCG) outlined work being done to support the emotional and mental health of young people.

Violence Against Women and Girls, Men and Boys (VAWG)

The report contained some shocking statistics. Suffolk Police receive a report of Domestic Abuse once every 1 hour & 20 minutes. (18/day). A serious sexual offence is reported every 5 ½ hours. There is an improvement in recording practices and victims are more willing to come forward, but it is estimated that 5 in 6 victims do not report their experiences.

Asked about the refuges for women and children and the lack of places for male victims, Claire Harvey (SCC) responded that there were 23 static accommodations across the county. These were not available to males however. There were arrangements for sharing with other counties however.

There was further questioning on Suffolk Rape Crisis (not in SCC's remit) and on whether the WSCSP was making improvements to address the strategic points in the report. Claire Harvey was able to report that over the last three years a dedicated resource for domestic violence had become available with more funding than before. Whilst figures appeared to rise, an increase in awareness, lower toleration by victims and the reporting of historical cases by older women contributed to this.

The primary concern of the service was to ensure that the victim was safe. Any disclosure to the police was the choice of the victim.

Cllr Gibson-Harries stated that it was the intention of the WSCSP to provide a list of contact details for all related resources for all Parish Councils.

There was later discussion and questioning on Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHR). These, it was reported, were statutory and unrelated to police investigations. The focus was on any potential issues with public service provision. They were expensive, but rare. WSCSP was providing training and awareness.

Hate Crime and PREVENT

These two priorities were discussed together. A press reported increase in far-right group activities was not reflected locally according to Supt Warner, although the police received national reviews on threats. Claire Harvey (SCC) stated that the Prevent strategy, in identifying individuals at the risk of radicalisation was taking an increasing interest in far-right groups. Ann Hunter (BMSDC) added that all Councillors were offered training in both Safeguarding and Prevent awareness.

Key Messages

All the witnesses were asked to sum these up.

Members should report issues appropriately.

Awareness for Members and residents.

Councillors could signpost services at Community level.

County Lines affect all communities in all areas. Education of residents locally was paramount.

Members, as community leaders, could play an important part in educating the public in the wards to increase awareness of these issues.

Conclusions and Resolutions

Although this review was a statutory requirement, the committee felt that a positive and proactive outcome should be sought. To merely pay 'lip service' to the review of the WSCSP was not enough.

Accordingly, it was unanimously resolved that

- 1.1 That a joint Member briefing be delivered to all Members detailing the issues in the report.**
- 1.2 That a toolkit with the key contact details for agencies dealing with the issues discussed today be formulated and distributed to all Members**
- 1.3 That officers prepare a summary of the main points of the discussion to be circulated to Suffolk County Council**

All of the above should be being prepared and available shortly. It is hoped that the toolkit will be of use as an aid to members, both in their wards and outside.

Other Business.

This review involved a substantial amount of work by officers, the WSCSP, the witnesses and the Joint Committee itself. Hence the length of this report. On behalf of the committee, I would like to express our thanks to all those involved.

An update on the Void Project was provided. The Joint Standard Voids time was being maintained at 20 days. A further update would be presented every quarter.

Babergh Overview & Scrutiny Committee met yesterday, on the 22nd October.

STRATEGIC PROPERTY AND LAND INVESTMENT FUND

The original version of this paper was presented at the Cabinet meeting on 13th September. The Cabinet then approved the establishment of this fund to enable the Council to react and secure strategic properties and land, within the district. As the maximum fund size was proposed to be £3 million, and there was no provision for the necessary borrowing within the current budget (2018-2019), it would need to be taken to Council for spending approval.

The paper was tabled for the Council meeting on 25th September but withdrawn to allow further member discussion and examination. The item had first appeared on the Forthcoming Decisions list in August, in a month when Scrutiny were not meeting. It became apparent that there were member concerns, across all groups about Purpose, Governance and Cost of Borrowing. Options available were a Member Briefing and/or a Scrutiny process through the committee. I expressed a desire for Overview and Scrutiny to examine the paper, at this point being unaware that it would be brought to Council on the following day. I believe that a proper Scrutiny process is more robust than a briefing, however desirable that might be.

After discussion between the O&S Chair and Vice-Chair, Johnathon Stephenson and Emily Attack, some changes were made to the report to address member concerns.

The amended report was closely examined in three principal areas.

1. Purpose and need for a Strategic Investment Fund.
2. Financial Impacts of any borrowing required by the Fund.
3. Governance and Decision making for the Fund.

1. Purpose and Need.

Questioning revealed that a full Cabinet or Council decision making process might take two or three months to complete. There were occasions where this timescale would be too long, in the case of a sale by auction for example, and an opportunity could be missed. Some of the potential situations are described in the report before you today, but it became apparent that each situation would be different, and it was not possible to anticipate every possibility. The ability to act quickly, according to number of established criteria and with defined limits would be useful to the Council. The £3 million limit, with a maximum £1.5 million individual purchase seemed reasonable, had been benchmarked, and was not greatly challenged.

The purpose of each purchase would equally be variable, and dependent on individual circumstances. Examples are contained within the report. Purchases might be Strategic, Investment or some combination of both.

2. Financial Impacts.

These are outlined in Para 6. A figure of £1.5 million was suggested to officers as being both the maximum single purchase and half the fund. For impact for the full fund, simply double the figures. For impact within the remaining 6 months of the current Council year, halve the figure. (Year 1 only).

There were concerns that the Risk Management of these costs had not been expressed. John Ward, as Leader of the Council, expressed the view that these potential costs could be accommodated within the current budget and the forthcoming budget, should it be necessary. There was no capital provision in advance. This would be borrowing at need.

The inclusion of the minimum revenue provision, or depreciation cost, was welcomed.

3. Governance & Decision Making.

Para 1.3 and Appendix A describe the decision-making process. Members questioned this and whether the proposed level of consultation was a sufficient control. For practical reasons (not having to hold a Cabinet Meeting and the consequent delay) the decision would be a delegated one by the Strategic Director, Assets & Investments. The responsible officer would be consulting with a minimum of two specifically defined and appropriate Cabinet members, and the Section 151 officer.

All of these would need to agree for the purchase to be considered. This was welcomed by the committee.

The appropriate Ward members would also be involved in discussions to provide their insights. It emerged that local ward members might also make suggestions on potential purchases.

In making their recommendations, the committee considered whether these arrangements were robust enough to achieve the Fund objectives and protect our financial position. Some language changes, references and the agreement of three Cabinet members, including the defined portfolios, were added.

The following Recommendation to Council and Cabinet was proposed and seconded, **accepting Recommendation 3.1.**

1. Recommendations

1.1 That recommendation 3.2 in the report to Council be amended to as follows:

Delegates to the Strategic Director, with responsibility for Assets and Investments, in consultation with a minimum of **three Cabinet Members including the Cabinet Members for Assets and Investments, Finance and Economy, the authority to pursue and finalise purchases of strategic property and land as set out within sections **4.7** and **4.8** of this report.**

The vote in favour was 7 to 0, with 1 abstention, and the committee make the Recommendations as above.

Information Bulletin:

STAFF TURNOVER AND WELFARE.

This report derived from a Mid Suffolk resolution in June. As it affected the joint staff position, the two chairs agreed it should be shared across both O&S Committees. The conclusions presented indicated that in two areas (Planning & Strategic Planning and Housing (Tenancy Services) the sickness and absence data for BMSDC was no worse than other comparable combined Councils. The figures were incomplete for 2018, but even allowing for the forthcoming winter months there were some signs of a reducing number of sickness days lost per employee.

13 vacancies in Development Management and Strategic Planning, 7 at around Grade 5 and above, were concerning. This is in line with a national shortage of planning professionals. We are seeing an overall increase in qualified staff however. The report was noted.

I'm happy to take questions, either in or out of the meeting.

Alastair McCraw.

Chair of Overview & Scrutiny Committee, BDC.

22nd October, 2018.