

MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT BY THE CHAIR OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 FEBRUARY 2019

ADDENDUM TO ITEM 9 – PAPER MC/18/37

The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on the 14th February 2019.

JOS/18/28 REVIEW OF OUTSIDE BODIES

The Committee considered the above report which was presented by Jan Robinson, Corporate Manager-Democratic Services. This had been prepared, at the Committee's request, to review Member representation and consider how this could be more effective.

The benefits to the Council of this representation are in receiving early warning of issues affecting our communities, demonstrating our support to outside bodies and understanding their concerns, and making ourselves more accessible just by being involved. A distinction was drawn between Members appointed by the Council, and Members involved in their private capacity.

Mid Suffolk appoints Members to 20 such organisations and Babergh to 30. Their range and purpose, and the Members' role and status, varies considerably. Likewise, some of these appointments are statutory, some are to organisations that we provide funding for, and some are to organisations that have clear links to objectives outlined within the Joint Strategic Plan.

No detailed review having been carried out for some years, both Members and organisations were contacted for information. This information was presented in a spreadsheet format for each Council. The return of information for this report, although not complete has proved to be a useful core of a database and provided the basis for discussion.

Members had clearly valued the work done by most outside bodies. The Committee, from their own experience on these, provided further examples of positive outcomes for both Council and community. Many Members provided regular feedback on the bodies, either by circulating reports or discussing areas of mutual interest with both officers and other Members. However, there were no formal arrangements for these, as much was left to Members' own discretion. The Committee had no desire to add significantly to the workload of Members, but felt that some simple mechanisms would improve both contact and exchange of useful information. After discussion, a consensus developed that Members could be asked to provide a simple, short, annual report to Democratic Services, one for each body. This information, once collected (potentially at the end/beginning of the calendar year), would then be collated and would provide the basis of an annual review. That report would be examined by Overview and Scrutiny Committees towards the end of the Council year. The practical details remain to be established, but this would be a less piecemeal approach.

The Committee also felt that those bodies where there was a statutory requirement for council representation had a special significance. Any attendance problems on these

could reflect poorly on the Council. In accord with both Councils' principles of transparency and accountability, the Committee felt that it would be advisable to keep, and publish, attendance records for the main (qualifying) meetings of Members appointed to these outside bodies.

Many Members appointed to outside bodies had received little information upon appointment and no direction or indication as to their, and the Councils', role upon them. It was felt that this should be addressed as a matter of urgency, particularly for newly elected councillors after the forthcoming election. Jan Robinson assured Members that work was already in progress as part of the Member Learning Programme currently being prepared for the post- election period.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That training needs relating to outside bodies be investigated by the Member Learning and Development Working Group and any relevant training be programmed in for the next municipal year.**
- 1.2 That a simple mechanism be agreed for councillors to report back on an annual basis to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**
- 1.3 That a review of the list of Outside Bodies be carried out on an annual basis and the update of that review be included in the report above.**
- 1.4 That records be kept of Members attendance at qualifying meetings of the Statutory Outside Bodies**
- 1.5 That the attendance of Members on Statutory Outside Bodies/Panels be published on the website.**

JOS/18/29 INFORMATION BULLETIN 1: DISABLED FACILITIES GRANTS

This bulletin was introduced by Jan Osborne, Babergh Cabinet Member for Housing, and presented by Heather Warton, Corporate Manager-Property Services, and Amanda Todd, Senior Environmental Health Officer.

Concerns about this issue had been highlighted by Mid Suffolk O&S. Both Councils had a significant underspend of available funds to make adaptations to the homes of disabled private sector residents to enable independent home living. There are multiple factors causing these, in particular the under-performance of Orbit Home Improvement Agency, the agency contracted to carry out referrals to Occupational Therapists. Also, there is a complex and lengthy process within an application; the means test is severe; and there is a shortage of Occupational Therapists to carry out referrals. Further, Orbit are operating at a financial loss, with little prospect of improvement. Without action, this underspend would continue, and residents would not receive required assistance. It was also clear that the original 5-year contract,

involving all Suffolk authorities, had not been well designed. This contract now has some 16 months left to run.

Some Members (understandably) were so frustrated by this situation that they would prefer that the Councils seek to walk away from the contract completely. Officers and the Cabinet Member were very concerned that the penalty clauses within the contract would result in a greater financial loss and a significant pause in delivery.

Much of this situation was already being examined, and preparatory discussion towards this Scrutiny examination had raised the profile of the issue. Both Cabinets will be considering proposed changes to Disabled Facilities Grants process in March. These proposals are included here, as they are crucial to an understanding of the issues.

Proposed Changes to DFG's

3.0 Applicants needing adaptations costing £4,999 or less will not be means tested. This will enable more applicants to be eligible to receive assistance and speed up the process. The figure of £4,999 is to avoid the requirement of registering the grant as a local land charge and repayment of the grant if the property is sold within 10 years. Setting an upper limit also restricts the risk that public funds are misappropriated but still remains proportionate to the benefits.

3.1 Providing adequate heating where the medical need of the applicant is likely to be exacerbated by living in a cold home.

3.2 Removing the need for an Occupational Therapist (OT) Referral for the straightforward cases. The long wait for an OT visit has long been a bottle neck within the DFG process.

3.4 Purchasing of equipment which can be installed quickly where and when it is needed and re-used when no longer needed. Examples include modular ramps, adjustable chair risers, posture aids, wash/dry toilets, key safes, sensor lights, coloured light sockets and lever taps.

3.5 Using DFG funding to rent a Council owned property within each district to provide temporary accommodation to enable someone to be discharged from hospital when adaptations are required to their home. Two Sheltered properties have already been identified in each district for this purpose.

3.6 Extending the scope of eligible work to include adaptations to assist those with dementia or mental health issues.

3.7 A Suffolk wide workshop will be taking place to discuss a future model for DFG delivery. The workshop will involve a variety of stakeholders from Suffolk County Council, Health Professionals and LA's.

The Committee did not feel that this matter could be allowed to rest, however. Some money that might have been used within the Babergh & Mid Suffolk districts might have to be used elsewhere in Suffolk, although for the intended purpose.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED: -

- 1.1 That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee strongly endorsed the proposed 'Changes to Disabled Facilities Grant 3.0 to 3.7' in the Information Bulletin to Cabinet.**
- 1.2 That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive a report back after the Cabinet Meeting in March 2019 on the agreed future arrangements for the Disabled Facilities Grant and that the report includes the outcomes of the Suffolk-wide workshop and the legal implications of terminating the contract with Orbit, to be considered at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in June 2019.**

JOS/18/29 INFORMATION BULLETIN 2:

Review of the impact and implementation of Universal Credit and its effect on Income Management within the Babergh and Mid-Suffolk Housing Service

This bulletin was introduced by Jan Osborne, Babergh Cabinet Member for Housing, and introduced by Lee Crowdell, Corporate Manager - Tenancy Services. It focussed on the impact of Universal Credit, its roll out, problems faced by housing officers in a constantly changing situation. Primarily, the bulletin dealt with UC's impact upon the Councils' position as a landlord of properties and the impact of tenants receiving UC. I would recommend the Information Bulletin to all Members with an interest in the subject. Members of the Committee felt that they had a much clearer understanding of the issues and officers were commended for the information presentation.

Inevitably, there were discussions around all aspects of UC, but the focus was on the issue in hand: the impact on our housing services. The Councils are able to deal with individual circumstances by a variety of means; Alternative Payment Arrangements (APA's direct to Landlord), Personal Budgeting Support (PBS), regular contacts with the DWP and the Landlord Portal were all being used effectively.

A 53-week year (Rent is due to be paid on Mondays.) will occur in 2019/20. The system has not been prepared for this, only allowing for 52 payments. The roll-out of UC will continue, albeit at a slower pace than feared. Babergh is more affected at present due to a 20% roll-out; in Mid-Suffolk it is nearer 10%. Early indications, figures not being complete, show a small increase in rent arrears. It is not currently proposed to alter targets for rent collection until the situation is clearer.

Working practices will continue to evolve, seeking to identify the problem areas and apply appropriate support. In an environment where the responsible Secretary of State has been critical of UC, there is little clarity. The Committee were reassured that our Housing Team were well prepared, and flexible enough to deal with these impacts.

It was RESOLVED:

That the Information Bulletin 2 be noted.

Note: This addendum report is intended to deal with recent Scrutiny matters, leaving only the O&S Annual Report to be presented to Council in March.

Keith Welham

MSDC District Councillor for Stowupland Ward

Chair of MSDC Overview and Scrutiny Committee