

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

TO: Council	REPORT NUMBER: BC/19/17
FROM: Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee	DATE OF MEETING: 24 September 2019

The Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee met on the 18th July 2019

Chair: Keith Welham (MSDC Co-Chair)

JOINT COMPLIMENTS, COMMENTS AND COMPLAINTS POLICY

The committee considered a report from the Corporate Manager for Customer Operations. The new system for dealing with compliments, comments and complaints was ready to be rolled out on the 22nd July, by which time all officers dealing with complaints would have been trained in its operation. Members noted that there had been real improvements in the quality of stage 1 complaints responses and a marked reduction (34%) in the number of stage 2 complaints being upheld.

Members debated the details contained in the report and highlighted the need for monthly reports to be provided to the Senior Leadership Team.

It was RESOLVED:

That the Joint Compliments, Comments and Complaints Policy be endorsed by the Committee to commence in August;

To note that the complaints reports are submitted every month to the Senior Leadership Team.

DISABLED FACILITIES GRANT (DFG)

The committee considered a report from the Corporate Manager which set out steps being taken to provide much-needed adaptations to properties in Babergh and Mid Suffolk, and avoid an underspend of the budget for 2019/20. A way forward could be to make Minor Adaptions Grants up to a limit of £5000 and arrange for work to be carried out by Babergh and Mid Suffolk Building Services (BMBS). Discussions are taking place with other district councils in Suffolk to develop a future strategy regarding future commissioning once the current contract with Orbit Homes has ended.

Members of both councils could help by promoting the grants and providing information to residents.

It was RESOLVED that:

The contents of the report and appendices be noted and that Overview and Scrutiny Committee review progress on any remodelling of the DFG process within the next six months;

Members commend the work of the Manager for Housing Delivery (Heather Worton), her team and other parties involved for the work that was currently taking place and ongoing regarding Adaption Grants; and

Hard copies of resources be provided to Members to promote the grants and advice that were available to residents.

GYPSY AND TRAVELLER SITES IN THE DISTRICTS

Members debated whether or not to set up a Task and Finish Group to scrutinise the effectiveness of work to establish the need for permanent and temporary sites and provide sites to meet that need. It was pointed out that the Councils have appointed Members to a Joint Gypsy and Traveller Steering Group, but that group had not yet met. The Committee concluded that if a Task and Finish Group were to be set up it merely duplicate the work of the Steering Group.

It was RESOLVED that Members would revisit the need for a Task and Finish Group after the first meeting of the Joint Gypsy and Traveller Steering Group.

STAFF TURNOVER AND WELFARE

The Committee considered an Information Bulletin which set out statistics covering staff turnover and sickness. It was noted that staff turnover had dropped. Sickness related absence had also dropped by sickness related to stress, anxiety and depression had increased. This could have been in part due to societal change and a better understanding of mental health and, also, to the long-term absence of a very small number of staff.

The mental health and counselling service has been heavily promoted. Staff may self-refer to the service; it is well-used but waiting times for appointments are short.

It was RESOLVED that Staff Turnover and Welfare be reported back to the Committee when data for 2019 – 2020 is available to allow a direct comparison.

The Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee met on the 19th August 2019

Chair: Alastair McCraw (BDC Co-Chair)

CITIZENS ADVICE SERVICE

Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee have commenced a review of the provision of Citizens Advice across Babergh and Mid Suffolk districts and hope that the review can be widened to cover provision across the whole of Suffolk. On 19 August 2019, the joint committee received a presentation from Coleen Sweeney, Chief Officer of Sudbury and District Citizens Advice, and Carol Eagles, Manager of Citizens Advice Mid Suffolk.

Each Citizens Advice (CA) is part of National Citizens Advice but is a locally funded independent charity. There are a number of paid members of staff but the service relies heavily on unpaid volunteers.

Around 6000 residents of the two districts have been helped in the last year; approximately 40% of contacts with clients are face to face. Other means of contact are by telephone, email, webchat, a visit to a client or via an outreach event. A high percentage of requests for advice are on benefit issues and debt.

CA works closely with District Council and County Council officers, occasionally making joint visits to clients. Research has shown that CA services save national and local government around £8M per year and help to generate social and economic benefits of around £48M.

CA's are funded from a number of sources; the largest financial contribution to Sudbury and District CA is from BDC (£53,500). SCC halved their funding in 2019/20 compared to 2018/19 (when funding of £41k was given) and have warned that they will provide no funding in 2020/21. The CCG provided funds to cover the loss of 2019/20 funding and the same level of funding will continue for 2020/21.

Members expressed concern that funding for 2020/21 should be in place in time to avoid the problems caused when SCC withdrew 2019/20 funding. CAs remain concerned about the long-term future because most of their financial support is awarded on an annual basis making long term financial planning difficult.

CAs are finding it difficult to recruit volunteers with the necessary skills. Council members are asked to help with this by suggesting to people who have suitable professional skills that they consider becoming CA volunteers.

It was RESOLVED:

That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to both Cabinets that the current minimum funding for the Citizens Advice be maintained for the next three years;

That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee approach the Chairs of the Scrutiny Committees and Scrutiny Governance Officers of East Suffolk Council, West Suffolk Council, Ipswich Borough Council and Suffolk County Council, with a view of setting up a county-wide scrutiny process to examine funding and the impact on Citizens Advice and the services of Citizens Advice; and

That the Chairs of the said Scrutiny Committees be supplied with a report from Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the topic of Citizens Advice based on this Committee meeting as a basis for the scrutiny process.

FIVE-YEAR HOUSING LAND SUPPLY UPDATE

The committee considered a report which set out the draft annual position statement figure for both Councils, which now demonstrated that both Councils had a Five-year Housing Land Supply, including a 20% buffer for MSDC & a 5% buffer for Babergh. The BDC Supply the figure, at the time of the meeting, was calculated at 5.78 years. Whilst this is some reassurance, the councils are not yet in the strongest position. Completion of the Local Plan process remains vital because without a Local Plan the Councils can still be subject to challenges from developers when planning permissions were refused.

With an approved Local Plan, the Five-year Housing Land Supply could be agreed by the Planning Inspectorate and would then be fixed for a year. Until this was agreed, and the statement published, the Council could be challenged by developers.

Responding to questions regarding the weight that could be given to the Position Statement at planning committees, the Chief Planning Officer explained that, by providing a Five-year Housing Land Supply statement, the Councils would be in stronger position. Adopted Neighbourhood Plans already carry weight and will continue to do so even without an approved Local Plan.

It was RESOLVED:

That the content of the report and the Draft Babergh and Mid Suffolk Five-Year Housing Land Supply Annual Position Statement for 2019/20, which were subject to consultation, be noted.

HOUSING VOIDS

Members discussed the Information Bulletin which showed that void times has remained below target and whether it would be necessary to continue to receive regular updates on voids as the Performance Management Statistics on Connect included the performance in respect of void times.

It was agreed by committee that the Voids Project had been a success for the team and that thanks should be extended to the entire Housing Team for the work undertaken for the past two years. It was also agreed that no further voids Information Bulletins need be forwarded to the Committee unless there was a significant change in performance against void time targets.

It was RESOLVED:

That no further Voids Information Bulletins be forwarded unless there was a significant change in the targets; and

That thanks be extended to the entire Housing Team for the work undertaken for the past two years.

CHANGES TO BIN COLLECTION ROUTES

Committee's attention was drawn to the issues with the new bin collection routes. Members debated a proposal that the Committee ask for a report on the newly introduced change of the collection routes and the issues related to the collection of the bins, the reasons for the disruption of collection, the long-term effect and the issues with communication to residents.

It was RESOLVED:

That a report be produced and brought the next Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the newly introduced change of the collection routes and the issues related to the collection of the bins, the reasons for the disruption of collection, the long-term effect and the issues with communication to residents.

I'm happy to take any questions on this report, or our future work plans, either within the meeting or afterwards.

Alastair McCraw.

Chair of Overview & Scrutiny Committee, BDC.

12th September 2019.