

Mid Suffolk District Council – 23 January 2020 - Questions for Cabinet Members

CMU12 CABINET MEMBER FOR COMMUNITIES

1. Councillor Keith Welham to the Cabinet Member for Communities

Could we be given more information on the Active Schools project including:

Which schools are taking part?

Which aspects of the project are they involved in?

Is there direct involvement in the project from officers and members?

How is the project funded?

Response

Information was provided to you in July of last year shortly after the project was launched, and there is a reference in paragraph 3.9 of my report, but I'm pleased that you have given me the opportunity to provide further detail.

Within Mid Suffolk, Gislingham primary School has had an initial meeting as have St Botolph's in Botesdale and Cedars Park Primary. Thorndon have been in touch to express interest. The furthest ahead are Freeman and Abbots Hall primaries in Stowupland and Stowmarket who both have action plans in place.

The project is focused on helping these schools increase physical activity among their students. Council Officers have contacted schools directly to encourage their involvement and explain the role of Active Suffolk, who have been commissioned to deliver on behalf of the Council.

The project is jointly funded through funding from Public Health and directly from the Council's Communities budget.

2. Councillor Keith Welham to the Cabinet Member for Communities

Could we have an update on the proposed Park Run in Stowmarket, please? Have negotiations on use of the land for the Chiltern Fields route been completed? Or has another route been considered?

Response

Public Realm Officers have taken the lead on this project and met with Cllr Mansel last week.

All Saturday morning users of Chilton Fields have now been contacted seeking confirmation that proposed timing would not conflict with any existing activities on the site (including football, rugby and cricket clubs). Each of these groups have been advised that Cllr Mansel would be Event Director and that all of the parkrun volunteers are keen to look at and

address any potential issues (ie bottle neck points) by walking the route as part of the site meeting. Sarah has also made all groups aware that Cllr Mansel is in discussion with other local sites about potential local parking, for parkrun participants, nearby but not at Chilton Fields as parking is one of the concerns raised.

A face to face meeting is being set up with the clubs in the next 3 weeks.

3. Councillor Keith Welham to the Cabinet Member for Communities

Could we have an update on the Leisure Strategy, please, in particular the strategy for providing leisure services in remote areas?

Response

The Leisure, Sport and Physical Activity Strategy (LSPAS) delivery has focussed on redeveloping and refurbishing the Council's own main leisure centres, in Stowmarket and Stradbroke. These are Invest to Save projects that, when complete, will generate annual revenue savings to the Council, an element of which will be used to establish resourcing within the Communities team to develop the proposed outreach programmes.

Negotiations are currently underway with Everyone Active, to agree not only the redevelopment/refurbishments of the leisure centres, but also to consider their proposals to provide a community outreach resource. The detail of their proposals is now being considered to establish their delivery programme, which is a new role for them and currently due to commence from the start of their new contract in October 2020 (subject to the relevant approvals).

Another important project supporting provision in more remote areas is the Active Wellbeing project referred to at paragraph 3.8 of my report. Delivery in Mid Suffolk has been focused around Fressingfield and Stradbroke, Debenham and Eye. I won't rehearse the information provided within the report in answer to this question but impact is being monitored and further information is available here: <https://www.activesuffolk.org/awsbandm>.

CMU 15 CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT

1. Councillor Andrew Mellen to Cabinet Member for the Environment

In the process of scoping for a new waste depot site, has Gateway 14 been considered as a potential location?

Response

We are currently looking at 3 sites, which includes Gateway 14.

2. Councillor Andrew Mellen to Cabinet Member for the Environment

Noting that in Paragraph 3.15, Mid Suffolk's membership of the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership has resulted in a number of properties benefiting from the "solar together Suffolk" bulk-buying scheme, will there be a further round of this scheme in 2020? Can the portfolio holder request a widening of the scheme in 2020? Can the portfolio holder request a widening of the scheme to include solar hot water panels as well?

Response

A further round of the scheme is currently underway. Full details are available at www.solartogether.co.uk/suffolk/home. Each scheme has run from September through to March. So, the current round will end this Spring.

Any future rounds would be along a similar timetable starting Autumn 2020. That said, the take up has been much lower this time round and it may not be viable for the suppliers/installers the next time – it all depends on prevailing market conditions. The Partnership will review the market over the summer before deciding whether to run a third round in the Autumn.

The scheme has been widened this year to include a battery storage system if requested. Batteries save the energy that is generated by your solar panels, meaning applicants can use the solar energy whenever they want, instead of only during the day.

Solar thermal (hot water) panels have not been included. However, an immersion controller, known as a power diverter, will be included if an applicant states during registration that they have immersion hot water heater. This device will detect when the solar panels generate more electricity than the householder consumes. Instead of exporting this surplus of energy to the grid, the power diverter will redirect this energy to heat the water in the immersion heater. Not everyone has an immersion heater, but if they do, adding a power diverter can increase your annual savings and earnings.

3. Councillor Barry Humphreys to the Cabinet Member for Environment

As most Councillors will be aware the Forestry Commission runs tree planting grant schemes and Government also has an Urban Tree Challenge Fund.

Please can you reassure me that the Climate Emergency Task Force is fully considering the issue of tree coverage in Mid Suffolk and how best to identify land suitable for tree planting and then fund the planting of more trees.'

Response

The Task Force take tree planting seriously and will be committing to improve tree coverage over the District. We are aware of the grant schemes and funding available and will be looking to access these to support our initiatives. Officers are currently assessing the criteria of these funds to see how they can be utilised in Mid Suffolk. We are in our second year of a very successful Tree for Life initiative with the collection event taking place tomorrow. We are currently undertaking an exercise to ensure our mapping system is up to date. Once this is complete, we will assess what land we have that is available for planting. We will further be working with town and parish councils to

understand their appetite around tree planting and to support them where we can. Further emerging tree planting initiatives will be discussed at the next Task Force Meeting.

CMU 16 CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE

1. Councillor John Matthissen to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Noting our staff are Members of the Suffolk Wide Local Authorities pension scheme, is our representative pressing for divestment from all fossil fuel investments?

Response

Thank you for your question Cllr Matthissen. In 2019 I was appointed as a Trustee of the Suffolk Pension Fund to represent the district and borough councils. In that regard I represent not only Mid Suffolk but also West Suffolk, East Suffolk, Babergh and Ipswich. The Suffolk Pension Fund exists to pay the pension benefits for over 65,000 members from over 300 separate employers in the Fund. The Pension Fund Committee invests just over £3billion of pension fund monies and has a fiduciary duty to protect and target an approximate risk adjusted investment return. As a defined benefit scheme any shortfall arising from performance and in funding has to be met by employers and therefore ultimately the risk and any additional cost is that of our council taxpayers.

The Committee invests the money in a wide range of asset classes and with a diverse set of investment managers to discharge its fiduciary duty. The Committee has appointed two active equity managers to outperform their respective equity indexes by selecting and holding shares which they believe will outperform. That process involves them taking into account all information available including climate change. The Committee also invests in equities through passive investment funds which invest in all shares in a given index to guarantee returns in line with that market. Recently the Committee transferred just under 40% of its passive equity investments into a climate aware passive fund without altering the expected investment return. I feel this demonstrates the Committee's commitment to taking climate change into account whilst still firmly meeting its fiduciary duty responsibilities.

Both through its investment managers and by its membership in the Local Authority Pension Fund Forum, the Committee engages with all the companies in which it directly invests to improve environmental, social and governance practices. Such dialogue includes how those companies will adopt to the effects of climate change.

CMU 17 CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING

1. Councillor Sarah Mansel to the Cabinet for Housing

The proportion of universal credit recipients who have alternative payment agreements has risen in the last 6 months from approx 58% to over 70% (from section 3.12). Am I correct that this method is used only to clear rent arrears? Is there anything we as a council can do to ensure that this figure does not continue to rise and to help those claimants manage their budgets?

Response

Alternative Payment Arrangements, or APA's, have increased in line with the number of our tenants who are in receipt of Universal Credit and are in rent arrears. As the rollout of Universal Credit continues, we would also expect to see an increase in the number of APA's.

APA's can be used for tenants who are not in rent arrears, for example, where there are addiction problems, mental health issues, learning difficulties, or they were previously homeless. However, we normally only request an APA if a tenant is in arrears, and the decision will follow a discussion with the tenant.

Once an APA is in place, the rent account will be regularly reviewed, and contact made with the tenant. As the tenant gets close to clearing their arrears, we would discuss with them ending the APA. Some tenants may feel confident that they will be able to manage once the arrangement comes to an end, but others may prefer to continue for a time.

Regarding budgetary support for claimants, when a tenant first moves onto Universal Credit their work coach will refer them for budgeting support. The Income Officers will also discuss this with the tenant and can make further referrals if required. This might be to teams within the Council, such as the Tenancy Support Officers, or to external organisations such as Citizens Advice, Step Change or Home Group.

The Income Team have also started calling all new tenants within the first two weeks of their tenancy. This has allowed us to identify issues much earlier and provide support before rent arrears become unmanageable. The benefits of this approach include the opportunity to build rapport with new tenants, making sure that tenants know who to go to if they get into difficulties with their rent, and assisting with Universal Credit claims.

2. Councillor Sarah Mansel to the Cabinet Member for Housing

Are there any future plans to provide more properties for the 'staying close' project with SCC?

Response

The Council is working closely with Suffolk County Council to understand all of their housing requirements, not only for Staying Close but also for other client groups, including those with specialist accommodation needs, such as Learning Disabilities. We have a meeting scheduled to discuss what their needs are and agree what is feasible for Mid Suffolk to assist with. It is important we work closely with SCC, particularly around our Corporate Parenting responsibilities, but we also need to balance the demand through the Housing Register and those households currently placed in Temporary Accommodation.

3. Councillor Sarah Mansel to the Cabinet Member for Housing

What is the timeline for presenting the business case for the joint venture building services programme to Cabinet or Council?

Response

- Work is ongoing in developing the 'legal framework' for which the Joint Venture would operate within, this involves separate legal advice on Employment and Tax
- Work is ongoing in ensuring that the financials (with respect to the current) service and the cost of the JV are comparable, and robust
- Regular updates to staff – in the form of meetings and weekly newsletters
- A restructure of the service to align it with our aspirations going forward
- A review of our contract with Blue flame whom are a member of the Flagship Group
- Wider awareness and involvement – through shadowing by myself
- Huge amounts of effort in developing current service delivery this has included interim management and improvements such as renegotiating our materials contract and identifying new ways of working for staff that improves productive as well as employee satisfaction

4. Councillor Matthissen to Cabinet Members for Housing and Planning

Does the current draft of joint local plan provide sufficient policies to deliver the council's housing strategy? In particular I refer to:

Tenure mix

1. Size mix
2. Bungalows
3. 3 levels of access for those with disabilities
4. "Pepper-potting" of social housing
5. "Tenure-blind" external appearance

Will you commission a systematic review of JLP is provided to identify any relevant aspects of the Housing Strategy which cannot be delivered?

Response

To be responded to at the meeting.

CMU 18 CABINET MEMBER FOR PLANNING

1. Councillor Keith Scarff to Cabinet Member for Planning

As a Member of the joint Council Planning Charter Review Group, which has only met once on August 6th, can you advise as to progress on this issue? My understanding was that officers would be looking at a merging of the two separate planning charters and reporting back to the review group with a draft combined charter so that members could comment as the next stage in the process.

Response

Since the original meeting in August significant work has been undertaken to review the Charter taking into account examples of best practice from other local authorities. As such a draft has now been completed and has been sent to the Cabinet Members for planning for comments before it is presented to the Working Group. It has taken longer than anticipated to conduct this work due to the General Election where Democratic Services Officers worked to help ensure the election ran smoothly.

With regards to the proposed visits these were also delayed by the election as the other Democratic services teams were heavily involved in the election and advised that they could not facilitate a visit to showcase their best practice.

However, the democratic services team are currently organising the visits to other Councils and Members will be invited to these shortly. Once these visits have taken place a formal meeting of the working group will be organised.

I will be meeting with my fellow portfolio holder on 11 February along with the Monitoring Officer and Chief Planning Officer to review their progress on this and to discuss the potential to agree common ground in relation to key topics within the Charter in order to assist the prompt work of the review group.”