

TO: Council	REPORT NUMBER: MC/19/37
FROM: Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee	DATE OF MEETING: 27 February 2020

REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee held two separate meetings on 8 January 2020. Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee also met on the same day and again on 16 January. Reports on those meetings are set out below. A report on the Cross-Authority Task and Finish Group set up to look at the Citizens Advice Service was presented to the January meeting of Council so that it could be used to inform the budget setting processes of the Council.

JOINT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 8 JANUARY 2020

1. CORPORATE PLAN OUTPUTS

Following the request made by Councillor Morley at the October 2019 meeting of Council, the joint committee examined the Corporate Plan Outputs document. This high-level document forms a layer between the Corporate Plan and the Action Plans to be produced by Strategy Task Groups. It lists the various outcomes desired under each of the six priorities, including items completed, in progress or planned for action.

The document was introduced by the two Council leaders, Councillors Morley and Ward, who expanded on the need for a statement of the Outputs as a series of desired outcomes over the course of the next four years. Each priority was to be supported by its own strategy, updated as necessary. These, and the outputs themselves, could be added to and changed throughout their life. In addition, 'Business as Usual' would be expected to contribute to Strategies and Outputs without being specifically listed.

Several threads had been identified to achieve strategic outcomes. Examples were given. The use of resources such as funds and staff resources and a Learning and Development Plan for each member of staff, were described.

At the same time, it was recognised that both all Members and Cabinet should be equipped with the development opportunities that would be needed. Further regular monitoring and reporting would take place, which could then feed into future Overview and Scrutiny work plans.

In questioning, members queried how measurement of the outputs could be achieved as many of the 'Outcomes' had no specific target. An approach of using 'milestones' and Programme Boards chaired by the Strategic Director was suggested by the Leaders, alongside the quarterly reports to Cabinet. A traffic light system (red, amber, green) was being integrated.

All-Member briefings for the priority themes were suggested by the Corporate Director and there were cross party member Working Groups already in place to support delivery.

There was a considerable amount of discussion about the various means of involving members more fully in the Corporate Plan, the Corporate Outputs and the strategies and outcomes which would come from the Strategy Groups. It was noted that attendance at briefings and ownership of corporate strategies was not always high amongst members.

It was Resolved: -

That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee urges Cabinet to find a range of methods to engage with all Members to understand the linkage between the Corporate Plan and the Corporate Outputs and explain the role of Member Working Groups in developing strategies and action plans.

2. WESTERN SUFFOLK COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP (WSCSP)

This annual statutory requirement had been postponed due to the General Election. It was attended by the following witnesses.

Cllr Joanna Spicer	Chair of Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership Suffolk County Councillor
Paul Goodman	Group Commander for Prevention and Detection – Suffolk Fire and Rescue
Clair Harvey	Community Safety Lead - Localities & Partnerships Team Health, Wellbeing & Children’s Services Suffolk County Council
Emma Gaskell	Senior Primary Care Manager NHS West Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group
Kim Warner	Western Area Commander – Police Vice-Chair of WSCSP

Councillor Mansel, as the MSDC representative, introduced the report detailing the aims and priorities of the Partnership and requested that members confine their questions to these already complex areas. The Professional Lead for Communities, and Corporate Manager for Community Safety, Franstine Jones, would be happy to assist with individual concerns after the meeting.

The five priority areas are County Lines, Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) which includes men and boys, Hate Crime, PREVENT, and Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHR). This does not exclude emerging areas of concern in Community Safety.

Each witness was invited to introduce their role within the WSCSP.

Councillor Spicer emphasised that Western Suffolk included West Suffolk, Babergh, Mid Suffolk and Ipswich and expanded on the active involvement of all partners. This had been further enlarged to include organisations other than the statutory members.

Councillor Spicer outlined the work and programmes undertaken by the WSCSP including issues around social housing. Lee Crowdell – Tenants Services Corporate Manager had contributed to this area. Work programmes for schools and education had focussed on County Lines and gangs. West Suffolk College, secondary schools and the Pupil Referral Units now had representatives on the WSCSP. The WSCSP is in the process of preparing its 5-year Tactical Plan and would welcome feedback from members.

Paul Goodman, for the Fire and Rescue Service, outlined the process of information sharing, and referral of issues in diverse areas such as County Lines, drug abuse, radicalisation and domestic violence. Resources were often shared, and training given in spotting signs for protection and prevention. In response to a question, he also described available resources for target hardening (locks on letter boxes for example) in cases of potential victims at risk.

A fuller report on target hardening was included in the committee agenda papers and this is recommended reading for all Members.

Emma Gaskell (CCG) explained the NHS role in relation to health, domestic abuse and County Lines. Training was provided to GPs regarding these issues and in gathering information which could be provided to relevant organisations. She agreed that NHS contacts were a prime indicator for potential issues as highlighted by Domestic Homicide Reviews. These, though rare, are a statutory duty for the WSCSP to examine what lessons may be learnt.

Clair Harvey (SCC) confirmed the five main areas concerning the Partnership were unchanged but, following recent event feedback, two new areas were emerging; these are modern day slavery and anti-social behaviour. In addition, the recent Government Violence Bill had added a statutory duty for the CSPs to tackle severe violence, including County Lines and drug-induced violence. No resources have been allocated for this extra responsibility.

In response to Members' questions, Clair Harvey explained that Suffolk had no special issues and did not differ from other areas. Supt Warner confirmed that Suffolk has a low crime rate but, otherwise, reflected national trends with no disproportional effects compared to similar areas.

Kim Warner described how the Partnership's work had changed over the last five years, fundamentally by its own work in tackling meaningful topics. County Lines work continued as a focus and indications were that this was having an effect. The Police Service are working in schools, with students and Head Teachers, and seeking to inform parents. A Crime Disruption Unit is operating very effectively with other forces, including the Metropolitan Police, to conduct preventative measures. The WSCSP itself cooperates within the partnership and is looking at the right areas of concern.

In general questioning and discussion, questions were raised about Violence against Women and Girls, domestic abuse in general, mental health issues, availability of beds for victims of domestic abuse. It became apparent that the situations are much as before, but that there is an increasing willingness to report issues and for them to be taken seriously.

In summary, Councillor Davis, the Babergh representative on the WSCSP, added that the WSCSP was very relevant to Babergh and Mid Suffolk and that the Councils should not be complacent, and that lessons learnt should be shared with the various groups working together in the WSCSP.

The committee debated, with input from witnesses and officers, how members could assist with the work of the WSCSP. The following points were arrived at:

- Member briefings;
- Members to consider how they could share the information available with the wider community;
- Raise awareness amongst Council employees;
- Use meetings and committees as a catalyst for awareness for Councillors and communities;
- Use social media for awareness campaigns;
- News releases to Parish Councils;
- Approach Suffolk Association of Local Councils to assist with Parish Councils for the above;
- Display posters on community notice boards
- Members, who were involved with Community Safety, to share their training experiences with other Members.

The review of WSCSP held in late 2018 resulted in the production of a Members' Confidential Tool kit; it was proposed that this be updated and distributed.

Thanks to all the witnesses were given by Councillor Morley (Leader MSDC) and the Chair.

It was Resolved: -

That the confidential member 'Contact Tool Kit' pack be updated and distributed to all Members as a Babergh and Mid Suffolk Confidential 'Contact Tool Kit'.

MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 8 JANUARY 2020

GATEWAY 14

This item was considered following the exclusion of members of the public. However, this report does not include any of the confidential details presented and discussed. For such details, Members are invited to read the Committee Agenda papers and minutes.

Councillor Brewster, Cabinet Member for Economic Growth and Chair of MSDC (Suffolk Holdings) Ltd, introduced the report and outlined the agreement options available to the Council to bring the Gateway 14 and Stowmarket East project forward. He then detailed the main points in the report including:

- The partner relationship;
- The governance structures;
- The financial implications;
- The progress on the Gateway 14 and Stowmarket East development.

It was clarified that Gateway 14 is the vehicle for implementing the development and that the Stowmarket East site and the Gateway 14 site are considered to be one development site for future planning and development.

Emily Attack, Corporate Manager for Assets and Investments provided a presentation to Members.

She confirmed that both sites were wholly owned by Mid Suffolk District Council and had received planning permission for outline consent. It was clarified that although the two developments were to provide financial returns to the Council, it was also the intention that they would provide benefits to the local community as employment sites and for social activities. The most likely occupants would be commercial operations and distribution centres. The current time scale is to develop the site over 12 years. The appendices contained within the restricted papers detailed partnership arrangements, sensitivity and risk analyses and risk register.

17 hectares of the land had been designated as an Enterprise Zone and will retain that classification for 25 years. If occupied by March 2021 occupiers of designated land will receive a five-year business rate relief. The scheme had been set up to encourage occupation for specific sites. However, this arrangement was expiring and further advice on how this arrangement would proceed was anticipated from Central Government.

In response to questions, the Assistant Director for Assets and Investments responded that, in choosing partners for the site, the main business goal is to generate revenue, but that both social and community aspects were taken into consideration and were important to the project. It was a large site and there would be opportunities for various developments on the site, but focus remained on business expansion. It was anticipated that a number of occupancies and businesses would be attracted to the site improving skills and employment opportunities for the area.

There were questions about the type of businesses likely to take up occupancy on the site, whether jobs would be low paid or technical employment and if climate change would be taken into consideration when choosing occupancy.

In response to questions about the inclusion of distribution centres and warehouses in the plan, particularly why manufacturing businesses had not been included, the Assistant Director – Asset and Investments responded that there was a clear need for industrial premises in the market but that the Stowmarket East site could attract higher value operations. Currently there is a high demand for distribution centres.

Reference was made to the Council's declaration of a climate emergency. However, the Gateway 14 development would depend on road transport, increasing road traffic at a time when this needed to be minimised. Environmental sustainability should be given very serious consideration.

The Assistant Director – Assets and Investment responded that increasingly occupiers were looking to be sustainable. Work was being undertaken to ensure that the site would be sustainable where possible and, although this point might not be as strong as the Council would have wanted, a balance had to be struck between financial and sustainable considerations.

Concern was expressed that local businesses in other local business premises would relocate to Gateway 14, which would pose a problem with other business premises being left empty. The Assistant Director – Assets and Investments confirmed that proactive work was already being undertaken to investigate this issue.

Members discussed possible recommendations and it was generally agreed that the report should be supported, but that the sustainable aspects and the reduction of carbon should be explored further when choosing occupancy of the Gateway 14 site.

It was Resolved: -

That the committee supports the recommendations included in the report;

That the social and community potential be expanded in the report;

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to Council to consider discussions with partners to explore opportunities in maximizing sustainability of the site.

MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 16 JANUARY 2020

1. DRAFT GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2020/21 AND FOUR-YEAR OUTLOOK

This report will not describe the draft budget provisions as members will have the Final Budget before them within the agenda papers for this Council meeting.

The report was introduced by Councillor Whitehead, the Cabinet Member for Finance.

In response to a question about the change in Council Tax Relief and how this would have an effect on beneficiaries and families in relation to unoccupied properties following the owner's death, Councillor Whitehead responded that this change was aimed at short-term tenancy agreements and that the number of properties for renting was increasing. The Assistant Director for Corporate Resources added that properties left unoccupied following death were exempt from paying Council Tax until the estate was settled. If necessary, an exemption for a further six months could be granted.

In response to a question regarding PV panels and the cost of servicing and repairs of these, the Assistant Director for Housing clarified that there had been some issues with this project. However, in the last few months the income from the panels had been steady. He outlined some of the issues with repairs and suppliers.

Reference was made to the New Homes Bonus and that this would be phased out over the next couple of years, particularly whether any guidance from Central Government had been received in respect of a replacement for New Homes Bonus. The Assistant Director – Corporate Resources responded that the Council had not yet been informed on how the New Homes Bonus would be phased out.

A question asked if a full review of Business Rates would be conducted as there was no indication in the Budget that the income from Business Rates had dropped significantly for the retail sector despite the current instability in the retail market. The Assistant Director for Corporate Resources explained that the income from Business Rates had been set at a prudent level, until firm guidance was received for the future. Income of £2M had been received last year out of the £16m - £17m collected in total. The government received 50% of the Business Rates collected by the Shared Revenues Partnership and the remainder of the money was shared between authorities included in the Shared Revenues Partnership.

In response to a question regarding the Budget reserves held for homelessness, the Assistant Director for Housing explained how funding for homelessness was received and that Budget Reserves held for homeless people had already been earmarked for projects involving homelessness.

A question was raised regarding the loan for CIFCO and whether it was being repaid at the new interest rate. The Assistant Director for Corporate Resources explained that for new long-term loans the interest rate would be increased. The assumption used for the budget had been 1% below the interest rate and, in reality, this was now 1% above. However, this would have only an insignificant impact on the repayments.

Regarding cost pressures in Table 7 for planning appeals, it was confirmed that these costs are currently funded from budget reserves. In respect of the negative cost pressure in respect of Gateway 14, the Assistant Director for Corporate Resources outlined the loan arrangements for Gateway 14 and that the related borrowing from the Council was a benefit as the loan would be repaid to the Council once the project had commenced. She explained that the Council received as an income the difference between the interest paid on the loan and the interest received from Gateway 14.

There were queries regarding expenditure income associated with Civil Parking Enforcement which were to be answered outside the meeting.

Members debated the recommendations and it was generally agreed that comments made at the committee should be forwarded to Cabinet for their consideration at their meeting in February.

It was Resolved: -

- **That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee ask that Officers and Cabinet take into consideration the comments made at this meeting when submitting the budget to Cabinet for consideration at the Cabinet meeting in February 2020.**
- **That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomed the additional £1/2m allocated to Climate Change for the year 2020/21.**

2. DRAFT HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET 2020/21 AND FOUR-YEAR OUTLOOK

Councillor Whitehead, Cabinet Member for Finance, introduced the report and summarised the main points in the report.

An explanation was sought in respect of the service charges for Sheltered Housing: properties are being de-sheltered and the cost per tenant was increasing, is this part of the reason for the increase in Sheltered Housing Service Charges? The Assistant Director for Housing confirmed that as the number of sheltered housing units decreased it was likely that the cost per sheltered home would increase and would include additional costs for issues such as checks for legionella and fire risk assessments to ensure that tenants were safe. A review of Sheltered Housing would be undertaken in the coming years to ensure that the service was cost effective.

In response to a concern about the staffing costs around the new build and if there was enough staff to manage this area, the Assistant Director for Housing responded that over the past four years a hundred or so homes had been built and any additional staffing costs were being absorbed in the budget. Staffing issues had been resolved by restructuring and the teams had the staff required going forward.

It was noted that garage uptake had not increased as expected. The Assistant Director for Housing responded that there would be a report on garage sites going to Cabinet later in January regarding the use of these. He informed the committee that the waiting list for garages had been cleared, and that some sites remained unutilised. The Housing team was working with the Assets team to review these sites.

Clarification on plans for a new council housing development in Elmswell were requested. The Assistant Director for Housing responded that there were several developments across the District, which were about to commence or had received planning permissions. However, it was not expected to bring the site in Elmswell forward for the next couple of years. Plans were being worked on during the next few months and it was not possible at this stage to provide any numbers for this site. He thought that the site had potential for a slightly different development which could include different ownerships such as open market sales, shared ownership or social housing, but it was too early to define the plans.

Referring to the table in paragraph 5.4, it was queried if the spike in 'New Build and Acquisitions' is due to the planned development of the Old HQ site in Needham Market and the Middle school site in Stowmarket and this was confirmed by the Assistant Director for Housing.

Comments were made on the withdrawal of decorating vouchers for tenants, which would save £3000 per annum, and that this would have an effect on local charities. Local organisations were approached to help with grants and funding by tenants and were currently coping with the demand but would find it a challenge to continue such funding if there were to be an increase in applications. Would be taken into consideration when determining the HRA budget? The Assistant Director for Housing explained that the Council had stopped offering decoration vouchers but had not received any negative feedback from new or prospective tenants. Carpets and furniture had never been provided by the Council. However, there was a team in place to support tenants with such issues and he urged Members to contact them if they were approached.

The increase in the CPI from 1% to 2% and the decrease in tenants' rents during the last four years had been a statutory requirement from the Government. Concern was expressed that further statutory requirements would have an adverse impact on the tenants. Councillor Whitehead, Cabinet Member for Finance responded that the increase is due to a statutory requirement set by Central Government for the next five years. The Assistant Director for Housing added that, despite the CPI increase to 2% there still existed a deficit in the budget for this service. Tenants actually paid less rent now than predicted four years ago. He then outlined how the HRA budget was forecast for the next four years and the next thirty years and the implication of managing costs. However, £40m would be invested over the next four years in new housing and this was an achievement worth noting.

The Assistant Director for Corporate Resources informed that the Government would be increasing the Local Housing allowance, so benefits would be going up, which would help with the rent increase.

Members generally agreed that the HRA Budget should be endorsed and that the comments made at the meeting should be forwarded to Cabinet.

It was Resolved: -

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorse the Housing Revenue Account Budget and Four-year Outlook but ask that Officers and Cabinet take into consideration the comments made at this meeting when submitting the budget to Cabinet for consideration at the Cabinet meeting in February 2020.