

BABERGH AND MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCILS

Minutes of the meeting of the **JOINT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in the King Edmund Chamber, Endeavour House, 8 Russell Road, Ipswich on Monday, 24 May 2021

PRESENT:

Councillors:	Terence Carter	James Caston
	Paul Ekpenyong	Kathryn Grandon
	Alastair McCraw (Chair)	Mary McLaren
	David Muller	Adrian Osborne
	Keith Scarff	Keith Welham (Co-Chair)

In attendance:

Officers: Strategic Director (KN)
Assistant Director Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer (EY)
Senior Governance Support Officer (HH)

Apologies:

Councillors Jane Gould

55 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

55.1 There were no declarations made by Members.

56 JOS/20/20 TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 22 MARCH 2021

It was RESOLVED:-

That the minutes of the meeting held on the 22 March 2021 be confirmed and signed as a true record of the meeting.

57 TO RECEIVE NOTIFICATION OF PETITIONS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE COUNCIL'S PETITION SCHEME

57.1 None received.

58 QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

58.1 None received.

59 QUESTIONS BY COUNCILLORS

59.1 None received.

60.1 The Chair, Councillor McCraw introduced the item and outlined the background for the annual review of the Committee. He referred to the appendices in the Agenda and invited Members to make comments and observations on the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees 2020/21 and the Annual Reports.

60.2 Members provided the following comments on remote meetings:

- The remote meetings had worked well given the circumstances of the Covid-19 Pandemic.
- Virtual meetings were missing the interaction before the meetings.
- Pressures on staff had increased due to the circumstances of working from home.
- Officers had provided tremendous support for Councillors before and during virtual meetings and generally during the Pandemic.
- Some Members felt there was more pressure from attending remote meetings, due to technical issues.
- Both Chairs felt that chairing virtual meetings was demanding.
- The challenges throughout the year had been resolved to a high standard by the Officers and advice received from the Monitoring Officers had been valuable.
- All Members agreed that face to face meetings provided a better setting for committee meetings.
- Hybrid meetings were suggested however this was for Central Government to decide in due course.
- Monday morning virtual meetings were hindered by lag on-line.
- Some Members appreciated the reduction of travel time and cost of attending face to face meetings in the Councils' premises
- Some Members felt that remote meetings were more accessible for Members, Officers and members of the public wishing to attend.
- The electronic voting was an advantage.
- Remote meetings made it more difficult for councillors to speak.
- Officers were commended for the seamless transition from face to face to virtual meetings.

60.3 The Chair and Councillor Welham raised issues around task and finish groups and the possibilities of remote meetings.

60.4 The Monitoring Officer clarified the High Court ruling on remote meetings. Attendance for Councillors and officers for the Councils' public meetings must be in a single, specified geographical location and be physically attended, which made hybrid meetings illegal for decision making committee meetings and the meetings for Council and Cabinet.

60.5 Councillor McLaren thought that remote meeting missed the interaction

between members, which made it easier to contribute to a debate.

- 60.6 Councillor Grandon felt more comfortable participating in face-to-face meetings, as she was not hindered by the restrictions of virtual meetings.
- 60.7 Councillor Scarff commented that in particular larger remote meetings such as Council, were very lengthy, as a result of the virtual meeting process. However, remote meetings had worked well when the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had invited witnesses to attend, such as the Local Citizens Advice and the scrutiny of Representatives on Outside Bodies. Briefings were particularly suitable for remote meeting and saved time for both councillors and officers.
- 60.8 Members continued the debate relating to past meetings and made the following comments:
- That the spontaneous interaction and dialogue with officers when being in Endeavour House was missing.
 - That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were mostly guided by the Cabinet and Council for items to be scrutinised.
 - That the Joint meetings enabled a broader debate; however, they reduced the number of meetings held, which resulted in less items being scrutinised.
- 60.9 The Chair commented that both the Joint and sovereign Overview and Scrutiny Committees had held a large number of meetings, scrutinised most of the items on the workplans, and were the hardest working committees in the Council.
- 60.10 Councillor Carter added that personally he had used MS TEAMS to contact officers more frequently than if he had been in Endeavour House. He asked if the officers present would like to comment on their experiences of remote working and meetings.
- 60.11 The Monitoring Officer had experienced an increase in speaking to different Councillors, but less frequently during the remote working period. There had been less opportunities for informal interaction and chance meetings which would have enabled Officers to check the welfare of Councillors on a regular basis. However, she thought that remote working had helped Councillors, who were working, to participate in more meetings. She also commented on her personal experience in working from home.
- 60.12 The Strategic Director explained that her role was to meet with different groups and attend meetings. During the past year Councillors had contacted her on a wider range of communication systems and she had enjoyed when Councillors turned on their cameras in the virtual meetings.
- 60.13 The Senior Governance Officer thought that the workload had remained the

same throughout the pandemic and that it was the way officers and members worked together which had changed, as committees and meetings continued through the lockdowns in the past year.

- 60.14 Members returned to consider time management during virtual meetings and committees. Many of these had increased in length in comparison to face to face meetings. Virtual pre-Committee meetings had not been as effective as face to face pre-committee meetings.
- 60.15 There were various views on the process of scoping of topics. Some Members felt that this was not an efficient way of approaching topics for scrutiny, as it was going over the same topic twice.
- 60.16 The Monitoring Officer explained the benefits of scoping a topic and suggested that in the future officers could present a more completed scoping document to the Committee for consideration.
- 60.17 Councillor McLaren felt that Members needed training not just in scoping of topics but for scrutiny in general. It was generally agreed that face to face training provided a better engagement than virtual training.
- 60.18 The Chair suggested that the Guide for Scrutiny from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny should be distributed to all Committee Members.
- 60.19 Members then considered the Committee's recommendations to Cabinet and Council and Councillor Ekpenyong thought that there was no mechanism to monitor whether recommendations had been carried through in a timely fashion or if the recommendations had achieved the desired impact. He thought that scoping of a topic made the committee cognisant.
- 60.20 The Chair explained that the Chairs presented the Overview and Scrutiny Committees recommendation to Cabinet and that they were usually taken into account when Cabinet made recommendations. The Cabinet also sent cabinet reports to be scrutinised by the Committees.
- 60.21 Councillor Welham suggested to look at actions in the Districts for future scrutiny processes, as several points had been raised by residents, some of which could be scrutinised. He suggested rural transport even though it was not directly the responsibility of the Council. He also thought that collaborative scrutiny with other authorities could add value to the scrutiny process.
- 60.22 Members then considered the Annual Reports and the benefits for a joint scrutiny process, when the decision of one Council could have an impact on the other. Generally, Members agreed that the joint Overview and Scrutiny Committees were beneficial for joint topics.

60.23 Members briefly discussed Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership (WSCSP) and performance reporting.

60.24 Members considered the recommendations to be made to the future Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

60.25 Members proposed and seconded each recommendation individually as follows:

Proposed by Councillor Caston and seconded by Councillor Muller.

1. *That pre-meetings of half an hour are adopted as standard practice.*

Proposed by Councillor McCraw and seconded by Councillor Carter.

2. *That officers work on a proposal for increasing the size of each committee to enable robust scrutiny for the sovereign Overview and Scrutiny Committees.*

Proposed by Councillor McLaren and seconded by Councillor Grandon.

3. *To hold a bespoke training session for committee members, encompassing all elements of the scrutiny function and taking into account the skills and experiences of individual members.*

Proposed by Councillor Caston and seconded by Councillor Muller.

4. *That an increased use of a wider range of internal and external witnesses be adopted by the Committee.*

Proposed by Councillor McCraw and seconded by Councillor Ekpenyong.

5. *That an increased use of Task and Finish Group be adopted by the Committee.*

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED:-

The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to the new Overview and Scrutiny Committees:

1.1 That pre-meetings of half an hour are adopted as standard practice;

1.2 That officers work on a proposal for increasing the size of each

committee to enable robust scrutiny for the sovereign committees;

1.3 That a bespoke training session for committee members be held, encompassing all elements of the scrutiny function and taking into account the skills and experiences of individual members;

1.4 That an increased use of a wider range of internal and external witnesses be adopted by the Committee;

1.5 That an increased use of Task and Finish Group be adopted by the Committee.

61 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST

It was RESOLVED:-

That the Forthcoming Decisions List be noted

62 JOS/20/22 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

62.1 Members considered both workplans and made the following proposal for upcoming topics to be scrutinised:

- Delivery of services for transport for both town and rural areas.
- The Infrastructure Delivery Plan
- The way Cabinet was operating and whether this worked for the Council in relation to communication, learning and information and whether this was working for all members.

62.2 The Chair would begin preparation of these topics at the next Chairs' Overview and Scrutiny Briefing.

It was Resolved:

That the Babergh and the Mid Suffolk Work Plans be noted.

63 JOS/20/23 MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

See the previous item.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 11.43 am.

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Chair