

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

TO: Council	REPORT NUMBER: IRBC/21/24
FROM: Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee	DATE OF MEETING: 25 January 2022

22 November 2021 Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting - Chair Mary McLaren

10 Committee Members attended the meeting

JOS/21/13 REVIEW OF THE SHARED LEGAL SERVICE.

The Shared Legal Services Manager introduced the report to the Committee outlining that the service worked equally across Babergh, Mid Suffolk and West Suffolk Councils. The Service reported to a Steering Committee that had representatives from all three councils and also reported to leadership teams in each authority. Work was prioritised within the Service on when it was needed to be completed and not by which authority it came from. Three budgets had been split and agreed across the authorities, based on the case management system. However, it had now changed to look at the volume of cases coming from each authority to determine how that split would be managed in future. This would be considered by the Steering Group.

Questions raised by Members into the differing numbers of staff and whether employment conditions were the same, received re-assurances that due to different rates of pay across the three councils, people doing the same job role were employed by the same authority to avoid discrepancies in rates of pay. The Monitoring Officer (Steering Committee) added that whilst the number of direct employees differed from each authority, the costs of all the staff were split proportionally across the whole service.

Questions regarding records of external costs and the time spent on cases were satisfied that time spent on each individual case would be reported and recorded by the individual officers working on the case however whilst no cost per case was calculated if outsourcing was needed for any matter, it would be billed to the Shared Legal Service and sent to the relevant department. In relation specifically to time spent there was a complex scoping method for referrals in order to determine a predicted time frame that a case could be completed in.

Members expressed their views that more detail was needed to identify the differences between Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils, clearer performance statistics to highlight progression and clearer reports on which departments were using the service and in what capacity.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED: -

- 1.1 That the Legal Services Steering Board review the re-charging mechanism for the costs of the legal service and consider whether the performance monitoring arrangements are sufficient and that the findings of the Legal Services Steering Board be presented back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee via an information bulletin after its meeting in December 2021.**
- 1.2 That the information bulletin in recommendation one also include historical and current performance monitoring data, which would enable the Committee to observe the trends in performance over time.**
- 1.3 That a further information bulletin be presented to the Committee in six months into the financial year demonstrating the split of new legal matters between Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils.**

JOS/21/14 TASK AND FINISH GROUP FOR SCOPING OF TRANSPORT

Councillor Welham introduced the report to the Committee outlining that the Task and Finish Group had had their first meeting to which a number of witnesses had been called. This included officers from Suffolk County Council and service managers of Community Transport providers in Babergh and Mid Suffolk. The Task and Finish group found that the services provided had had little in way of promotion and publicity since 2016 (posted on Bus Shelters) as to what was available to residents and who were not aware of services provided by Community Transport providers.

Some Members stated that they had not been aware of Community Connections within in their wards.

Members were concerned that Suffolk County Council in its provision of bus operators would have little interest in the work of the Task and Finish Group which could be costly and that the Task and Finish Group needed to be clear in its aims to ensure communication of the existing services are improved and highlight where gaps exist.

With 7 votes for and 3 against

It was RESOLVED: -

That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee resolved that the Task and Finish Group scope and carry out the exercise.

JOS/21/15 SCOPING OF CITIZENS ADVICE REVIEW

Councillor Welham presented the report to the Committee outlining that two years ago a Task and Finish Group from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been set up to Review Citizens Advice. The Committee decided to do an annual review that would focus on recent impacts and allow the Committee to see where they could facilitate change and add value.

However, over the past two years the situation had changed. Financial support had been agreed to Babergh and Mid Suffolk CA's, the Covid Pandemic had changed the methods by which residents accessed the services and changes in employment and income had increased the number of residents seeking help. This had impacted the purpose of the original review.

It was agreed to develop a scoping document for the Committee and the Citizens Advice Services in order to inform the purpose and focus of the review and would allow the focus to be agreed between CA and the Committee.

It was also agreed that only two Citizen's Advice representatives would be invited and time limits would be put on the report giving.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED: -

That the Committee resolved to approve the scoping document included in the tabled papers with amendments as discussed at the meeting and that delegation be given to the Monitoring Officer to complete the remainder of the scoping document.

**20 December 2021 Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting – Chair
Keith Welham**

9 Committee Members attended the meeting

JOS/21/20 REVIEW OF LOCAL CITIZENS ADVICE

The Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Sudbury) and the Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Mid Suffolk) presented to the Committee how the Local Citizens Advice Services had adapted their services over the Covid-19 Pandemic. For the purpose of this report, I have omitted the comments by the Mid Suffolk LCA and Mid Suffolk Member's specific comments on the Mid Suffolk Service.

Sudbury & District LCA Activity: -

There has been a restart of some face to face appointments, but CA have found that the telephone help service has been massively successful and some of the issues presented by clients had been resolved without the need to see the clients face to face.

There has been an increase in the number of 25–35 year olds seeking advice and guidance and 50% of existing clients have an underlying health condition. The CA's Debt Advisor has been given additional funding, so the post is now secure for the next three years. However due to the current financial difficulties of many clients and the increasing numbers of debt problems within the general population, requirement for Debt Advice has increased and it takes one year for a Debt Advisor to be trained and fully accredited to respond competently to client need.

Recruitment and training of new staff and volunteers is a key priority. At the 1 December 2021, 13 new volunteers have been recruited since the April 2021. On the 20th of January 2022 the CA is looking to restart outreach services in Hadleigh once a month. It is also offering services from the Phoenix Centre in Sudbury on a monthly basis.

The Current Revenue Grant to Sudbury and District Citizens Advice Bureau 2021-2022 is £53,500 with the same amount agreed for 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. There is an expectation that there will be a continued increase in the number of clients and issues but are confident they have the systems and equipment in place to handle a large number and meet face to face with complex cases.

Questions around the following topics were raised by Members:

- What was the relationship between food banks and the LCA and how was an holistic approach achieved. Sudbury CA when making a Foodbank referral would also review the individual's wider situation to determine what may be causing the issue. Conversely budgeting advice and benefit checks were undertaken when the referral came to the CA from the Food Bank.
- Data protection was fully agreed between the food banks and the CA.
- Government funding such as the household support fund had been made available to clients, but this obviously had a time limit.
- Cross border use as in the Essex/Suffolk Border was no barrier to the use of the Sudbury LCA by Essex residents however no funding was received from Essex.
- Resource sharing was a rare occurrence in Sudbury however during the pandemic Sudbury LCA had outsourced debt provision to Ipswich LCA.
- Maximum wait times for telephone and email responses were within the same day and appointments were scheduled within the same week.
- Recognising that Sudbury and Hadleigh are the main locations for actual face to face advice, residents in other parts of the district had, prior to the pandemic, been seen in GP surgeries. Greater access has been through digital access and email advice. However, this did leave many residents digitally excluded and without a service in many parts of Babergh.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED: -

- 1.1 To thank the LCA Chief Officers and their respective staff for their work that they have carried out in the last year. Particularly during the pandemic.**
- 1.2 The Committee are re-assured that both LCA's are operating effectively and efficiently and responded well to all questioning from Members.**

- 1.3 That the councils take a single view of debt and implement an integrated system for dealing with housing rent and council tax debt.**
- 1.4 That contact be made to food banks with a request that their clients are referred to the LCA for advice on nutrition, budgeting and cookery skills classes.**
- 1.5 That remote virtual operational capability for LCA and other bodies should be provided on an accelerated programme as a matter of urgency defining locations, IT equipment and applications, training and connectivity.**
- 1.6 That Cabinets be asked to consider the previous resolution of the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee that the 3 year rolling funding arrangements review be subject to indexation on an annual review basis.**
- 1.7 That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the Local Citizens Advice in December 2022.**

By a unanimous Babergh District Council vote

It was RESOLVED: -

Recommendation to Babergh Cabinet that extra funding be provided to Sudbury Citizens advice to enable greater provision for debt advice across the whole district.

JOS/21/22 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

It was RESOLVED: -

That with the following amendment the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan be noted and updated:

Information Bulletin on the cost of maintenance of tenanted properties.