

## MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

<b>TO: COUNCIL</b>	<b>REPORT NUMBER: MC/21/20</b>
<b>FROM: Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee</b>	<b>DATE OF MEETING: 27 January 2022</b>

### OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT TO MID SUFFOLK COUNCIL

The Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee met on 20 September 2021 and considered the following items:

#### **ANNUAL REVIEW OF JOINT HOMES AND HOUSING STRATEGY AND HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING REDUCTION STRATEGY 2019-2024**

The Housing Needs and Standards Manager gave a presentation to Members on the progress to date on actions identified in the strategies, the actions currently underway, and future actions planned over the remaining period of the strategies.

Queries were raised concerning redevelopment of partly redundant garage blocks, housing for rough sleepers and the effects of the pandemic on housing needs and supply. It was noted that in the last 12 months MSDC had acquired fewer housing units than BDC; Members asked whether, in Mid Suffolk, the needs for social and affordable housing were being met. In response, the Housing Needs and Standards Manager explained that more reliable figures are obtained by considering the number of acquisitions over a longer time period.

MSDC Members suggested that joint working between Citizens Advice staff and Housing Officers could be improved and further suggested consideration be given to the creation of a new post to be jointly funded by Citizens Advice and MSDC. An additional proposal to that effect was made and a separate vote of MSDC Members only was taken.

**It was RESOLVED:**

**By Mid Suffolk Members and by 3 votes to 2 that:**

**This committee recommends that urgent action is taken, to build improved joined up working with Citizens Advice and recommends that this is a top priority. Furthermore, that consideration is given to creating a jointly funded post by Cabinet, in order to move this priority and critical area forward.**

**It was RESOLVED:**

**By a unanimous vote of the Joint Committee that:**

**The content of the action plan was noted, and the Committee asked for further information on the day-to-day activities of the action plan.**

**It was RESOLVED:**

**By 7 votes to 2 of the Joint Committee that:**

**The homes and housing strategy and homelessness and rough sleeping strategy be reviewed twice yearly.**

## **INFORMATION BULLETINS**

Members received two information bulletins:

### **Customer Service Update**

### **Anti-Social Behaviour**

These bulletins can be found in the committee agenda papers. There were questions to seek clarification of some of the details in the papers, after which each of the Information Bulletins was noted.

**The Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee met on 22 November 2021 and considered the following items:**

## **REVIEW OF THE SHARED LEGAL SERVICE**

The Shared Legal Services Manager introduced a report which outlined the way the service operates across Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils. The Service reports to a Legal Services Steering Board made up of representatives of the two councils and to the Senior Leadership Team. There is a close working relationship between the Service Manager and the Assistant Director, Law and Governance.

There were questions around the mechanism for recharging costs to separate Services within the Districts and performance management arrangements and whether the fees paid by each authority are in the same proportion as the value of work done for each of the separate authorities. Members felt that the Steering Board should review recharging mechanisms and performance monitoring arrangements and their findings and recommendations be reported back to the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**It was RESOLVED that:**

**The Legal Services Steering Board review the recharging 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 Overview and Scrutiny Committee via an information bulletin after its meeting in December;**

**The information bulletin referred to should also include historical and current performance monitoring data, which would enable the Committee to observe the trends in performance over time; and**

**A further information bulletin be presented to the Committee six months into the new financial year demonstrating the split of new legal matters between Babergh and Mid Suffolk.**

## **SCOPING DOCUMENT – PROVISION OF TRANSPORT WITHIN THE DISTRICTS**

The Chairman presented the recommendation from the Task and Finish Group set up to consider scoping of a review of provision of transport within the two districts. There was discussion around what aspects of transport provision should be scrutinised and suggestions made that the focus should be on identifying gaps in service provision.

**It was RESOLVED:**

**That the Task and Finish Group scope and carry out the exercise.**

## **SCOPING DOCUMENT – CITIZENS ADVICE**

The Chairman explained that Committee had earlier agreed to carry out an annual review of the Citizens Advice Service provided to residents of the two Districts. In order that this year's review could focus on topical issues, rather than review all of the services provided, a scoping document needed to be agreed and provided to Citizens Advice so that at the review in December they would focus on those issues. A draft scoping document was available within the tabled papers.

The Corporate Manager, Communities undertook to meet with Citizens Advice in advance of the December meeting to explain the scope of the review and discuss performance in the key areas of service and any trends that could lead to a change in the service they provide.

Members made a number of suggestions for points to be included in the scoping document.

**It was 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.**

**The Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee met on 20 December 2021 and considered the following item:**

## **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 outlining how the Local Citizens Advice (LCA) had adapted their services since the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

In response to questions, the CA managers explained the relationship between the LCA and the foodbanks and how the holistic approach of the LCA could assist people referred to them with other concerns they may have, such as debt, benefits etc. They also explained that emergency Covid support funding had been used to help families, but central government timescales caused difficulties. The Cabinet Member for Communities agreed to take this up with the Leader of the Council.

A Virtual Services Project is being trialled in 2 locations in Mid Suffolk and strategies have been developed based on what has worked well. The virtual devices in parishes had helped residents to get online and allowed the LCA to monitor district data to see where there was a need for further support and advice.

In response to questions about the process for assisting people who owed debts to multiple sources, the Chief Officer of Citizens Advice (Mid Suffolk) responded that the LCA supported people with their debts and could place waits if needed, and could source financial aid where possible. The LCA had been working with the Shared Revenue Partnership to allow Council tax and housing benefit issued by SRP to be viewed jointly under a single view of debt, to see what an individual owed the Council as a whole and to advise the individual accordingly.

In response to a question on whether the recommendation from the previous Joint Overview and Scrutiny review that rolling index-linked funding of LCA had been discussed by Cabinet, the Cabinet Member for Communities stated that this recommendation had not been adopted. It was noted that Mid Suffolk LCA had been given funding that had been redirected from Diss and Thetford Citizens Advice to provide a CA service in Eye.

There was general agreement that the LCA presentation had given sufficient reassurance that there was help for residents to access services. However, the joint way of working for a single view of debt needed to be introduced at the earliest opportunity. Members also agreed that an increase in line with inflation on a three-year rolling plan should be recommended again to both Cabinets, and that Joint Overview and Scrutiny should review the LCA again in twelve months' time.

**It was RESOLVED: -**

**To thank the LCA Chief officers and their respective staff for the work that they have carried out in the last year, particularly during the pandemic.**

**That the Committee are reassured that both LCAs are operating effectively and efficiently, and responded well to all questioning from Members.**

**That the Councils should take a single view of debt and implement an integrated system for dealing with housing rent and council tax debt.**

**That contact be made with foodbanks with a request that their clients are referred to the LCA for advice on nutrition and budgeting and cookery skills classes.**

**Remote virtual operation 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.**

**That Cabinets be asked to consider the previous resolution of Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee that the 3 year rolling funding arrangements review be subject to indexation on an annual review basis.**

**That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the Local Citizens Advice again in December 2022.**

**By a vote of Mid Suffolk Members only, that Mid Suffolk Cabinet confirm that funding previously allocated to Thetford and Diss LCA will be allocated to Mid Suffolk LCA.**