

Appendix A

BABERGH DISTRICT  
COUNCIL  
**ANNUAL REPORT**  
**2021/22**

Overview & Scrutiny





# **BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL ANNUAL REPORT**

## **FOREWORD BY THE CHAIR OF BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2021/22**

At the Annual Council Meeting on 25 May 2021 in Wherstead Park, I became the Chairman of the Babergh District Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Co-chair of the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Babergh & Mid Suffolk). As a member of that Committee since 2019 I did not fully appreciate the background work undertaken by the Chairs, Vice Chairs and Democratic Services to ensure that the function of Overview and Scrutiny maintains the integrity and rigour of such a committee.

At this point I would like to thank all the people who have supported us throughout the year with wise counsel, patience, and practical solutions. They are Henriette Holloway and Robert Carmichael, Governance Officers, Committee Services, Emily Yule, Assistant Director for Law and Governance, Jan Robinson, Corporate Manager of Democratic Services and Governance and more recently Bethany Webb and Alicia Norman who undertakes the live stream technology.

I welcome the proposed addition of a permanent post within Democratic Services to provide full time support to the Overview and Scrutiny function which generates in-depth research and clerical work.

We were very pleased to actually meet as a Joint Committee in the King Edmund Chamber from June 2021 onwards, though all Chairman's Briefings, officer discussions, meetings with Leaders and Task and Finish Groups continue to operate on Teams.

What was unforeseen was the absence of our Vice Chair Kathryn Grandon for personal reasons, so her insight and support was sorely missed. However, the unprecedented rapid turnover of Committee members was the biggest threat to the Constitutional Working of this Committee and its quoracy.

Working with Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee was one of cooperation and collaboration throughout the Municipal year. Working with my Co-Chair Keith Welham and Vice Chair James Caston was very proactive and together we were making progress in raising the expectation among Members that Overview & Scrutiny is a necessary presence within the Constitution of the Council and reviewing new work-areas for scrutiny was the way forward. The previous Work Plans had repeated familiar subjects, so it was time to explore those services that impact our residents but are not necessarily within the immediate remit of the Council.

One of the interesting occasions was being invited to discuss Overview and Scrutiny at the District Peer Review. Our discussions with the team were lively and informative for them and us, as in other Districts the Overview and Scrutiny Committees may only report to the Council annually, or at the most 3 monthly and all reports are written for them.

I wish to thank Keith Welham for a great working relationship. His experience and breadth of District and County Council experience helped me, so due to the change in my responsibilities I am very sad to relinquish my role as Chair of the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee. I wish my successor all the best for the future.

**MARY MCLAREN** Chair, Babergh Overview & Scrutiny Committee, Co-Chair, Babergh & Mid Suffolk Joint Scrutiny Committee. May 2022.

**MEMBERS OF THE BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE 2021/22**



**Cllr Mary McLaren – Chair**



**Cllr Kathryn Grandon – Vice-Chair**



**Cllr Jane Gould**



**Cllr Simon Barrett**



**Cllr Sian Dawson**



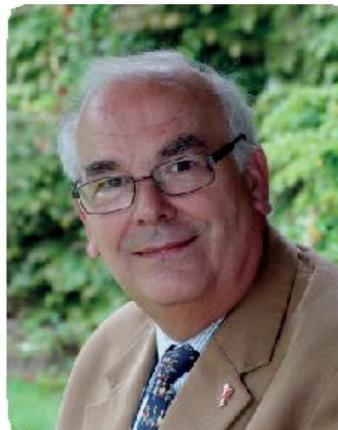
**Cllr Margaret Maybury**



**Cllr Melanie Barrett**



**Cllr Adrian Osborne**



**Cllr John Hinton**



**Cllr Robert Lindsay**

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY**

In May 2017 Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils adopted the Leader/Cabinet model for each Council. This resulted in the Joint Scrutiny Committee being decommissioned and the formation of separate Overview and Scrutiny Committees for each Council.

The Committee consists of six members of the Council, who can be any Member except Cabinet Members. No Member is allowed to scrutinise a decision where they have been part of the decision-making process. Substitutes for Members on the Committee must be from the same political group and Council. The Committee sets its own workplan and can set up task and finish groups, as and when considered appropriate.

The Babergh and Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committees undertake joint meetings on regular basis, whilst each sovereign Overview and Scrutiny Committee will call additional Committee meetings for scrutiny of respective issues if this is required.

## **THE ROLE OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

The role of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is defined as having the key purposes of:

- Scrutinising the work of external stakeholders and service providers.
- Holding the Cabinet to account.
- Being the home of “call in”.
- Being the home of Member Call for Action.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviews items in relation to the Joint Corporate Plan and Strategic Priorities and where the Committee can add value; avoiding duplication with any other Committees or working groups and ensuring that, where changes have been made, a significant time has lapsed before a review has been undertaken if this is deemed a valuable approach. These suggestions are worked up by the Chairs, Vice Chairs and officers into a forward plan, which is put to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for agreement.

Overview and Scrutiny forms an important part of the democratic process within the Council and wider community by examining topics and continuing to monitor the outcome of its work. Where it is considered necessary to follow up on the outcome of a scrutinised topic, the Committee will conduct further scrutiny or receive updates on the topic to enable the Council to continue to deliver the best service for all residents in the District.

## **THE STRUCTURE FOR OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

At the public meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Assistant Directors and report authors are present to respond to questions. Cabinet Members, who are invited to attend and respond to questions within their relevant portfolio. Other Members of the Council are able to attend and are often allowed, at the discretion of the Chair, to ask questions with regards to the items presented at the meeting.

## **TRAINING**

Committee Members received in-housing training at the beginning of the municipal year and in 2022 a joint workshop was held, focusing on identifying areas to scrutinise within the Corporate Strategies.

## **THE ORGANISATION OF THE WORK PLAN**

The Work Plan is updated at the Chairs' briefings and any Member can propose possible items for consideration for the work plan. Each item is evaluated to determine relevance and purpose by the Scrutiny Chairs and scrutiny officers will work with colleagues to prepare reports and background information to be presented at Committee.

Other items on the Work Plan are the Information Bulletins, brief updates on topics, areas of interest or fact-finding pieces of work for items the Committee may wish to scrutinise in the future.

## **COMMITTEE DEVELOPMENT THROUGHOUT 2021/22**

The Committee is continuing to work jointly with Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee and in 2021/22 most meetings were joint as the Committees were scrutinising identical topics. The Committee invites outside witnesses to provide information on areas outside the Councils' remit, and on matters where specific knowledge, expertise or experiences have been sought to provide a better foundation for the scrutiny process. Scrutiny of the Local Citizens Advice, CIFCO and the West Suffolk Community Safety Partnership were assisted by the contributions from representatives of these and other outside organisations.

# The Work of Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2021/22

## 1. CAPITAL INVESTMENT FUND COMPANY (CIFCO CAPITAL LTD) BUSINESS TRADING AND PERFORMANCE REPORT

In June 2021, the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met to scrutinise CIFCO.

The Committee were asked to consider the following:

- Does the current performance of CIFCO deliver good value to both Councils?
- Are the KPIs appropriate measures of performance?
- Is the business plan robust and appropriate for the next 12 months?
- Is there sufficient confidence in the management of CIFCO?

Two written questions in relation to share allocation and registration were raised by a member of the public prior to member's questions. These highlighted the importance that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be transparent and recognise that the public do watch the live stream and take an interest.

Members questioned the value of shares, opportunistic investments, late payment of interest, borrowing costs reletting and refurbishing of properties to highlight a few. Members debated the issues and were reassured by the details of the report.

### RESOLVED

**That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee had considered the four bullet points in the Executive Summary and that the Committee were satisfied that the CIFCO Capital Ltd Business Plan and Investment Plan for 2021/22 was robust.**

### VALUE ADDED

The annual scrutiny of CIFCO ensures that the Business Plan is robust and provides the Board Members of CIFCO Capital Ltd. the opportunity to account for the decisions taken in relation to the Business Plan and subsequent managing of the property portfolio.

## 2. SCRUTINY AND REVIEW OF THE JOINT PARKING STRATEGY PROCESS AND TIMELINE

At the June 2021 meeting, Members were advised that the timeline had changed as an external consultant would be engaged to carry out parking surveys and other pre-consultation work. The pre-consultation period could be concluded in the summer 2022 rather than December 2022.

Members welcomed the shortening of the timescale and were given an assurance that the new proposed date took account of the Cabinet and Council decisions needed.

Members raised concerns in respect of pavement parking, electric charging points, disabled access, on street parking, car pooling, park and ride and the urgent need for resident car parking schemes.

In order to make an impact towards meeting climate change targets, the strategy should look for opportunities to influence motorist behaviour.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1.1 That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of the report.**
- 1.2 That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted that by employing consultants to carry out some of the identified tasks, the timeline can be amended and requested that the final report be presented to Cabinet in June 2022.**

- 1.3 That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended that the following should be added to the list of stakeholders in the Officers report:**

- Voluntary Groups**
- Emergency Services**
- Electricity supply companies and EV charging providers.**

**And that the following topics should be considered:**

- Parking on pavements and verges,**
- Town Centre on street parking,**
- Impact of car park maintenance and management on climate change,**
- Park & Ride, Park & Walk, Park & Cycle,**
- Hospital Car Parks,**
- Car Pooling,**
- Opportunities for using the Strategy to encourage walking, cycling, and Public Transport.**

- 1.4 That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee recognised that there was an urgent need for a resolution to resident parking permit scheme issues within both Districts and in doing so that both Districts would have to consider potential financial commitments to such a scheme.**
- 1.5 That work on this subject must be carried out within the Joint Parking Strategy.**

## **VALUE ADDED**

Members' questioning and subsequent debate identified areas to be included in the Joint Parking Strategy and the recommendation for emergency services, voluntary and Community Groups, and energy suppliers were added to the list of stakeholder involvement in the Cabinet report. The Committee also raised concerns for a resolution to residents parking permit scheme.

This Meeting was closed prematurely due to some members of the Babergh Overview & Scrutiny Committee leaving the meeting early and thus rendering the meeting inquorate.

Outstanding items from this meeting were deferred to the July Meeting.

## **3. QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC**

A question by a member of the public read out at the June meeting was received. The question was in regard to the Shared Legal Service, which had been operating across both Councils since July 2018. There had been a number of occasions relating to successful or conceded challenges against both Councils. This raised potential issues around the quality of advice provided by the Shared Legal Service.

## **VALUE ADDED**

Questions from the public allowed the Committee to identify a topic for review that was of concern to residents. The Shared Legal Service was then reviewed at the Joint Committee on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2021.

## **4. LAND ADOPTIONS POLICY INFORMATION BULLETIN**

In July 2021, Members received an Information Bulletin in the form of a presentation by the Assistant Director, Environment and Commercial Partnerships and the Corporate Manager for Strategic Property.

The Corporate Manager for Strategic Property re-affirmed that the Land Adoption Property Review was intended to capture points such as ownership of open spaces, Section 106 Agreements within time constraints and the use of verges and their ownership.

## **5. INSOURCING PUBLIC REALM PROJECT INFORMATION BULLETIN**

Members also received an Information Bulletin presented by the Assistant Director of Environment and Commercial Partnerships highlighting that Public Realm was one of only two services that remained to be integrated under the "Working Together" arrangements.

The Bulletin summarised the work of the group of cross-functional team of officers set up to manage development and delivery of the project.

**BOTH INFORMATION BULLETINS WERE NOTED.**

## **6. TASK AND FINISH GROUP – SCOPING OF TRANSPORT IN BOTH DISTRICTS**

In July 2021, the Chair introduced the item for a Task and Finish Group to scope a potential item for scrutinising Transport in the Babergh and Mid Suffolk Districts.

A motion “That Overview and Scrutiny scoping Transport is outside the remit of the Committee” was lost.

A counter motion to create a Task and Finish Group for the scoping of Transport was carried.

### **RESOLVED**

**That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee does create a Task and Finish Group for the scoping of Transport in the districts.**

**That the Chairs of BDC and MSDC Overview and Scrutiny Committees formulate the Task and Finish group with two members from each Council excluding Chairs.**

### **VALUE ADDED**

A Task and Finish Group allows members a more comprehensive view of rural transport and to identify possible recommendations to the Scrutiny Committee.

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

In September 2021, the Housing Needs and Standards Manager gave a presentation to Members of the Committee on the progress to date, the actions that are currently underway and the future action planned over the remaining two and half years of the strategy. Queries by Members whether the Draft Joint Local Plan had correctly identified the number of affordable dwellings actually needed during the past 18 months were re-assured that the service had been flexible in responding to demand during that time.

### **RESOLVED**

**1.1 That the content of the action plans be noted and asked for further information on the day to day activities of the action plan.**

**1.2 That the Homes and Housing Strategy and the Rough Sleeper Strategy be reviewed twice yearly.**

### **VALUE ADDED**

The scrutiny of the report and the presentation indicated that the strategies were robust, and that the delivery of services had been met. The Committee was satisfied that residents received a good standard of support.

## **8. INFORMATION BULLETINS**

Members received two information bulletins at the September 2021 meeting:

### **Customer Service Update**

### **Anti-Social Behaviour**

Members sought clarification on some of the details.

**BOTH INFORMATION BULLETINS WERE NOTED**

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

In November 2021, the Shared Legal Service Manager introduced the report 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 reported to the leadership teams in each Authority.

Members were reassured that the costs of all staff were split proportionally across the whole service though the number of direct staff employed differed in each authority.

Records of external costs and the time spent on cases was undertaken by individual officers and reported, however no cost per case was calculated if out-sourcing was needed for any matter. Time spent on cases was assessed by a complex scoping method for referrals in order to determine a predicted time frame that a case could be completed in.

### **RESOLVED**

- 1.1 That the Legal Services Steering Board review the 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 Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee via an Information Bulletin after its meeting in December 2021.**
- 1.2 That the Information Bulletin in the previous recommendation 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 six months into the financial year demonstrating the split of new legal matters between Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils.**

### **VALUE ADDED**

Following a question from the public received at the 21 June meeting, the Shared Legal Service was scrutinised by the Committee to establish whether the performance of the service is being maintained, and to reassure the public that the Shared Legal Service is performing to a satisfactory standard.

## **10. TASK AND FINISH GROUP FOR SCOPING OF TRANSPORT IN THE DISTRICTS**

Members received a report of the first meeting with Suffolk County Council officers and Community Transport providers within Babergh and Mid Suffolk. It was found that there had been very little in promotion and publicity since 2016 in relation to Community Transport Providers for local residents and communities and some Members were unaware that these services operated in their Wards.

It was felt that Suffolk County Council would have little interest in the work of the Task and Finish Group.

### **RESOLVED**

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

### **VALUE ADDED**

The scrutiny process established that Scrutiny of transport in the district is a difficult topic to approach as there are local and volunteer services operating separately from that provided by Suffolk County Council.

## **11. SCOPING OF THE REVIEW OF LOCAL CITIZENS ADVICE (LCA)**

The Annual Review by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the Citizens Advice Services across Babergh and Mid Suffolk required a new approach. The past two years had changed the nature of the services provided and the overall needs of their clients had increased.

In November 2021, 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. It was also agreed that only two Citizen's Advice Representatives would be invited.

### **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.**

### **VALUE ADDED**

Enabled the Committee to carry out a focused and thorough review of Local Citizens Advice and ensure that the review provided the most value.

## **12. REVIEW OF LOCAL CITIZENS ADVICE (LCA)**

In December 2021, the Chief Officers of Citizens Advice from Babergh and Mid Suffolk presented to the Committee how the Local Citizens Advice had adapted their services over the Covid-19 Pandemic.

- A restart of some face-to-face appointments but the LCA 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 clients face to face.
- There had 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.
- Due to the current financial difficulties, many clients have an increasing number of debt problems which has increased the need for Debt Advice.
- It takes one year for a Debt Advisor to be fully trained and accredited.
- Recruitment and training of new staff and volunteers is a key priority.
- From January 2022 outreach services to commence in Hadleigh.

### **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 LCAs 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 approach for dealing with housing rent and council tax debt.**
- 1.4 That contact be made with 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.**
- 1.8 Recommendation to Babergh Cabinet that extra funding be provided to Sudbury Citizens Advice to enable greater provision for debt advice across the whole district.**

## **VALUE ADDED**

The annual scrutiny of the Local Citizens Advice allows the Committee an opportunity to identify issues for the LCAs in the Districts, and how they relate to the services provided by the Council. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended to Cabinet that the funding was increased to aid the service.

## **13. DRAFT GENERAL FUND AND FOUR-YEAR OUTLOOK**

In January 2022, Councillor Simon Barrett – Cabinet Member for Finance introduced the report to the Committee outlining that the budget had been based on a “no increase in council tax”, however an increase would take place, if Cabinet decided, it was necessary.

In addition to this, the Emergency Reserves held by Babergh District Council would be reduced by £200k to £1 million, as there had been no expenditure from this fund during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The excess of £200k could be considered for community projects. He also advised that the Budget had shown a surplus of £403k.

Questions raised by the Committee were wide ranging and demonstrated their appreciation of the various aspects of the Draft General Fund and its importance in maintaining the fiscal integrity of Babergh District Council.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the General Fund budget 2022/23 and Four-Year Outlook.**
- 1.2 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report from Cabinet on the outcomes of the performance framework on a six-month basis.**

## **VALUE ADDED**

The scrutiny of the General Fund Budget supports the role of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in holding the executive to account.

## **14. DRAFT HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) AND FOUR-YEAR OUTLOOK**

Also in January 2022, Councillor Simon Barrett – Cabinet Member for Finance introduced a report to the Committee outlining that the HRA account is in deficit due to additional spending in building services. This had been due to an increased cost of resources such as a competitive labour market, which had led to an increased use of sub-contractors. There had also been a rent increase of CPI+1.

The Assistant Director for Housing - Gavin Fisk further clarified the various reasons for the overspend. This had been due to an increased cost of materials over the past year. To decrease the dependence on external contractors there had been additional training for staff. There had also been the costs to replace vehicles and to change the fleet to HVO.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the Housing Revenue Account 2022/23 and the Four-Year Outlook.**
- 1.2 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended that the information about the use of sub-contractors be included in the quarterly performance monitoring report. (Financial HRA Outturn Report).**

## **VALUE ADDED**

All Members had received several briefings for both the General Fund Budget and the HRA Budget before the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, however Members ensured that the HRA Budget was sound and would provide the best services for the Council's residents.

## **15. CALL-IN OF THE BABERGH CABINET DECISION FOR BCA/21/38 ACCOMMODATION AND AGILE STRATEGY – ENDEAVOUR HOUSE**

The Call-In to Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 21 February 2022 was signed by six Babergh District Councillors.

The main details of the Call-In:-

- That paper BCA/21/38 which was presented to the BDC Cabinet on Monday 7 February 2022, did not contain sufficient information on the capital costs of the works proposed for Cabinet to make an informed decision.
- The Capital Costs of £250,000 had no explanation on how it would be spent.
- Cabinet approved the paper, but no Cabinet Member asked questions on costs or debated the elements of this issue.
- The amount to be spent was more than £150,000 and therefore as a key decision needed the Cabinet to demonstrate publicly that they had considered all circumstances of the case and given Councillors the opportunity to comment.

The Lead Signatory Councillor Melanie Barrett presented her reasons for the Call-In.

The Cabinet Member for Assets and Investments, Councillor Busby presented his reasons why the decision had been taken by the Cabinet.

Members debated the lack of questions on finance at the Cabinet Meeting. It was noted that other Members attending that meeting had an opportunity to ask questions but did not do so.

Recognising that the Cabinet may have been informed of the relevant detail, the public decisions to deal with large sums of money should in the interests of transparency include more rigorous questioning by the Cabinet in a public meeting.

Within the protocol of the Call-In process there are only three recommendation options available to Members. Advice by the Section 151 Officer and the Monitoring Officer ruled out Option 2.

## **RESOLVED**

**That the decision be upheld and implemented immediately.**

## **VALUE ADDED**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is the home of the Call-in and as the Committee operates separately from the Executive can provide a critical review of Cabinet decisions. As evidenced in this meeting, questioning and debate can establish that a sound process had taken place.

## **16. REVIEW OF WESTERN SUFFOLK COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP (WSCSP)**

The Annual Review of the WSCSP by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee is required under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, the Police and Justice Act 2006 and the Crime and Disorder Overview and Scrutiny Regulations 2009.

In March 2022, the Cabinet Member for Communities, Councillor Derek Davis introduced the Corporate Manager Vicky Mosely, who gave a brief overview of the WSCSP report as the Committee had received a very comprehensive and detailed report prior to the meeting. She also defined the Committee's role in relation to the WSCSP and highlighted the partnerships key priorities.

Over the past year the WSCSP discharged its duties by: -

- Carrying out an assessment of crime and disorder in the area (Strategic Assessment)
- Continuing to deliver actions against the three-year plan and an action plan to reflect the priorities of the partnership.
- Carrying out Domestic Homicide Reviews

## **The Strategic Assessment 2020-2023**

The Strategic Assessment is to assist the Partnership in understanding the patterns and trends relating to crime, disorder, anti-social behaviour and community safety issues affecting the WSCSP area and help identify which priorities to focus on in the coming years.

### **WSCSP Priorities**

- Criminal Exploitation
- Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)
- Hate Crime
- Prevent (prevention of Terrorism)
- Modern Slavery

In addition to the above 5 priority areas that comprise the WSCSP Action Plan, the partnership maintains a close focus on ASB, Domestic Homicide Reviews.

Members debated the content of the report, an update on the tool kit, information resources and a possible Member Briefing with more concise analysis.

### **RESOLVED**

- 1.1 That the Committee noted the contents of the report.**
- 1.2 That the comments made by the Committee regarding the name of the partnership and the format of the Action Plan be reported back to WSCSP.**
- 1.3 That the Reporting Tool Kit for all Members be updated and circulated.**
- 1.4 That a training session be held for all Members to ensure that all Councillors have knowledge and awareness of their role in respect of identifying and reporting crime and safety issues in their area and are able to support their town and parish councils when discussing crime and safety.**
- 1.5 That a simplified version of the Action Plan be circulated to all Councillors with the O&S Chairs Report to full Council on this item.**
- 1.6 Review of the WSCSP report to be based on the meeting cycle of the Partnership ensuring that the most up to date position is reported and to review the format of the report to ensure that the information is clear, concise and has strategic focus.**
- 1.7 To explore whether the Strategic Assessment is available from the County Council.**

## **VALUE ADDED**

The Committee scrutinises the WSCSP annually and this has added value not only to the questioning process, but also to the expectation for witnesses to provide analysis and evaluations against the priorities. There are also opportunities to identify issues across the district and for Members to broaden their understanding of the work of the WSCSP.

## **17. DRAFT EMPTY HOMES POLICY**

In April 2022, Councillor Jan Osborne - Cabinet Member for Housing, introduced the report to the Committee, outlining that bringing empty homes back into occupation, maximised the use of existing private sector housing to meet the local housing needs of both Districts. The Senior Environmental Health Officer and the Housing Needs Officer using an actual case, presented the process of bringing an empty home back into use, including the use of the Empty Homes Loans of up to £20,000 to encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use and the Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) process. Officers highlighted that there were currently 450 identified empty homes in Babergh and 530 in Mid Suffolk.

The number of CPOs per year would be a maximum of two due to the cost involved in purchasing the properties. The Committee thanked the officers for an exceptional presentation.

Because of the disparity between the two Councils regarding the number of Empty Homes Officers employed, Councillor Osborne reassured the meeting that the workload was being monitored in Babergh to determine whether an additional officer would be needed. A long-term empty home was defined by any property being unoccupied for six months or over and being furnished or unfurnished was immaterial.

Identifying an empty home was initially listed and obtained from Council Tax records. However, there was also a reliance on members of the public reporting properties online and officers identifying properties when working within the district.

Following some further broad questioning, Members fully debated all the issues and made various suggestions.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee complimented the officers on the report and presentation and recommended to Cabinet that the policy be adopted taking into account the following recommendations:-**
- 1.2 That Overview and Scrutiny considers that the maximum loan of £20k is insufficient and asks that Cabinet raise the level of the loans and consider if a nominal rate of interest should be applied.**

- 1.3 That loans for works to improve the energy efficiency of homes should also be available.**
- 1.4 That the information in the communication plan be strengthened to include publicity via Parish Councils and local community groups and that a briefing note be circulated to Councillors when the policy is adopted.**
- 1.5 That Cabinet be asked to monitor the budget for empty homes this year and consider whether an increase is required for 2023/24.**
- 1.6 That further quantitative information be provided to members of the committee on the empty homes' loans and the financial implications for the Councils.**
- 1.7 That close working be encouraged with the Homelessness Outreach Officers.**

**Babergh Cabinet only**

#### **RESOLVED**

- 1.8 That the Empty Homes workload be kept under review by Cabinet to explore additional funding options for an Empty Homes Officer.**

#### **VALUE ADDED**

Members were able to scrutinise the Draft Empty Homes Policy in detail and gain insight into the work undertaken by the Empty Homes Officers. The scrutiny process highlighted areas that officer might wish to consider in the Policy.

After the meeting on 25 April 2022, a workshop with Emily Yule - Assistant Director and Monitoring Officer and Jan Robinson - Corporate Manager – Governance and Civic Office was held with Joint Committee Members to explore the possible subjects and areas that could be included in the future Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan.