

Appendix A

MID SUFFOLK
DISTRICT COUNCIL
ANNUAL REPORT
2021/22

Overview & Scrutiny



MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL ANNUAL REPORT

FOREWORD BY THE CHAIR OF MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2021/22

Having met virtually throughout the previous municipal year, it was such a relief to meet in person again in June 2021, and throughout the year. Presentations by officers, questioning, and debate have greater impact when we are all in the room together, whether it be in the King Edmund Chamber or a meeting room in Endeavour House.

As in previous years, most of the meetings during the year have been joint meetings with Babergh Overview and Scrutiny members, with Mary McLaren (Chair of Babergh Overview and Scrutiny) and I alternating the Chairing role. Separate meetings are held when items are relevant only to one or other of the two sovereign councils, for example scrutiny of the General Fund Budget and the Housing Revenue Account Budget and to deal with the call in of a Cabinet decision.

Our Work Plan for 2021/2022 included a number of topics which are scrutinised annually, and others which were chosen by the Joint Committee. We have carried out scoping exercises and set up a Task and Finish Group to look at the unmet transport needs of our residents. We have received presentations from senior officers and invited witnesses and received information bulletins. A summary of our discussions on each topic, together with our agreed recommendations and how we added value to the work of the Council, are included in the main body of this report.

Our meetings are planned at monthly Chairs' and Vice Chairs' meetings, where we discuss with officers the content of reports and information bulletins which they will be presenting at future committee meetings. These informal meetings and Task and Finish Group meetings have been held virtually; MS Teams is appropriate for meetings with fewer participants, some of whom are present for only part of a meeting.

The work of scrutiny relies heavily on the commitment of officers, and we have benefited greatly from the input and support of Henriette Holloway, Jan Robinson and Emily Yule. I would like to record my thanks to them and also to Robert Carmichael, Bethany Webb and Alicia Norman who have also assisted for part of the year. I am grateful too for the input and support of James Caston, our Vice Chair, and to Mary McLaren, Chair of Babergh Overview and Scrutiny, and all members of both Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Planning for next municipal year was delayed when two members of the Babergh Committee took on Cabinet portfolios and resigned from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Nevertheless, a draft Work Plan is presented to Council for noting in June 2022. This will need to be built upon when the newly appointed committee is able to meet for the first time.

Keith Welham Chair, Mid Suffolk Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Co-Chair, Babergh & Mid Suffolk Joint Scrutiny Committee. June 2022.

**MEMBERS OF THE MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
2021/22**



Chair - Cllr Keith Welham



Vice Chair - Cllr James Caston



Cllr Terence Carter



Cllr Keith Scarff



Cllr Paul Ekpenyong



Cllr Dave Muller

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 a 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 workplan. 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 Babergh 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.

Reviews Carried out by the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2021/22

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

In June 2021 the Joint Committee reviewed the performance of CIFCO during 2020/21 and considered the draft business plan for 2021/22.

The Assistant Director - Assets and Investments and the Mid Suffolk Cabinet Member for Assets and Investments, presented the main report. Four witnesses, who were members of the CIFCO Board of Directors, presented the essential details relating to the proposed business plan. Member questioning included the value of shares, opportunistic investments, the location of the investments, late payment of interest, borrowing costs, reletting and refurbishment of properties, whether the KPI measures were appropriate and effective, debt collection start date, weighted average unexpired lease term, future targets for sustainability, the management fee and possible shortfall in repayments.

RESOLVED

That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee had considered the four bullet points in paragraph 1.2 of the Executive Summary and that the Committee was satisfied that the CIFCO Capital Ltd Business Plan and Investment Plan was robust for 2021/22.

VALUE ADDED

A range of concerns were raised by members of the Joint Committee, and these were considered by officers and Directors of CIFCO in preparing a report to the sovereign councils. The annual scrutiny of CIFCO ensures that the Business Plan is robust and provides the invited Board members for 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

In June 2021, the Joint Committee scrutinised the Joint Parking Strategy and timeline for introducing changes. The Assistant Director – Environment and Commercial Partnerships introduced the report and informed Members that the timeline had changed, as an external consultant would be engaged to carry out parking surveys and other pre-consultation work. Members welcomed the shortening of the timescale and were given an assurance that the new proposed date for completing pre-consultation work of summer 2022 took account of the need for Cabinet and Council decisions.

RESOLVED

- 1.1 That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of report JOS/21/3.**
- 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 paragraph 4.6:**
 - Voluntary groups**
 - Emergency services**
 - Electricity supply companies and EV charging providers.**

And that the following topics should be considered:

- Pavement parking**
 - Town centre on-street parking**
 - Impact of car park maintenance and management on climate change**
 - Park and ride, park and walk, park and cycle**
 - Hospital and health and social care centre 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's issues within both Districts and in doing so recognised 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 raised a range of concerns about parking, including the need to take account of legislation and enforcement in respect of pavement parking and more detailed issues listed in the recommendations. By raising these issues and concerns, the Committee has added value to the pre-consultation process by influencing the scope of pre-consultation work.

3. LAND ADOPTIONS POLICY INFORMATION BULLETIN

At the July 2021 meeting of the Joint Committee, the Corporate Manager for Strategic Property presented an Information Bulletin and invited questions and comments. Members raised questions and concerns about maintenance of open spaces on housing developments, maintenance of roadside verges, the scope of mapping software, maintaining an accurate record of open spaces and responsibility for maintaining them, and the role of planning enforcement if open spaces are not properly laid out and maintained, during and after completion of new developments.

VALUE ADDED

The Corporate Manager agreed that the points raised would be taken into account as work proceeds on developing a Land Adoptions Policy.

4. INSOURCING PUBLIC REALM PROJECT INFORMATION BULLETIN

At the July 2021 meeting of the Joint Committee, the Assistant Director for Environment and Commercial Partnerships outlined the work being undertaken to insource the service provided in Babergh and provide an in-house service to both Districts. Mid Suffolk Members agreed that the in-house service provided in that district was well run and would not wish its effectiveness to be diluted. Babergh Members outlined concerns about the current service provision in Babergh, which was provided under a contract which was nearing its end date. The Assistant Director gave details of progress made and next steps required, including the transfer of contractor's staff to the Councils.

VALUE ADDED

The positive comments made by Mid Suffolk Members gave reassurance that an in-house service could be provided effectively. Concerns raised in respect of potential understaffing if operatives chose not to transfer, had been considered by officers and Members were assured that steps would be in place to hire staff at short notice if necessary.

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

In September 2021, the Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee met and received a presentation by the Housing Needs and Standards Manager to inform 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.

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.

RESOLVED by the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

In relation to 3.13, 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.

RESOLVED

- 1.1 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.**
- 1.2 That the homes and housing strategy and homelessness and rough sleeping strategy be reviewed twice yearly.**

VALUE ADDED

Members raised concerns about the apparent lack of joint working with Local Citizens Advice centres. Officers had considered ways of providing a more joined up service, particularly to help avoid debt and homelessness.

6. REVIEW OF THE SHARED LEGAL SERVICE

In November 2021, the Joint Committee received a report on the Shared Legal Service. The Service Manager introduced the report which outlined the way the service operated 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 for Law and Governance.

There were questions around recharging costs and performance management arrangements and whether the fees paid by each authority were 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.

RESOLVED

- 1.1 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 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee via an information bulletin after its meeting in December.**

- 1.2 That the information bulletin in recommendation 1 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 new financial year demonstrating the split of new legal matters between Babergh and Mid Suffolk.

VALUE ADDED

Members expressed a range of concerns and asked for historical and current data on costs, recharging and performance to be presented to the Joint Committee to allow a better understanding of the recharging mechanism and performance trends.

7. TASK AND FINISH GROUP FOR SCOPING OF TRANSPORT IN THE DISTRICTS

RESOLVED

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

8. SCOPING OF THE REVIEW OF LOCAL CITIZENS ADVICE (LCA)

RESOLVED

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.

9. REVIEW OF LOCAL CITIZENS ADVICE (LCA)

In December 2021, 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.

A wide range of aspects of the LCA's work was discussed. 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, in particular working with the Shared Revenue Partnership to allow Council Tax and housing benefit to be viewed jointly under a single view of debt.

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 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.**

RESOLVED by the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Mid Suffolk Cabinet to confirm that funding previously allocated to Thetford and Diss LCA be allocated to Mid Suffolk LCA.

VALUE ADDED

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 funding in line with inflation on a three-year rolling plan should be recommended again to both Cabinets.

10. DRAFT GENERAL FUND AND FOUR-YEAR OUTLOOK

In January 2022, Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the 2022/23 budget and asked that the Cabinet Member for Finance have regard to their comments before finalising his budget and presenting it to Council.

Detailed comments were made in respect of staffing and vacancy rates, and the very high level of reserves, which it was planned to increase.

A more general concern was the timing of scrutiny of the budgets. Members considered that there would be greater value in reviewing the budget process and assumptions made in developing a detailed budget. This would allow a more strategic approach to scrutinising the budget.

RESOLVED

- 1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the General Fund budget 2022/23 and Four-year Outlook and asks that the Cabinet Member for Finance and officers take into consideration the comments made at the meeting.**

- 1.2 That the budget preparation process is reviewed by the S.151 Officer and the Monitoring Officer to ensure that the O&S Committee can be involved earlier in the development of the budget, enabling a more strategic approach to scrutinising the budget. Further, that the Monitoring Officer and Constitution Working Group review the terms of reference for the O&S Committee and the JAS Committee to ensure that financial scrutiny is being undertaken in the most appropriate way.**

VALUE ADDED

Comments made by members of the Committee were taken account in the drafting of the budget and report presented to full Council in February. A review of the involvement of Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the budget setting process is being reviewed, along with the Terms of Reference of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Joint Audit and Standards Committee.

11. DRAFT HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) AND FOUR-YEAR OUTLOOK

In January 2022, Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee expressed concern about the large amount of planned maintenance carry forward, and asked how much of this work could be completed in the forthcoming year. The Assistant Director – Housing responded that to ensure the fund carry over would be spent, the staffing resource, existing contracts and their renewal had been looked at. He explained that retrofitting energy saving measures would be a great percentage of the planned maintenance schedule.

Members also queried whether sufficient funding would be available for updating council homes and the justification for the proposed increase in council house rents.

RESOLVED

- 1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the Housing Revenue Account 2022/23 and Four-year Outlook.**
- 1.2 That information be provided for the level of council rents compared with other authorities for benchmarking for the current year and the number of tenants receiving rent rebate in the current financial year be provided to Council in February and to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their review of the Budget in the next municipal year.**

VALUE ADDED

Comments made by Members of the Committee were taken account in preparing the report to the February full Council meeting. Furthermore, additional information surrounding the level of council house rents in comparison to other authorities' properties and information about the number of tenants in receipt of a rent rebate in the current year has since been provided.

12. CALL IN OF THE DECISION FROM THE MID SUFFOLK CABINET MEETING 6 DECEMBER 2021 MCA/21/32

The Lead Signatory, Councillor Mellen, highlighted the reasons for the call in. He explained that the environmental implications were not satisfactorily explained in the report upon which the Cabinet made their decision. He and Councillor Stringer gave examples of information, which they considered Cabinet should have been made aware of.

The Cabinet Member for Environment, Councillor Fleming, provided her summary of the events at Cabinet and suggested that the main issues related to the desire for a mandatory timetable for transition to EVs and that the wider implications of this transition were not fully considered.

Members of the Committee sought and received clarification on a number of issues, followed by speeches by way of summary from Councillor Fleming and Councillor Mellen.

Asked by the Chairman to present a summary, Councillor Fleming said that in order to have an environmentally secure service the policy needed to be approved. It was the result of both informal and formal work, which had produced a balanced policy that provided safety and accessibility for taxi and private hire vehicles.

Councillor Mellen summarised that he believed that much of the policy had been well considered, however it should be revisited in order to align with Mid Suffolk's environmental objectives. A timetable would also be needed in order to provide incentives to the trade around mandating EVs, and formal responses around this issue were needed.

Councillor Mellen, Councillor Stringer and Councillor Fleming left the meeting and Committee members debated the issues. Some members strongly expressed views which supported the policy and process and others felt strongly that not all available information had been provided to Cabinet. During the debate, Members made the following observations:

- That insufficient evidence of the pre-consultation regarding mandating conversion of vehicles to EV was made available to Cabinet and further consultation with trade operators was recommended.
- That Cabinet needed further information in respect of plans to provide on- and off-street taxi ranks and on- and off-street EV charging, following further consultation with taxi providers.
- That an action plan was needed to be agreed for the incentive scheme as mentioned in the Cabinet report.
- That Cabinet needed to give further consideration of the discussion of the Licensing and Regulatory Committee and its reasons for recommending the policy to Cabinet.

RESOLVED

- 1.1 Refer the matter back to the Cabinet for reconsideration, together with the observations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Cabinet will then take a final decision and that decision cannot be called in.**
- 1.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee referred the matter back to Cabinet with the following observations.**
- 1.3 Insufficient evidence of the pre-consultation regarding mandating conversion of vehicles to EV, and further consultation with trade is recommended.**
- 1.4 That Cabinet needs further information in respect of plans to provide on- and off- taxi ranks and on-and off- street EV charging, following further consultation with taxi providers.**
- 1.5 That an action plan is needed to be agreed for the incentive scheme as mentioned in 6.1.1 of the Cabinet report.**
- 1.6 That Cabinet needs to give further consideration of the discussion of the Licensing and Regulatory Committee and its reasons for recommending the policy to Cabinet.**

VALUE ADDED

The availability of the Call-In to give an opportunity for Overview and Scrutiny to review a Cabinet decision is an important element of the Council's Constitution. This item gave the opportunity for a fuller examination of all aspects of the preparation of the policy and the policy itself. The policy was discussed again by Cabinet with more information available.

13. TO REVIEW THE ACTIVITY OF THE WESTERN SUFFOLK COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP (WSCSP)

In March 2022, the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the work of the WSCSP. Councillor Derek Davis, Babergh Cabinet Member for Communities and Chairman of WSCSP, introduced the report highlighting the work of the partnership over the previous year including the work that had been undertaken on Modern Slavery, the new Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (VAWG), and the progress that had been made by the partnership in relation to anti-social behaviour. MSDC Councillor Sarah Mansel, Vice Chairman of the WSCSP, explained that domestic abuse figures for the partnership are higher than the national average, and that this is a priority area for the WSCSP, and will focus on prevention and support for victims.

Superintendent Wratten of Suffolk Police and the Corporate Manager – Communities were present to respond to queries from the Committee. Members raised concerns about modern slavery, the effectiveness of CCTV in Sudbury and Hadleigh, and whether or not enough emergency accommodation was available in Suffolk. Queries were raised about under-reporting and what was being done to reduce the current crime rate. Members felt that the name of the partnership, whose area stretches to the Shotley Peninsula, was confusing.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 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 the WSCSP.**
- 1.3 That the reporting toolkit 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 is circulated to all councillors with the O&S chair's report to full council on this item.**
- 1.6 Review the timing of the WSCSP report based on the meeting cycle of the partnership and 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 a strategic focus.**
- 1.7 To explore whether the strategic assessment is available from the County Council.**

VALUE ADDED

The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviews the work of the WSCSP annually; through questioning of witnesses and debate, a better understanding of the work of the partnership evolves and information is gathered and passed on to all council members and their residents.

14. DRAFT EMPTY HOMES POLICY

In April 2022, the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the policy and process for bringing empty homes back into occupation.

Councillor Jan Osborne introduced the report to the committee and the Senior Environmental Health Officer, and the Housing Needs and Standards Manager presented the process of bringing an empty home back into use, including the use of 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.

In response to a query about whether, with an additional Empty Homes Officer appointed by Mid Suffolk, a fair and equal service could be ensured for Babergh, the Housing Needs and Standards Manager responded that through the case management system it was ensured that work would be allocated to officers equally for each Council. Councillor Jan Osborne added that the workload would be monitored by Cabinet to determine whether an additional officer would be needed for Babergh.

There followed an extensive debate during which suggestions were made for consideration when finalising the policy.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee compliments 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 was insufficient and asked that Cabinet raise the level of loans and consider if a nominal rate of interest should be applied.**
- 1.3 That loans for works to improve for energy efficiency of homes should also be available.**
- 1.4 That the information in the communication plan be strengthened including publicity via Parish Council and local community groups and that a briefing note be circulated to Councillors when the policy was adopted.**
- 1.5 That Cabinet be asked to monitor the budget for empty homes this year and consider whether an increase was 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.**

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 Committee gave recommendations to officers to address before the policy was presented to Cabinet.

USE OF TASK AND FINISH GROUPS

PROVISION OF TRANSPORT WITHIN THE DISTRICTS

This group first met in August 2021 to discuss how to approach a review of the availability of public 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.

In September, the Group received presentations from officers of SCC and BMSDC and representatives of Connecting Communities and reported back to the Joint Committee in November, when Members agreed that the Task and Finish Group proceed with a review. The Group met three times but, before their work could be completed, two of the BDC members were appointed to Cabinet positions and resigned from the Task and Finish Group. A further meeting will be held when BDC are able to appoint members to the Group.

SCOPING OF REVIEWS

Members have prepared two scoping documents during the year to give advance guidance to officers and witnesses in preparation for scrutiny of the following topics:

- Provision of transport within the districts.
- Local Citizens Advice Services

INFORMATION BULLETINS

Members received two information bulletins in September 2021:

Customer Service Update

Anti-Social Behaviour

There were questions to seek clarification of some of the details in the papers, after which each of the Information Bulletins was noted.