

BABERGH AND MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCILS

Minutes of the meeting of the **JOINT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in the Frink Room (Elisabeth) - Endeavour House on Monday, 25 April 2022

PRESENT:

Councillors:	Melanie Barrett	Terence Carter
	James Caston	John Field
	John Hinton	Mary McLaren (Co-Chair)
	David Muller	Adrian Osborne
	Keith Welham (Co-Chair)	

In attendance:

Councillor(s): Jan Osborne
Lavinia Hadingham

Officers: Assistant Director - Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer (EY)
Corporate Manager – Governance and Civic Office (JR)
Housing Needs and Standards Manager (JK)
Senior Environmental Health Officer (AT)
Senior Governance Officer (HH)
Governance Officer (BW)

Apologies: Paul Ekpenyong
Kathryn Grandon
Keith Scarff

137 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None received.

138 JOS/21/29 TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 21 MARCH 2022

It was RESOLVED: -

That the amended minutes of the meeting held on the 21 of March 2022 be confirmed as a true record.

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

None received.

140 QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

None received.

141 QUESTIONS BY COUNCILLORS

None received.

142 JOS/21/30 DRAFT EMPTY HOMES POLICY

142.1 Councillor Jan Osborne 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 the districts.

142.2 The Senior Environmental Health Officer and the Housing Needs and Standards Manager presented to the committee outlining the process of bringing an empty home back into use, 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.

142.3 Councillor Field queried how many CPOs would be issued per year. The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that following the implementation of the policy it was expected that there would be a maximum of two per council per year due to the cost involved in purchasing properties. The Housing Needs and Standards Manager added that CPOs were a last resort action, and that the priority was to work with owners to bring homes back into use.

142.4 Councillor McLaren queried that with the additional Empty Homes Officer appointed for Mid Suffolk, how would a fair and equal service 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.

142.5 Councillor Caston queried the Empty Home Loan process and whether there were credit checks, interest, and how they were paid to applicants. The Senior Environmental Health Officer outlined that there was no financial means test for the loan and that there was no interest paid. Additionally, where possible the loans were paid directly to contractors after the work was completed.

142.6 Councillor Caston questioned whether Empty Homes Officers worked with the Homelessness Prevention Team if they were aware of squatters at a property. The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that, when possible, referrals were made to the Homelessness Prevention Team.

142.7 Councillor Barrett questioned how a long-term empty home was defined. The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that any property that had been unoccupied for six months and over was defined as an empty home. Whether a home was defined as furnished or unfurnished was not a concern.

- 142.8 Councillor Carter questioned how the council was proactive in identifying empty homes, especially in rural areas. The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that an initial list was obtained from Council Tax in order to identify how long a home had been empty. However, there was also a reliance on members of the public reporting properties online, and officers identifying properties when working in the districts.
- 142.9 Councillor Barrett queried whether it had been advertised to the public what help was available to bring homes back into use. The Housing Needs and Standards Manager responded that officers had worked with the Communications team to form a communications plan and had previously used case studies to demonstrate what was available.
- 142.10 Councillor Welham queried which budget had the Empty Homes Loans provision. The Housing Needs and Standards Manager responded that the provision was in the General Fund Budget under Capital Funding.
- 142.11 Councillor Adrian Osborne questioned how the Shared Revenue Partnership tracked Empty Homes. The Housing Needs and Standards Manager responded that Council Tax identified properties that have been empty for six months, also as set out in paragraphs 4.2 and 4.3 in the report that premiums were added to the Council Tax of properties that had been identified as empty for two years or more.
- 142.12 Members asked questions on commercial properties with dwellings above them and whether these applied under the Empty Homes Policy. The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that if the dwelling had its own address it fell under the Empty Homes Policy, however commercial buildings did not qualify.
- 142.13 Councillor Welham queried whether someone who had applied for the Empty Homes Loan would be able to apply for an Energy Efficiency Loan. The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that this work would fall under the Empty Homes Loan, and they could not get the additional Energy Efficiency Loan.
- 142.14 Councillor Welham questioned how CPOs were approved. The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that as there was no funding in the budget for CPOs they needed to go to Full Council for approval.
- 142.15 Councillor Field questioned whether it was illegal to leave a property empty. The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that it was not illegal to leave a home empty and that there was no statutory duty to bring them back into use.
- 142.16 Councillor Barrett queried whether Empty Homes cases could go to court. The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that they were unable to go to court and only had enforcement options available, such as CPOs.

142.17 Members debated the issues, and the following suggestions were made:

- That the maximum loan amount of £20,000 did not seem sufficient for the cost of works to bring an empty home back into use.
- That the amount allocated in the General Fund for Empty Homes Loans was insufficient.
- That Energy Efficiency Loans should be allowed in addition to Empty Homes Loans.
- That adding interest to Empty Homes Loans should be considered.
- That information was provided to Members to take to Parish Councils on bringing Empty Homes Back into use.
- That Empty Homes officers work closely with the Homelessness Prevention Team.

142.18 A short break was taken between 10:58-11:19am.

142.19 Councillor James Caston proposed these recommendations.

142.20 Councillor Terrence Carter seconded this motion.

By a unanimous vote

It was 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 in to 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 was 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 was provided to members of the committee on the empty homes' loans and the financial implications for the Councils.

1.7 That close working was encouraged with the Homelessness Outreach officers.

142.21 Councillor Mary McLaren proposed for the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee only:

Recommendation to Babergh Cabinet that the Empty Homes workload be kept under review by Cabinet to explore additional funding options for an Empty Homes Officer.

142.22 Councillor John Hinton seconded this motion.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED: -

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

143 JOS/21/31 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST

The Forthcoming Decisions List was noted.

144 JOS/21/32 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

The Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan was noted.

145 JOS/21/33 MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

The Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan was noted.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 11:31 am..

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Chair