

MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

TO: Council	REPORT NUMBER: MC/22/30
FROM: Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee	DATE OF MEETING: 26 January 2023

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT TO MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Mid Suffolk District Council on the business conducted at the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 24th October 2022, 21st November 2022 and the 19th December 2022 as well as the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 22nd November 2022.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 This report is for noting.

3. KEY INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on the 24th October 2022 and considered the following items:

3.1.1 **JOS/22/17 ANNUAL REVIEW UPDATE OF THE JOINT HOMES AND HOUSING STRATEGY AND THE HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION AND ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY 2019 - 2024**

Councillor Jan Osborne – Babergh District Council’s Cabinet Member for Housing – introduced the report to the Committee, outlining the history of the strategy and the purpose of the document.

The Housing Strategy and Policy Officer gave a presentation to the Committee outlining the 9 strategic aims that underpin the strategy, progress on implementation of the strategy and the changes that have been made to update the strategy. The presentation included the references to the refocussed delivery plan, and the status of the 93 actions outlined in the plan.

Members asked questions around a number of different housing topics, including self-build completions, ‘homes for life’, downsizing, anti-social behaviour and electric vehicle charging points.

In response to queries, the Corporate Manager for Housing Solutions provided data relevant to homelessness. Information was also given regarding temporary housing stock and provision of refuge spaces for those escaping abuse. There is a concern around providing for Ukrainian refugees who are approaching the end of their six months with a host family and have not yet been provided with more permanent accommodation.

It was agreed that concerns around the potential for conflict between the Housing Strategies and the Community Strategy be referred to Cabinet. It was also noted that a comprehensive report on the review of council garages would be considered by Cabinet in January 2023.

Following a full debate of the issues:

It was RESOLVED:

(a) That Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members have reviewed the contents of report JOS/22/17, including the appendices, and requests that the Portfolio Holders and Officers take account of verbal comments made by members of the committee. Also, that Cabinet bears these comments in mind when debating the refocussed delivery plan, the refreshed Joint Homes and Housing Strategy, and the Joint Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

(b) That the committee members support the strategic aims of the Joint Homes and Housing Strategy and agreed that the newly refocussed plan is reflective of the current challenges facing the housing sector whilst continuing to deliver the aims set out in the strategy.

(c) To ask Portfolio Holders and Officers to consider further provision of financial and physical support to all residents wishing to downsize.

3.2 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on the 21st November 2022 and considered the following items:

3.2.1 JOS/22/23 REVIEW OF LOCAL CITIZENS ADVICE AND THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

Councillor Mary McLaren – Babergh District Council’s Cabinet Member for Communities – outlined the role of the Communities Team and input from internal stakeholders; she thanked all officers who had contributed to the Councils’ response to the Cost of Living Crisis.

The Interim Director for Communities presented the report, outlining progress made on the Cost of Living Five Point Plan, including the appointment of a Cost of Living Coordinator, an uplift of 30% in grant funding to Citizens Advice.

The Chief Officers of Mid Suffolk and Sudbury Citizens Advice detailed work they had undertaken in response to the crisis, highlighting an overall increase in demand for their services, especially in respect of advice on benefits, tax credits, debt, utilities, and food. Members asked questions across a wide range of topics, including:

- Difficulty in recruiting volunteer advisors,
- Lack of support from Statutory Bodies, such as Department for Work and Pensions,
- The need for more integrated working and sharing community intelligence,
- Community Supermarkets,
- Utility costs and pre-paid meters

- The impact of the crisis on young people, particularly men under 25

It was RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of the report and commends the work being undertaken in response to the Cost of Living crisis,**
- (b) That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee supports the 30% uplift to Local Citizens Advice and the work being conducted as a result and recommends that this support continues for a further 2 years,**
- (c) That the Councils facilitate a more collaborative approach between organisations by encouraging the promotion of joint working,**
- (d) That Officers work with relevant agencies to understand the situation for young people under 25, specifically men, to build a proactive response to support them as an at-risk group,**
- (e) That Cabinet and Officers explore how we can embed the Cost of Living into the culture of the organisation for all staff when working with residents across all departments as part of a more integrated system of support.**
- (f) That a Joint All Member Briefing be arranged for all Councillors on the Cost of Living crisis with input from Local Citizens Advice.**

3.2.2 JOS/22/24 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY AND CABINET PROTOCOL

The Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Office introduced the report, explaining that the protocol is a response to the Corporate Peer Review. Its aim is to promote a culture of accountability, openness, and transparency within the Councils. The protocol had been endorsed by the Senior Leadership Team and if approved by the Committee would be submitted to Cabinet for their approval.

During a short debate on the protocol, a request was made for training on the call-in procedure.

It was RESOLVED:

That Overview and Scrutiny approves the Scrutiny/Cabinet protocol.

- 3.3 The Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on the 22nd November 2022 and considered the following items:

3.3.1 MOS/22/01 DRAFT GENERAL FUND (GF) AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) 2023/24 AND FOUR YEAR OUTLOOK

Councillor Whitehead – Cabinet Member for Finance – introduced the report to the Committee referring to the request from Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2021 that the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account be reviewed by the Committee earlier in its development in order to review the assumptions made in preparing the 2023/24 General Fund and Housing Revenue Account.

The Corporate Manager for Finance, Commissioning and Procurement presented the report to the Committee outlining:

- the 2023/24 General Fund Forecast carried out in February 2022,
- the current financial position of the 2022/23 General Fund,
- the assumed General Fund 2023/24 costs (including employee costs, contracts, sales, fees and charges, and interest) and funding (including Council Tax, business rates, and Central Government Grants), and the total draft funding surplus.

Members sought clarification on a number of points in the report and presentation, and debated a range of issues, including:

- The assumption made for garage rents and the possibility of increasing the rents
- Ways to decrease the deficit for the Housing Revenue Account by reducing recharges to that account from the General Fund
- Staffing costs and the impact of inflation on staff wages
- The assumptions made concerning costs of premises, contractors, supplies and equipment, and the need for these figures to be broken down into more detail
- The value of comparing a new budget to an old budget
- The timeliness of Cabinet receiving quarterly performance budget information

It was RESOLVED:

- (a) That Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomes this earlier opportunity to consider the draft budget assumptions and thanks Officers for their presentation and clarification.**
- (b) That Cabinet and Officers take account of the comments made at this meeting of the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**
- (c) That Cabinet explores opportunities to reduce to a minimum the recharges to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) from the General Fund (GF).**
- (d) That Officers look further at the Vacancy Management Factor assumption of 5%.**
- (e) That Officers consider further opportunities to increase garage rents.**
- (f) That Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee suggests a more prudent assumption in respect of the Pay Award 2023/24.**
- (g) That Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends the cost assumptions for repairs and maintenance be looked at in more detail.**

(h) That more timely quarterly information on the General Fund's and Housing Revenue Account's income and expenditure be used to develop the budget and request that this information be made available to Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3.4 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on the 19th December 2022 and considered the following items:

3.4.1 JOS/22/32 REVIEW OF SUFFOLK ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS (SALC)

Sally Longmate, CEO of SALC, presented her report setting out:

- The purpose of the Association and its operating model
- The training and support services provided to councillors, clerks and councils and benefits of membership
- Its business plan and outcomes detailed in the most recent annual report.

In response to a question, Ms. Longmate explained that SALC did not have a role in resolving issues concerning the Councillors' Code of Conduct. That is a matter for the appropriate Monitoring Officer.

Ms. Longmate agreed that there is a need for better communication and more collaborative working between the District Councils, SALC and Town and Parish Councils.

The Committee agreed to note the report.

3.4.2 JOS/22/33 INFORMATION BULLETIN – PROTECTION AGAINST CYBER ATTACKS

This item was considered in confidential session

3.5 At each meeting of the Committee, the Overview and Scrutiny Action Tracker and future Work Plans are considered. Up-to-date versions of the Work Plans are available to access on the Councils' website at the following link: [Overview and Scrutiny » Babergh Mid Suffolk](#)

4. REPORT AUTHORS

Councillor Keith Welham – Chair of Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee