

## MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

<b>TO:</b> Council	<b>REPORT NUMBER:</b> <b>MC/22/42</b>
<b>FROM:</b> Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee	<b>DATE OF MEETING:</b> 20 March 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 23 January 2023 and 20 February 2023 and the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 23 January 2023.

#### 2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 This report is for noting.

#### 3. KEY INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 23 January 2023 and considered the following items:

##### 3.1.1 **JOS/22/39 REVIEW OF THE CULTURE, HERITAGE, AND VISITOR ECONOMY STRATEGY**

Councillor Richardson – Cabinet Member for Economic Growth – introduced the report and explained that the stakeholder consultation and development of the strategy were recommendations from the Corporate Peer Review.

Members queried the timeframe for implementation of the strategy and were informed that it was expected that Cabinet would approve the strategy in March and a delivery plan provided by the end of June.

The Corporate Manager explained that Babergh and Mid Suffolk worked collaboratively with other bodies as part of the Suffolk-wide Strategic Tourism Group.

The lack of sufficient hotel accommodation was raised; however, there is a wide range of other accommodation available and the strategy is to encourage visitors from within Suffolk as well as tourists seeking a stay in the area. A number of visitor themes were suggested including churches, industrial heritage, fishing, arts and culture and charitable organisations.

Members offered a wide range of comments aimed at assisting officers in the development of a delivery plan.

**It was RESOLVED:**

**1.1 That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the report and requests that Officers take account of the comments made by Members.**

**1.2 That a review of the progress of the Strategy's implementation plan be undertaken by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2024.**

3.2 The Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 23 January 2023 and considered the following items:

**3.2.1 MOS/22/02 GENERAL FUND AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (2023-24) – REVIEW OF SAVINGS, PROPOSALS AND UPDATED POSITION**

Councillor Whitehead – Cabinet Member for Finance – introduced the report and explained changes in the financial position of each of the accounts since the committee considered them in November 2022. Councillor Morley read a statement on behalf of Councillor Hadingham – Cabinet Member for Housing.

There were a number of queries around anticipated savings and assumptions being made, in particular the predicted additional income from council house rents. The Director for Housing explained that the figure is based on the higher level of rents proposed for 2023/24.

The logic behind funding of Councillor Locality Awards from the Strategic Infrastructure Fund, rather than including funding for the awards as a line in the General Fund Budget, was queried. Members also suggested that the amount available to each councillor should be raised.

After a short debate,

**It was RESOLVED:**

**1.1 That the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the report.**

**1.2 That Cabinet considers an increase in the Locality Award allocation for each Member.**

**3.2.2 CALL IN OF THE DECISION FROM THE MID SUFFOLK CABINET MEETING 7 NOVEMBER MCA/22/27**

The Lead Signatory, Councillor Mellen, explained the reasons for calling in the Cabinet decision to secure funding for the development of a site in Elmswell as an exemplar housing scheme. Councillor Mellen explained that the decision was premature as there had been no pre-planning discussions and no pre-application advice sought. Furthermore, the site is well-used as an open space, and a similarly used but much smaller space within Elmswell had been refused permission for housing development. A limited public consultation had shown that the proposal had little or no local support. In summary, Councillor Mellen stated that the cabinet report had been lacking, and further information would be required if Cabinet were to make a sound and informed decision.

The Leader, Councillor Morley, explained that the report was presented to Cabinet to secure funding and that the proposal would be subject to the usual planning and development procedures. She said that, in view of the response from residents and from the planning authority, it would be right to return the item to Cabinet for further discussions and she did not contest the call in.

The Lead Signatory and Leader responded to members questions and then left the meeting.

Some members stated that the call in should be rejected, the Cabinet decision confirmed, and any further matters should be for decision by Development Control Committee members. Other members expressed concerns about the lack of public engagement.

A proposal that the decision be upheld and implemented immediately was lost. A proposal that the matter be referred back to Cabinet was then put to the vote.

**It was RESOLVED:**

**That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee refers the matter back to Cabinet for reconsideration with the following observations:**

- **That Officers undertake further public engagement**
- **That Officers and Cabinet consider locating other sites within the district for the scheme**
- **That Cabinet takes into consideration the planning advice provided.**

3.3 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 20<sup>th</sup> February 2023 and considered the following items:

3.3.1 **JOS/22/45 ARE PLANNING PRE-APPLICATION ADVICE CUSTOMERS GETTING A VALUABLE SERVICE?**

The Chief Planning Officer presented a report and explained the results of surveys carried out with users of the service as well as Planning Officers. He also introduced three witnesses – two architects and a planning agent – who have used the service to present their feedback and answer questions.

Questions from members of the committee covered a wide range of topics including changing the frequency of the survey, the quality of advice received, and comparisons with other local authorities.

Information provided by the witnesses assisted with the drafting of a number of recommendations.

**It was RESOLVED:**

**1.1 That the contents of the report be noted by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**

**1.2 That Officers be requested to alter the frequency and content of the survey of customer experience of the pre-application service to "open" rather than annual.**

- 1.3 That Officers be requested to undertake an annual survey of Development Management Planning Officers of their experience of customer service.**
- 1.4 That Officers develop a model for quarterly audit of timeliness, quality and customer service including to assess the effectiveness of the pre-application advice process in the validation of applications and correlation of advice with outcome.**
- 1.5 That the Corporate Director for Planning and Building Control and the Chief Planning Officer review the results of the above-mentioned surveys and audit with the Client Side Panel and report at least bi-annually to the Cabinet Members for Planning.**
- 1.6 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests the Director for Planning and Building Control and the Chief Planning Officer consider arrangements to provide adequate training and mentoring opportunities for all planning staff with a view to providing an improved level of pre-app service.**
- 1.7 That the Corporate Director for Planning and Building Control and the Chief Planning Officer aim for an overall quality of advice level of satisfaction of 60% by 30th April 2025.**

### **3.3.2 JOS/22/46 PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING ENFORCEMENT AND CIVIL PENALTIES POLICY**

Councillor Jan Osborne – Babergh Cabinet Member for Housing – introduced the report to committee, explaining how the policy would assist in maintaining and improving housing standards. Prosecutions are confrontational and can be very time-consuming. The alternative of using civil penalties would enable a more collaborative approach by working with landlords to achieve essential improvements to properties.

The levels of fines and other penalties were discussed, and detailed information provided by officers to enable the committee to formulate recommendations to Cabinet.

#### **It was RESOLVED:**

- 1.1 That Overview and Scrutiny recommend to Cabinet to adopt the new private rented sector housing enforcement policy, including the use of civil penalties as an alternative to prosecution, and agree a fair charging regime to recover the costs of housing enforcement action taken by the Council.**
- 1.2 To recommend that Cabinet approve and authorise the use of civil penalty and financial penalty powers provided by the Housing and Planning Act 2016 (Appendix 2), Electrical Safety Regulations (Appendix 3) and Energy Efficient (Private Renter Property) Regulations (Appendix 4).**
- 1.3 To recommend to Cabinet the proposed charges for relevant housing enforcement action based on officer time taken and that any revenue arising from civil penalties will be retained within the service to meet the legal or administrative costs and expenses incurred under the relevant housing law.**

**1.4 To recommend to Cabinet that comments made at this meeting be made available to them when they discuss implementing the Private Sector Housing Enforcement & Civil Penalties Policy.**

### **3.3.3 JOS/22/47 INFORMATION BULLETIN**

The Committee received an information bulletin and presentation on the following topic:

**Education, Skills and Employment – What more can the Councils do to raise opportunities and attainment?**

There followed a wide-ranging discussion, including questions on support for SEN students, the Gateway 14 Skills and Innovation Centre, and the support for developing technical and complex skills to allow young residents to pursue careers in emerging high-skilled industries.

**The Information Bulletin was noted.**

3.4 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 AUTHOR**

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