

## BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

<b>TO: Council</b>	<b>REPORT NUMBER: BC/22/47</b>
<b>FROM: Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee</b>	<b>DATE OF MEETING: 22 March 2023</b>

### OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT TO BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

#### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Babergh District Council on the business conducted at the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committees on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January and the 20<sup>th</sup> February as well as the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January.

#### 2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 This report is for noting.

#### 3. KEY INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2023 and considered the following items:

##### 3.1.1 BOS/22/02 GENERAL FUND AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (2023-24) – REVIEW OF SAVINGS, PROPOSALS AND UPDATED POSITION

Councillor Busby – Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments – introduced the report which gave the latest position of the accounts.

After detailed questioning by the Committee on all aspects of the accounts, the report was duly noted and of course has subsequently been approved by full Council.

##### 3.1.2 BOS/22/04 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

Councillor Hinton suggested that an item on Public Realm be added to the work plan and Councillor Grandon suggested that the Public Realm item be considered in March.

Subsequently this has come before the March meeting.

- 3.2 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee also met on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2023 and considered the following items:

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

Councillor Harry Richardson – Mid Suffolk’s Cabinet Member for Economy – introduced a very comprehensive report which covered the vast array of attractions, events, and areas that cover the two Districts.

It could not cover every detail but after extensive questioning of the officers and Cabinet Member by the Committee it was generally found to be a sound foundation on which to build some more detailed strategies.

The links between the Strategy and the Local Plan were questioned and it was reported that the Councils’ planning policy team were involved in the development and delivery of the strategy.

Some of the questions were around disability groups and their involvement and the response was that questions on health and wellbeing and accessibility had been asked of consultees and these themes would start to develop within the implementation stage of the strategy.

By a unanimous vote

**It was RESOLVED:**

**(a) That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report and requested that Officers take account of the many comments made by Members.**

**(b) That a review of the implementation plan’s progress be undertaken by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2024.**

3.3 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on the 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 the report to the Committee. It is obviously an important subject and numerous questions were asked concerning the level of respondents and the consequential rating of the service.

The response was that, in the words of my school report, “we can do better” and the independent witnesses affirmed that they considered the advice acceptable and of a consistency that they could recommend the extra costs involved to their clients, but that it “could be better”! They also recommended that there would be benefits from an opportunity to submit further information when requested before the Officer made their decision.

**(a) That the contents of the report be noted by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**

- (b) 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.**
- (c) That Officers be requested to undertake an annual survey of Development Management Planning Officers of their experience of customer service.**
- (d) 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.**
- (e) That the Corporate Director for Planning and Building Control and the Chief Planning Officer review the results of the above-mentioned surveys and audit and report at least bi-annually to the Cabinet Members for Planning.**
- (f) 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.**

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

Councillor Jan Osborne - Babergh's Cabinet Member for Housing - and the Senior Environmental Health Officer presented the report to the Committee.

Improving the quality of all housing stock in the Districts, the Councils obviously responsible for their own, and private stock, is important to the economic wellbeing of the population.

After discussion on the level of powers and the effect that they may have, Councillor Hinton raised the question of systems to identify problem properties and landlords.

The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that a data base of all landlords was being compiled and that social landlords did fall under the proposed policies.

Councillor Grandon enquired if the rates were national ones to which the response was no but were set after consultation with other Suffolk Councils.

The item was debated on the following issues:

- The potential increase in safety for residents.
- Building a register of private landlords within the Districts.

**It was RESOLVED:**

- (a) 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. Agree a fair charging regime to recover the costs of housing enforcement action taken by the Council.**
- (b) 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 Efficiency (Private Rented Property) Regulations (Appendix 4).**
- (c) 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.**
- (d) 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 – EDUCATION, SKILLS, AND EMPLOYMENT – WHAT MORE CAN THE COUNCILS DO TO RAISE OPPORTUNITIES AND ATTAINMENT?**

This bulletin was information only on the progress to increasing skills and job opportunities across both Districts. Gateway 14 Skills and Innovation Centre would supply a broad spectrum of locally required skills and the number overall of apprenticeships across both Districts was higher than pre-Covid.

The items on Tourism and Private Sector Enforcement have subsequently been to Cabinet and approved.

- 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 John Hinton – Chair of Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee