

MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

TO: Council	REPORT NUMBER: MC/23/19
FROM: Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee	DATE OF MEETING: 26 October 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 and the recommendations made at the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committees on the 24th July, 21st August, and the 18th September.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 This report is for noting.

3. ITEMS FROM THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON 24TH JULY

- 3.1 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on the 24th July 2023 and considered the following items:

3.2 Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership

- 3.2.1 Community Safety Partnerships, established in 1998 under the Crime and Disorder Act, are statutory bodies composed of various partner organisations including the police, local authorities, probation services, clinical commissioning groups, and fire and rescue services. The Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership (WSCSP) serves the areas of Babergh, Mid Suffolk, and West Suffolk.
- 3.2.2 Councillor Derek Davis, Chair of the WSCSP, and Councillor Sarah Mansel, Vice-Chair of the WSCSP, introduced the item to the committee outlining before Members the purpose of the Partnership, the priorities of the Partnership, how issues in our communities are identified, the teams and organisations that work collaboratively to form the Partnership, and commended the officers involved for their hard work.
- 3.2.3 Questions from the committee were asked on topics including: what the Partnership could do to improve Councillors' level of understanding on their work to best address safety concerns and inform policy, liaison with local housing associations at monthly anti-social behaviour panel meetings, communication to town and parish councils through the Suffolk Association of Local Councils, and if there was an order of prioritisation for dealing with different types of reported hate crime.

- 3.2.4 The costs of running the Partnership were discussed – it is always crucial to look into the costs no matter how important the work is. The Partnership does not have a formal budget, although they can offer small grants to local community groups. The Partnership also does not collect information on officer time spent and its corresponding financial costs as it is part of their everyday workload.
- 3.2.5 Councillor Row questioned what mitigation measures were in place to prevent radicalisation occurring in Ipswich from reaching Babergh and Mid Suffolk. The Suffolk County Council Head of Community Safety responded that every local authority was required to have a PREVENT Delivery Group that are dedicated to identifying instances of radicalisation and preventing it from occurring in their areas and from spreading further.
- 3.2.6 Councillor Warboys posed questions aimed at understanding how the Partnership identifies various demographic groups and engages with them. The Superintendent responded that Suffolk Police have Community Engagement Officers who play a crucial role in facilitating communication with diverse grassroots community groups, building stronger relationships and providing a vital mechanism for the Partnership to identify and address pressing issues.
- 3.2.7 Further questions were asked on issues concerning violence against women and girls (VAWG), particularly within schools, and how the Partnership deals with cases of missing children and their returns home. The Head of Community Safety responded that secondary schools had a statutory obligation to provide “healthy relationship” classes for students aimed at stopping violence against women and girls at the root. The Superintendent also clarified that Multi-Agency Crime Exploitation Panels had been established to help conduct “return home” interviews for returning children which aim to identify underlying problems or risks that the child might be facing.
- 3.2.8 The Assistant Manager for Community Safety and Resilience presented a report on anti-social behaviour and introduced the committee to the Councils’ Community Safety Officers. Questions were asked on the Anti-Social Behaviour Strategic Board’s five core principles and the value they provide to the Partnership.
- 3.2.9 Members debated the item on the following issues: the Partnership’s link to the Significant Business Risk Register, further training for Councillors on the Partnership, the risk of further statutory items being assigned to officers in the Partnership, the cost and time input of BMSDC officers, and communication with town and parish councils.
- 3.2.10 The following recommendations were made:
- That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the report and commends the Officers involved for their work within the Partnership.

- That an All Member Briefing and further training be delivered for all Councillors regarding the topics covered by the Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership, including how to report anti-social behaviour and an updated contact list.
- That a review of the current costs of Babergh and Mid Suffolk resources, and the potential impact of further statutory responsibilities, is undertaken and reported back to the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- That the level of engagement with community groups within the Districts is incorporated into the next review of the Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership and is reported to the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- That a review is undertaken of the Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership's position within the Babergh and Mid Suffolk Significant Business Risk Register.
- That more formal communication procedures are put in place between the Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership and our parish / town Councils.

4. ITEMS FROM THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON 21ST AUGUST

4.1 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on the 21st August 2023 and considered the following items:

4.2 CIFCO Performance Report (2022/23) and Business Plan (2023/24)

4.2.1 The Board of CIFCO Capital Ltd is responsible for the funds' performance which is aligned with the business plan. Joint Overview and Scrutiny review the performance report and upcoming business plan on an annual statutory basis. The Board meets regularly to assess asset performance, make investment decisions, and establish governance policies. CIFCO continually reviews its business plan and investment strategy, adjusting as needed with input from Jones Lang LaSalle, and seeks approval from the Holding Company and Full Council yearly – this is a process that the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee supports.

4.2.2 Councillor John Ward, Babergh's Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments, and the Director for Assets and Investments introduced the item to the committee outlining before Members the purpose of the business plan, the structure of the trading companies, the CIFCO property investment portfolio, the key performance indicators (KPIs), the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) improvement plan, and an overview of the 2023/24 business plan.

4.2.3 Members raised concerns about the adequacy of the KPIs and targets that had been established, commenting that these had perhaps been set too conservatively. In response, it was explained that these targets were set at the current levels to ensure they were realistic and attainable with fluctuating market conditions and that there were plans to go beyond these targets.

- 4.2.4 Questions were asked on the time scale and costs of the EPC improvement plan. There is no definitive timeline and end date for the improvements but it was stated that work will be done in a priority order based on potential for returns. The costs of this plan would be funded purely through CIFCO and would not require further funds from Council and its budget.
- 4.2.5 Further questions concerned issues such as deferred debt repayments, the Councils' short-term borrowing debt, the potential for the portfolio to reach net-zero, rent arrears, and the running costs of CIFCO.
- 4.2.6 Members debated the item on the following issues: relying on a loan-based income stream, the proposed EPC improvement plan, the impacts on the commercial property market, deferred debt repayments and their impact on Council finances, and reaching net-zero targets.
- 4.2.7 The following recommendations were made:
- That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the CIFCO Business Trading and Performance Report and asks that the minutes of the meeting be taken into account when CIFCO is next considered at Full Council.

4.3 Cost of Living: Review of 6 Month Plan and Beyond

- 4.3.1 The Cost of Living Plan emphasises the importance of a coordinated approach to address the cost-of-living crisis. It stresses the significance of considering the needs of residents, avoiding duplication of work, and supporting the most vulnerable efficiently. Additionally, it emphasises the balance between crisis support and preventative measures and the importance of addressing the underlying drivers of poverty for long term community resilience.
- 4.3.2 Councillor Andrew Mellen, Cabinet Member for Performance and Resilience, the Corporate Manager for Customer Services, and the Cost of Living Co-ordinator introduced the item to the committee outlining before Members the last 6 months of work, the different kinds of support delivered directly to residents, plans to improve communication methods, digital inclusion schemes, collaboration with Community Action Suffolk, and initiative to help get more residents online to access web-based support services.
- 4.3.3 Members questioned about the types of communication being delivered to residents. Officers responded that general blanket communication is sent to all residents but that training had been provided to officers in income, building services, and customer services to identify vulnerable residents who may require more targeted communication and support. Following a query about current redirections to support on our websites, it was stated that a review on whether these online communications were effective would be carried out following the launch of our new sites.
- 4.3.4 Further questions were asked about the physical support provided to residents and the access to online services. Members were reassured that the communities team constantly maps the level of need in our districts and that physical support was provided to areas with the highest identified demand.

Customer Access Points (CAPs) will also be reviewed to assess their value as a base for residents to access specific cost-of-living support. The Councils are running digital inclusion sessions, in partnership with Suffolk Libraries, particularly aimed at supporting older residents and those living in rural locations in getting online and accessing further support.

4.3.5 Concerns were raised about government funding and the resilience of the cost-of-living strategy should this no longer be a government priority and funding reduced. Officers responded that key risks had been identified and are being constantly monitored, and that a proactive approach with internal solutions would be drafted up so there would be limited impact to the delivery of key services.

4.3.6 Members debated the item on the following issues: support for younger residents, support for residents where English is not their first language, further communication and direct engagement with residents, methods of identifying vulnerable residents, strategic support for the continuation of services, and collaboration with Citizens Advice.

4.3.7 The following recommendations were made:

- To note phase 3 of the Cost-of-Living Action Plan and endorse the commitment to develop a longer-term approach to preventing poverty which seeks to understand the underlying drivers of poverty across both Districts at a hyper local level through continued work with internal and external stakeholders and to include wider engagement with Town and Parish Councils.

5. ITEMS FROM THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON 18TH SEPTEMBER

5.1 The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on the 18th September 2023 and considered the following items:

5.2 Review on Current Levels of Untreated Sewage Discharges to Waters in Babergh and Mid Suffolk

5.2.1 This information bulletin addresses concerns about water quality and sewage pollution in rivers which was an issue originally raised by Councillors and their communities. In November 2022, both Councils unanimously passed a resolution to invite senior representatives from Anglian Water, the Environment Agency, and Natural England to a scrutiny meeting to discuss sewage discharge levels. The bulletin, put together by internal officers, provided information about the previous work of the Suffolk Flood Risk Scrutiny Committee, and looks at national policy regarding stormwater flood events.

5.2.2 Unfortunately, I did not attend this meeting due to illness. The below is the report from this meeting as put together by Councillor Mary McLaren, my Co-Chair at Babergh District Council.

5.2.3 The Director of Operations introduced the item to the Committee outlining before Members the approved motion from both Councils in November 2022, stakeholder responsibilities, and the background information provided by internal officers in the information bulletin.

5.2.4 Anglian Water provided a presentation to the Committee outlining before Members the operational background of the organisation, the current strategic goals, the five “Get River Positive” commitments, investment into the reduction of storm spills, water recycling programmes, storm overflows and their designated permits, and event duration monitors (EDMs) installation and maintenance. Representatives from the Environment Agency, Natural England, and the River Stour Trust introduced themselves to the committee and outlined before Members their organisation’s purpose in managing rivers in the districts.

5.2.5 Given the intense interest and the very wide and specific concerns of the Committee it is impossible to reflect the specific and wide questioning that was generated by members. It resulted in a very long session before recommendations were agreed. The following responses to questions have been divided by the Agencies present.

5.2.6 Anglian Water

5.2.6.1 Frequency of storm spills are not determined by the amount of rainfall in an area. External factors such as fats in the sewage system and blockages were affecting activation of storm spills and a third of activations were false events.

5.2.6.2 Verification checks are now taking place to improve the accuracy of storm spill devices, however there is always a risk that not all would be identified.

5.2.6.3 Anglian Water are not statutory consultees in the Planning Process and there are legislative restrictions to the information they can provide.

5.2.6.4 Hadleigh Water Recycling Centre was due for the delivery of a phosphorous scheme which would reduce levels of phosphates in the system therefore reducing plant growth and encouraging wildlife to return. If necessary, an aerator would be added to the water supply to increase oxygen levels to improve the habitat of wildlife.

5.2.6.5 Educating the public about the inappropriate disposal of wet wipes into the sewage system had resulted in consultations to consider banning the use of plastic in wet wipes. Currently running a “Keep it Clear” communications campaign to remove “unflushables” from the sewage system.

5.2.6.6 Sudbury Water Recycling Centre and the installation of phosphorous removal equipment is already planned and would be concluded by 2024.

5.2.6.7 Anglian Water are not paying more in dividends than is invested in improved infrastructure. Their annual public report is provided annually for the public to review.

5.2.7 Environment Agency

- 5.2.7.1 Raising the status of water quality from poor to good is subject to regulations to make improvements with a deadline of 2027. However, it was possible that only one measurable aspect of the river was resulting in its “poor” status rather than the whole river being below standard quality.
- 5.2.7.2 Storm spill records are provided by Anglian Water to the Environment Agency and their subsequent investigation and tests are carried out dependent of frequency and risk.
- 5.2.7.3 Should an application for bathing water status be granted then the area will go into a monitoring programme where the water will be tested regularly for pathogens and that improvement measures could be made to the quality of the water once it has received a classification from the government.
- 5.2.7.4 The EA has legal powers to bring pig farms into compliance with the Nitrate Vulnerable Zone Regulations should there be a run-off from farms (e.g. open pig farms) and there was a dedicated team for such pollution incidents. Natural England are also able to get involved if the pollution is affecting protected sites.
- 5.2.7.5 Some collaboration is taking place with DEFRA regarding certain chemicals and their impact on the river system (e.g. by-products of drugs in the sewage system)

5.2.8 Natural England

- 5.2.8.1 Natural England have agreed to assist with the provision of education and training for Councillors regarding catchment sensitive farming so that Members can work collaboratively with farmers in their Wards to protect water quality.

5.2.9 The following recommendations were made:

- That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee thank Anglian Water, the Environment Agency, Natural England, and the River Stour Trust for their attendance and for the answers provided.
- That the Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny provide a report and verbal update on the contents and outcomes of the Committee meeting at the next Full Council meetings in October.
- That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests for more information from the external representatives, specifically including the phosphate reducing programme, and asks that this be fed back to the Committee via an Information Bulletin.
- That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests for a wider publicity campaign for residents, staff, and Councillors regarding materials that cannot be put into the sewage system.

- That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests for Cabinet to investigate the possibility of running a campaign regarding the provision of water butts for residents.
- That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests for Council to consider supporting “citizen science” projects.

6. STATUTORY DOCUMENTS

- 6.1 At each meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees, the action tracker and the future work plans are considered by Members and adjustments made as appropriate. The Work Plans can be found on the Councils’ websites. The Action Tracker has been attached to this report.

7. ATTACHMENTS

Title	Location
(a) Overview and Scrutiny Work Plans	https://www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/web/mid-suffolk/w/overview-and-scrutiny
(b) Overview and Scrutiny Action Tracker	Attached

8. REPORT AUTHORS

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Alicia Norman – Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny