

BABERGH AND MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCILS

Minutes of the meeting of the **JOINT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in the King Edmund Chamber, Endeavour House, 8 Russell Road, Ipswich on Monday, 23 October 2023

PRESENT:

Chair: James Caston

Councillors:	Terence Carter	Kathryn Grandon
	Leigh Jamieson	Mary McLaren
	Janet Pearson	Dr Daniel Pratt
	Brian Riley	Miles Row
	Keith Scarff	Laura Smith
	John Whyman	

In attendance:

Councillor(s): Rachel Eburne – MSDC Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources

Officers:

- Corporate Manager for Housing Solutions (AAY)
- Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation (DW)
- Corporate Manager for the Councils Companies (HB)
- Housing Strategy and Policy Officer (RW)
- Housing Enabling Officer (RF)
- Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Office (JR)
- Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny (AN)

Apologies:

Councillor(s): Dr Ross Piper

35 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTIONS

35.1 Apologies were received from Councillor Ross Piper.

35.2 Councillor Daniel Pratt substituted for Councillor Piper.

36 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

36.1 Councillor Carter and Councillor Smith declared an interest in Item JOS/23/21 due to their positions as social housing tenants.

36.2 Councillor Caston and Councillor Whyman declared an interest in Item JOS/23/21 due to being private landlords.

36.3 The Deputy Monitoring Officer responded that all Councillors are granted a dispensation to deal with housing matters therefore all Members could remain

on the Committee and participate in the debate and vote.

37 JOS/23/20 TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 18 SEPTEMBER 2023

37.1 Councillor Smith proposed that the minutes of the meeting be confirmed and signed as a true record.

37.2 Councillor Whyman seconded the proposal.

37.3 By 7 For, 1 Against, and 4 Abstentions

It was RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 18 September 2023 be confirmed and signed as a true record.

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

38.1 None received.

39 QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

39.1 None received.

40 QUESTIONS BY COUNCILLORS

40.1 None received.

41 JOS/23/21 ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE JOINT HOMES AND HOUSING STRATEGY

41.1 Councillor Eburne, Mid Suffolk's Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources, introduced the item to the Committee on behalf of the Cabinet Members for Housing outlining before Members the history of the Strategy since its adoption, the commitment for Overview and Scrutiny to conduct annual reviews into the progress of the Strategy, and the updates to the Strategy since it last came before the Committee for consideration.

41.2 The Housing Strategy and Policy Officer presented the item to the Committee outlining before Members the updated delivery plan, the use of an action tracker to monitor progress against the delivery plan, the amendments made to the Strategy in 2022, updates provided to the Housing Programme Board, plans to further include Members in existing and upcoming processes, a summary of progress made towards actions on the delivery plan since

October 2022, and provided an update on work towards the Strategy's 12 key aims.

- 41.3 Councillor Caston asked what tools were available to help identify land to increase the supply of self-build plots. The Housing Enabling Officer responded that the Strategy focussed purely on Council owned land, that there was a limited supply of available land, and that reviews had to be made to assess whether the land was suitable to support self-build infrastructure.
- 41.4 Councillor Pearson asked for a definition of affordable housing in the context of the Strategy. The Housing Enabling Officer responded that, whilst there were multiple definitions for affordable housing, the one used in the Strategy was the same as detailed in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
- 41.5 Councillor Jamieson queried what work was being carried out to make improvements to the environmental standards of our existing housing stock. The Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation responded that there were existing actions throughout the Strategy's delivery plan, including a stock condition survey, that enabled officers to identify areas of stock falling below standard and implement targeted improvements.
- 41.6 Councillor Smith queried what the time scale was for collecting data as part of the stock condition survey. The Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation responded that a full comprehensive review would need to be undertaken for all properties and that the proposed timescale for completion was 4 years.
- 41.7 Councillor McLaren questioned what the Councils currently offer in terms of housing to key workers to help support the recruitment process and the delivery of our key public services. The Corporate Manager for Housing Solutions responded that conversations were currently ongoing with partners across Suffolk about a strict definition of "essential worker" and what could be offered in terms of housing once a definitive demand had been realised.
- 41.8 Councillor Row queried if the Councils were in a position to apply for the next round of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund. The Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation responded that the Councils had collected enough relevant data and would be applying for the next stage of funding.
- 41.9 Councillor Pratt questioned if the current stock of affordable housing was actually accessible to those under 30 on a median income. The Housing Enabling Officer responded that there was a difference between affordable housing and housing affordability and that a response would be provided outside of the meeting after a review.
- 41.10 Councillor Grandon questioned whether installing air-source heat pumps into our social housing would only occur in new builds or if there were plans to retrofit our existing stock. The Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation responded that there are a number of other alterations that need to be made to existing stock if air-source heat pumps were to be fitted but that there were

currently plans to do so as well as installing pumps in new builds.

- 41.11 Councillor Grandon further questioned what work was being done to provide homes and communicate to residents the option to downsize their properties. The Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation responded that there was a policy in development focussing on encouraging residents to downsize their properties and that this would be communicated in due course.
- 41.12 Councillors Smith and Carter raised issues with Gateway to Homechoice and its ability to capture real-life scenarios and the specific needs of residents. The Corporate Manager for Housing Solutions responded that a health-check would take place on Gateway to Homechoice to ensure that residents are able to express their needs and that suitable housing options are matched to them.
- 41.13 Councillor Scarff queried if redundant and underused sheltered housing stock were in the right locations to be utilised to their full potential. The Corporate Manager for Housing Solutions responded that a majority of underused properties were in the wrong places and that this would be picked up by the older persons strategy and a full review of the stock.
- 41.14 Councillor Riley questioned what was currently being done to hold contractors to account. The Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation responded that there had been issues with poorly-managed contractors and contracts not meeting the Council's needs and demands, and that there were plans to review all contracts to ensure they were being managed effectively and that contractors were being held to account and delivering what had been requested.
- 41.15 Councillor McLaren queried if tenants are given support when they move into a property and are provided with correct contact details for reporting issues. The Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation responded that all new tenants have a "welcome visit", either in person or over the phone, upon moving into a property where all the necessary support was provided to them.

A short break was taken between 10:58am and 11:11am.

- 41.16 Councillor Whyman questioned whether houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) were available to the Council as operators and whether any assessment was made of private landlords prior to collaboration with them. The Corporate Manager for Housing Solutions responded that the Councils did have access to HMOs and that checks were made on private landlords where appropriate to ensure the safety of our residents.
- 41.17 Councillor Scarff queried if conversations were had with private landlords, via Central Suffolk Lettings, regarding the Council acquiring properties from landlords who wish to leave the sector. The Corporate Manager for Housing Solutions responded that landlords had provided the Council with properties in the past but that checks had to be made to assess whether the houses met the needs of our residents appropriately and that there were sufficient funds

available.

41.18 Councillor Caston questioned what checks had been brought in to the process to ensure we are on the right path with the changes proposed. The Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation responded that monthly discussions took place between the Councils and the social housing regulator to track progress and that weekly updates were provided to portfolio holders and senior staff to monitor improvements.

41.19 Councillor Riley queried what support was provided by the Councils for larger families and their accommodation. The Corporate Manager for Housing Solutions responded that there were concerns about the number of stock available for families with multiple members and that there was currently not sufficient provision. The Corporate Manager further responded that a downsizing policy would help to manage the suitability of families to their properties and that further policies specifically regarding larger families would be brought implemented in the future.

41.20 Members debated the item on the following issues:

- Provision of properties to allow residents to downsize and how this option is communicated
- The scrutiny of private landlords
- The proposed timescale of the stock condition survey
- The accessibility of our housing stock financially to young people and those on a lower-than-median income
- The definition of affordable housing and its practicality
- The timescale for repairs and retrofitting to our stock
- Methods of more effectively reporting the risks of the strategy in further annual review reports
- A refocus on supporting officers to deliver the strategy and improvements to our housing stock
- The degree of involvement of ward members in getting issues resolved and an appropriate reporting mechanism

41.21 Councillor Riley left the meeting at 12:01pm during the debate.

A short break was taken between 12:10pm and 12:28pm for officers and Councillors to formulate appropriate recommendations.

41.22 The Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Office put forward the following recommendations based on the questions and debate from Members:

- That Overview and Scrutiny Committee support the strategic aims of the Homes and Housing Strategy ensuring the delivery plan is reflective of the

current challenges facing the housing sector, whilst continuing to deliver the aims set out in the Homes and Housing Strategy.

- That Cabinet considers reducing the proposed timescales for the stock conditions audit of the Councils' properties.
- That Cabinet reconsiders the use of inhouse occupational therapists.
- That Cabinet identify what housing is affordable in the private market to various demographics in the Districts to determine the most appropriate tenures to secure and deliver.
- That officers incorporate a RAG status into future reports taken before Joint Overview and Scrutiny and provide more detailed focus on the associated risks of delivery of the Strategy.
- That the Cabinet undertake a clear refocus on housing and ensure that there is enough support for officers to achieve the housing needs of our residents
- That officers are requested to involve all Members in any open sessions carried out by the department.
- That the Chief Planning Officer provides the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the number of dwellings with outstanding planning permission that have not yet begun construction.
- That officers identify residents who are most vulnerable so that services can be proactively designed around their needs and tailored to them when appropriate.
- That Cabinet and officers explore methods of both providing and communicating to residents the option to downsize their properties.
- That officers scrutinise and investigate private landlords before working collaboratively with them.
- That Cabinet reconsiders the means in which data is collected in support of community led housing.

41.23 Councillor Scarff proposed the recommendations as read out by the Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Office.

41.24 Councillor Whyman seconded the proposal.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED:

- 1.1. That Overview and Scrutiny Committee support the strategic aims of the Homes and Housing Strategy ensuring the delivery plan is reflective of the current challenges facing the housing sector, whilst continuing to deliver the aims set out in the Homes and Housing Strategy.**
- 1.2. That Cabinet considers reducing the proposed timescales for the stock conditions audit of the Councils' properties.**
- 1.3. That Cabinet reconsiders the use of inhouse occupational therapists.**
- 1.4. That Cabinet identify what housing is affordable in the private market to various demographics in the Districts to determine the most appropriate tenures to secure and deliver.**
- 1.5. That officers incorporate a RAG status into future reports taken before Joint Overview and Scrutiny and provide more detailed focus on the associated risks of delivery of the Strategy.**
- 1.6. That the Cabinet undertake a clear refocus on housing and ensure that there is enough support for officers to achieve the housing needs of our residents**
- 1.7. That officers are requested to involve all Members in any open sessions carried out by the department.**
- 1.8. That the Chief Planning Officer provides the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the number of dwellings with outstanding planning permission that have not yet begun construction.**
- 1.9. That officers identify residents who are most vulnerable so that services can be proactively designed around their needs and tailored to them when appropriate.**
- 1.10. That Cabinet and officers explore methods of both providing and communicating to residents the option to downsize their properties.**
- 1.11. That officers scrutinise and investigate private landlords before working collaboratively with them.**
- 1.12. That Cabinet reconsiders the means in which data is collected in support of community led housing.**

42 JOS/23/22 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST

- 42.1 The Forthcoming Decisions List was noted.**

43 JOS/23/23 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ACTION TRACKER

43.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Action Tracker was noted.

44 JOS/23/24 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

44.1 Councillor McLaren queried if there had been any advancements to an update on the Corks Lane development coming before the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

44.2 The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny responded that conversations had been had with the Chief Executive and the Corporate Manager for the Councils' Companies where a decision had been made that Overview and Scrutiny was not the appropriate body to oversee such an item at this moment in time. Therefore, the item had been taken off the work plan pending further discussion and decisions.

44.3 The Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan was noted.

45 JOS/23/25 MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

45.1 The Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan was noted.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 12:45pm.

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Chair