

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL AND MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

Joint Scrutiny Committee Report for Council

17 December (Babergh) and 19 December (Mid Suffolk) 2013

Joint Scrutiny Committee Meeting of 4 December 2013

A summary of key items follows (and for full detail of the meeting, please see the minutes):

1. **Impact of Welfare Changes:** Members heard from the Shared Revenues Partnership (SRP) and from Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) regarding the impact of the Welfare Reform Bill changes on the SRP, Councils and residents.
 - 1.1 Members raised many questions and these were in relation to: who to contact on behalf of residents for issues on the various different benefits and services; whether the reduction in housing benefit for under occupation was having an impact; whether these changes were actually getting people back to work; what the cost impact was to SRP; how downsizing requests would be actioned when the two Councils had a lack of one and two bedroom properties; levels of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and expectations for future years; the introduction of Universal Credit; if the funding formula for the SRP would be reviewed; keeping records on residents with particular issues such as lack of literacy skills; and customer service levels.
 - 1.2 In the ensuing discussion Members were particularly concerned about what plans the two Councils had to address the lack of one and two bedroom properties and it was suggested that the Committee might revisit this.
 - 1.3 Members also wished to see whether the SRP would address the funding balance between the three Councils.
 - 1.4 Input from CAB was particularly welcomed in being able to provide practical examples of where the changes were having an impact.
2. **Planning Policy Update:** This was a verbal report requested by Members at the last Joint Scrutiny Committee. Members welcomed the Head of Economy's full overview of the current situation regarding the status of and development of planning policy in the two Councils.
 - 2.1 Questions were raised by Members in relation to two key areas: development of planning policy where it was felt that existing policies were either not complete or not fit for purpose; and Member involvement in development of planning policy in general.

- 2.2 Discussion ranged across a number of issues including lack of policies relating to alternative energy; protection of the two Councils' environments; dealing with planning policy issues that are being discussed within different Transformation Enquiry Groups (TEGs); how to progress policy development faster; taking account of risks and advantage of opportunities; lack of a forum in which to debate these issues; utilising Member expertise and getting all Members together to move issues forward.
- 2.3 There was lengthy impassioned debate between Members and Officers around the view that all the two Councils' strategic priorities depended on the two Councils having a robust planning policy framework. It was felt that this issue should not await completion of work currently being done within the TEGs as the two are not mutually exclusive and that it would improve matters if there was a group taking forward these planning policy aspects. It would potentially save money with regards to future (and current) appeal challenges to the Councils and ensure Officers were able to concentrate on this area rather than dealing with many different planning policy issues.
- 2.4 Members unanimously recommended to Executive and Strategy Committees that a Planning Policy Group is set up to work in conjunction with the Transformation Enquiry Groups to deal specifically with planning policy matters and support the development of the planning policy framework for the Councils.
3. **Other matters:** Members received a report on Complaints and Compliments and asked that some further detail be included in the next (annual) report on the risk rating and the number of complainants. Members requested that the Workplan included Planning Enforcement.

The next Joint Scrutiny Committee is on Wednesday 5 February 2014 at Mid Suffolk District Council offices. (There are individual Council Scrutiny Committee meetings to scrutinise the draft budget in January 2014.)

Councillor Jenny Antill
Joint Chair (Babergh) and Chair of this meeting

Councillor Rachel Eburne
Joint Chair (Mid Suffolk)