

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

From: Head of Corporate Organisation	Report Number: P7
To: Council	Date of Meeting: 22 April 2014

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND BABERGH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 In accordance with the Constitution, the Committee must report annually to Council on its work during the last year and make recommendations for future work programmes.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the contents of this report regarding work carried out in 2013/14 be noted.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 There have been no financial implications to date other than the costs of officer time and normal allowances for Members that are included in the budget.
- 3.2 Any development of the work of in-depth scrutiny, including items such as the payment of out-of-pocket expenses for expert and other witnesses can be accommodated within existing budgets for 2013/14. The position for future years will be addressed through the Strategic Financial Planning Process, if that is necessary.

4. Risk Management

- 4.1 This report is an update on work completed during 2013/14. Risk management considerations for individual topics will be included in reports to the Committee as the year progresses.

5. Consultations

- 5.1 Members of the Joint Scrutiny Committee have been invited to identify any topics for consideration during 2014/15.

6. Equality Analysis

- 6.1 There are no equality implications with this report. Equality analysis considerations for individual topics will be included in reports to the Committee as the year progresses.

7. Shared Service/Partnership Implications

7.1 The Joint Scrutiny Committee provides a focus for scrutinising the work of external stakeholders, service providers and partners. Shared Service/Partnership implications for individual topics will be included in reports to the Committee as the year progresses.

8. Key Information

8.1 As part of the overall Governance Review carried out in 2013 and approved by both Councils in April 2013, the role of the Joint Scrutiny Committee was redefined as having the key purposes of:

- Scrutinising the work of external stakeholders and service providers.
- hold the Strategy/Executive Committee to account
- Being the home of “call in”.
- Being the home of Member Call for Action.

8.2 The Joint Scrutiny Committee has two Joint Chairs, one from each authority and meets every 2 months, alternating location and chairing responsibilities between the two Councils.

8.3 The following is a summary of the Committee’s main achievements during the year:

New Homes Bonus

The Committee discussed the funds available from the New Homes Bonus (NHB) for both Babergh and Mid Suffolk, looked at examples of the use of NHB in other Councils and considered possible options for the use of NHB. The Joint Scrutiny Committee’s view was: -

- That the importance of the ‘invest to save’ approach be recognised and incorporated in the Budget process for 2014/15.
- That there is a need to secure effective community engagement and clarity throughout the process (of using the NHB), with a clear timetable and criteria for making bids.

A letter was sent to the Transformation Enquiry Group Lead Members informing them of this view.

Western Community Safety Partnership

Members scrutinised the work that had been carried out by the Partnership in 2012/13. Support was expressed for the work of the partnership and the benefits of a good working relationship with the local Police. Concern was raised about the reduced budgets available to the Partnership with the advent of the new Police and Crime Commissioner structures. Support was expressed for the existing geographical structure of the Partnership.

Corporate Comments, Compliments and Complaints

The Committee received regular reports on Corporate Compliments, Comments and Complaints which Members felt it was important to monitor, especially during the period of structural change and transformation. Enhancements to the information collected and reported were proposed and accepted. Emphasised need for departments to collect compliments.

Transformation Programme

The costs and savings of the Transformation Programme were scrutinised by comparison with the integration business case presented in October 2011. Members recognised that the financial position and Government funding reductions were worse than previously thought and substantially worse than could have been predicted when the integration business case was put together. During the discussion Members recognised the challenges that Councils faced and how operations were going to be affected and noted the savings already made through the transformation review.

Review of Partnership Accountability

The Committee discussed a preliminary review of partnership activity and appointments to outside bodies. It was clear that further work was required in order to obtain a clear understanding of who we should be working with; the alignment with the Council's strategic priorities; and the benefits and savings therein. This work is now being linked to the development of the strategic plan and programme of work for the Councils. This project will also review both Councils' arrangements for Councillor representation on outside bodies, and reporting thereon.

Impact of Welfare Changes

The Committee heard from the Shared Revenues Partnership (SRP) and the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) regarding the impact of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 on our residents, with specific focus on how the SRP and the Councils were dealing with the impact. Issues examined included the impact of the reduction in housing benefit for under-occupation; whether the changes were actually getting people back to work; the number of down-sizing requests and the lack of one or two bedroom properties; level of Discretionary Housing payments both for the current year and future years; and who to contact on behalf of residents for issues on the various benefits.

Planning Policy Update

The Head of Economy gave a verbal update on the current situation regarding the status of and development of planning policy in the two Councils. The Committee's view was that all of the two Councils' strategic priorities depended on having a robust planning policy framework. As a result of the Committee's recommendation to Strategy and Executive Committees a short-term working group has been established on a task and finish basis, including both senior officer and nominated Member representation. This will have 2 key roles:

- To oversee an agreed overall programme of future planning policy work.

- To agree an appropriate approach for officer / Member joint working in future in this regard operating on a collaborative basis that meets both service delivery needs and Member wishes to allow for their involvement in policy planning and its preparation.

S106 / Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) arrangements

Members scrutinised reports which reviewed the Councils' current arrangements for the management and monitoring of S106 agreements and the current position regarding the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Members asked about the process for revising and changing S106 agreements, and about the involvement of communities in discussing such agreements. The Developer Contributions Manager from Suffolk County Council attended to answer questions with respect to contributions collected relating to education, highways and infrastructure.

Choice Based Lettings

The existing arrangements for Choice Based Lettings via Gateway to Homechoice (sub-regional choice based lettings scheme which includes eight authorities in Suffolk and Essex) were examined with a focus on ensuring the system was fair to all. Members sought clarification about the inclusion of local connections in the criteria for allocation. The Committee was content that the scheme is fair and with the provisions in place to help those who might have difficulty accessing the system.

Localism

A review is currently ongoing looking at the impact of the Localism Act on our communities.

Health Review

Members discussed a potential review of the impact of the Health and Social Care Act, especially in relation the Councils' public health obligations. Members noted that this was a very wide and varied topic involving many specialist areas. As such Members felt it would be most useful to have a broader meeting involving public health experts and patient 'champions' where issues relating to the Districts could be discussed.

- 8.4 The Joint Scrutiny Annual Work Plan for 2014/15 is under development. Councillors are reminded that they can put forward any suggestions for inclusion in the Joint Scrutiny work plan at any time.

Babergh Scrutiny Committee

- 8.5 This Committee met only once during the year, in January, to scrutinise the Babergh draft General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budgets and the HRA business plan. After questions and discussion the Scrutiny Committee made the following recommendations to Strategy Committee:
- a) That in view of increasing financial risks and uncertainties, consideration be given to having a higher General Fund working balance/reserve and a clear policy in relation to this.
 - b) That the community grants budget be increased in 2014/15 to reflect the fact that this has not been increased over recent years.

8.6 Strategy Committee having considered recommendations a) and b) above made revised recommendations which were subsequently accepted by Council, as set out below:-

That in relation to the Babergh Scrutiny Committee's recommendations on the Budget proposals:

- (a) in view of the increasing financial risks and uncertainties, consideration be given to reserves policy as part of the review of the Medium Term Financial Strategy
- (b) the community grants budget be reviewed as part of the priority based budgeting exercise, which will review all our spend and how it contributes towards our priorities.

9 Appendices

None.

10 Background Documents

None.

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