

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

From: Head of Corporate Organisation	Report Number: R5
To: Babergh District Council	Date of Meeting: 19 May 2015

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND THE BABERGH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2014/15

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 Annual Report of the Joint Scrutiny Committee and the Babergh Scrutiny Committee for 2014/15 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 2014/15. 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 2014/15. 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 2015/16.

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

Joint Scrutiny Committee

8.1 The role of the Joint Scrutiny Committee (JSC) is defined as having the key purposes of:

- Scrutinising the work of external stakeholders and service providers.
- Holding 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:

Review of Community Rights

The review focussed on the Community Right to Bid and the listing of Assets of Community Value (ACVs). Three community groups were invited to discuss their diverse experiences of using the legislation. After the review, the view of the committee was that the listing of ACVs should be encouraged and the Councils should continue to provide what assistance they could to achieve this. Concerns were raised regarding the lack of the nominator’s right of appeal if a listing was rejected; the fact that a listing was not a material planning condition; and the use of permitted development rights to change the use of a listed asset. The JSC used the findings from the review to present written evidence to a Communities and Local Government Select Committee on Community Rights. The conclusions and recommendations of this Select Committee accorded with those of the JSC and proposed relevant amendments to the legislation.

Planning Enforcement

The review undertaken in September 2014 addressed issues regarding the public perception of planning enforcement activity. There appeared to be a discrepancy between public expectations and what action the Councils are able to take. Identified actions to address this were joint policies, better communication, more training and briefings. A satisfactory progress report on these actions came back to the March 2015 meeting.

Fuel Poverty

Both Councils are committed to reducing fuel poverty and are involved in a wide range of initiatives across a range of services within the Councils including such subjects as the installation of photovoltaic panels on council houses; initiatives to help private sector landlords improve the thermal efficiency of their properties to bulk oil buying schemes. A Member task and finish group was set up to derive recommendations from the wide ranging discussion which were then reported back to the February JSC meeting. The key recommendation was the Councils needed one lead officer to co-ordinate the work being done across the services. This and a further six recommendations were agreed and proposed to the March meetings of Executive and Strategy where the recommendations were noted and delegated to the relevant programme Steering Boards to be adopted as part of the work programme and a report made back to Executive / Strategy on progress.

Business rates and pooling

The Joint Scrutiny Committee looked at this topic because of its importance in future funding for the Councils. The review in November 2014 looked into how the new arrangements for business rates pooling were working. Many businesses are not taking advantage of all their (central government funded) rate reliefs and Members could help in building awareness of this. At the February 2015 meeting the Corporate Manager (Economic Development and Tourism) provided information on the current projects and activities being undertaken to promote business growth within the area.

Impact of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 on the Districts

The main focus of the October meeting was an initial exploration of the subject with representatives of the Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB), the Suffolk County Council Health Scrutiny Committee and the patient watchdog Healthwatch. Issues covered were wide ranging including mental health, young people and homelessness, helping people to stay living independently in their own homes, dementia and isolation. The Committee agreed some practical ways forward were to have wider Member involvement in promoting the work being undertaken stemming from the HWB; raising awareness of Healthwatch; investigating priority issues for our areas; and guidance for Members. Subsequently Healthwatch cards and leaflets were distributed to all members for them to pass to any residents with complaints / issues.

Impact of Welfare Reform on Rent Collection and Voids

Following on from previous reviews last year 2013/14 that looked at the Impact of Welfare Reform on Benefits and at Choice Based Lettings; a further review was undertaken in February 2015 to look at the impact of Welfare Reform on the ability of our tenants to meet their rent payments and whether void times had increased because larger properties were no longer in demand. A wider view of the impact on all our residents was incorporated by presentations from Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and the Disability Advice Bureau (DAB) who reported an increase in demand for their help.

Discussions ranged from the unintentional impact on the homeless; internal actions to increase rent collection levels; the Financial Inclusion project; and use of Discretionary Housing Payments. It was agreed that the issues raised may need to be investigated further and there might be the potential to set up a Task and Finish Group. Further discussion at the March Committee meeting agreed to put this on the work plan for 2015/16.

Review of Districts' Contribution to Health and Wellbeing

Following on from the earlier review of the Impact of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 on the Districts, the Committee considered some of the key transformation projects and programmes being undertaken internally and across Suffolk and the Councils' strategic approach to health and wellbeing. Members recognised the importance of this work to our communities and gave it their support. They also welcomed the information provided to assist them in advising their constituents on how to access support; complain or express concerns. This information should be passed to all Members via the induction process or Member briefings.

- 8.4 The Joint Scrutiny Annual Work Plan for 2015/16 is under development. Councillors are reminded that they can put forward any suggestions for inclusions in the Joint Scrutiny work plan at any time.

9. Babergh Scrutiny Committee

- 9.1 This Committee met only once during the year, in January, to scrutinise the Joint Medium Term Financial Strategy and the Babergh draft 2015/16 budget covering the General Fund, Council Housing and Capital Investment. After questions and discussion the Scrutiny Committee made the following additional recommendations to the Strategy Committee:

- a. That the proposed Community Grants (revenue) expenditure for 2015/16 be increased by 2.3%, being the RPI figure as at September 2014.
- b. That use of the £25m, referred to in paragraph 8.11 of Paper JAC44, to be subject to business cases that will be presented to Strategy Committee for onward recommendation to Full Council.

Recommendation a. was not accepted due to the fact that the Community Grant expenditure for 2014/15 was underspent. Recommendation b. was amended at Strategy to exclude the need for onward recommendation to Full Council but this was further amended back to its original form at Full Council.

10. Appendices

None.

11. Background Documents

None.

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