

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

From: Interim Head of Law and Governance	Report Number: S5
To: Council	Date of meetings: 26 April 2016

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND BABERGH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2015/16

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.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Joint Scrutiny Committee's Annual Report for 2015/16 be noted.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 The main financial implications have been the costs of officer time, normal allowances for Members and Member training costs that are included in the budget.

4. Legal Implications

- 4.1 None.

5. Risk Management

- 5.1 There are no inherent risks associated with this report. The Joint Scrutiny Committee takes account of the Council's key risks when determining its work plan and carrying out its reviews.

6. Consultations

- 6.1 Members of the Joint Scrutiny Committee have been consulted on an on-going basis on topics to be included in the future work plan.
- 6.2 The review of the Scrutiny function has involved consultations with a range of Members and officers including Scrutiny Members, Leaders and Senior Leadership Team.

7. Equality Analysis

- 7.1 There are no inherent equality implications within this report. Equality analysis considerations for individual topics will be included in reports to the Joint Scrutiny Committee as the year progresses.

8. Shared Service / Partnership Implications

8.1 There are no inherent shared service / partnership implications within this report. The Joint Scrutiny Committee provides a focus for scrutinising the work of external stakeholders, service providers and partners. Shared service / partnership implications are considered as part of individual scrutiny reviews.

9. Implications for the Joint Strategic Plan

9.1 This report itself does not link directly to the Joint Strategic Plan. Links to the delivery of the Joint Strategic Plan are considered in the selection of topics for review.

10. Key Information

10.1 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.

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

10.3 Initial training on the role and function of scrutiny was offered for all Members. This was also covered at the first JSC meeting in June 2015.

10.4 Work plan for 2015/16

At the June meeting the JSC took part in a workshop-style discussion to probe areas for the forward plan and consider priorities for these. Items for review were considered in light of the strategic plan priorities; where the Committee could add value; avoiding duplication with any other committee or working group and ensuring where any changes had been made that significant time had lapsed before a review was undertaken. These suggestions were worked up by the Chairs, Vice Chairs and officers into a forward plan which was then discussed with the Leaders before being referred back to JSC for agreement.

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

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Income Collection Performance

In February 2015 the JSC reviewed the impact of Welfare Reform on rent collection. At that time it was recognised the total sum of outstanding rent showed a significant increase especially at Mid Suffolk. An action plan had been put in place to improve the situation and an update was presented to the August 2015 JSC meeting to review the progress and effectiveness of the action plan. It was recognised that the position was improving with proposed and ongoing actions in place to further reduce arrears.

Corporate Compliments, Comments and Complaints

The annual corporate compliments, comments and complaints report is scrutinised by the JSC for the purpose of identifying any areas of concern which would benefit from scrutiny review. No such issues were identified this year.

Procurement and Community Value

This review was considered as part of the theme of looking at how well the Councils are supporting businesses in the Districts. The review focussed on how the current procurement policy enabled local businesses to obtain work and thus boost local economy. Revised Contract Standing Orders (adopted by full Council in October 2015) and a new Procurement Manual have been produced to provide clearer guidance on procurement.

Supporting Business Growth

Actions taken to support Business Growth were considered alongside the above review of Procurement. The work of economic development team and other Council officers in enabling the growth of the local economy through their support for businesses was examined. An external perspective of what work was valued by small businesses was sought from a representative of the Stowmarket and District Chamber of Commerce. In his view the main problems from a small business perspective were availability of skilled staff, poor broadband coverage and transport links. Any assistance the Councils could provide in these areas would be useful. The JSC wish to examine this topic further in the future focussing especially on Council assistance and support to micro and small businesses.

Homelessness

The Homelessness review was in response to Member concerns on how cases of homelessness are dealt with as well as to gain an understanding of the statutory duties. The reasons for differences in levels and reasons for homelessness were considered. Partnership working with other agencies was outlined to both avoid homelessness occurring and to deal with those unfortunate enough to become homeless.

Community Grants Project Review

The Council currently has a range of Grant Aid schemes to support activities within the community. These are accompanied with help, support and guidance to groups seeking external funding from other sources. The Community Grants Review Project is looking at how the Council can work with communities to maximise opportunities for external funding and to ensure that the Council's own grant scheme is delivered effectively, equitably, inclusively and is fully aligned to the Council's strategic priorities. At the request of Leaders and Portfolio Holders, the JSC have examined the project progress and provided critical friend input into the various phases of the Community Grants review. The JSC have endorsed the approach to assess overall external funding opportunities and develop capacity in the wider community to take advantage of this. The project is expected to be completed by the beginning of May 2016 and JSC will undertake a final appraisal subsequent to this.

Void Performance

Void time is the time between when a Council property becomes vacant and the time when a new tenant moves in. Keeping this time to a minimum is important in allowing new tenants requiring housing to be housed quickly and to provide rent income to the Council. JSC was requested to look at the area of void performance following the identification as this as an area of concern in performance reports presented to Executive and Strategy Committees. The JSC scrutinised the improvement programme which has been introduced and the progress on implementation.

Waste and Recycling

Members wished assess the effectiveness of the Council's current waste and recycling arrangements. A question and answer session was held to gain an understanding of the current arrangements and contractual commitments. This understanding will be used to identify whether there are any aspects which would benefit from a JSC review, to scope any proposed review and the timing of any potential review in order to add value.

Affordable Housing Provision

The need to deliver affordable housing and the pace of delivery emerged as key concerns to Members. JSC were briefed on the progress made with affordable housing delivery and looked at future plans to evaluate whether the Councils have the capacity and capability to continue to deliver the stretching affordable housing targets. The Committee were advised that fully funded plans are in place to strengthen the skills to meet the delivery objectives.

10.6 Work plan 2016/17

The detailed work plan for 2016/17 has not yet been established. A workshop of JSC members will be held in early May where existing proposed topics and further suggestions will be evaluated in terms of value added, strategic priorities and impact. The resulting draft work plan will then be discussed with Leaders and the Senior Leadership Team to avoid duplication with other activities and ensure availability of officer resource. The draft plan will then be presented to the full JSC.

Members are reminded that they can put forward any suggestions for inclusion in the JSC work plan at any time.

10.7 Review of Scrutiny Function

The Councils are undertaking a "Strengthening Governance" programme of work. . As part of this programme, a review of the scrutiny function is being undertaken. The approach to the scrutiny element of this programme of work is to: -

- Initially gather evidence and views from a range of internal and external "stakeholders"
- An analysis of the information and intelligence
- The development of options and a shared vision for scrutiny.

It is intended to get some external support from the Centre for Public Scrutiny for the developing options phase of the review. The Centre for Public Scrutiny is a charity whose principal focus is on scrutiny, accountability and good governance, both in the public sector and amongst those people and organisations who deliver publicly-funded services and they have wide experience in assisting Councils in developing the scrutiny function.

Scrutiny members attended an initial workshop to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current scrutiny function and suggest ways it could be improved. These have formed part of the evidence gathering. Further involvement is anticipated as part of the options development phase.

10.8 **Networking and Best Practice**

Members of the JSC have taken advantage of opportunities to attend meetings and events both within Suffolk and across the Eastern Region. These events have afforded the opportunity to share best practice and to explore areas and topics where joint scrutiny reviews with other Councils could be beneficial. A discussion was held to identify when and how the JSC should work with other scrutineers in future.

10.9 **Babergh Scrutiny Committee**

The Babergh Scrutiny Committee met only once during the year in January when they scrutinised the annual budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy. Although concerns were raised on the 5-year plan, the Scrutiny Committee then endorsed the recommendations but asked for the comments raised to be considered including the recognition of the inherent risks in the financial approach and the need to pursue further cost cutting options.

There have been no call-ins or Councillor calls for action in 2015/16.

11. **Appendices**

None.

12. **Background Documents**

None.

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