

MINUTES OF THE JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD IN THE
COUNCIL CHAMBER COUNCIL OFFICES CORKS LANE HADLEIGH ON
WEDNESDAY 4 DECEMBER 2013 AT 5.30 P.M.

PRESENT:

BABERGH

MID SUFFOLK

Mrs J Antill (Chairman)
Mr B D Hurren
Mr F R Lawrenson
Mr M Newman
Mr D L Wood

Mr D M Burn
Mrs R J Eburne (Chairman)
Mr J E Matthissen
Mr D J Osborne
Mr M R Redbond
Mrs J C Storey
Mr C M W Tilbury

The following Members were unable to be present:

BABERGH

MID SUFFOLK

Mr J A B Long
Mrs A M Norman
Mr J M Owen

Mrs E B Gibson-Harries
Mrs S Powell

1 ADDITIONAL ITEM OF BUSINESS

The Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 provides that an item of business may not be considered by a Committee unless it is included on an Agenda. The Act does, however, make provision for an exception to this general rule to be made where by reason of special circumstances, the Chairman of the meeting is of the opinion that the item should be considered at the meeting as a matter of urgency.

The Chairman advised that a situation had arisen where it had become necessary for the Committee to consider an item not included on the Agenda (Planning Policy Update) and that she was satisfied that there were good reasons for dealing with this at this meeting.

2 SUBSTITUTES

Mr D M Burn was in attendance as a substitute for Mrs E B Gibson-Harries.

3 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None declared.

4 MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 2 October 2013 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

5 PETITIONS

None received.

6 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

None received.

7 IMPACT OF WELFARE CHANGES

Evelyn Crossland, the Head of Shared Revenues Partnership (SRP) introduced [Paper JSC/18/13](#) relating to the Welfare Reform Bill changes and the impact on the SRP, Councils and residents.

Members were asked to note the current position, including the support provided through collaborative working, based on the first six months' experience of the new arrangements. Carol Eagles, Mid Suffolk Bureau Manager, was present at the meeting to explain the evidence presented by local Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABs) – Appendix B to Paper JSC/18/13 refers – and the link between the CAB and the SNAP organisation and with CARA (Central Access Referrals Agency) – Appendix C.

In response to questions from Members, the Head of SRP referred to the roles of the various agencies and some of the ways in which help and advice could be given to those experiencing difficulties in meeting their bills, which included two Financial Inclusion Officers (temporary posts being funded from the HRA) and the Tenants Support Officer. She also explained the way in which the discretionary Hardship Fund operates.

Ms Eagles informed Members of the extent to which advice could be accessed via the Stowmarket CAB for residents other than those in its immediate catchment area, in view of the large volume of enquiries currently being dealt with by the Ipswich Bureau.

The Head of Corporate Resources explained the basis on which the costs of the SRP had been set up, as reflected in the legal agreement between the three Local Authorities in the SRP, and which also determined the way in which savings are shared. Members were advised that the basis of the allocation would not form part of any annual review, but asked for this aspect to be followed up. Officers also responded to questions about various other matters raised by Members including the following:-

- Introduction of Universal Credit – pilot scheme and country-wide application
- Data protection issues regarding literacy skills of benefit claimants
- Customer Services data on numbers of enquiries – further information to be provided, and included in future Work/Forward plans as appropriate
- Need to maintain a substantial level of discretionary funding (particularly while there is a shortfall of suitable properties for 'downsizing') – suitable opportunities could be taken to lobby the relevant Government department.

Members noted that overall, due to cross service support and other factors, the first six months of operation had not seen the level of difficulty which might have been anticipated. They were aware however that the effect of winter weather conditions on heating bills, combined with the continuing lack of alternative accommodation for those families in properties with overprovision of bedroom space was expected to impact the second half of the year.

RESOLVED

That the position on the first six months experience of the welfare reforms, as detailed in Paper JSC/18/13 be noted as follows:

Management information is now being collated and trends monitored. The next six months will provide the SRP with intelligence on how the winter with the associated heating costs and Christmas will impact on the ability of our residents to continue to pay their Council Tax and rent. The collaborative working across teams and the regular communication to our residents, key stake holders, staff and Councillors have helped to support our residents.

8 CORPORATE COMPLIMENTS, COMMENTS AND COMPLAINTS

The Head of Corporate Resources presented Paper [JSC/19/13](#) updating Members on the figures for Quarter 2.

During the course of the discussion, Members asked for further information to be provided on various of the elements referred to in the report, including the following:-

- number of complainants, as well as numbers of complaints – *information will be included in future reports*
- an indication of the relative gravity of complaints – *Head of Corporate Resources to circulate*
- alignment with the Risk Register – *Heads of Service to consider as part of reviewing the complaints in their area*
- District of which the complainant is a resident – *will be included in future Annual Reports*
- level of detail in Annual Reports – *Heads of Service receive and monitor detailed reports on a quarterly basis, exception reporting is made to Members*

RESOLVED

That the update on Compliments, Comments and Complaints as summarised in Appendix A to Paper JSC/19/13, together with the actions identified above, be noted.

9 WORK PLAN

The Head of Corporate Organisation gave a verbal update on [Paper JSC/20/13](#) relating to items that had been identified on the Corporate Work Plan.

The current versions of the Executive Committee Forward Plan and the Strategy Committee Work Plan were appended for Members' information. The Head of Corporate Organisation also gave an update on the progress of the Transformation Enquiry Groups and a brief explanation of the work undertaken to date.

RESOLVED

That the contents of Paper JSC/20/13 be noted.

10 PLANNING POLICY UPDATE

The Head of Economy made an oral presentation to the Committee giving a full overview of the current situation regarding the status and development of planning policy in the two Councils.

He summarised what is currently in place from a planning policy perspective for each District and referred to the key drivers (LEP, housing policy, NPPF, Suffolk growth strategy). He outlined the future approach (the 'one service vision') including joint new planning policies for the 2 Districts and explained the role of the TEGs in the policy development environment (linking achievement of the strategic priorities to the development of the planning policy).

The key issue relates to the need to develop a planning policy framework which supports the delivery of the strategic priorities, particularly around the delivery of the Suffolk growth strategy and the focus on housing supply.

Some key points from the Member discussion:-

- Members felt that they are not as engaged as they had been in the past in the development of planning policy.
- Concerns were expressed that there are currently no specific / detailed policies relating to alternative (renewable) energy developments, and that Suffolk will become the power station of the UK.
- Concerns that the balance of environmental protection for specific areas of the Districts (eg. Babergh AONB) is not currently addressed through planning policy framework.
- Some confusion concerning the development process for the local development plans and the relationship with community and neighbourhood plans.
- Concern that there is not a mechanism in place or a forum to enable all Members to contribute directly to the development of the planning policy framework.

- Concern that the lack of supplementary planning guidance could impact on the ability of the Councils to successfully defend challenge from the government planning inspectorate.
- Risk of missing out on alternative energy opportunities if the right policies are not in place, eg. PV panel policy etc.
- Suggestion that a joint meeting for all Members of both Councils is held to discuss a number of topics including planning policy.

RECOMMENDED TO EXECUTIVE AND STRATEGY COMMITTEES

That a planning policy group be 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 two Councils.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 7.50 p.m.

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Chairman