

MINUTES OF THE JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD AT THE
COUNCIL OFFICES, MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL, NEEDHAM MARKET
ON WEDNESDAY 11 FEBRUARY 2015 AT 5.30 PM

PRESENT:

BABERGH

MID SUFFOLK

Peter Burgoyne
Bryn Hurren
Peter Jones
Mark Newman
Jack Norman
Nick Ridley
David Wood

Rachel Eburne (Chairman)
Elizabeth Gibson-Harries
John Matthissen
Derek Osborne
Samantha Powell
Martin Redbond

Also Present: Carol Eagles (Citizens Advice Bureau), Pat Ramsay (Disabled Advice Bureau), David Johnson (Shared Revenues Partnership), Anne Bennett (Corporate Manager – Housing Revenue Account), Gavin Fisk (Corporate Manager – Tenant Services), Dave Benham (Corporate Manager – Economic Development and Tourism)

1 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTIONS

An apology for absence was received from Councillors Jane Storey and Charles Tilbury. Councillors Peter Jones and Nick Ridley were substituting for Councillors James Long and Jenny Antill respectively.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None declared.

3 MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 26 November 2014 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

4 PETITIONS

None received.

5 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

None received.

6 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

None received.

7 JOINT SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM ON RENT COLLECTION AND VOIDS

The report set out a review of the impact of welfare reform on rent collection and voids and covered the following:

- Welfare Reform – Background and detailed timetable of changes, SRP Statistics
- Welfare Reform and the impact on rent collection
- Welfare Reform and the impact on voids.

Members heard from District Council and Shared Revenue Partnership officers on the specific issues around rent collection and also from visiting speakers from the Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and the Ipswich Disabled Advice Bureau (DAB).

Carol Eagles (CAB) said that clients faced difficulty for various reasons, including: a complex system; letters that were very complicated and difficult to understand; sanctions (claims being closed if they do not respond in time); and an inability to manage money. Work was being carried out with the Council's Financial Inclusion Officer and four presentations had been held specifically for tenants to ensure they were claiming everything they were entitled to. CAB staff were receiving ongoing training in readiness for the introduction of Universal Credit to this area, although the date for this was as yet unknown, particularly as there had been changes to the system since training had first been carried out in July 2014.

Pat Ramsay (DAB) said that the Ipswich DAB also covered parts of Mid Suffolk and Babergh and had outreach centres one day a week in Brantham and Hadleigh. In April 2014 a Debt and Money Management Service had been set up to help clients. A particular difficulty was the introduction of an on-line system requiring claimants to log in once a month to trigger payments, when many did not have access to a computer and many others could not understand the system. Courses were being held to assist clients and one to one help was also available. A particular problem was that claimants with mental health issues often did not open their post or answer their phone so were unaware of problems until at a late stage. For people with disabilities, downsizing to a smaller property to avoid payment of 'bedroom tax' was an issue as this often meant moving to a different location and the loss of a care network. The DAB took on 3,000 cases per year, many of which required help with filling in forms as they did not have the literacy skills to do so. The DAB had been fortunate in getting a lottery grant in 2014 which had been used to fund a Universal Credit lead officer.

In response to questions raised Members were advised:

- Rent collection was improving
- While voids had not been affected unintended consequences had resulted with difficulties in down-sizing due to the lack of one and two bedroom homes and homeless households getting less priority
- Tenants wishing to downsize had to register on Gateway to Homechoice to show their intention to do so if they wished to claim a discretionary housing payment. Tenancy Support Officers could assist them to do this and also support them through a move

- Tenants building up arrears were identified and offered help with the necessary forms to claim discretionary housing payment
- Recent information showed there would be a reduction in the Government budget of £25,000 for Babergh and £21,000 for Mid Suffolk in relation to Discretionary Housing Payments
- The same help was offered to tenants in private sector housing
- There had been a sharp increase in the number of food parcels issued in Stowmarket
- Statistics within the report related to Mid Suffolk and Babergh Districts
- Officers had prioritised the actions within the Financial Inclusion Project Action Plan resulting in six priorities which Officers wished to achieve in the coming year
- CAB advisers were training clients into monthly budgeting in preparation for Universal Credit being introduced
- Housing Officers were focusing on tenant training for new tenants of which a fundamental part would be around money management
- No credit checks were undertaken before letting properties although affordability checks were carried out using the information available

It was agreed that Members might wish to investigate the issues raised further, potentially by setting up a Task and Finish Group. It was agreed to investigate this further at the 25 March meeting.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the information provided in the report on the impact of welfare reform on rent collection and voids be noted**
- 2. That the issues raised be investigated further at the 25 March Joint Scrutiny Committee meeting, together with the potential of setting up a Task and Finish Group**

8 ROLE OF THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TEAM IN ACHIEVING BUSINESS RATES GROWTH IN THE DISTRICTS

The Corporate Manager – Economic Development and Tourism gave a verbal report on the work of the Economic Development Team to promote business rates growth.

The delivery of Business Rates was one measure that must be taken in context with a holistic approach. Growth would come from both existing and new businesses coming to the area but in order to support and sustain growth it was necessary to understand business needs, aspirations and issues. For example, to support existing businesses the Team could provide initial advice and guidance, broker relationships with statutory services, project manage the development, signpost support measures and help with bids for funding.

Businesses needed space to grow and land availability was an issue. While there was no shortage of land much of it was of little or no use due to high cost, lack of services, contamination or lack of infrastructure which meant its value was below its cost to the developer. There were approximately 20 key sites across the two districts that could generate approximately £20m and unlocking the potential of these sites was critical to achieving the Councils' growth targets.

The Team was project managing a number of these sites and this was accelerating the programme. Usually a mix of employment and residential was needed to pay for the infrastructure and to make employment viable. The Strategic Site Project was about understanding the issues and unblocking the potential, the key was in understanding the risks and increasing deliverables. This would increase the Council's ability to apply for external funding and accelerate development.

This work required a huge investment in time and the toll on the service was that other work was not being done. In order to alleviate this problem a bid had been made for two additional Economic Development Officers and this had been approved. A bid had also been made to the Transformation Fund for money to support research as it was essential to have detailed information and data relating to the site.

In response to Members' questions he confirmed that much support was also given to small businesses; 60% of businesses were in rural areas and 90% employed less than ten people.

There was concern that following recent planning changes farm buildings were more likely to be converted to residential rather than employment use reducing the opportunity for those wishing to set up a small business of finding relatively cheap accommodation.

It was noted that vacant business premises could be listed on the 'Invest in Suffolk' website, which was run by Suffolk County Council in collaboration with the District/Borough Councils.

9 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FUEL POVERTY TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The report presented the Fuel Poverty Task and Finish Group's proposed recommendations following the Joint Scrutiny Committee Review on Fuel Poverty at the meeting on 23 July 2014.

The key concern of the Group was that although from the outset it had been established that a single lead officer to coordinate the Councils' approach to fuel poverty was required, no such officer had yet been appointed.

It was unanimously agreed to propose all the recommendations in the report to Executive and Scrutiny Committees.

RESOLVED

Recommended to Executive and Strategy Committees

That:-

- 1. A single lead officer be assigned the responsibility for co-ordinating the Councils' approach to the cross cutting issues of fuel poverty**
- 2. The Councils work actively with partners such as the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership and the Health and Wellbeing Board on developing and promoting fuel poverty initiatives**

3. **The Councils ensure our tenants are able to make effective use of their heating systems by providing adequate briefing and support especially when new systems and technology are installed**
4. **An approach to lobbying and working with Housing Associations within our Districts is determined to ensure that cost effective heating systems are installed in their new properties and the replacement of inefficient heating systems in their existing properties**
5. **The Councils take a proactive approach to seeking out grants and the use of new technologies to enable the most cost effective approach to fuel efficiency to be implemented**
6. **The Councils derive an approach to working with private landlords to improve awareness of the potential benefits to them of effectively heated properties, grants and funding available, and the future statutory requirements**
7. **The Councils explore the potential for working with developers and Housing Associations to improve the energy efficiency of new housing by offering loans to allow additional efficiency measures to be installed at the time of construction. This could be a potential income stream to the Councils and would alleviate future fuel poverty**

10 **JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PLAN FOR 2014/15**

The Annual Work Plan, Report [JSC/03/15](#) was submitted to Members for approval.

RESOLVED

That the Joint Scrutiny Work Plan for 2014/15 be approved

The business of the meeting was concluded at 7.20 p.m.

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Chairman