

MINUTES OF THE JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD AT THE
COUNCIL CHAMBER, COUNCIL OFFICES, CORKS LANE, HADLEIGH ON
WEDNESDAY 19 AUGUST 2015 AT 5.30 PM

PRESENT:

BABERGH

MID SUFFOLK

Peter Burgoyne (Chairman)
Barry Gasper
Kathryn Grandon
Bryn Hurren
Margaret Maybury
Mark Newman
Fenella Swan

David Card
Jessica Flemming
Glen Horn
John Matthissen
Wendy Marchant
Suzie Morley
Dave Muller

10 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillors Jessica Flemming, John Matthissen, Margaret Maybury and Glen Horn were substituting for Councillors James Caston, Rachel Eburne, Harriet Steer and Jill Wilshaw respectively. Apologies for absence were received from Councillors John Levantis and John Nunn.

11 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None declared.

12 MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the meeting held on [17 June 2015](#) be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Note: queries raised by Members regarding Forward Plan items were dealt with under Minute No 19 below.

13 PETITIONS

None received.

14 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

None received.

15 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

None received.

16 REVIEW OF CURRENT HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) INCOME COLLECTION PERFORMANCE

Gavin Fisk, Corporate Manager – Tenant Services, presented Paper [JSC/11/15](#) on the progress being made in this service area to improve collection rates and align the two Councils' procedures. He referred to the effect of welfare reforms on performance, and highlighted some of the challenges which the service had faced, including direct debit failures which had impacted on the effectiveness of arrears management. However, recent bench marking exercises showed an improving position generally.

The Corporate Manager then answered questions from Members on various related matters, including:-

- the reaction of tenants to the direct debit failures – Members were informed that staff had reassured tenants regarding 'no fault arrears' and provided options for them to make up their payments – these measures were generally well received with very few complaints. The Corporate Manager was happy to look at individual cases outside the meeting.
- staffing levels – he expanded on the reasons referred to in paragraph 8.5 of the report.
- tenants running a business from home – tenant services staff review this area in relation to the relevant tenancy conditions, and provide guidance and training on this type of operation, which is encouraged by Government.
- back office / front office – following the end of the CSD contract, the Councils' previously differing practices are being aligned.
- the introduction of Universal Credit – a bid has been made to the Transformation Fund to fund a separate post to help those affected to understand and deal with the new arrangements. Training / briefing will be provided for staff and Members, and information will be supplied to Members on the implementation of UC, which is currently the subject of regular meetings with DWP and SRP officers.
- standard letters not covering complex problems such as the direct debit failures – staff try to deal with this in other ways, which are more resource-intensive
- write-offs / bad debts – there is a strict process which is followed, and bad debt provision is included in the HRA accounts
- collection rates – these are monitored and performance is reported.

RESOLVED

That the progress made by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Income Collection Team to improve current collection levels, as set out in Paper JSC/11/15 and reported at the meeting, be noted.

17 ICT SCRUTINY REVIEW

The Corporate Manager – ICT and Information Management gave an oral update on the position, and the measures which had to be taken following the end of the CSD contract in May 2014.

He outlined the work needed to update the Babergh systems and to get both sites using the same back office applications, with improvements including Skype. Considerable progress had been made, but there was still a lot to do to meet the Councils' strategy for digitalisation, providing a single intranet / internet and having one planning system. Some concerns were expressed by Members regarding the time taken to get to the current position, but they noted the constraints imposed on the process as a result of Babergh's ICT not being as advanced as that of Mid Suffolk, and including the lengthy procurement process for the new planning system together with the negotiation of the collaborative agreement with Suffolk County Council to provide ICT support for both Councils.

RESOLVED

That the update be noted.

18 CORPORATE COMPLIMENTS, COMMENTS AND COMPLAINTS ANNUAL REPORT

The Corporate Manager – Customer Services presented Paper [JSC/12/15](#) on the Corporate activity in this area in 2014/15, including information relating to Ombudsman complaints.

He referred to the Data Protection position which meant that complainants' details could not be shared with third parties without the complainants doing so. He explained how lessons learnt from reviewing the information received from customers can help to develop or improve services. There had been a cultural change which was enabling staff to see this as a positive learning curve.

In response to a query about planning-related information, the Corporate Manager will send the relevant data separately outside the meeting. He also responded to Members' questions on other aspects, including:-

- The ratio of the number of complainants compared to the number of complaints
- The various means by which complaints etc can be submitted
- The point at which a complaint has to be formally recorded as such – this usually depends on whether an easy resolution is achievable.

RESOLVED

That the Corporate activity for the year – 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015 contained in Paper JSC/12/15 and its Appendices be noted.

19 FORWARD PLAN

Members expressed concern that the Forward Plan submitted as Paper [JSC/13/15](#) did not include all of the items identified in Minute No 9 – 17 June 2015 under ‘Topics put forward for consideration.’

It was agreed that the topics listed, together with Community Grants, would be the subject of the forthcoming discussions between the Joint Chairs and the Leaders on the scrutiny role and its operation, including the need to complement, and not duplicate, the monitoring and development work of the Strategy Committee and the relevant Programme Steering Boards.

RESOLVED

That the content of Paper JSC/13/15 together with the information reported to the meeting as set out above be noted.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 7.40 p.m.

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Chairman