



Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2023/24

An annual review of the work undertaken by Mid Suffolk District Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2023/24

Foreword

By the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chair

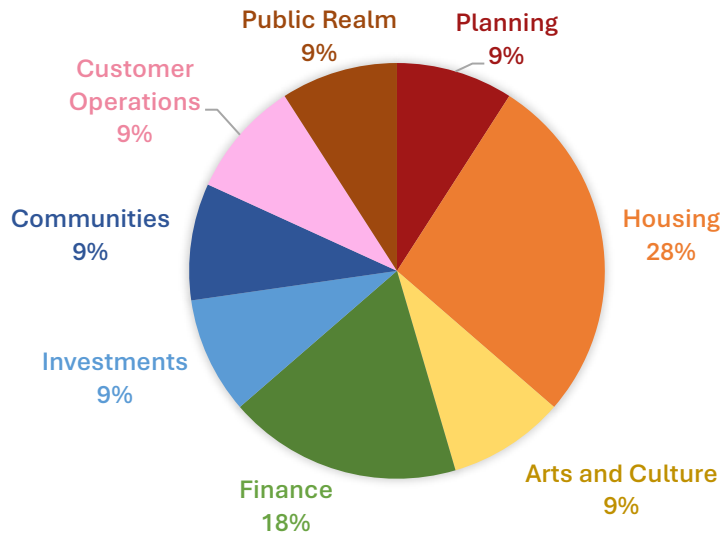
As Chair of the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee, I am pleased to present our annual report to Full Council. The report highlights our work over the municipal year between May 2023 to May 2024. This annual report will feature the subjects we have brought to the Committee, including details on what we have achieved, where we are going, and how that work enhances the governance and accountability within Mid Suffolk District Council.

Over this year, we have looked at 11 different sizeable items including planning enforcement, the Culture, Visitor, and Heritage Economy Strategy, homelessness, and sewage, as well as our cyclic scrutiny of the General Fund and the CIFCO company. This has resulted in 60 recommendations of which 33 have been marked as completed on our action tracker with 17 marked as ongoing. It is worth noting at this point that this includes business conducted in the April and May meetings, and it would not be expected to be completed at the point of writing.

The challenge we face is that our recommendations are dealt with by those who have been assigned them. At the point of writing, we only have four items that have been given fully 'completed' status. These items are the General Fund and HRAs, the cost of living, CIFCO, and the review of sewage discharges. It might be that these certain recommendations need to be given 'rejected' status so they can be officially concluded if they will not be considered further. We are working hard as a committee to clear the Action Tracker and encourage officers to be frank about what is possible, helping us to construct recommendations that will deliver tangible results.

We have had good engagement at our meetings with Cabinet Members often present for items under their remit, as well as officers bringing plenty of resources. We have had a range of different experts present to take us through the more complicated areas. The quality of the papers presented to Members and the information within these has been very good and invaluable to get the best out of the scrutiny process.

AREAS OF INVESTIGATION



We are continually working to improve the process. In the next year, our main goal is to increase public and external interactions with the Committee by trying to get more people interested in what we consider and inviting our residents to make comment on the quality of services they receive. We want to help the Council and Cabinet make decisions based on the best quality feedback – to do this, we would like to review more items from outside of our standard cyclic scrutiny expectations, and we have spent time looking at the Call-in process with Alicia as the Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny refreshing paperwork and procedure.

I would like to thank Cllr Keith Scarff, the Vice Chair of the Committee, Cllr Carter, Cllr Pearson, Cllr Piper, and Cllr Row who have worked incredibly hard in this year, working together to deliver effective scrutiny and who have all made great and invaluable contributions. My thanks also go to Cllr Baker, Cllr Patchett, Cllr Pratt, Cllr Marriott, Cllr Warboys, Cllr Matthissen and Cllr Overett for their time on the committee when substituting.

In closing, I am confident that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will continue to play a significant role in ensuring the transparency and accountability of the Council and will continue to be a positive addition to our processes and delivery. I look forward to the year ahead.

James Caston – Chair of Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Cllr James Caston
Chair

Bramford



Cllr Keith Scarff
Vice-Chair

Combs Ford



Cllr Terence Carter

Chilton



Cllr Janet Pearson

Haughley, Stowupland,
and Wetherden



Cllr Ross Piper

Needham Market



Cllr Miles Row

Combs Ford



Introduction

In May 2017, Mid Suffolk District Council formerly adopted a Leader/Cabinet model of governance. As per the Local Government Act (2000), all Councils that operate under this model are required to have at least one Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee plays a vital part in Mid Suffolk's democratic decision-making processes. Whilst the Committee cannot make any of its own decisions, it can exercise influence and direction over decisions, both before and after they are implemented, to ensure that the Council is delivering its services efficiently and effectively. This is done by:

- Conducting pre-decision scrutiny on key issues and making recommendations to the Cabinet and officers for improvement;
- Reviewing the Council's budgets annually and the delivery of strategic policies;
- Monitoring the performance of different services and strategies

The Committee consists of six members (as listed on Page 4) who can be any Member of the Council except for those who are part of the Cabinet. No member of the Committee is allowed to scrutinise a decision where they have been a key part of the decision-making process (i.e. an ex-Cabinet Member). It is crucial that Overview and Scrutiny is independent of the Cabinet in order to maintain its ability to hold the Council's main decision-makers to account.

In 2022, members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet Members agreed to a new "Cabinet and Scrutiny Protocol". The purpose of the protocol is to promote a culture of accountability, openness, and transparency within Mid Suffolk District Council and sets out how both groups will work together to deliver effective and outcome-focussed scrutiny. Full details of the protocol can be found [here](#).

Due to working in partnership, the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee often combines with the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee to undertake joint meetings where there are items for consideration that affect both Councils to equal measure. Each Council is still able to convene an independent meeting to scrutinise specific items (e.g. the budgets) where appropriate.

A full terms of reference for Mid Suffolk's Overview and Scrutiny Committee can be found in Part 3: Rules of Procedures in the Constitution as linked [here](#).

Scrutiny in Numbers

During 2023/24 the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee, often in partnership with the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Committee, was responsible for the following:



Committee Meetings



Reports



Recommendations



Recommendations to
Cabinet/Council



YouTube Views

All meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee are open to public attendance and streamed to YouTube. Recordings of the Committees held in 2023/24 can be found [here](#).

Organisation of the Work Plan

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee sets out a work plan at the beginning of the year that provides Members with key areas to focus on and review. These workplans are put together through considering:

- The Councils' Plan
- The Forthcoming Decisions List
- Statutory Items
- Requests from Councillors
- Requests from the Public
- Call-ins of Cabinet decisions

The Work Plans are reviewed at monthly meetings between the Chairs, Vice Chairs and Officers which are then agreed monthly by the Committee.

Any Member can propose possible items for consideration for the Work Plan. Each item proposed is evaluated to determine its relevance and purpose by the Chairs. If added to the Work Plans, the Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny will work with Officers to ensure that the appropriate information is presented to the Committee for review.

Other items included on the Work Plans are Information Bulletins, brief updates on specific topics and areas of interest, or fact-finding pieces of work for items the Committee may wish to scrutinise in the future.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is required to consider specific statutory items on an annual basis, such as the Budgets and the Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership, and these must be factored into the Work Plans appropriately.

Work Plan Workshop – June 2023

In June, members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were invited to a workshop with the purpose of identifying topics for review in 2023/24.

Members were encouraged to pick out topics from all areas of the Corporate Plan for a balanced approach. The topics that received the most support from Members at the workshop were considered for addition on the 2023/24 Work Plan.

2023/24 Work Plan

TOPIC	LEAD OFFICER	CABINET MEMBER
24 JULY 2023		
Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership	Director – Sustainable Communities	Cabinet Members for People and Place
21 AUGUST 2023		
CIFCO Performance Report and Business Plan 2022/23	Director – Property, Development and Regeneration	Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments
Cost of Living: Review of 6 Month Plan and Beyond	Corporate Manager – Customer Experience	Cabinet Members for People and Place
18 SEPTEMBER 2023		
Review on Current Levels of Untreated Sewage Discharges to Waters in Babergh and Mid Suffolk	Director – Operations and Climate Change	Cabinet Member for Environment
23 OCTOBER 2023		
Annual Review of the Joint Homes and Housing Strategy	Director - Housing	Cabinet Member for Housing
20 NOVEMBER 2023		
Draft General Fund (GF) and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) 2024/25 Assumptions	Director – Finance and Procurement	Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments
Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2024	Director - Housing	Cabinet Member for Housing
22 JANUARY 2024		
General Fund (GF) and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) 2024/25	Director – Finance and Procurement	Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments

TOPIC	LEAD OFFICER	CABINET MEMBER
14 MARCH 2024		
Review of the Implementation of the Culture, Heritage, and Visitor Economy Strategy	Director – Economic Growth	Cabinet Member for Economic Growth
Information Bulletin: A review into the Use of Customer Services by Residents	Director – Corporate Services	Cabinet Member for Customers, Digital Transformation, and Improvement
22 APRIL 2024		
An Overview of Planning Enforcement and their Functions	Director – Planning and Building Control	Cabinet Member for Planning
13 MAY 2024		
CIFCO Performance Report (2023/24) and Business Plan (2024/25)	Director – Property, Development, and Regeneration	Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments
Is the Councils' Social Housing Stock "Inspection Ready"?	Director - Housing	Cabinet Member for Housing

The 2023/24 Work Plans have included topics from most key strategic areas of the Plan, focussing on different aspects of the Council's deliverables. The topics highlighted in bold signify items that were identified and scoped at the Work Plan session in July 2023.

At each Committee meeting, the Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee are often requested to make recommendations based on the items before them. All recommendations have the purpose of adding value to the organisation and providing benefits to our residents by improving and strengthening our strategies and outputs.



Economy

CAPITAL INVESTMENT FUND COMPANY (CIFCO CAPITAL LTD) PERFORMANCE REPORT (2022/23) AND BUSINESS PLAN (2023/24)

The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee are committed to reviewing the CIFCO performance report and upcoming business plan on an annual basis, as decided by Full Council. The Committee's purpose is to oversee these reports, which include details on the Company's KPIs, the current investment portfolio, and the five-year cashflow forecast, ahead of their consideration by Council.

The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed this item twice during this municipal year. On 21st of August the Committee considered the item for the first time, receiving a presentation from the leadership teams at CIFCO and JLL.

The following Cabinet Members and officers were in attendance:

- Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments
- Director for Property, Development, and Regeneration
- Director for Finance and Procurement
- Corporate Manager for the Councils Companies and Development

Members asked questions on issues including:

- The Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) Improvement Plan
- Short-term borrowing debt
- The state of the investment portfolio
- Deferred debt repayments and arrears
- Running costs to the Council

The following recommendation was made:

- 1.1. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the CIFCO Business Trading and Performance Report and asks that the minutes of the meeting be taken into account when CIFCO is next considered at Full Council.

CAPITAL INVESTMENT FUND COMPANY (CIFCO CAPITAL LTD) PERFORMANCE REPORT (2023/24) AND BUSINESS PLAN (2024/25)

The Committee considered CIFCO again on the 13th of May. Members of the Committee were able to question the leadership team at CIFCO and the Director of Property, Development, and Regeneration on the growth made to the portfolio since it was last before the scrutiny committee, as well as the performance of the financial assets acquired.

The following Cabinet Members and officers were in attendance:

- Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments
- Director for Property, Development, and Regeneration
- Director for Finance and Procurement
- Corporate Manager for the Councils Companies and Development

Members asked questions on issues including:

- The Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) loan
- Tenant solvency and mitigation of rent arrears
- A review of the KPIs and targets
- Property expiries due for 2025 – 2027
- Net return to the Councils

The following recommendations were made:

- 1.1. That the Committee notes the CIFCO Performance Report (2023/24) and the Business Plan (2024/25) ahead of its consideration at Full Council.
- 1.2. That Officers explore means of providing more details about redacted information without disclosing identifying features.
- 1.3. That more details are provided in the report to Council on the proposed strategy to reach the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) target and requests that localised benchmarking is introduced to measure the effects of EPC ratings.
- 1.4. That future reports provide financial information about each property, including comparative data and forecasting.
- 1.5. That a risk management key is provided within future reports to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Full Council.
- 1.6. That further training is provided for all Members on CIFCO and the Councils' Companies.
- 1.7. That a glossary of key terms is provided within future reports to Overview and Scrutiny.

DRAFT GENERAL FUND (GF) 2024/25 ASSUMPTIONS

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee have oversight of the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account at multiple points during the annual budget setting process. The Committee has the opportunity to review the budget assumptions in November ahead of the final figures being presented to the Committee, and then Cabinet and Council, in the new year. This allows the Committee to provide a steer for areas within the budgets they would like to see further explored and forecasted, as well as request for additional information to be made available for their final review.

Having oversight of the assumptions was agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2022 after it was deemed best practice when reviewing the budgets. Bringing Overview and Scrutiny on board earlier on in the process allows Members to give more informed direction and critical analysis when the final figures are presented to them.

The following Cabinet Members and officers were in attendance:

- Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments
- Chief Executive
- Director for Finance and Procurement

Members asked questions on issues including:

- The Pay Award assumption
- The assumed 0% increase in council tax
- Proposed increase in planning fees
- Potential reductions in rent at Endeavour House
- Rates to the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Group

The following recommendations were made:

- 1.1. That the draft budget assumptions as set out in the report for the 2024/25 General Fund budget be noted.

GENERAL FUND (GF) AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) 2024/25

In January, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a presentation on the up-to-date budget finances, following on from the first assumptions being discussed. This included information on the general fund gap and the deficit for the HRA, the current cost pressures and savings on the Council, the increased net cost of service, and the proposed increase in council housing and garage rents.

The following Cabinet Members and officers were in attendance:

- Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments
- Director for Housing
- Head of Finance, Commissioning, and Procurement
- Senior Finance Business Partner
- Finance Business Partner

Members asked questions on issues including:

- Business rates
- Income and interest receivable from CIFCO
- Plans for reaching a balanced budget
- Decrease in neighbourhood planning income
- Increased social and affordable housing rents

The following recommendations were made:

- 1.1. That the draft revenue budgets set out in the report for the 2024/25 General Fund and Housing Revenue Account budgets be noted.
- 1.2. That further information on interest receivable and capital expenditure be included in future reports to provide a breakdown of interest for all projects.
- 1.3. That tables detailing the breakdown of information on aspects such as the increase in dwelling rents and service charging be included in future reports.
- 1.4. That the lobbying of central government on the 1 year funding settlement being increased be continued.
- 1.5. That information on relevant projects be placed together and presented in a collective summary in future reports for accessibility purposes.
- 1.6. That officers explore incorporating accessibility improvements into the reports, including bridge charting, graphics, and a glossary, to provide Members with further clarity on the information provided.

REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CULTURE, HERITAGE, AND VISITOR ECONOMY STRATEGY

On 14th March, the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the ways in which the newly adopted Culture, Heritage, and Visitor Economy Strategy had been implemented and delivered. This review was requested by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2023 via recommendation after Councillors first considered the development of the strategy and what its delivery plan would constitute.

The following Cabinet Members and officers were in attendance:

- Cabinet Member for Economic Growth
- Director for Economic Growth and Climate Change
- Head of Economy and Business
- Arts and Culture Lead Officer

Members asked questions on issues including:

- Consultation and collaboration with sustainable and active travel
- Engagement with schools and young people
- Accessibility arrangements
- Integration of grassroots and community groups
- Protection from overdevelopment

The following recommendations were made:

- 1.1. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the report and commends the Officers for the work undertaken in delivering the Strategy.
- 1.2. That Officers take on board the comments made by the Committee, particularly regarding accessibility, marketing, and public consultation, and incorporate these into the future delivery of the Strategy.
- 1.3. That the Cultural Working Group, in conjunction with the Community Grants Review, are requested to explore expanding the scope of locality grants to incorporate funding support for young people looking to engage with the arts.
- 1.4. That Officers explore various methods of further communicating the Strategy and its aims to a wider audience.
- 1.5. That the Cabinet Member for Planning be asked to note the committee's concerns towards the potential for overdevelopment of the districts and that the SPD for Heritage and Culture be examined to better protect the tourism and culture offer that is currently available.

Value Added

CIFCO

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has retained its role in scrutinising CIFCO, its performance, and its upcoming business plan on an annual basis. This remains a crucial step in ensuring that the Company is delivering for our Council as planned. The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny meeting always form an appendix in the official Full Council papers and the comments and recommendations made by the Committee are thus considered by all Members as part of their review.

General Fund and Housing Revenue Account

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has now reviewed the budgets twice in a municipal year for a second time, enacting on the past Committee's wishes to see to budgets earlier on in the process. Having oversight of the budget assumptions enables the Committee to provide informed recommendations when the final figures are presented for scrutiny and enhances the value that the committee can contribute.

Culture, Heritage, and Visitor Economy Strategy

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested in January 2023 that the implementation of the strategy be reviewed at a later date once delivery had begun, permitting Members to have an input into the Strategy at all stages of its progress and enable them to provide a steer on the direction that should be followed.

This review of the Strategy's implementation enabled the Committee to assess areas which had been operating effectively, as well as areas that potentially need further attention. A direct comparison was also made between what was being delivered versus what was requested as part of public consultation during the development of the Strategy. The Committee have asked Officers to provide more focus on ensuring their venues, and the talent that is platformed, are as accessible as possible and that the arts are promoted more effectively to young people via schools and youth groups.



REVIEW ON CURRENT LEVELS OF UNTREATED SEWAGE DISCHARGES TO WATERS IN BABERGH AND MID SUFFOLK

In November 2022, both Full Councils passed a motion regarding concerns about water quality and the environmental impact of sewage discharges into rivers throughout the Districts. As part of this motion, the following resolution was made:

“Ask the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee to invite senior officers of Anglian Water plus senior representatives from the Environment Agency and Natural England to attend a meeting to answer questions on the current levels of sewage discharge.”

The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered this item on 18th September. Due to water quality not falling within the District Council’s remit, the Director of Operations provided the Committee with a short information bulletin on the current background information held by the Councils, the quality of water amongst the Districts, and outlined different stakeholder responsibilities. External representatives in attendance presented an overview of their company’s work and their plans to tackle river quality issues.

The following external representatives were in attendance:

- Grant Tuffs – Regional Engagement Manager at [Anglian Water](#)
- Natasha Kenny – Head of Quality Regulation and Enforcement at [Anglian Water](#)
- Ben Marshall – Senior Environmental Officer at [Environment Agency](#)
- Alison Parnell – Area Environment Manager at [Environment Agency](#)
- Nikolas Bertholdt – Senior Advisor at [Natural England](#)
- John Kemp – Representative for [River Stour Trust](#)

Members asked questions on issues including:

- Raising current water quality standards from “poor” to “good”
- Planned improvements to the levels of wildlife and biodiversity across the Districts
- External influences causing increase storm spill events
- Investment in infrastructure for new housing developments
- Installation of phosphorous removal equipment
- Effectiveness of the “Keep It Clear” campaign to remove unflushables from the system

The following recommendations were made:

- 1.1. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee thanks Anglian Water, the Environment Agency, Natural England, and the River Stour Trust for their attendance and for the answers provided.
- 1.2. That the Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny provide a report and verbal update on the contents and outcomes of the Committee meeting at the next Full Council meetings in October.
- 1.3. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests for more information from the external representatives, specifically including the phosphate reducing programme, and asks that this be fed back to the Committee via an information bulletin.
- 1.4. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests for a wider publicity campaign for residents, staff, and Councillors regarding materials that cannot be put into the sewage system.
- 1.5. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests for Cabinet to investigate the possibility of running a campaign regarding the provision of water butts for residents.
- 1.6. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests for Council to consider supporting "citizen science" projects.

Value Added

Whilst the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is highly encouraged to delve into subjects within the Council's remit to be able to exert attainable influence, the Committee does have an essential function to investigate external topics. This item showcases an example of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee utilising their skills to hold external companies and organisations to account for their delivery of services within our District and the impact this has on residents.

Members of the Committee were able to ask questions of key senior representatives of multiple water companies to ascertain a clearer picture on the work being delivered for Mid Suffolk and the county as a whole. These companies were held to account for the impact they had caused across the District, and their proposed action plans for tackling the issue of decreasing water quality and eliminating sewage discharge.

Scrutinising external topics provides Members with a wider realm of knowledge about the work taking place across the District and enables them to recognise areas beyond their technical remit in which they may be able to exercise influence.



Communities

WESTERN SUFFOLK COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP

Community Safety Partnerships were established nationally in response to S.17 of the Crime and Disorder Act (1998), comprising of the following partner organisations: local authorities, the police, probation services, fire and rescue services, education providers, and the Youth Justice Service. Under S.19 of the Police and Justice Act (2006) and the Crime and Disorder Overview and Scrutiny Regulations (2009), it is a requirement that every local authority designates a committee to annually review and scrutinise the activity and effectiveness of their Partnership.

On the 24th July, the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee conducted their annual review of the Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership. This item was led by the Communities department with representatives from external organisations involved in the Partnership invited to present to the Committee their priorities and proposed action plans for tackling crime and disorder throughout the Districts.

The following Members, officers, and external representatives were in attendance:

- Councillor Derek Davis – Babergh Chair of the WSCSP
- Corporate Manager for Communities
- Assistant Manager for Community Safety and Resilience
- Community Safety Officers
- Janine Wratten – Superintendent of [Suffolk Constabulary](#)
- Richard Baldwin – Head of Community Safety at [Suffolk County Council](#)

Members asked questions on issues including:

- Liaison with local housing associations
- The costs of officer time related to work undertaken for the Partnership
- Mitigation measures to prevent radicalisation of young people
- A priority order for dealing with incidents of hate crime
- Proactive work concerning violence against women and girls (VAWG)
- The Anti-Social Behaviour Strategic Board's five key principles
- Communication between the Partnership and Parish / Town Councils

The following recommendations were made:

- 1.1. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the report and commends the Officers involved for their work within the Partnership.
- 1.2. That an All Member Briefing and further training be delivered for all Councillors regarding the topics covered by the Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership, including how to report anti-social behaviour and an updated contact list.
- 1.3. That a review of the current costs of Babergh and Mid Suffolk resources, and the potential impact of further statutory responsibilities, is undertaken and reported back to the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 1.4. That the level of engagement with community groups within the Districts is incorporated into the next review of the Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership and is reported to the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 1.5. That a review is undertaken of the Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership's position within the Babergh and Mid Suffolk Significant Business Risk Register.
- 1.6. That more formal communication procedures are put in place between the Western Suffolk Community Safety Partnership and our parish and town councils.

Value Added

This item was the first item considered by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee after its new membership was confirmed post-election in June 2023. It provided Councillors with the opportunity to become familiar with the Committee's remit, our statutory obligations as per government regulations, and flesh out their own areas of interest and expertise into insightful avenues of scrutiny.

Reviewing the Community Safety Partnership on an annual basis enables local authorities to scrutinise the delivery of services carried out by external organisations and provide a steer on the issues that need to be explored further as a matter of priority. Members are bolstered by concerns within their own ward areas regarding crime and safety, and are able to advise those in attendance about significant problems that need to be further reviewed and tackled.

The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee have asked members of the WSCSP to strengthen their communication between themselves, community groups, and town and parish councils to create a more cohesive and informative network. Progress on this will be assessed when the Partnership is next scrutinised by the Committee in July 2024 with further direction provided, if necessary.



Customers

COST OF LIVING: REVIEW OF 6-MONTH PLAN AND BEYOND

On the 21st of August, the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the Councils' progress on its delivery of its Cost of Living action plan purposefully designed to support vulnerable residents through the current economic crisis. Members were invited to review the actions taken thus far as well as the long-term approach devised for dealing with the cost of living, exploring how it had been embedded into all aspects of the Council's delivery as requested per a recommendation made by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny in November 2022.

The following Cabinet Members and officers were in attendance:

- Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments
- Cabinet Member for Customers, Digital Transformation, and Improvement
- Corporate Manager for Customer Experience
- Cost of Living Co-Ordinator

Members asked questions on issues including:

- Targeted pro-active communication with the most vulnerable residents
- Support services delivered to those living in rural areas / affected by digital exclusion
- Improvements to visibility and advertisement of support services
- Initiatives designed to tackle food insecurity and poverty
- The Council's financial competency to support the cost of living work should funding from the Government be reduced / stopped
- Collaboration with Community Action Suffolk, Suffolk Libraries, and local food banks

The following recommendation was made:

- 1.1. To note phase 3 of the Cost of Living Action Plan and endorse the commitment to developing a longer term approach to preventing poverty, which seeks to understand the underlying drivers of poverty across both Districts at a hyper local level through continued work with internal and external stakeholders, and to include wider engagement with Town and Parish Councils.

INFORMATION BULLETIN: A REVIEW INTO THE USE OF CUSTOMER SERVICES

On the 14th March, the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee received an update on the use of the different types of customer services on offer by our residents. Further information about customer interaction with the Councils was requested at the Committee's work plan session in June 2023 to help shape any future items in this service area. The Corporate Manager for Customer Experience set out for the Committee the distribution of customer contact between departments, the status of face-to-face contact points, and the results of the recent customer satisfaction survey. This information bulletin was **noted** with no further recommendations.

Members asked questions on issues including:

- Digital Skills and Inclusion Sessions
- Monitoring of social media interactions and messages
- Visibility and effectiveness of face-to-face customer access points
- Differences in satisfaction ratings between service areas
- Improvements needed to the complaints and compliments form

Value Added

Cost of Living

The Council is committed to tackling the Cost of Living crisis through every avenue possible and supporting our most vulnerable residents during this period and beyond. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee plays a key part in the delivery of this action plan, ensuring that the most appropriate actions are taken and that all areas of poverty and inequality within the Districts have been identified and resolutions adequately prepared.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee are dedicated to assisting with the Cost of Living action plan and providing direction and areas of focus when requested.

Use of Customer Services

Customer Services were identified in the June 2023 work plan session as a service area which Members would like to explore further in order to scrutinise the effectiveness and visibility of our customer support provisions. By requesting for an information bulletin into the current performance of the Customer Services directorate, the Committee has a new-found baseline knowledge on the deliverables of this area and how well different aspects are working which will enable the Committee to scope more refined and purposed items in the future, if desired.



ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE JOINT HOMES AND HOUSING STRATEGY

On 23rd October, the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee conducted their annual review into the Joint Homes and Housing Strategy with the ambition to improve performance in the delivery of the Councils' housing vision and strategic aims, and to ensure that the Joint Homes and Housing Strategy continues to strive towards the strategic aims and vision. The Strategy had undertaken a refresh of its delivery plan and its core aims in 2022, as discussed at Committee in its 2023 review, and tasked the Committee with reviewing the progress made towards these new deliverables.

The following officers were in attendance:

- Corporate Manager for Housing Solutions
- Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation
- Corporate Manager for the Councils Companies and Development
- Housing Strategy and Policy Officer
- Housing Enabling Officer

Members asked questions on the following issues:

- Identification of land suitable for self-build plots
- Clear, cross-department definitions for affordable housing
- Improvements to the environmental standards of existing housing stock
- Current proposed timescales for data collection via the stock condition survey
- The Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund
- Installation of air-source heat pumps into social housing
- Acquisition of properties from private landlords via Central Suffolk Lettings
- Support for young people and large families

The following recommendations were made:

- 1.1. That Overview and Scrutiny Committee support the strategic aims of the Homes and Housing Strategy ensuring the delivery plan is reflective of the current challenges facing the housing sector, whilst continuing to deliver the aims set out in the Homes and Housing Strategy.
- 1.2. That Cabinet considers reducing the proposed timescales for the stock conditions audit of the Councils' properties.
- 1.3. That Cabinet reconsiders the use of inhouse occupational therapists.
- 1.4. That Cabinet identify what housing is affordable in the private market to various demographics in the Districts to determine the most appropriate tenures to secure and deliver.
- 1.5. That officers incorporate a RAG status into future reports taken before Joint Overview and Scrutiny and provide more detailed focus on the associated risks of delivery of the Strategy.
- 1.6. That the Cabinet undertake a clear refocus on housing and ensure that there is enough support for officers to achieve the housing needs of our residents.
- 1.7. That officers are requested to involve all Members in any open sessions carried out by the department.
- 1.8. That the Chief Planning Officer provides the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the number of dwellings with outstanding planning permission that have not yet begun construction.
- 1.9. That officers identify residents who are most vulnerable so that services can be proactively designed around their needs and tailored to them when appropriate.
- 1.10. That Cabinet and officers explore methods of both providing and communicating to residents the option to downsize their properties.
- 1.11. That officers scrutinise and investigate private landlords before working collaboratively with them.
- 1.12. That Cabinet reconsiders the means in which data is collected in support of community led housing.

IS THE COUNCILS' SOCIAL HOUSING STOCK "INSPECTION READY"?

On the 13th May, the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report from the Corporate Manager for Housing Transformation on the work needed to be undertaken to meet the requirements of the upcoming inspection from the Regulator for Social Housing. An update on this was requested by the Committee at their work plan session. Members were presented with information provided about the new Consumer Standards and new regulatory framework for local authorities as encompassed within the Social Housing Regulation Act (2023).

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee were also presented with information about the creation of a Tenant Scrutiny Board, the proposed governance structure, the Committee's collaboration and involvement with the running of the Scrutiny Board, and the efforts made to ensure that the Councils remain in compliance with the Transparency, Influence, and Accountability Standard.

Members asked questions on the following issues:

- Proposed training materials and schedule for tenants on the Board
- Measures to ensure housing officers were competent and fully trained
- Application of the new Standards to the Gateway to Homechoice scheme
- Implementation of a new repairs interface for tenants
- Established structures to support the Tenant Scrutiny Board and enhance its effectiveness
- The proposed terms of reference for the Board
- Accessibility of information being presented to the Board

The following recommendations were made:

- 1.1. That the Committee notes the report and commits to supporting the new Tenant Scrutiny Board, welcoming the opportunity for our tenants to engage with the Councils.
- 1.2. That a quorate for holding a meeting is established within the Tenant Scrutiny Board's terms of reference.
- 1.3. That a Vice Chair position on the Tenant Scrutiny Board is created.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE HANDLING PROCESSES FOR ENFORCEMENT CASELOAD

The revised Joint Local Planning Enforcement Plan (JLPEP) was adopted in March 2023 and brought into effect in May 2023. Its primary purpose was to provide greater clarity and to ensure that Councillors and officers, external agencies, and the public were aware of the Council's approach to its planning enforcement responsibilities. Full Council requested that a review of the implementation of the plan and its Prioritisation Strategy (PEPS) be undertaken after 12 months of use with a joint member working group arranged to conduct this. The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee acted as a stepping stone, taking a broader look into the effectiveness of the new Enforcement Plan, and assessing the criteria used by officers for determining the level of enforcement breach.

The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee invited members from the Planning Enforcement team to present to Members their experiences with the new Joint Local Planning Enforcement Plan and how they have utilised the new Prioritisation Strategy to resolve cases, giving the Councillors a deeper understanding of the processes followed for further scrutiny by the working group.

The following officer were in attendance:

- Director of Planning and Building Control
- Chief Planning Officer
- Team Leader for Heritage and Planning Compliance
- Professional Lead for Digital Solutions
- Principal Planning Enforcement Officer
- Planning Enforcement Officer (x5)

Members asked questions on the following issues:

- Implementation of timeframes for handling enforcement cases
- Ability to log enforcement issues anonymously
- The costs of planning enforcement and the distribution between Councils
- The formulation of the Prioritisation Strategy criteria
- Strengthening existing deterrents to prevent enforcement breaches
- Capacity to officially log multiple breaches being conducted by one person / organisation

The following recommendations were made:

- 1.1. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the report and asks the Officers to take on board the comments made by the Committee.
- 1.2. That the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee note that the Joint Member/Officer working group is being established to review the revised JLPEP and PEPS to assess implementation and achievement of desired outcomes as expected by Council in March 2023.
- 1.3. That the Joint Member/Officer Working Group for the Joint Local Planning Enforcement Plan review and consider appropriate enforcement performance metrics based upon the JLPEP standards for case closure, serving of notice, and other formal actions.
- 1.4. That Planning Enforcement be encouraged to keep a record of individuals and companies found committing multiple breaches.
- 1.5. That the Joint Member/Officer Working Group for the Joint Local Planning Enforcement Plan be requested to carry out a review of resourcing within the Planning Enforcement team to encourage a proactive approach to enforcement and introducing the implementation of spot checks to monitor compliance.
- 1.6. That the Joint Member/Officer Working Group for the Joint Local Planning Enforcement Plan reviews whether the criteria used to determine whether a site is "untidy" complies with the Councils biodiversity strategies.

Value Added

Homes and Housing Strategy

Annual reviews of the Homes and Housing Strategy enables the Committee to provide consistent direction on the delivery of the Strategy and how effective our outreach is in supporting the Council to achieve its key housing aims. Members recommended new areas of focus for the Strategy to tackle, with work carried out in regard to these identified areas further assessed in the 2024 annual review.

Social Housing Stock

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be playing an integral part in the formation of the new Tenant Scrutiny Board, supporting the Board with their recommendations, and acting as an official gateway between the Board and Portfolio Holders / SLT.

Planning Enforcement

The Committee now has a better understanding of the processes followed when undertaking enforcement caseloads and the criteria needed to meet relevant thresholds. A broader overview being presented to the Committee acted as an effective baseline for more intense work on the JLPEP which will be conducted by the Working Group.



Miscellaneous

As part of the initiation into our review of social housing ahead of the Regulator for Social Housing's inspection, and to strengthen our understanding of issues that the Tenants Board will be scrutinising, the Committee undertook a tour of our social housing stock across both Districts in October 2023.

Committee Members were shown areas of good and poor quality social housing, highlighting what has been working for our housing transformation team as well as areas that still needed significant improvement ahead of inspection, and reviewed our tenant satisfaction surveys to learn whether our residents needs were being met by the current standard of our stock. It is our hope that we will be undertaking more "tours" related to upcoming scrutiny items to enrich Members' in-depth understanding of topics before they are presented in front of committee for a formal review.



Additionally, as part of our collective drive to make Overview and Scrutiny the best it can be we are undertaking reviews on how other local authorities run their Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Every authority's committee is unique and all operate in different ways – by discussing with our neighbours what makes their committees run well and deliver effective results it enables us to bolster our own procedures. So far, the Chairs of the Committees, along with the Lead Officer for Overview + Scrutiny, have been to visit Ipswich Borough Council's Strategic Scrutiny Committee in February 2024. More visits are being planned for this municipal year.

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