

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the **BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in the King Edmund Chamber, Endeavour House, 8 Russell Road, Ipswich on Monday, 20 November 2023

PRESENT:

Councillor: Mary McLaren (Chair)
John Whyman (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Kathryn Grandon Leigh Jamieson
Brian Riley Laura Smith

In attendance:

Councillors: John Ward – Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments
Elisabeth Malvisi (Observer)

Officers: Chief Executive (AC)
Director – Corporate Resources (ME)

1 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTIONS

1.1 None received.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

2.1 None declared.

3 TO RECEIVE NOTIFICATION OF PETITIONS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE COUNCIL'S PETITION SCHEME

3.1 None received.

4 QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

4.1 None received.

5 QUESTIONS BY COUNCILLORS

5.1 None received.

6 BOS/23/01 DRAFT GENERAL FUND (GF) 2024/25 ASSUMPTIONS

6.1 Councillor John Ward, the Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments, introduced the item to the Committee outlining before Members the forecasted general fund deficit, pay award increments and the pay review, the reduction in planning income, the increase in short term borrowing rates,

the proposed savings from the lack of top-slicing to the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Group, the upcoming pressures, and the assumptions as listed in the report.

- 6.2 Councillor Whyman questioned if the 4% assumption for the pay award was accurate and if the costs of job movement had been factored into this value. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that the numbers concerning the pay award were set in stone and therefore accurate, and that job movement was loosely covered by the vacancy management factor.
- 6.3 Councillor Whyman commented that not having a sufficient pay award resulted in high risks of further costs in later years due to having to recruit new staff. The Chief Executive responded that the pay award was set nationally and was unable to be controlled by the Councils.
- 6.4 Councillor Jamieson questioned why no assumption had been made for gas and electricity usage. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that an overall assumption was unable to be made due to the amount of differing contracts.
- 6.5 Councillor Grandon questioned the reasons for the assumed 0% increase in council tax. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that the administration had not yet agreed a position on council tax, and that national government had not agreed a settlement limit, so an assumption could not be accurately made at this point.
- 6.6 Councillor Riley queried how Babergh could be made into an attractive region to develop and invest in to increase the income derived from planning fees and reduce the budget deficit. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that the reduction of planning income was largely a reflection of the national economy but that the adoption of Part 1 of the new Joint Local Plan demonstrated that Babergh is a suitable place for further development and economic investment.
- 6.7 Councillor Riley asked for clarification on the top slice from the pooled business rates that was awarded annually to the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Group (SPSLG). The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that all Suffolk local authorities pooled their business rates, that some of this was top-sliced to the SPSLG to fund county-wide projects, and that it was suggested for 2024/25 that this top-slice would not be awarded to the SPSLG and would instead be retained by Babergh District Council.
- 6.8 Councillor Smith questioned how a call for voluntary redundancies would impact Mid Suffolk District Council due to the shared workforce. The Chief Executive responded that staff are employed on a single contract and that in the case of any voluntary redundancies Babergh would only retain half of the salary of that position.

- 6.9 Councillor McLaren queried the vacancy management factor and the costs for temporary and interim members of staff. The Director for Corporate Resources responded that the costs for temporary staff were offset against the vacant post's salary.
- 6.10 Councillor McLaren further queried regarding the potential reductions in rent fees from halving the Babergh and Mid Suffolk floor space in Endeavour House. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that the previous costs were £164,000 in rent and £200,000 in service charges per annum and that these had been reduced to £82,000 in rent and £107,000 in service charges per annum.
- 6.11 Councillor McLaren asked a further question on the impact of approved developments not being completed and the lack of income this would result in from the new homes bonus and the community infrastructure levy. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that there was no way of determining when a developer would commence work on an approved application and that applications not being worked on had an undeniable impact of the budgets.
- 6.12 Councillor Riley questioned how the proposed increase in planning fees by 25% compared to that of neighbouring councils and local authorities. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that there was a 25% fee for minor developments and a 35% fee for major developments and that this was set by the national government for all local authorities.
- 6.13 Members debated the item on issues including:
- Sufficient scrutiny of revenue streams
 - Management of income
 - The national picture regarding council finances and budgets
- 6.14 The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny put forward the following recommendations based on the questions and debate from Members:
- That the draft budget assumptions as set out in the report for the 2024/25 General Fund budget be noted.
 - That the Director for Corporate Resources further assesses how the Council manages its income to further decrease the general fund deficit.
- 6.15 Councillor Whyman proposed the recommendations as read out by the Lead Officer.
- 6.16 Councillor Jamieson seconded the proposal.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED:

- 1.1. That the draft budget assumptions as set out in the report for the 2024/25 General Fund budget be noted.
- 1.2. That the Director for Corporate Resources further assesses how the Council manages its income to further decrease the general fund deficit.

7 BOS/23/02 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST

- 7.1 No comments.

8 BOS/23/03 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

- 8.1 Councillor Riley queried why an item relating to the numbers of officers working from home and productivity levels had been removed from the work plan as per the Chief Executive's advice. The Chair responded that Councillor Riley's query had been noted and that a further response would be sought from the Chief Executive.
- 8.2 Councillor Grandon requested that if the committee did consider an item relating to the above if the eventual report could contain comparative data so that the current situation could be assessed against pre-Covid levels. The Chair responded that this would be included.
- 8.3 Councillor McLaren asked if this topic should be looked into by a task and finish group rather than the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny responded that data would need to be gathered first and the potential item fully scoped before a decision could be made on the best method to review.
- 8.4 Councillor Riley requested that the proposed item be considered at the January meetings. The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny responded that discussions would need to be had with Mid Suffolk as to whether to make this a joint item, that there were no joint meetings in January to consider this item if approved by Mid Suffolk, and that there needed to be sufficient time to scope and discuss the item ahead of it potentially coming before the committee.
- 8.5 Councillor Whyman queried if information on the impact of Part 1 of the Joint Local Plan on decision-making could be incorporated into the upcoming review of the Joint Local Planning Enforcement Plan T&FG scheduled for March 2024. The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny responded that this would be included in further scoping discussions at upcoming Chairs briefings.
- 8.6 Councillor Jamieson commented that the proposed item regarding planning should not be limited to planning enforcement and should cover a wider remit across planning as requested by Councillors. The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny clarified that these requests would be considered during further scoping discussions and reassured that the relevant Directors had oversight

of the initial scoping documents as completed by the Committee in June.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 10:43am.

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Chair