

## **BABERGH AND MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCILS**

Minutes of the meeting of the **JOINT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in the Frink Room (Elisabeth) - Endeavour House on Monday, 21 August 2023 at 09:30am.

### **PRESENT:**

Councillor: Mary McLaren

Councillors:	James Caston	Kathryn Grandon
	Leigh Jamieson	Mary McLaren
	Jen Overett	Dr Daniel Pratt
	Brian Riley	Miles Row
	Keith Scarff	Laura Smith
	Rowland Warboys	John Whyman

### **In attendance:**

Councillor(s): John Ward – BDC Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments  
Andrew Mellen – MSDC Cabinet Member for Performance and Resilience  
Alastair McCraw – BDC Cabinet Member for Customers, Digital Transformation, and Improvement

Witness(es): Henry Cooke – CIFCO Capital  
Neville Pritchard – JLL

Officers: Director for Assets and Investments (EA)  
Director for Corporate Resources (ME)  
Corporate Manager for Council Companies (HB)  
Corporate Manager for Customer Services (SL)  
Cost of Living Co-ordinator (ED)  
Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Office (JR)  
Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny (AN)

### **Apologies:**

Councillor(s): Terence Carter  
Janet Pearson  
Dr Ross Piper

## **12 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTIONS**

12.1 Apologies were received from Councillor Terence Carter, Councillor Janet Pearson, and Councillor Ross Piper.

12.2 Councillor Rowland Warboys substituted for Councillor Carter.

12.3 Councillor Jen Overett substituted for Councillor Pearson.

12.4 Councillor Daniel Pratt substituted for Councillor Piper.

### **13 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

13.1 Councillor Row declared an interest in Item JOS/23/09 as an employee for Suffolk Libraries, a partner to the Council in the delivery of cost of living support.

13.2 The Monitoring Officer declared that Councillor Row could remain in the room during consideration of the item and confirmed that they could participate in the debate and vote on any eventual recommendations.

### **14 JOS/23/07 TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 24TH JULY 2023**

14.1 Councillor Jamieson proposed that the minutes be accepted as a true record.

14.2 Councillor Whyman seconded the proposal.

By a vote of 10 For and 2 Abstentions

**It was RESOLVED:**

**That the minutes of the meeting held on the 24<sup>th</sup> July 2023 be confirmed and signed as a true record.**

### **15 TO RECEIVE NOTIFICATION OF PETITIONS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE COUNCIL'S PETITION SCHEME**

15.1 None received.

### **16 QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC**

16.1 None received.

### **17 QUESTIONS BY COUNCILLORS**

17.1 None received.

### **18 JOS/23/08 CIFCO PERFORMANCE REPORT (2022/23) AND BUSINESS PLAN (2023/24)**

18.1 Councillor John Ward, Babergh's Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments, introduced the item to the Committee.

18.2 Emily Atack, Director for Assets and Investments, presented the item to the Committee outlining before Members the purpose of the business plan, the

structure of the trading companies, an overview of the UK property market, the CIFCO property investment portfolio, the five-year cashflow forecast, the CIFCO Board key performance indicators (KPIs), an overview of the 2023/24 business plan, the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) improvement plan, an overview of deferred debt repayments, and introduced Henry Cooke (CIFCO Capital) and Neville Pritchard (JLL) to the Committee.

- 18.3 Councillor Grandon queried the decision to stop purchasing properties and questioned if this was a “firm” decision. The Director for Assets and Investments responded that there was no funding available for further acquisitions by CIFCO as this phase was completed in 2021.
- 18.4 Councillor Scarff queried whether the KPIs and targets set out in the business plan were too low. The Director for Assets and Investments responded that the KPIs were reasonable with the current market uncertainty and that the EPC targets were aligned to legislation.
- 18.5 Councillor Scarff further questioned about EPC ratings and how quickly the improvement plan could be actioned to achieve “B” ratings across the board. The Director for Assets and Investments responded that the outset ambition was to achieve a “B” rating for all properties and that the costs of improving to both a “C” and a “B” were looked at in the view of determining what would provide the most return. The Director further responded that there were long-term plans that supported achieving these ratings as quickly as possible.
- 18.6 Councillor Caston questioned who makes the decision to defer certain debt repayments. The Director for Assets and Investments responded that the power to defer debt repayments was decided upon by Full Council in 2020 for a three-year period. The Director further responded that since this period, it has been decided upon by the CIFCO Board whether to implement the deferred payments each financial year.
- 18.7 Councillor Jamieson queried which assets could be sold to provide the best financial return. The Director for Assets and Investments responded that this was something that was considered on a regular basis by the Board throughout the year due to constant changes in the values of the assets.
- 18.8 Councillor Jamieson further questioned whether the EPC Improvement Plan would come at additional cost to the Councils. The Director for Assets and Investments responded that the expenditure from making these improvements would not come out of the Councils’ budgets and that no more investment from the Councils into CIFCO can be made.
- 18.9 Councillor Warboys questioned how much of the Councils’ short term borrowing debt was attributed to CIFCO. Melissa Evans, the Director for Corporate Resources, responded that 9% of borrowing in Babergh and 19% of borrowing in Mid Suffolk is related to CIFCO.
- 18.10 Councillor Row queried what potential there was for CIFCO to reach net-zero earlier than 2030. The Director for Assets and Investments responded that

this would be evaluated once CIFCO had carried out an EPC assessment for the entire portfolio.

18.11 Councillor Riley questioned if the reduction in arrears over the last business year were attributed to a single tenant or distributed across the portfolio. The Director for Assets and Investments responded that these arrears were contributed to by a collection of tenants.

18.12 Councillor McLaren queried the cost to the organisation of working with eight different corporate partners. The Director for Assets and Investments responded that all partners were paid by CIFCO from the income from the portfolio and that the running costs equated to approximately £700,000.

18.13 Members debated the item on the following issues:

- Relying on a loan-based income stream
- The proposed EPC Improvement Plan
- Impacts on the commercial property market
- The increase in value of assets
- Deferred debt repayments, arrears, and the impact on Council finances
- Sustainability and reaching net-zero

18.14 The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny put forward the following recommendation based on the questions and debate from Members:

- 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.

18.15 Councillor Caston proposed the recommendation as read out by the Lead Officer.

18.16 Councillor Row seconded the proposal.

By a unanimous vote

**It was RESOLVED:**

**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.**

- 19.1 Councillor Andrew Mellen, Mid Suffolk's Cabinet Member for Performance and Resilience, and Councillor Alastair McCraw, Babergh's Cabinet Member for Customers, Digital Transformation, and Improvement, introduced the item to the Committee.
- 19.2 Sam Lake, Corporate Manager for Customer Services, and Elysa Dale, the Cost of Living Co-ordinator, presented the item to the Committee outlining before Members a look-back at the last 6 months of work, the development of a long term approach to deal with issues, the different kinds of support delivered directly to residents, improving communication, both internally and externally, regarding the services available to support residents, digital inclusion, collaboration with Community Action Suffolk (CAS) to hire a new Food Network Co-ordinator, plans to launch a data SIM pilot to help residents get online, and communication with Town and Parish Councils.
- 19.3 Councillor Jamieson queried if there was targeted communication for residents who might be struggling with the cost of living crisis. The Cost of Living Co-ordinator responded that general communication was sent out to residents but that training had been provided to Income Officers, Building Services, and Customer Services about the support that was available so they can refer and signpost more vulnerable residents that they come across in their line of work.
- 19.4 Councillor Smith questioned what support was available for residents in rural areas and connecting them to key services in our towns. The Cost of Living Co-ordinator responded that the Communities department assess and map the level of need across the Districts and use this to identify the key areas to provide focussed support but that more support was branching out into villages and rural areas.
- 19.5 Councillor Grandon queried what support was in place for older residents who may lack the means to increase their income due to retirement. The Cost of Living Co-ordinator responded that the support and services provided were able to be accessed by residents of all ages and that digital inclusion and literacy schemes were being actioned to help support older residents in particular to get online and access all services.
- 19.6 Councillor Whyman questioned how we can increase officer visibility in the District to promote and discuss services with residents face-to-face. The Corporate Manager for Customer Services responded that there were several customer access points (CAPs) throughout the Districts that could facilitate the delivery of services within the community based on a review of the need in the area.
- 19.7 Councillor Overett questioned if more work could be done to signpost residents to online services via the Councils' websites. The Corporate Manager for Customer Services responded that there are currently banners on the main page directing our residents to the cost of living support area but

that further communication and clarity would be considered as part of the new website review in the near future.

- 19.8 Councillor Pratt queried about the support for residents struggling with food insecurity and ensuring that they are provided with nutritional food, especially young people, as part of our services. The Cost of Living Co-ordinator responded that tackling food insecurity was a collaborative approach with the food banks in the Districts and that what is provided to residents is limited by what products get donated to the food banks.
- 19.9 Councillor Warboys questioned about the financial capacity to carry on providing support for the cost of living crisis if government funding is reduced. The Cost of Living Co-ordinator responded that the key areas of risk would need to be identified in a proactive approach and internal solutions drafted up to ensure that there is minimal impact to the delivery of key services.
- 19.10 Councillor Scarff queried what communication about cost of living support takes place at a hyper local level. The Cost of Living Co-ordinator responded that this was something to improve and will be covered in the next stage of the plan, particularly through further communication with Town and Parish Councils and utilising local community facilities.
- 19.11 Councillor Smith questioned if the Councils worked collaboratively with Suffolk Libraries to deliver digital inclusion sessions. The Corporate Manager for Customer Services responded that this did take place in a blended approach, with the Councils providing logistic support for the delivery of the sessions, and that through grant funding libraries across the Districts have been supplied with a total of 27 iPads for residents to use.
- 19.12 Councillor McLaren questioned about the costs of the hiring of a Food Network Co-ordinator and whether this role involved overseeing the governance of food banks. The Cost of Living Co-ordinator responded that the funding for the position came from the Shared Prosperity funds and had been re-directed from initial plans to develop a community supermarket. The Officer further responded that the role would entail making sure food banks are sustainable, working efficiently, and are connected to their communities.
- 19.13 Members debated the item on the following issues:
- Support for younger residents
  - Support for residents where English is not their first language
  - Collaboration with Citizens Advice
  - Further communication and direct engagement with residents
  - Methods of identifying vulnerable residents
  - Strategic support for continuation of services
  - Cross-department collaboration
- 19.14 Councillor Scarff proposed the recommendation as listed in the report.

19.15 Councillor Warboys seconded the proposal.

By a unanimous vote

**It was RESOLVED:**

**1.1. To note phase 3 of the Cost of Living Action Plan and endorse the commitment to develop 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.**

**20 JOS/23/10 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST**

20.1 The Forthcoming Decision List was noted.

**21 JOS/23/11 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ACTION TRACKER**

21.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Action Tracker was noted.

**22 JOS/23/12 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN**

22.1 Councillor Riley suggested that an update on Corks Lane and an item concerning staffing, agile working, and productivity be added to the Babergh Work Plan.

22.2 The Corporate Manager for Governance and Civic Office noted these suggestions and responded that conversations would take place with the Chairs and Officers outside of the meeting to best determine how these items could be brought forward for consideration.

**23 JOS/23/13 MID SUFFOLK OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN**

23.1 Councillor Caston noted the current empty schedule for the December meeting and suggested the following ideas for addition on both work plans:

- A tour of the key towns in both Districts – linked to the upcoming, unscheduled item regarding Town Regeneration.
- A visit to a “best practice” Council to learn from their Overview and Scrutiny procedures.

23.2 Members voted in favour of a tour of the key towns in both Districts.

23.3 The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny confirmed that this would be added to the work plans in due course after discussion with the Officers responsible for the Town Regeneration item.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 13:22pm.

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Chair