

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 January 2020

PRESENT:

Councillor: Alastair McCraw (Chair)
 Adrian Osborne (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Siân Dawson Jane Gould
 Mary McLaren Jan Osborne
 John Ward

In attendance:

Councillor(s): John Ward – Cabinet Member for Finance
 Jan Osborne – Cabinet Member for Housing

Officers: Strategic Director (KS)
 Assistant Director – Corporate Resources and Section 151 Officer (KS)
 Assistant Director – Housing (GF)
 Senior Finance Business Partner
 Corporate Manager - Financial and Commissioning and Procurement
 Assistant Director - Housing
 Assistant Director – Corporate Resources and Section 151 Officer
 Senior Governance Officer (HH)

Apologies:

Kathryn Grandon

11 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

11.1 There were no declarations of interests.

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

12.1 There were no petitions received.

13 QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

13.1 None received.

14 QUESTIONS BY COUNCILLORS

14.1 None received.

15 BOS/19/5 DRAFT GENERAL FUND BUDGET 202/21 AND FOUR-YEAR OUTLOOK

- 15.1 Councillor Ward, Cabinet Member for Finance, introduced the report and summarised the main points in the report.
- 15.2 He provided Members with the following updates:
- The surplus had increased from £542,000 to £584,000
 - Acquisitions were now at £1.125M.
 - The Transformation Fund was nearer to £900,000 due to the increase in the surplus.
- 15.3 Councillor McCraw commented on the improved lay-out and structure of the report.
- 15.4 Councillor McLaren asked for clarification of the increase for the Council Tax and asked that in the future the explanation in the press was made more accessible to the public.
- 15.5 Councillor Ward explained that the Council Tax was shared between the Council, Suffolk County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner. The £5 increase was for a Council Tax Band D property and was equivalent of 3.1% increase for the Babergh amount of the Council tax bill. This was all explained on the annual Council Tax bill.
- 15.6 Councillor Ward would investigate how to provide better information to Parish Councils and residents.
- 15.7 Councillor McLaren enquired if there was any training available for Parish Councillors and Councillor Ward informed that Suffolk Association for Local Councillors (SALC) could provide support for such issues.
- 15.8 Councillor Jan Osborne, Cabinet Member for Housing, who was attending the meeting, said that Councillor Adrian Osborne, as the Council's representative, could bring this issue to the attention of SALC.
- 15.9 Councillor Adrian Osborne enquired if it was possible to bring forward the Parish precepts to allow parishes to plan their annual budget. The Assistant Director for Corporate Recourses responded that the Council would struggle to provide the precepts earlier, as tight deadlines existed because the information was provided following submission of a return to Central Government in October.
- 15.10 Councillor McCraw referred to the New Homes Bonus Scheme, which was being phased out and asked whether any new schemes would be introduced to replace this income.
- 15.11 The Assistant Director for Corporate Resources explained that currently there was no information from the Government regarding replacement for the New

Homes Bonus. She thought that any new schemes was likely to be linked with planning applications.

- 15.12 Councillor Ward assured the Committee that Members were lobbying Government for a replacement of the New Homes Bonus Scheme as the income was needed by the Council and was an incentivised bonus for new and completed developments.
- 15.13 The Assistant Director explained that the New Homes Bonus Scheme was currently split into 80% for the Council and 20% for Suffolk County Council. The Local Government Association (LGA) was working with the Government and represented both tiers of councils and it may be that this split would change.
- 15.14 Councillor McCraw queried the changes to the Empty Homes Discounts and what the rationale was behind the change.
- 15.15 Councillor Ward explained that the Council wanted to bring empty homes back into use as quickly as possible.
- 15.16 Councillor McCraw continued questioning and asked how often the Council connected with owners of unoccupied properties.
- 15.17 The Assistant Director for Housing outlined the process for contacting owners of unoccupied properties, who were contacted by letter in the first instance. The Housing department employed three officers to oversee the private sector rental market for the Council. The Council supported Landlords in the process in getting the property occupied, which was often caused by bereavement. Further advice would be organised later this year to support landlords.
- 15.18 Councillor Jan Osborne added that the Shared Revenues Partnership was very proactive in this area and provided regular reports for unoccupied properties.
- 15.19 Councillor Dawson asked if the figures included Council owned, unoccupied buildings and building projects, which were commenced but not completed.
- 15.20 Councillor Ward outlined Council Tax reductions and discounts and that properties were all subject to the same discounts.
- 15.21 In response to Councillor Dawson's further question regarding Angel Court, Councillor Ward stated that unoccupied and uncompleted properties were not included in the budget.
- 15.22 Councillor Adrian Osborne proposed that the Committee endorsed the budget to Cabinet as outlined in recommendation 3.1 to 3.3, and that the Finance Team be thanked for the work undertaken for the General Fund Budget, which was seconded by Councillor McCraw.

By a unanimous vote

It was Resolved: -

- 1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorsed Recommendations 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 in the report to Cabinet.**
- 1.2 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee complimented the Finance Team on the work undertaken for the General Fund Budget and Four-year Outlook.**

16 BOS/19/6 DRAFT HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET AND FOUR-YEAR OUTLOOK

- 16.1 Councillor Ward introduced report BOS/19/6 and outlined the main points for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget 2020/21 and Four-year Outlook.
- 16.2 Councillor McCraw queried the increase in capital spend in relation to the Council's new building programme and acquisitions for 2020-24.
- 16.3 The Assistant Director for Housing outlined the Capital Programme and referred to the HRA Business Plan. He said that new schemes were coming forward. The teams were working diligently on sites and a review of garage sites and whether these were used appropriately would be presented to Cabinet later in the year. Land was always needed for further housing developments.
- 16.4 Councillor Dawson asked for clarification of the review of the use of garage sites, as she thought there were quite a few sites which would be more suitable for other uses.
- 16.5 The Assistant Director for Housing assured her that a review would be conducted and that there was ongoing work by the Housing and Assets teams. A report would be presented to the administration for the use of garages.
- 16.6 Councillor Dawson asked if compulsory buying of garages sites, which could be used for housing developments, had been considered and the Assistant Director for Housing responded that there were various aspects to consider before developing garage sites including the Right to Buy options for tenants, listed buildings and general building regulations.
- 16.7 Councillor McCraw asked if the impact on residents was considered when raising the sheltered housing rent and Councillor Jan Osborne, Cabinet Member for Housing, responded that she had challenged the increase for Sheltered Housing before the budget had been published, but that an increase was required to reduce the subsidy by general need tenants.

- 16.8 The Assistant Director for Housing added that rent levels and demand had to be considered on a year on year basis. The figures were based on a five-year budget. The requirements for the service and residents were always taken into consideration. The current rent was actually lower than predicted five years ago.
- 16.9 Councillor McCraw asked if the surplus in the budget would be transferred to the HRA reserves and the Assistant Director for Housing confirmed that was the case and that investments in future housing developments and land would be supported by the reserve. Currently the HRA reserves were at £12.727m (Appendix B).
- 16.10 In response to Councillors McCraw's question, Councillor Jan Osborne confirmed that further Council houses would be built
- 16.11 In response to several questions from Councillors, the Assistant Director for Housing referred to Appendix B in the report and assured Members that the funding received from the Right to Buy scheme would be invested in new homes.
- 16.12 Councillor Adrian Osborne proposed that the Finance Team be thanked for the work undertaken for the HRA budget and that the recommendations in the report be endorsed to Cabinet.
- 16.13 Councillor McLaren seconded the motion.
- 16.14 Councillor McCraw proposed an additional recommendation to be added; that the Committee noted with satisfaction the proposed new build of 229 new homes.
- 16.15 The Chair asked if Councillor Adrian Osborne would accept the additional recommendation, which he accepted.
- 16.16 The proposed recommendations were put to Members for the vote, which was unanimous.

It was Resolved: -

- 1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorsed Recommendation 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 in the Report to Cabinet.**
- 1.2 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee complimented the Finance Team for the work undertaken for the Housing Revenue Account budget and Four-year Outlook.**
- 1.3 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted with satisfaction the proposal to build 229 new homes.**

It was Resolved: -

That the Forthcoming Decision List be noted.

18 BOS/19/ BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

- 19.1 The Chair went through the Work Plan and explained to Members the implication of each item for the Committee, including that the BMBS item which had been to committee before.
- 19.2 The Chair suggested that he sent out a message to all Members regarding the Representatives on Outside Bodies, which included a questionnaire for Members to complete in relation to their role on respective Outside Bodies.
- 19.3 Jan Robinson, Corporate Manager for Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer provided details on a project to demonstrate the relationship between the Council and its communities. She listed several options and thought that the Committee would be able to provide support for this project.
- 19.4 Members agreed and the Chair added that further officer support would be available from June 2020 for the project.
- 19.5 He proposed that 15 minutes were spent at each committee to raise questions to help produce a report and he would be discussing this with the Chair of the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Committee that the next Chairs' briefing.
- 19.6 It was agreed that the Disabled Facilities grant topic be deleted, and that the Police and Crime Panel be deferred to March 2021.
- 19.7 The Improving Access to the Private Renting Sector item would be discussed that the next Overview and Scrutiny Chairs' briefing.

It was Resolved: -

That the Babergh Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan be noted.

19 BOS/19/ MSDC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

It was Resolved: -

That the Mid Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan be noted.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 11.07 am.

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Chair