

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, 22 January 2024

PRESENT:

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

Councillors: Kathryn Grandon Leigh Jamieson
Laura Smith

In attendance:

Councillor(s): Dave Busby – Leader of the Council
John Ward – Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, & Investments
Derek Davis
Paul Clover

Officers: Chief Executive (AC)
Director for Operations (ME)
Director for Planning and Building Control (TB)
Director for Housing (DF)
Corporate Manager – Finance, Commissioning, & Procurement (KW)
Senior Finance Business Partner (SC)
Finance Business Partner (JS)

9 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTIONS

9.1 None received.

10 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

10.1 None declared.

11 BOS/23/04 TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 20 NOVEMBER 2023

11.1 Councillor Whyman proposed that the minutes of the meeting held on 20 November 2023 be confirmed and signed as a true record.

11.2 Councillor Smith seconded the proposal.

By a unanimous vote

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 November 2023 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

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

12.1 None received.

13 QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

13.1 None received.

14 QUESTIONS BY COUNCILLORS

14.1 None received.

15 BOS/23/05 GENERAL FUND (GF) AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) 2024/25

15.1 Councillor John Ward, Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments, introduced the report to the committee outlining before Members: the budget gap for the General Fund and the deficit for the HRA, the overall position for 2024/25, the cost pressures and savings, the increase in net cost of service, the council tax increase, the top slice of funding to the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Group (SPSLG), planning fee increases, the earmarked reserves to assist with budget funding, the forecasted position for the next three years, the revenue contribution to capital, loan repayments and interest rates, the increase in council housing rents and garage rents, and introduced the finance team for further questions.

15.2 Councillor Whyman asked for clarification on how business rates worked for Councils in terms of what money we collect and how much is received by Government. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that at a baseline 50% of business rates were taken by the Government, 40% went to District Councils and the remaining 10% went to County Councils but that due to government assessments the Council usually receives less than 40%.

15.3 Councillor Grandon queried if the interest receivable from CIFCO was income for the Council. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that this was money CIFCO paid to the Council from the rental income from their properties.

15.4 Councillor Jamieson questioned the reasons for the reduction in the interest receivable from CIFCO. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that some money was being retained by CIFCO for capital improvements and that deferred rental payments had been agreed.

15.5 Councillor Whyman questioned what strategic plans were in place to assist with reaching a balanced budget in the future. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that the Senior Leadership Team would be reviewing how services would be delivered and the costs associated with this. The Chief Executive responded that a balance would be

struck between increasing income and decreasing costs of service delivery.

- 15.6 Councillor Jamieson queried whether the revenue budget pressure arising from the forecast loss at the former HQ site in Hadleigh would have an impact on this years budgets as well as next years. The Corporate Manager for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that it would have an impact on both but that it could not be forecasted in the current papers due to the project's ongoing status and the fluctuation of market prices.
- 15.7 Councillor McLaren queried the reasons for the decrease in neighbourhood planning income. The Director for Planning and Building Control responded that this income was from designated areas where grants had come into the Council to help support the parish with referendum and advertising costs and that there was simply an anticipated reduction in this amount from what had previously been forecasted.
- 15.8 Councillor Grandon queried what HR and organisational development costs entailed. The Chief Executive responded that this was money spent internally on training and corporately developing staff.
- 15.9 Councillor Whyman questioned if residents would get support from the Council towards their increased social and affordable housing rents. The Director for Housing responded that there were financial inclusion officers within housing solutions who worked with residents to offer multiple types of support and that this increase in rent would be covered by housing benefits for those tenants on universal credit.
- 15.10 Councillor Whyman further questioned if the costs for the building services transformation was a one-off cost or a reoccurring charge. The Director for Housing responded that it was a one-off cost due to the hiring of interim staff to assist with the transformation.
- 15.11 Councillor McLaren queried if the costs for services and supplies as detailed in Table 2 covered the expenditure for hiring external consultants to provide the Council with advice. The Senior Finance Business Partner responded that this was covered by the services and supplies cost and that a savings program aimed at reducing external contract spend was being introduced into next year's budget.
- 15.12 Members debated the item on issues including:
- Duplications of costs and expenses;
 - Delivery of key services;
 - Distribution of service delivery between the District and the Parish/Town councils;
 - Potential impact on staffing levels;
 - The need for public engagement and further clarification on the pressures faced by the Council

15.13 The Governance Officer put forward the following recommendations based on the questions and debate from Members:

- That the draft revenue budgets set out in the report for the 2024/25 General Fund and Housing Revenue Account budgets be noted.
- That engagement with the public, specifically through media releases and Town and Parish Liaison meetings, be encouraged to help outline and provide clarity to the public regarding the budget pressures on the Council.
- That the district authority actively considers the deployment of certain services to Town & Parish councils who have an appetite to accept functions currently carried out by Babergh District Council.

15.14 Councillor Jamieson proposed the recommendations as read out by the Governance Officer.

15.15 Councillor Whyman seconded the proposal.

By a unanimous vote

It was RESOLVED:

- 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 engagement with the public, specifically through media releases and Town and Parish Liaison meetings, be encouraged to help outline and provide clarity to the public regarding the budget pressures on the Council.**
- 1.3. That the district authority actively considers the deployment of certain services to Town & Parish councils who have an appetite to accept functions currently carried out by Babergh District Council.**

16 BOS/23/06 UPDATE ON CAR PARKING CHARGES

16.1 Councillor Busby, the Leader of Babergh District Council, introduced the information bulletin to the committee outlining before Members: the reasons for presenting the bulletin to the committee, current budget pressures, the current way car parking charges are subsidised, the results of the strategic review completed in 2023, the potential impact on the environment and climate change, the aim to cut down on unnecessary car journeys, and the future impact of potential savings.

16.2 Councillor Jamieson queried how public transport provision would be funded if the direction from the executive was to encourage the public to travel into towns sustainably rather than using cars. Councillor Ward, Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that assessments would have to be made regarding appropriate tariffs to put in each car park and that further plans would be drawn up once these figures had been realised.

- 16.3 Councillor Whyman questioned whether Hadleigh or Sudbury had carried out economic impact assessments to determine how businesses on the high street would be affected should parking charges be implemented. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets, and Investments responded that he did not believe any economic impact assessments had been formally carried out by the town councils.
- 16.4 Councillor Smith queried if there would be any ring fenced money from the potential incoming charges to fund sustainable forms of transport. The Leader of the Council responded that the Council was going out to consultation with the town councils, as agreed by Cabinet, to get their direction on how they would like to see their towns developed in terms of access and transport and that the ring fencing of money would be considered at a medium-term financial review.
- 16.5 Councillor McLaren asked for clarification on how engagement with the town councils would take place and what this would entail. The Director for Operations responded that this consultation would be led by the Strategic Policy team and would mainly take form of a questionnaire, that engagement questions would be sent out to all district councillors and recognised groups, and that he had attended town council meetings and met with Clerks of said councils to gather views.
- 16.6 Councillor Grandon queried the validity of following on from the decision made by the Cabinet in 2021 to implement car parking charges. The Chief Executive clarified that this work was not following on from the decision made by Cabinet in 2021, that the entire process had started from scratch, and that the decision to implement car parking charges had not yet been made – this would be decided by Cabinet in March this year.
- 16.7 Councillor Jamieson queried if parking charges would be implemented at leisure centre car parks and if the impact on attendance and economic intake of these leisure centres had been assessed and considered. The Director for Operations responded that in instances where the Council leases car parks for businesses, such as leisure centres, shops, or village halls, that arrangements had been made with the Council's parking team to assess what could be done to limit the impact of introducing charges.
- 16.8 Councillor Smith questioned if consultation had also taken place with nearby Councils who do subsidise their town parking and if the Council had queried their reasons for not implementing paid parking. The Director for Operations responded that discussions had been held with these Councils and that in most cases only the first hour of parking was free or the town councils contributed funds to the district councils to help subsidise these costs.
- 16.9 Councillor Smith further questioned if resident permits had been considered as part of these propositions. The Director for Operations responded that implementing resident permit zones was an option available and that this would require collaboration with the county council to put in place.

16.10 Councillor Grandon questioned if the potential impact on volunteers working within the towns would be taken into consideration when drafting parking charges. The Director for Operations responded that funding for the voluntary sector was currently under significant pressure and that considerations would be made to support volunteers.

16.11 Members debated the item on issues including:

- The existing parking charges subsidies;
- The potential benefits for the environment;
- Patterns of behaviour from residents in terms of where they shop;
- The consequences of the budget deficit;
- The original Cabinet decision from 2021 to implement car parking charges;
- Consultation and engagement with the town councils;
- The potential impact on local businesses

16.12 This information bulletin was noted.

17 BOS/23/07 FORTHCOMING DECISIONS LIST

17.1 No comments.

18 BOS/23/08 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ACTION TRACKER

18.1 No comments.

19 BOS/23/09 BABERGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN

19.1 Councillor Jamieson raised concerns about the upcoming planning enforcement item and that it did not encompass all issues discussed by the committee at their original scoping meeting. The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny responded that this item had yet to go to Chairs Briefing so had not been further scoped and that there would be opportunity to refine the topic further to ensure that all points were being picked up as appropriate.

19.2 Councillor Grandon raised that a topic regarding working from home and the potential impact on the delivery of services, particularly customer focussed, could be added to the work plans. The Lead Officer for Overview and Scrutiny responded that an upcoming item already on the work plans would focus on the current delivery of customer services and that concerns about officers utilising agile working to work from home should be raised with the Chief Executive.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 17:03pm.

.....
Chair