

## District Councillor Report for Bramford February 2023

### The Budget

The General Fund Budget 2023/2024 and Four-Year Outlook will be on the agenda for Thursdays full council. We have looked into the budget for the next budget year and a 5 year projection of the accounts..The CIFCO investment portfolio has now been completely filled and with 3 other funds and Gateway 14, they produce a steady and secure income of £2.880m which is over 12% of the total income, which is now subsidising services within the council.

The council tax revenue is £7.24 m and the tax base will increase year on year.

The councils gross expenditure is £33.5m and income is £21.1m alongside funding of £16.019m

The cost of service is expected to be £12.44m, up 3.672m on last year.

The council tax raises another £5.944 of other income including business rates predicted at £6.449m and grants on top.

This year's budget with no changes to council tax would produce a £3.578m surplus.

I intend to vote to approve the budget and to not increase council tax for the second year running.

### The HRA Account

The Housing Revenue Account is the account for the council owned dwellings and has to be a stand alone account. It contains council rents, service charges and non-dwelling rents. This is set against the cost of maintaining the assets, depreciation and interest payments. This is in a serious state and is at a £816,000 deficit next year. This is due to several factors, including an increase in cost of service by £3.422m a 46% increase. The income has also increased by £1.351m, pretty much every figure has increased apart from a reduction in interest payable.

This account is covered by very strict rules that do not allow any subsidisation or even free grounds maintenance to be carried out from the main council account.

The big question is whether to increase council rents by 7%,  
This would on average bring;  
A social weekly rent from £87.99 to £94.15  
Affordable housing weekly rent from £128.96 to £137.99

Sheltered housing service charges are looking to be raised by 7% also  
heating will go up on average £3.92 per week  
water will go up on average £2.53 per week

this recovers 50% of the increase in utilities that the council is paying. Heating and water are both subsidised in sheltered accommodation.

I with a very heavy heart will support these increases. The HRA is not sustainable without them and would have to sell houses and probably still will. These houses would probably go outside of affordability for the people who need them I believe they are better as social or affordable but with a rent increase. I continue to be frustrated that we have a surplus in one account and desperately need funding in the other. It is regulated very carefully to stop councils creating an unsustainable account and the going bust in their general fund because of it, but a well financially managed council like Mid Suffolk should be able to improve their HRA with their General Fund..

Both these accounts will be voted on in full council on the 23<sup>th</sup> of February in the council chamber.

### **Suffolk councils secure £2.2m to improve tenants' quality of life**

Suffolk's district and borough councils have secured £2.2m of Government funding to improve the standard of private rented homes in the county – tackling poor housing conditions and improving tenants' wellbeing.

The successful joint bid, by Babergh, East Suffolk, Ipswich, Mid Suffolk and West Suffolk Councils, will see the funding awarded over two years by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), from a share of its £14m Private Rented Sector (PRS) Pathfinder Programme.

The funding will be used to create and support additional roles, offering advice and support to tenants and landlords, and taking enforcement action against those who continue to let poor quality housing.

### **New £12m depot would 'future-proof' services for residents**

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are exploring plans to consolidate three aging operational sites into a shared £12m depot – future-proofing services for residents and improving conditions for their staff.

If councillors approve funding later this month, the next stage of the project will involve developing a more detailed business case. It will also include identifying a suitable location for the councils' 200 shared operational staff and fleet – including waste services, public realm, and building services and repairs teams.

The councils' current main depots, in Stowmarket and Sudbury, are each over 50 years old and not fit for future needs, with significant and increasing costs now required to keep them running. A further depot at Great Wenham is also starting to struggle to meet 21st century operational demands.

According to a report going before councillors, the sites are no longer able to house the staff and vehicles required to provide services in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

As well as providing council staff with a modern, fit-for-purpose depot to help them meet the needs of the growing population more effectively and efficiently, the new depot would also help 'future-proof' the councils' ambitions for further change ahead.

Babergh and Mid Suffolk's fleet was amongst the first in the country to begin running on Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) in a move to slash carbon emissions. But further changes are in the pipeline with the implementation of the Government's Resource and Waste Strategy, and the global transition towards fully electric vehicles, which the existing sites would struggle to accommodate.

Significant capital investment is required to secure a new depot – with an estimated £12m required to develop a 3.25 hectare (8 acre) site within the districts. This would more than double the councils' current combined operational capacity – with Babergh District Council and Mid Suffolk District Council funding £6m each.

These costs would be offset by the operational savings and income generation that could be delivered from sharing a single depot, estimated to be between £75k to £150k coming back into councils' coffers each year.

### **Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils take action over housing issues.**

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are taking action to improve their Building Services - which maintain their council housing - and urgently resolve a number of issues.

The councils began a programme of work to improve the service last summer, and in-depth assessments arising from this work subsequently identified issues around health and safety compliance.

Of their 6,788 homes, 344 do not currently have up-to-date electrical safety reports. Gas inspections are also overdue on 92 properties, and asbestos reinspection surveys are not up-to-date on 33 homes.

Urgent work to address the issues is already underway – including additional inspections, an overhaul of existing processes, and obtaining more robust data around health and safety compliance to provide tenants with complete reassurance.

The councils voluntarily referred themselves to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) as soon as they became aware of the issues and contacted all its tenants.

The RSH has now confirmed the councils' findings and issued a Regulatory Notice, meaning it will monitor the councils and meet regularly until it is assured sustainable, long-term improvements are embedded.

The regulator has confirmed it does not intend to take statutory action against the councils because an urgent programme of work is already in place to rectify the problems.

The councils are confident their action plan will promptly result in full compliance with the required standards but welcome the support of the regulator in ensuring that robust procedures and practices are embedded.

Tenants at every home where an additional inspection is required have already been contacted.

### **Civic Service**

Thank you all that took part in my Civic Service, it was a wonderful day and raised £260 for my charity Stowmarket ASD Saturday Clubs as well as a bit for Bramford Church.

I hope you all received an invite to my dinner at Wattisham on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, if not please contact me asap and I will sort out last minute tickets.

Kind Regards

James Caston  
District Councillor for Bramford