

District Councillor Report for Bramford March 25

The Budget

The Council have approved the 2025/2026 General Fund Budget, although it shows a £2.4m surplus down from £5.2m in the previous year, it forecasts less money coming in mainly because of reduced government funding.

The headlines from the budget are there is no rise to council tax a Band D will still be charged at £175.03 with an increased tax base of 3.7%, which will generate more income whilst bills are not effected.

The cost of service is up £1.6m to £17.7m. This is mostly Staff costs increasing by 11.4% and premises expense costs increasing by 34.9%, even with grants to cover the National Insurance hike.

The reserves sit at a healthy £49.8m.

There is a £52 capital program over 5 years built in that is also a £25.9m investment plan for 2025/26, this plan includes £2.1m for regeneration and £3.1m for sports provision with 29% being spent in Stowmarket, our biggest town, and 71% across more rural areas.

Business rates are projected at £8.8m for 2025/26, down from £9.4m in the previous year.

Locality budgets have also been increased to £10,000 per Councillor for 2025/26.

The budget received unanimous support at the Full Council meeting on 27th February.

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Housing Revenue Account

Also approved in the meeting was the 2025/2026 HRA Budget. This includes a 2.7% rent increase for social and affordable housing to try and work towards the account balancing in the future this is still a long way off as it goes further and further into debt every year until then projected turn around in 30 years time. The way this works is a massive problem as for years there has been strict rules on how much rent can increase or freezes placed by successive governments, while costs are not protected leading to 2025 costs and rents from the early 21st century. It seems to be looked at in a different way, as most HRAs around the country are in the same boat it never seems to go into huge cuts or special measures and it is still quality of service and reducing backlogs that take precedent when planning the budget, ahead of short term affordability and sustainability. There are many efficiencies that are being carried out, to reduce visits to the same properties and better recording so that jobs can be priorities and time spent can be recorded. We also look at value for money where outside contractors are carrying out work for us and make sure quotes are correct for the job.

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

Devolution refers to the election of a single Mayor for Norfolk and Suffolk and the creation of a new Mayoral Authority.

LGR refers to the creation of new unitary councils

Devolution and LGR has continued at pace with the County Council request to be part of the priority programme being granted and county elections in May 2025 now being postponed for up to 12 months. In terms of devolution, a Mayor for Norfolk and Suffolk will now be elected in May 2026 and the Mayoral Authority will then be created with devolved powers and extra funding from central government. With substantial strategic powers, this new authority will become a new tier of local government with a potential workforce of 300 employees and its own council tax precept. Under the devolution and LGR proposals, there will be the Mayoral Authority, one or more unitary councils in Suffolk along with the existing town and parish councils. The district and borough councils will be abolished with their powers and duties absorbed within the new unitary councils. Draft proposals for LGR in Suffolk are required to be submitted by 21st March – a very tight deadline. Government would prefer to receive one set of proposals for Suffolk. However, it is likely to receive several. Suffolk County Council has already declared in favour of a single unitary council without yet producing an evidence base. Legally, it would be a brand-new entity but it might be seen by some as merely a rebranding of the county organisation whilst it absorbs all the functions currently carried out by the district and borough councils. Ipswich Borough Council has proposed a three unitary model for Suffolk. This would include a Greater Ipswich unitary council encompassing the Shotley peninsula, Felixstowe and all the land between, along with the many villages that surround Ipswich. This model would bring the Bramford, Claydon & Barham, Great Blakenham, Sproughton and Kesgrave into Greater Ipswich. Council tax equalisation could see large increases for these villages – Ipswich charge £419.58 for a Band D property in 2025/26 compared to, for example, Mid Suffolk's £175.03. It is already known that the business case would include plans for a Northern Bypass with housing to meet the government's targets. The four other district councils have yet to finalise their proposals but a two-unitary solution which combines Babergh, Mid Suffolk and West Suffolk into one new unitary, and Ipswich and East Suffolk into another unitary has the merits of using existing district 'building blocks' to create two very similar sized unitary councils (in terms of population/voters/dwellings) whilst 'more localising' the present county council functions. The evidence base for how this will meet the government's criteria is being prepared. Whether the government's decision will be evidence based or political remains to be seen. The March draft submission(s) form just the start of this exercise with detailed working plans and wider public consultation to be undertaken over the next six months prior to final submission for government consideration in September. We will do our best to keep our parishes up-to-date with these fast-moving developments but please also watch the press and local social media for news.

Elections for the shadow Unitary authorities will likely be in 2027 and they should be up and running during 2028, at which point Suffolk County Council, the 4 District Councils and Ipswich Borough Council will cease to exist.

Dog and Litter bins

From the 1st of April The price for dog and litter bin emptying will go up to £50, Poo bins down from £58.16 and up from £49.66 for litter bins. There has been some differences in how much each parish council pays and the previous price, this brings conformity, overcharged PCs will receive credit.

Locallity Grants

I have £350 remaining in my Locality coffers which can still be applied for before the end of the month, my plan is, should it not be taken up, to pool it with other councillors to go towards a grant from Save the Gipping. They do a great deal of work from Papermill Lane and Bushmans Bridge and are passionate about restoring the river to it's former glory, they remove blockages like fallen trees and vegetatiuon and repair banks and footpaths, they also leave much of the wood in a way that encourages biodiversity. I am happy to do this, but as I don't have an application from them it is only fair to let the application period expires.

Kind regards

Cllr James Caston