

To Chairman & Councillors: Holbrook Parish Council
From Councillor Mary McLaren – Stour Ward

Holbrook Parish Council Report – 18 March 2024

Difficult challenges for Babergh District Council but outlines its determination to create a more resilient and sustainable future for its residents despite severe financial pressures

In February Babergh District Council agreed to the 2024/2025 budget which includes an increase to the district's share of council tax bills of 2.99%. In practical terms a Band D home will rise from £182.64 to £188.10 per year - an increase of 10p per week. Babergh keeps only 9% of the bill with the rest going to Suffolk County Council, the Police and Crime Commissioner and town and parish councils.

The latest figures show the cost of providing district council services to residents will rise by £1.6m to £14.1m in the next year. An increase of 12.8%.

This is mainly due to inflationary pressures, particularly interest rates, energy and salary costs while there has also been a reduction in planning fees as potential development continues to slow due to the economic downturn. Government funding has increased by only 3.4%.

Babergh closed its budget gap this year with the use of earmarked reserves (once they are gone, they are gone) but we must save £6.7m over the next four years. We have only £2.4m reserves available so we have to be responsible and make tough choices.

The council has increased fees and charges to reflect the actual cost of providing licences and services, and a savings programme is also expected to achieve savings of £540k.

Council Tenants will see a 7.7% increase in rents. This will ensure the necessary investment in repairs and maintenance across councils social housing stock. The average weekly social rent will increase by £7.92 from £102.88 to £110.81. For affordable housing, weekly rents will increase from £144.51 to £155.63.

Babergh District Council provides advice and support to those struggling to pay their bills with a council tax reduction of up to 100% for residents on lower incomes.

Babergh District Council Leader joined all Suffolk Council Leaders in their condemnation of Suffolk County Council in their proposed changes to the Housing Related Support Scheme.

This Temporary Housing Scheme assists people in the care of Suffolk's Social and Children's Services. It enables individuals to learn skills which are needed to enable them to live independently prior to re-housing by district and borough councils in an attempt to prevent and relieve homelessness. However SCC now intends to remove all funding and de-commission the scheme by March 2025 having signed a five-year contract with support providers just over a year ago. The housing related service provides over 700 accommodation places through multiple specialist providers who support tenants to live independently. There is currently a waiting list of approx 400 people. This includes 16- & 17-year-olds with no family with whom to live, 18-year-old care leavers and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Other clients include those with mental health problems or learning disabilities, histories of drug and alcohol dependencies and those being released from prison. This will impact other Adult and Community Services and their budgets. The feeling is this is very short sighted and will haunt the SCC in future years.



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Parking Charges Petition is heard at full council meeting and the next steps are considered

Whichever side of the debate one stands on, Babergh Council considered the petition of 8000 names at the full council meeting which was proposing to maintain the status quo in regard to subsidised parking charges in Sudbury, Hadleigh and Lavenham. After a passionate debate it was agreed to note the petition. The next steps already in progress was to include Parish and Town Councils in an engagement exercise which was concluded on 5 March 2024. With budgets under pressure all options need to be considered, recognising that alternative services to be considered for cost-cutting action may have a greater impact on the wider Babergh communities who may not use but subsidise the free parking service.

Proposed new tariffs will be presented to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee on the 18th March and the final decision will be made by the Cabinet in April 2024. As I am Chair of that Committee it will be an interesting meeting.

Tax premiums agreed for owners of second homes and empty properties.

There is a desperate shortage of houses available for single people and families whether social renting or private renting. There are almost 600 empty properties across Babergh which could be used to meet our critical housing need. Under new legislation councils will target empty properties after just one year from April 2024 and impose a levy on second homes from April 2025.

Owners who have left properties empty after one year - the premium will go up to 100%

Owners who have left properties empty for five years or more the premium will go up to 200%

Similarly for properties left empty for 10 years the premium will go up to 300%.

Owners of second homes will see their Council Tax doubled from April 2025.

Maintaining a green perspective

- **Loft Insulation Offer for Suffolk Homes**
Visit the Green Suffolk Website for further details
- **More of Suffolks tree cover and orchards to be restored.**
Suffolk County Council have secured £201, 213 from the government to provide The Local Authority Treescapes Fund for 1877 new trees in a bid on behalf of all Suffolk Councils including Babergh District Council.

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