

**PAUL CLOVER/MARGARET MAYBURY DISTRICT COUNCILLOR'S REPORT FOR LAVENHAM
PARISH MEETING 7TH MARCH 2024.**

Babergh Budget for 2024/25

In the last few weeks prior to the budget being reported a deficit of £1.8m was declared. In stages this reduced as the figures were reviewed and reassessed to the point where a surplus was of £132k was declared before the full council meeting on 20th February. This is not an unusual occurrence when viewed in retrospect. Over the last 10 years, it can often be seen that a deficit of £1.6m is declared before income starts to come in and that future potential interest charges are better understood. The Cabinet are now highlighting a £6.7m gap in finances over the next 4 years, however this is difficult to qualify and much more work needs to be carried out on what the actual costs are as against those that are projected and where savings can be made against recent substantial increases in costs.

In detail the budget focussed on: (HRA; General Fund and Joint Capital investment and Treasury Management Strategies) plus an empty homes and second homes policy which looks to increase council tax on these.

Council tax is proposed to rise by 2.99% an increase of £5.46 pa for a band D property.

Social rents are proposed to rise by 7.7% an increase of £7.92 pw and affordable rents are proposed to rise by 9.4% which is £11.13 pw.

Garage rents are proposed to rise by 9.9% which is an increase of £3.83 pm or £4.71 pm for private rental.

Sheltered Housing proposed service charges increases are £49.12 pm and utility charges by £28.95 pm.

Babergh Cabinet proposal to introduce car park charges in the town centres of Lavenham, Sudbury and Hadleigh update

At the full council meeting I presented the petition against introducing new parking charges which comprised 8,758 validated signatures and a further 2000 signatories who were eliminated for either being out of area or not supplying full details.

The reasons for presenting the petition were as follows:

1) A decision to implement car park charges was taken by the previous rainbow coalition and without this petition district council members, both new and old, would not be allowed to debate and scrutinise this proposal. At face value, this would appear undemocratic.

2) The power to implement this decision rests solely with the Cabinet and the Director of Operations, again undemocratic, given the issue at hand.

3) The refusal by cabinet to have any assessment on the impact this decision would have on our local economies, the lifeblood of our town centre communities.

4) No explanation as to why the cost relating to car parks has risen from £185k in 20/21 to £427k in 23/24.

5) The fact that the £427k cost figure appears to be a guesswork figure and does not account for some of the £300k business rates that will be returned within that figure.

Half way through the debate a proposal was made to note the petition despite the debate being ongoing. The Chair accepted the proposal and the vote to note was carried by a small majority including some councillors who declared opposition to the car park charges.

The Babergh wide consultation with parish councils closes on 3rd March, therefore please register your views by this date.

Flood Prevention

Flooding has been an issue for many over the last few months and the loss of natural drainage systems in the district may have been a factor. I have therefore written to both the CEO of BDC and the Corporate Manager for Public Realm plus the two Suffolk County Councillors who represent our Ward to request a formal list of all open and closed ponds in the district and their drainage systems to ascertain if works are required on these to alleviate the possibility of flooding in the future.

Tax premiums agreed for owners of second homes and empty properties

Councillors at Babergh District Council have agreed higher tax premiums for owners of second homes and long-term empty properties as part of a raft of measures to bring more homes back into use.

Council leaders warn of 'catastrophic effect' of Suffolk County Council budget plans

Proposed changes to Housing Related Support 'could impact on our most vulnerable residents'.

More tree cover and orchards to be restored

Suffolk County Council has secured £201,213 from the government's Local Authority Treescapes Fund for 1,877 new trees in a bid on behalf of all Suffolk councils – including Babergh District Council. The funding will go toward planting and maintaining the trees – many of which will be 'standards', which are around six feet in height when planted.

Paperless council tax bills

In a move to save money and resource residents now have the option to receive a paperless version of council tax bills.