

Unconfirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held in the Deben Conference Room, East Suffolk House, on **Thursday, 18 January 2024 at 6.30pm**

Members of the Committee present:

Councillor Edward Back, Councillor Seamus Bennett, Councillor Dan Clery, Councillor Mike Deacon, Councillor Amanda Folley, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Mark Jepson, Councillor Geoff Lynch, Councillor Stephen Molyneux, Councillor Sally Noble, Councillor Sarah Plummer, Councillor Ed Thompson

Other Members present:

Councillor Paul Ashton, Councillor David Beavan, Councillor Vince Langdon-Morris

Officers present: Chris Bally (Chief Executive), Chris Bing (Head of Legal and Democratic Services), Kate Blakemore (Strategic Director), Sarah Davis (Democratic Services Officer), Heather Fisk (Head of Housing), Andy Jarvis (Strategic Director), Nick Khan (Strategic Director), Siobhan Martin (Head of Internal Audit), Agnes Ogundiran (Conservative Political Group Support Officer), Lorraine Rogers (Chief Finance Officer), Julian Sturman (Specialist Accountant – Capital and Treasury Management), Amber Welham (Finance Business Partner - Housing)

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Grey.

An apology was also received from Councillor Wilson, Assistant Cabinet Member with responsibility for Resources and Value for Money.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Capital Programme 2023/24 to 2027/28

The Committee considered report ES/1819 from Councillor Langdon-Morris, the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Resources and Value for Money, who gave a brief presentation relating to his report. He explained the reporting timescales for agreeing the capital programme and that it had been compiled taking account of the following main principles, to:

- maintain an affordable four-year rolling capital programme;
- ensure capital resources were aligned with the Council's Strategic Plan;
- maximise available resources by actively seeking external funding and disposal of surplus assets;
- not to anticipate receipts from disposals until they are realised; and
- to focus on the deliverability of the current projects within the programme.

The Chair reported that Chris Bing, Monitoring Officer was also present at the meeting.

The Cabinet Member reported that the General fund capital programme for 2023/24 to 2027/28 totalled £329m and the HRA capital programme totalled £81.94m.

He concluded that the capital programme linked to the overall budget position, directly linked to the Capital Strategy and Treasury Management and Investment reports and was also reviewed by the Audit and Governance Committee.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for his presentation and invited questions from members of the Committee. In response to the queries raised, it was explained that:

- The capital programme had been constructed from the Strategic Plan agreed in 2019 but had recently been reviewed line by line with each project having a business case.
- Some projects had more spend in one year than another because there were peaks and troughs for when the spend was made for each project.
- There was currently only a small amount of money allocated for coastal maintenance because bids would be made for funding, however, one of the principles of the programme was not to anticipate funding before the Council had it or had even applied for it.
- The leisure and tourism budget line was driven by specific projects and would move up and down but until funding was received it would not be included in the capital programme.
- Each year money was set aside into specific capital Reserves and, at the moment, the programme until 2027/28 would use them all up, however, come 2028/29 there would be further reserves because it was on a renewal basis so the Council could continue to fund capital programmes with the reserves available.
- The programme had been reviewed line by line and the projects would fit under the four themes of the new Strategic Plan which had an underlying narrative.
- The idea for having a resilience reserve for flooding was so that the Council could distribute help quickly whilst going through the Government grant process.
- Some projects that had external funding seemed to be in limbo, possibly due to the conditions attached to them, and they needed to be reviewed. In relation to the Local Authority Housing funding, the Council needed to decide if the project should go ahead, subject to a business plan, but if not then the money would need to be go back to DLUHC.
- CCTV equipment across the district was aging so was being reviewed and ideally new cameras with better resolution would be sourced. CCTV was monitored but the arrangements were being reviewed to ensure it was effective as possible. Discussions were being held with Felixstowe Town Council and Councillor Ashton, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services agreed to liaise with relevant Councillors regarding CCTV in Felixstowe.

- The funding for the North Felixstowe Garden Neighbourhood was the same amount overall but had been reprofiled.
- In relation to the Felixstowe sports hub, the Council had committed to working with the clubs to move to individual pitches and the project was nearing conclusion.
- £50K in the next financial year for Port Health related to just the IT equipment - no further capital funding was required after that.
- In relation to the Lowestoft Towns Fund, the Business case for each project would be scrutinised to ensure it remained viable. Some of the money was going towards the arts with £3m allocated to redevelop the Marina Theatre.

In response to queries relating to the HRA capital programme, the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing explained that:

- There was a lot of new legislation coming forward requiring improvements to the Council's stock and a work programme would be developed around compliance and standardising the service. Priorities would be reviewed and the Council would also look at how it could deliver as much affordable housing as possible.
- 977 homes were being targeted initially to have solar panels but that would depend on whether they were south facing, the pitch of the roof and capacity but even if only 500 had panels, that would help achieve the net zero target and help tenants save money. A review of properties less than 20 years old was being carried out and it was hoped to access funding to subsidise the works. If a tenant did not have a due south roof then the Council would still try to help them. The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Resources and Value for Money added that funding was allocated to improve windows and doors and provide cavity wall insulation which would help mitigate towards tenants' energy costs.
- The contract to complete Stock Condition Surveys for all blocks had already been awarded and work had been underway for about five months. A contract for all the houses was expected by the summertime next year when the Council would then have stock condition data for all of its 4,500 properties and would look to apply for grants to carry out the works.

Councillor Gooch queried that, if the four themes within the new Strategic Plan were unclear in terms of strategy, direction and priorities, how was it possible to measure the effectiveness of the budget in delivering the new Plan, although she acknowledged that perhaps it might just be clarity on the language being used.

Councillor Lynch referred to the budget for Planning and Coastal Management and stated that the figures identified were unrealistic so needed to be reviewed.

Councillor Bennett acknowledged the point made by Councillor Gooch but reminded Members that Our Direction had been discussed at Full Council and perhaps it would be better to consider Councillor Gooch's point after all the budget documents had been considered.

The Cabinet Member for Resources and Value for Money reassured Members that, having gone through the capital programme line by line, he was confident that it was realistic and whilst there might be a little adjustment required, each project was

underpinned by a business case with a rationale but they did need to be placed under each of the Strategic Plan themes and the projects were very wide ranging.

The Capital Accountant referred to the minor capital works set out on page 16 and explained that the Coastal Management projects spanned the life of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and most were subject to external funding. He added that currently Coastal Management had not identified any new projects to be added to the Programme but obviously they could do so at any point. He reassured Members that the current programme had been reviewed and were accurate at this point, however, it was obviously subject to change as projects evolved.

Having scrutinised the report, the Committee decided that it did not wish to make any formal recommendations to Cabinet in relation to the capital programme.

4 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget 2024/25 to 2027/28

The Committee received the joint report ES/1820 of the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Resources and Value for Money and the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing. The latter explained that the report brought together the Housing Revenue Account Budget for the period 2024/25 to 2027/28, with a projected outturn for 2023/24 and a summary of its reserves and balances. The HRA budgets were fully funded from existing funds to meet the Council's HRA spending plans, including the Capital Investment Programme and reserve balances as per the HRA Financial Business Plan.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing explained that, under the 2020 Rent Standard, Local Authorities could increase rents by up to CPI +1%. The September CPI value must be used, which for 2023 was 6.7%. East Suffolk Council was proposing a 7.7% rent increase in line with Government guidance for 2024/25. This rent increase was deemed necessary for the HRA to meet its required investment in its housing stock and to deliver required services to tenants. He added that social rents were based on a formula rent set by government and affordable rents, although they could be up to 80% of market rent, were set based on the Local Housing Allowance. Government had announced that the Local Housing Allowance would increase for 2024-25, however the values had yet to be released. If the increases were more than 7.7%, this would be the maximum increase applied to current tenants. It was noted that, every five/six years there was a 53-week rent year. This was where there were 53 Mondays in the financial year. 2024/25 was one of these years. It was proposed to continue to collect rents over this week as normal, but still provide two rent free weeks over the Christmas period. The rent was increased over the remaining charged weeks in the year to cover these 'rent-free' weeks. The proposed rent increase would give an average weekly social rent of £96.78 for 2024/25 - an increase of £6.92 compared to 2023/24. Service charges could only recuperate the cost of providing a service. The proposed average weekly General Service Charge for Grouped Homes for 2024/25 was £19.31 - an increase of £3.21 compared to 2023/24. The Cabinet Member concluded that the budget proposals gave a forecast HRA working balance for 2024/25 of £2.389 million, maintaining it at the minimum acceptable limit of 10% of total income.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and invited questions from Members.

Councillor Jepson expressed disappointment that the Committee had been sent an email from the Cabinet Member which included jibes about the opposition parties given that the Scrutiny Committee was cross party and neutral. The Cabinet Member explained that the email had contained the comments he made at Cabinet which he had hoped would help the Committee as he needed to be frank about the position the Council was in.

In response to Members' queries, it was noted that:

- The £30m deficit the Cabinet Member had referred to in his comments to Cabinet had been a broad figure and whilst most of it was confidential it did cover £9m for the overcharged rent and St Peter's Court including rehousing tenants.
- The information in the email regarding Right to Buy sales was written at the time the report went to Cabinet, however, there had been two further sales since then so the figure had now been updated.
- Emergency and temporary accommodation was dealt with under the General Fund not the HRA.
- Different options had been looked at instead of demolishing St Peter's Court, however, the building required long term investment which was costly and the Council wanted to provide tenants with high quality housing.
- There was a need to make sure that the staff structure met the needs of the Social Housing Act so there could be a small number of staff moving teams. The Empty Homes Officer who had been appointed following a Scrutiny Committee recommendation was a time limited General Fund project rather than HRA so the value of the post would be reviewed over the next 18 months before any further money was committed, however, it was hoped that the excellent work already undertaken would be built upon.
- Rent arrears had increased but the refund process should clear about £1m of it and they would hopefully be able to be kept at a much lower level in the future. The Council had employed Financial Inclusion Officers to help people struggling with their rents and the Ease the Squeeze campaign helped a huge number of residents. It was noted that an increase in rent arrears had been seen across the whole sector because of inflation etc.
- The Government specified that rents were increased by CPI plus 1% and although 7% was the maximum that could be charged, they had capped it at 6% last year which over 30 years added up. This was the last year of rent settlement and it was hoped there would be more clarity in future years because otherwise it made it more difficult to use the rent receipts to build houses.
- Paragraph 3.37 related to under utilised reserves originally being used to top up DHA but was currently being used for the temporary project worker posts at St Peter's Court.
- There was a risk that if rents did not increase then that would impact on the business case and that would need to be addressed. Whilst stock compliance was the priority, the team wanted to be more ambitious in future to provide as much housing as possible even if that included sensible and prudent borrowing.
- Money was allocated for projects in the capital programme which might not be delivered in the same year such as the building of the new accommodation project that would start by the end of the calendar year but could take several years to complete.

- The Council looked at properties being sold off by housing associations, however, one challenge was the number of properties being sold given that the Council's funding was already committed and the other was because they were selling them due to the retrofit costs which on average was approximately £30K per property, therefore, in many cases it was more cost effective for the Council to build than to buy existing properties and retrofit. The Council was working with Flagship who had built 666 affordable homes at social rent level in East Suffolk.
- The Council hosted the Safe Suffolk Renters Scheme which worked with landlords and tenants to provide safe homes. Enforcement was always used as a last resort. A recent impact day had been held in a particular road in Lowestoft where there were a lot of rented properties.

There being no further questions, the Chair opened debate by expressing his disappointment that this Council was not able to provide truly affordable housing given neighbouring authorities managed it and he added that he hoped that using an arms length company would help. The Cabinet Member stated that other authorities had the same issue trying to make a business case because the rents were too low and reiterated his commitment to providing 500 new homes at affordable rent over four years even if some were provided by housing associations. He added that he welcomed the involvement of all Councillors in reviewing the business plan.

Councillor Jepson thanked the Cabinet Member and Head of Housing for their candid responses but expressed concern that some of the comments had been vague and he requested that there was more clarity to ensure the Council was not over stretched and knew how the money we had was going to be spent. The Cabinet Member acknowledged that perhaps some of the wording he had used relating to borrowing had been vague but reassured Members that, before this happened, a robust business case would be undertaken. In relation to the existing budget, he stressed that he had confidence that the Head of Housing knew what she was talking about and would continue to scrutinise the budget.

Councillor Bennett stated that getting people off the streets was a priority and queried if the savings being made by housing them could justify the case to provide more affordable housing. The Cabinet Member acknowledged that savings could be made for different services but the Council could not use those savings when creating a business case for a loan to increase temporary accommodation on the basis that it would save money as that would not pay the interest. The Head of Housing explained that savings could be measured and she referred to the Housing First project where someone who had a long history of rough sleeping was given their own home with intensive support to live independently. She added that there was a huge cost benefit to prevention rather than not doing anything, not just for the Council but also for the Police and NHS.

Councillors Lynch and Folley suggested that the funding for the solar panel project for example might save some people money but it would be better used to buy houses or provide emergency housing.

Councillor Gooch referred to page 31 which gave details of the under-occupation charge and stated that it would be useful to understand how many residents this affected given some might not be able to move on because of their finances.

There being no further debate, the Chair requested the Cabinet Member and Officers to bear in mind all the comments made during this item and then proposed the following which was seconded by Councillor Lynch:

RESOLVED

That, having reviewed the Housing Revenue Account Budget, the Scrutiny Committee endorse borrowing to invest in housing as interest rates come down and the use of an arms length company, and the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing investigate new ways to finance sustainable housing potentially using borrowing both new builds and retrofitting.

5 Draft General Fund Budget and Council Tax 2024-25

The Committee received report ES/1818 of the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Resources and Value for Money who gave a brief presentation. He explained that this was the initial draft of the Council's General Fund Budget for 2024/25, presented to Cabinet on 2 January 2024. The Mid Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) provided a baseline forecast of income and expenditure and looked at the overall financial climate, including public finances and the local government financial environment. It was noted that the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement for 2024/25 had been released on 18 December 2023 and the most significant change was the New Homes Bonus (NHB) which would continue for another year (the 2024/25 allocation for ESC was £0.651m). Other settlement grants had either increased or decreased, but the overall funding position for the Council remained relatively unchanged, only an additional £16,800 of funds compared to last year.

The Cabinet Member stated that the proposal to increase council tax for 2024/25 up to the referendum limit of 2.99% or £5, whichever was higher, would equate to a District Band D Council Tax for East Suffolk of £186.57, an increase of £5.40 or 2.98%. He explained that the provisional settlement calculation assumed that the maximum council tax increase would be applied.

The Committee was informed that higher interest rates had benefited the Council with a greater return on treasury management (£1.4 to £3.15m). The Council was forecasting £1.04m of additional interest income next year (£1.4 to £2.45m).

The Cabinet Member explained that, due to the uncertainty of the timing and reform of the Business Rates (BR) system, the approach taken to the current MTFS had been to roll forward the estimates for 2023/24 through to 2027/28, with the exception being a tapering of the Pooling Benefit. This was to reflect a cautious approach to the overall Business Rates income position in the latter years of the MTFS. The BR -NNDR1 Return for 2024/25 would be completed later this month and would confirm the revised position on BR income for next year and the budget position for the report to Cabinet on 6 February 2024. The total estimated value for Pooling Benefit to Council was £4.6m which was £3.6m above original budget. The additional income from the Pooling Benefit and treasury management income had helped to mitigate some of the pressure on the budget for 2024/25. The most significant areas were pay and inflation and additional revenue funding of the capital programme. Until the BR - NNDR1 return

was completed this report presented a budget gap of £3.2m for 2024/25, which had reduced by £0.4m from the February 2023 position. The budget would be updated following completion of the BR - NNDR1. If a gap remained this would be funded from reserves to present a balanced budget to Full Council in February 2024. The opening balance on earmarked reserves was £48m. In addition to earmarked reserves, the Council held a general fund balance of £6m and no use of this was forecast currently. A risk assessment of the General Fund Balances informed the Chief Finance Officer's view of the adequacy of reserves to provide assurance to the budget. Having regard to the financial risks surrounding the budget planning process; the Council had maintained (for a number of years) the level of General Fund reserve balances at around 3%-5% of its budgeted gross expenditure (this equates to between £4m and £6m). Given the pressures on council finances and the uncertainty of government funding going forward, it might be prudent to increase this general fund balance to £8m. This would be further considered by the Chief Finance Officer in reporting at the end of the budget process and presented as part of the 2024/25 budget report to Full Council in February 2024.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for his introduction and in response to Councillors' queries, it was noted that:

- The Council had held a reserve of £6m for several years due to uncertainties, however, given the current economic climate, it was prudent to review the amount again and perhaps increase it before completing the budget process.
- The NHB supported a number of community initiatives, including the Enabling Communities Budgets, but these would need to be reviewed once the funding ended in 2026/27. It was hoped that the Government would replace the NHB by another funding stream.
- There was uncertainty over the Council's funding position and the shortfall was increasing year by year so expenditure and value for money needed to be looked at across all service areas as well as opportunities to generate income eg ESSL provided services for the Council but could also generate commercial returns that could be used to build houses for example in the future.
- ESSL started in July 2023 and the focus of the first year had been to understand what the core services were, spending commitments etc and that had shown a number of issues eg the need to invest in new equipment. A three year Business Plan was currently being drafted and the focus would be sorting out the quality of service of the contract and growing external contracts. If there were examples where staff had not performed or did not have the right equipment, these would be looked at.
- 3% had been allowed for the annual pay award but as it had been higher than that for the last few years, a corporate contingency had also been built in to the budget.

There being no further questions, the Chair invited Members to debate any recommendations.

Councillor Jepson stated that he recognised the difficulties this administration had and the uncertainty of the general election, but he had been encouraged to hear the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services' view that there was a need to look ahead at any risks.

Councillor Gooch stated that the Committee had looked at the budget in great detail and she agreed that some of the figures were vague, although she felt that the answers received at the meeting in respect of the uncertainties had justified that vagueness at the moment especially given the dire local and national circumstances.

On the proposition of Councillor Deacon, seconded by Councillor Jepson, it was:

RESOLVED

That the Scrutiny Committee endorse Cabinet's recommendations to Full Council as follows:

1. Approves the draft 2024/25 General Fund Revenue Budget as set out in this report and summarised in Appendix A5 and notes the budget forecast for 2025/26 and beyond.
2. Approves a proposed Band D Council Tax for East Suffolk Council of £186.57 for 2024/25, an increase of £5.40 or 2.98%.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Members and officers as well as the Committee for their work in scrutinising the budget papers.

The meeting adjourned from 8.50 to 8.57pm.

6 Cabinet Member Scrutiny Session

The Chair invited Councillor Langdon-Morris, the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Resources and Value for Money, to give details of the direction of travel for the services within his portfolio. The Cabinet Member began by thanking the Chief Finance Officer, her team, the housing team and Anglia Revenue Partnership (ARP) staff. He stated he had enjoyed working with officers since his appointment in May 2023 and, apart from having provided him with timely financial reporting, he felt their efforts had gone above and beyond, managing the remaining Covid grants and coping with the additional workload caused by the recent flooding events in East Suffolk.

In relation to Storm Babet flood funding support, the Cabinet Member explained that the Council's Finance and other teams, as well as ARP, continued to work closely with Suffolk County Council to distribute flood relief funds in accordance with set Government criteria to affected residents and businesses. As of 8 January 2024, letters / emails had been distributed to 366 directly and indirectly impacted residential properties in East Suffolk. 250 applications for the £500 grant had been received to date, 235 had been either paid or were being processed, totalling £117,500. In terms of Council Tax discounts, 216 discounts had been applied totalling £121,940 to date.

In relation to the business support grant of £2,500, 80 businesses had been written to, identified as potentially being eligible for support by the County Council. The application process confirmed whether a business was eligible, alongside additional fraud checks and visits by ARP officers. 40 applications had been submitted to date, 20 had been approved for funding, four rejected (due to non-eligibility on insurance) and the remainder were being processed.

Given East Suffolk had experienced two major emergencies in the past three years (Covid and flooding), the Cabinet Member stated that he had proposed that the Council maintain a Resilience Reserve. The amount and modality were still to be discussed, but its purpose would be to allow the Council to respond far more quickly and effectively in the event of future emergencies, and well in advance of central government support.

With regard to earmarked reserves, the Cabinet Member explained that for 2022/23, the Council's General Fund realised a surplus year end position of £0.76m which was placed in earmarked reserves as follows:

- £300K to Transformation Reserve
- £268K to In-Year Savings Reserve
- £200K to Revenue and Benefits Reserves

By the end of the 4th quarter 2024, a further surplus would be realised of approximately £800m which would also be transferred to earmarked reserves. The total transferred in 2023/24 to earmarked reserves would be £1.568m.

Interest payable was as budgeted and made against borrowings negotiated several years ago with very low, fixed interest rates. In terms of interest receivable, the Council's investment portfolio had benefitted from recent higher savings rates - currently averaging at 4.5 to 5.8%. Projections from the Bank of England indicated that interest rates on investments were likely to remain high for the rest of 2024 which would benefit the Council.

The Cabinet Member stated that the Council's Internal Audit capability was invaluable, given that the external audit by Ernst & Young (EY) was two years behind for all Councils. The reports generated by this team were reviewed and risks noted and acted upon. In relation to External Audit, the Council's 2020/21 Statement of Accounts had been concluded on 18 December 2023 and the audited accounts were now published on the Council's website. Following the ministerial statement in July 23 and continuing expectation of a 31 March 2024 backstop date for the completion of all outstanding audits to 2022/23, the external auditors EY had taken a number of steps to prepare for implementation of proposals. These included:

- Maximising the completion of historic audits.
- Planning for 2023/24 audits: Where capacity allowed, EY would seek to commence planning for 2023/24; focusing on the most recent set of financial statements.

It was noted that the Local Government Association had stated that Councils had experienced, in real terms, a 27% cut in core spending power since 2011.

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill had received Royal Assent in October 2023 and this gave billing authorities discretion to charge 100% premises on second homes (or empty dwellings). At Full Council in January 2023 it was agreed to approve this in principle, however, it required a full financial year's notice before a second home premium could be charged. More details about the categories of homes were still required. It was projected that this could generate £8m in future revenue with East Suffolk Council receiving a share of approximately £0.7m and the rest split between the

County Council and Police. The current MTFs and projected budgets did not consider this potential revenue stream.

The Cabinet Member stated that the Council would achieve, in accordance with Government criteria, a balanced budget for 2024/25. The current estimated budget deficit was £3.2m, or 4.2% of the 2024/25 total General Fund Budget, which would have to be taken from reserves, although, once known, the Business Rates revenues might reduce this deficit.

The Cabinet Member explained that a significant component of this projected budget deficit was due to investment in equipment for ESSL (previously Norse), however, it was anticipated that some revenue might be recouped from a share of Norse's last year's financial profits.

It was noted that there was £104m worth of borrowing over the MTFs and the Cabinet Member explained that all of the borrowing plans had been reviewed, however, he was concerned that some projects included under capitalisations that should underpin the business case but in fact undermined it. As these progressed into the final planning or delivery stages, Cabinet Members would be interrogating each business case and ensure that they aligned with the Council's strategic goals set out in Our Direction 2028. As part of finalising the last elements of the budget, funds would be set aside to support the delivery of these themes and this would be covered in the report to Cabinet on 6 February and before going to Full Council.

He concluded that he had been reassured by the Chief Finance Officer that the budgeting process was exactly the same as the one followed in previous years, to the same level of detail and to the same timeframes and with the same process of council wide sharing and scrutiny.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and invited questions from Committee Members.

Councillor Lynch pointed out that circumstances had changed and urged the Cabinet Member not to be afraid to review and change things as necessary. He referred to money allocated for bin replacements and queried if residents would be charged for brown bins. The Cabinet Member responded that he was aware that a lot of bins had been lost due to flooding and that bins were part of the ESSL budget. He added that he and Officers were reviewing the proposal for composting using brown bins. In response to Councillor Folley, the Cabinet Member stated that he would discuss rental charges for bins at largescale events such as First Light and Felixstowe Carnival. The Cabinet Member agreed with Councillor Bennett that there should be a charge for brown bins.

In response to Councillors Clery and Jepson, the Cabinet Member acknowledged it had been a steep learning curve since May 2023 to understand how the budget was put together and how the strategic plan was financed through the budgets. He stressed that he was reviewing everything to assure it aligned with the new Strategic Plan and that if the Council decided to build houses then there would be a robust Business Plan with a return on investment.

Councillor Gooch stated that she received many emails from residents regarding County Council services and queried how much influence the district had with County eg to repair potholes etc. The Cabinet Member stated that all Councillors received similar emails and he would be looking to see where East Suffolk could take more control of services within the district.

In response to queries from Councillors Lynch and Bennett, the Cabinet Member acknowledged that a large amount of capital money was spent in urban areas such as Felixstowe and Lowestoft and he quoted the Rural Services Network that rural residents paid 20% more in Council Tax than urban residents.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for his attendance.

7 Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme

The Chairman reminded Members that the review at the next meeting on 22 February was the Review of the Environmental Strategy. In addition, there would be the Cabinet Member Scrutiny Session with Councillor Smith-Lyte, Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment.

In relation to the Review of the Approach Taken to Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour in East Suffolk postponed from the 21 December 2023 meeting after it was cancelled, the Chair suggested that an informal TEAMS meeting be held for the Committee to agree how it wished to proceed with this review as there was an opportunity to do something a little different eg form a Task and Finish Group on a specific element of the report, if Members were so minded. Councillor Jepson referred to the recent Scrutiny training the Committee had received in November and agreed that it would be beneficial to look at possibly taking a different approach.

Councillor Plummer referred to the Budget Scrutiny trainer's comments that the Committee should pick up on things as they were discussed and suggested that, given the discussions at tonight's meeting, it might be beneficial for the Committee to scrutinise ESSL. The Chair reminded Members that topics for next year's Work Programme would be considered at the Work Programme Workshop to be held in the next few months.

The meeting concluded at 9.25pm.

.....
Chair