

Confirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Full Council** held in the Conference Room, Riverside,
Lowestoft on **Wednesday, 21 February 2024 at 6:30 PM**

Members present:

Councillor Paul Ashdown, Councillor Paul Ashton, Councillor Edward Back, Councillor David Beavan, Councillor Seamus Bennett, Councillor Peter Byatt, Councillor Jan Candy, Councillor Jenny Ceresa, Councillor Dan Clery, Councillor Janet Craig, Councillor Tom Daly, Councillor Mike Deacon, Councillor Deborah Dean, Councillor Julia Ewart, Councillor John Fisher, Councillor Amanda Folley, Councillor Tess Gandy, Councillor Andree Gee, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Katie Graham, Councillor Alan Green, Councillor Toby Hammond, Councillor Colin Hedgley, Councillor Mark Jepson, Councillor Beth Keys-Holloway, Councillor Vince Langdon-Morris, Councillor Geoff Lynch, Councillor Stephen Molyneux, Councillor Mike Ninnmey, Councillor Sally Noble, Councillor Mark Packard, Councillor Graham Parker, Councillor Keith Patience, Councillor Malcolm Pitchers, Councillor Sarah Plummer, Councillor Lee Reeves, Councillor Craig Rivett, Councillor Keith Robinson, Councillor Sheryl Rumble, Councillor Myles Scrancher, Councillor Rachel Smith-Lyte, Councillor Rosie Smithson, Councillor Anthony Specca, Councillor Jamie Starling, Councillor Ed Thompson, Councillor Caroline Topping, Councillor Geoff Wakeling, Councillor Sarah Whitelock, Councillor Tim Wilson, Councillor Kay Yule

Officers present: Chris Bally (Chief Executive), Chris Bing (Head of Legal and Democratic Services), Kate Blakemore (Strategic Director), Katy Cassidy (Democratic Services Officer (Regulatory)), Heather Fisk (Head of Housing), Lorraine Fitch (Democratic Services Manager), Phil Harris (Strategic Communications and Marketing Manager), Andy Jarvis (Strategic Director), Sue Meeken (Political Group Support Officer (Labour)), Agnes Ogundiran (Conservative Political Group Support Officer), Philip Ridley (Head of Planning and Coastal Management), Isabel Rolfe (Political Group Support Officer (GLI)), Lorraine Rogers (Chief Finance Officer), Alli Stone (Democratic Services Officer), Julian Sturman (Specialist Accountant – Capital and Treasury Management), Amber Welham (Finance Business Partner - Housing)

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Lawson, Mallinder, Grey and Robinson

2 Declarations of Interest

The Monitoring Officer had granted dispensations to the nine members of the Council who were also members of Suffolk County Council (SCC), and in receipt of allowances from SCC, so they could participate and vote in the budget setting items of business.

3 Minutes

On the proposition of the Deacon, seconded by Councillor Pitchers, it was by a unanimous vote

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 24 January 2024 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to amendment.

4 Announcements

Chair's Announcements

The Chair announced the sad passing of former Councillor Gordon Laing who passed away on 28 January 2024, at the age of 93. Councillor Laing was a member of both Suffolk Coastal District Council and Rushmere St Andrew Parish Council from 1983 to 2011 and served as the Chairman of Suffolk Coastal District Council in 1992.

Councillor Laing's funeral was due to be held at the Seven Hills Crematorium on Monday 26 February at 2.15pm, with a wake being held at the Ipswich Golf Club, Purdis Heath, after the service.

Councillor Deacon was invited to say a few words and spoke fondly of the well-respected former Councillor who would be sadly missed by his friends and family.

The Chair updated on the recent Model District Council event on 9 February 2024. The event was amazing, the Chair detailed the day and how it felt like he was Chairing a 'real' Full Council meeting. The young people made tremendous speeches in the Chamber during the meeting. A motion was brought forward and passed unanimously to establish a Youth Council and the Chair was looking forward to working further on developing the motion.

Positive feedback was received, notably from Castle East School who stated they rarely participated in events and felt that the day could not have gone better for the students who attended.

The Chair advised he had attended the following events:

The launch of Cancer Support Suffolk on 1 February

The Suffolk Punch Trust Royal Visit on 16 February

Vice Chair

The Vice Chair Councillor Fisher attended the Mayor of Ipswich's charity quiz evening on 15 February.

Leader's Announcements

The Leader had no announcements to make.

Members of the Cabinet

Councillor Smith-Lyte responded to Councillor Mallinder's question at the previous Full Council meeting, regarding waste collection. Councillor Smith-Lyte updated that funding for curb side collection for small electricals would be released shortly. Full details will be released in due course. Exploration was ongoing regarding how to keep electrical equipment in use for as long as possible.

Councillor Smith-Lyte concluded to state she would email Councillor Mallinder the information.

Chief Executive

The Chief Executive had no announcements to make.

5 Questions from the Public

No questions had been submitted by the electorate as provided by paragraph 29/1 of the Council Procedure Rules.

6 Questions from Members

The following questions from Members were submitted in pursuance of paragraph 29.4 of the Council Procedure Rules:

Question from Councillor Peter Byatt to Councillor Caroline Topping, Leader of the Council

What is the view of this Administration on the continuous failings of Suffolk County Council's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Service that is detrimentally affecting families in our District?

Response from Councillor Topping, Leader of the Council

'We are deeply concerned about the impact on local families of a system that isn't able to meet the ever rising demand for support with SEN and Disabilities. The Council supports a number of VCFSE organisations who work with families with SEND children and will continue to do so, but it is important that the capacity and capability in statutory support services responsible for SEND provision, such as Suffolk County Council, matches the demand.

As a previous Vice Chair of Children's education scrutiny on Suffolk County Council, I can empathise that despite the increasing rate of diagnosis, central government is just not increasing the funding accordingly. Children are rightly entitled to time with educational psychologists, and an educational health plan, but there simply aren't the resources available to successfully deliver this provision.

As a parent who would not hesitate to fight tooth and nail to make sure that my children had access to the best education possible, I would like to make it clear that my Cabinet and I will do what we can to support affected families, including through our Community Help Hub. I know that in East Suffolk Council, this commitment is shared by every single Councillor and officer, and I welcome any suggestions from across the chamber as to how we can help.'

Supplementary question from Councillor Byatt to Councillor Topping

Would Councillor Topping be willing to speak to other Suffolk Leaders with a view to writing to the government conveying, disappointment that Suffolk County Council had not been adequately funded.

Councillor Topping responded to state that she would email the other District and Borough leaders the next day and ask them to join together to write to government.

Question from Councillor Janet Craig to Councillor Sarah Whitelock, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Communities, Leisure & Tourism

As you will be aware, the Government's Household Support Fund and Cost of Livings payments will both be ceasing shortly. What Impact Assessments have been carried out by this Council on the effects this will have on those who have been relying on these?

Response from Councillor Sarah Whitelock, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Communities, Leisure & Tourism

The Council is part of both the Suffolk Collaborative Communities Board and its Tackling Poverty Sub Group, both of which have lobbied Government on this issue. The loss of both Household Support Fund and Cost of Living payments at the same time will clearly have a significant impact on households in East Suffolk, particularly at a time when local authorities have had year on year cuts to their budgets and there are no alternative financial resources to fill the gaps in more sustainable, long term support.

The Household Support Fund in Suffolk is paid to the County Council and is used to enable a range of activities including food supplies for food banks, pantries and pop-ups from Saxon House in Ipswich, the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme (LWAS) which provides cash payments to individuals and families in need, vouchers for families eligible for Free School Meals in the school holidays, grant funding for key VCFSE organisations via the Suffolk Community Foundation, and an allocation for District and Borough Housing Teams to support with a range of housing issues, including rent arrears. My fear is that the loss of these payments will put even more families and individuals at increased risk of homelessness, and will certainly contribute to the growing trend in inequality in this country.

We understand that the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) funding which comes via the County Council to ESC and enables a programme of activities and food support across the District during the Easter, Summer and Christmas holidays will continue.

The ESC Community Help Hub currently support many residents to apply for grants from the Suffolk LWAS – which allocated over £4 million during the last twelve months to individuals and families on lower incomes – and the loss of both LWAS and the Cost of Living payments will clearly have a significant impact on our population and increase the gap for many between the money they have and the money they need each month. We have requested data relating to LWAS allocations in East Suffolk over the last 12 months to enable us to assess the potential impact but we know, even without that data, that the loss of these funds is bad news for too many of our residents.

On a positive note our ESC Ease the Squeeze model is focussed on trying to support people to make sustainable changes which mean that they don't have to rely on emergency cash payments i.e. we aim to help people to increase their income (through work, benefits or grants) and reduce their expenditure to reduce the gap between the money they have and the money they need. Our Ease the Squeeze programme also focusses on longer term support like Community Pantries, Uniform Banks, Community Growing Spaces and Cooking on a Budget classes, all of which aim to build skills, reduce expenditure on food and essentials, and increase self-sufficiency in a sustainable way.

The Cabinet will continue to work with Council officers to explore additional support that could be provided to residents in East Suffolk and will work with Suffolk partners through collaborative arrangements like the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders group to try and collectively maximise the support available for local residents through the ongoing cost of living crisis. There are proposed funding increases to Citizens Advice East Suffolk, Disability Advice Service and Disability Advice North East Suffolk within the budget being considered by this Council this evening and these three organisations are key partners for us in terms of supporting our residents, particularly those most likely to be impacted by the withdrawal of this support.

7 Petitions

No petitions had been received as provided by paragraph 30.1 of the Council Procedure Rules.

8 Notices of Motion

The following Motion has been submitted in pursuance of paragraph 31.1 of the Council Procedure Rules:

Declaring a Biodiversity & Ecological Emergency

Proposer: Councillor Rachel Smith-Lyte
Seconder: Councillor Louise Gooch

This Council notes that:

There was political precedent as councils began declaring ecological and biodiversity emergencies as early as Brighton & Hove City Council in 2018, an example subsequently followed by many councils including Bath & North East Somerset Council and Cambridgeshire . Woodbridge Town Council have an established Climate & Ecological Emergency Committee . These declarations have been made across levels of local government by Lib Dem, Labour, Conservative and Coalition administrations.

The government states that ‘Local authorities are perfectly placed to lead by example, working with local communities, landowners and other partners to provide inspiring examples to others through the development of local plans and strategies.’

The Scottish Government’s Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045 states that an ‘emergency response’ is required as ‘a new international consensus is building around the urgent need to act decisively to address the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change together. Just like climate change, the loss of species and degradation of our natural environment is an existential threat to humanity. And just like climate change, the action needed is both urgent and transformative.’

This Council resolves to:

Declare a biodiversity and ecological emergency, and update the East Suffolk Environmental policy accordingly.

Develop a ‘Biodiversity Action Plan’ informed by consultation with residents, community groups, officers and councillors. This plan should be subject to annual review by the Environmental Task Group (ETG) in order to maintain its efficacy.

Lead by example by including targeted and site appropriate wildlife measures in council-owned land, buildings and communal areas, and commit to effective monitoring of biodiversity with resultant measures to be implemented by ESC to inform further action.

Explore supplementing the Greenprint Forum with a youth membership, or a partnership with local under-18 education institutions to allow future business and community leaders to have necessary access to biodiversity and ecology knowledge and resources.

Councillor Smith-Lyte outlined the purpose of the motion and the two interlinked crisis in the rising temperatures being experienced globally and the decline in nature. Councillor Smith-Lyte described biodiversity in more detail and the importance of East Suffolk ensuring that action was taken to protect nature.

Councillor Gooch seconded the motion and added her support, drawing light to the 2019 statistic from the State of Nature report which stated that in the last century 97% of wild meadows had been lost. Councillor Gooch summarised the difference between biodiversity and ecology. The former being the study at three different levels; genetic,

species and ecosystem. The latter being the study of organisms and how they interact with the environment around them.

Councillor Gooch added. 'At East Suffolk Council, we recognize the value of having, preserving and restoring a healthy biodiversity sphere in respect of the value to humans, in terms of the health, economic, social and educational benefits; and also, the intrinsic value of these systems in themselves.'

Councillor Jepson stated that he was mindful of the word emergency being used in a political arena. He acknowledged that there was a collective agreement that things needed to change with regard to the environment. Councillor Jepson summarised the work carried out by Councillor Mallinder in the previous administration and highlighted what was achieved.

Councillor Jepson was keen to ensure that there were demonstrable outcomes provided for output to be measured. He supported the motion.

Councillor Folley asked how the motion could be perceived when there were large scale building developments in operation, such as the creation of 5,000 new homes and a leisure centre in Felixstowe, using greenfield sites and farmland.

Councillor Smith-Lyte responded to state that she believed certain building projects had already been agreed or implemented. There would be the opportunity to ensure projects were done in the right way.

Councillor Hammond referenced Councillor Jepson's previous point and highlighted that ecological collapse would be a collapse of everything and therefore believed emergency was an appropriate word to use. Councillor Hammond recognised the work carried out in the previous administration, Councillor Mallinder and the desire to build on that going forward.

Councillor Deacon queried how Councillor Smith-Lyte intended the motion could alter the direction of Felixstowe's housing development in respect of environmental damage.

Councillor Smith-Lyte responded to state that it was too early to say, however the motion would give more leverage and help towards biodiversity net gain. Councillor Smith-Lyte referenced Councillor Jepson's previous point and the intention was to look to work more effectively with other partners and community groups.

Councillor Hedgley offered his support to the motion and encouraged there be consideration to any financial impacts given the wider financial challenges facing some Local Authorities elsewhere.

Councillor Ashton was happy to support the motion and was looking forward to working on developing opportunities for the open spaces in the district with the Environmental Task Group.

Councillor Ashton advised that he had attended a meeting with the head of his Ward's Farming Cluster. It was clear that lots of landowners and farmers were forward thinking

and using land for improving biodiversity. Support could be provided to assist with working through some of the rules and regulations.

Councillor Ashton concluded to state that the biggest draw on biodiversity was humans, and it was important to turn over land to allow genuine bio diversity to evolve.

Councillor Smithson supported the motion and the use of the word emergency.

Councillor Thompson outlined the importance of growing trees and provided information on a competition which provides funding to plant trees, which would help biodiversity.

Councillor Pitchers supported the motion, however had concerns regarding the planning arena and impacts on developers. Councillor Pitchers queried how would the Council ensure they did not push too far with biodiversity net gain.

Councillor Langdon-Morris advised that people are aware and noticing what was going on in their communities and referenced a recent email received relating to the removal of an ancient hedge row by a developer.

Councillor Daly stated the use of emergency was the right word and the discussed the reduction in insect numbers, highlighting the importance of insects and their habitats within the wider ecosystem. Councillor Daly added that there needed to be behavioural change in the way land was managed, mitigation put in place and education provided.

Councillor Daly advised he was working with the National Wildlife Trust on Nature Round Tables which brought together partners, including farm clusters, woodland partners and others.

Councillor Ewart raised the issue of a water emergency and whether water could be brought into the scope of the motion as it was a key element not to include.

Councillor Ninnmey supported the motion and advised of a presentation he had attended regarding the North Felixstowe Garden Neighbourhood Scheme and highlighted the loss of the greenfield land due to the development. During the presentation there was reference to the creation of a country park to the north of the development.

Councillor Noble shared her support to the motion and agreed with the use of the word emergency and working with developers to build in mitigation and improve opportunities for bio diversity net gain, quality of water and any other ways to tackle the crisis that was faced.

Councillor Topping highlighted the importance of master planning and working with developers to build in a sustainable and sensitive way.

Councillor Topping confirmed that the motion was not to undermine any of the previous work carried out, there was a lot of amazing work done and the motion intended to build on it.

Councillor Topping offered congratulations to Suffolk Wildlife Trust who had recently purchased Worlingham Marshes, which would be a new nature reserve.

Councillor Byatt welcomed the motion with some queries. These included that motion would relate to the Council's Strategic Plan and how it would be incorporated into the Climate change action plan which was instated by the previous administration. Within the action plan there were 14 strands in place, which provided the framework. Councillor Byatt stated it was important to know the detail, including statistics, costings and how the motion would fit into current workstreams.

Councillor Byatt stated the progress of the motion would need to go to Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet with regular updates available. The importance of working with developers in a positive way was supported. Councillor Byatt concluded to state he hoped to see some gaps addressed in policy tweaks and detail added.

Councillor Smith-Lyte concluded the debate to reiterate her earlier speech and stated that restoring and ecosystem and biodiversity was in the Strategic Plan. Councillor Smith-Lyte appreciated the support from the Chamber.

The motion was passed by a unanimous vote in favour.

9 General Fund Budget and Council Tax Report 2024 / 25

Councillor Langdon-Morris Cabinet Member with responsibility for Resources and Value for Money introduced the report which related to the General Fund Budget and Council Tax Report 2024/25.

At the end of the 2024/25 budget process, the Council was required to approve a balanced budget for the following financial year and set the Band D rate of Council Tax. The report set out the context and initial parameters in order to achieve that objective and contribute towards a sustainable position for the next financial year.

The report brought together all the relevant information to enable Members to review, consider and comment upon the Council's General Fund revenue budgets before making recommendations to Council on 21 February 2024.

On behalf of the Administration, Councillor Langdon-Morris thanked the Chief Finance Officer, the newly appointed Deputy Chief Finance Officer and wider team for their work and support in completing the work ready to bring to Full Council.

Councillor Langdon-Morris stated that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had reviewed the report and did not raise any issues. A balanced budget was being presented.

Councillor Langdon Morris talked through the circulated report in detail and provided some headlines which included the recommendation to increase to the referendum limit for 2024/25 for the Band D Council Tax to £186.57, which was an increase of £5.40 or 2.98%. The increase would generate approximately £0.492m of additional income for East Suffolk.

Councillor Langdon-Morris highlighted the recent emergency events regarding the winding down of COVID relief and the financial response required for flood relief in the district.

Councillor Langdon-Morris concluded to state that the 2024 / 2025 budget estimates were robust and considered known risks and mitigating strategies. The reserves were adequate for the 2024 / 2025 budget plan.

It was noted that Councillor Rumble left the meeting at 7:44pm.

Congratulations was offered to Councillor Langdon-Morris on his first budget report. There were a number of questions and speeches made by members in the chamber. These included Councillor Byatt who queried the Strategic Plan, reserves and how the themes were prioritised. Councillor Langdon-Morris responded to state that the funding was placed from earmarked reserves, was under discussion and could move over time.

Councillor Rivett congratulated the team and made a speech regarding the current financial climate and the previous administration for leaving the financial landscape of the Council in a strong position. Councillor Rivett outlined the Conservative group had examined the budget and noted there had been a conservative approach and much of it was unchanged from their approach. Councillor Rivett noted the spend profile over the next 5 years and the planned reduction of reserves from £48 million to £31 million.

Councillor Gandy requested specific East Suffolk figures be provided regarding indicators included in the referenced pages 44 and 45 of the report.

Councillor Langdon-Morris responded to state he would provide Councillor Gandy with a response outside of the meeting.

Councillor Daly thanked Councillor Langdon-Morris for the fully informative report and made commentary on elements which effected his portfolio.

Councillor Green referenced page 73 and regarding reputation and reference to 'consulting widely', Councillor Green queried who would be consulted. On page 188 there was reference to consultancy compliance requirements and queried the amount of the money against the budget point.

Councillor Langdon-Morris responded that there was an annual consultation process through the East Suffolk website. There were 192 responses, and it was hoped that would increase and more data would be collected.

The Chief Finance Officer responded regarding Councillor Green's second question, to state that it would be included in the Capital Programme Report which was next on the agenda.

Councillor Bennett referenced the Cycling and Walking Strategy and was pleased to note the commitment to support to begin to resource the strategy.

Councillor Deacon queried the reduction against the Port Health budget point.

The Chief Finance Officer responded that the Port Health staffing budget was in the report. A cost recovery position was being moved towards and there was uncertainty around the BTOM. The budget did include the staffing costs.

Councillor Ashton talked to his portfolio in a speech and answered a question from Councillor Smithson regarding the need for productivity, efficiency and given the medium-term nature of the budget why it was not being worked on presently. Efficiency work was taking place in Customer Services and within elements of IT systems at the Council. Improvements would continue to be explored regarding asset management which would continue to make efficiencies.

Councillor Parker referenced page 80 and the cost of training for the flood barrier and queried if there was opportunity to train people in-house.

Councillor Yule responded to state that it had been investigated it and at present the resources were not available. Work was ongoing to explore options.

Councillor Hammond congratulated Councillor Langdon-Morris for the report and made a speech relating to his portfolio. Councillor Hammond concluded to query the justification for regeneration costs of specific projects in the Lowestoft area, namely the Town Hall and Jubilee Parade work.

Councillor Langdon-Morris responded that the Town Hall regeneration was funded from the Town Fund and match funded from Central Government, with contribution from East Suffolk Council. Councillor Langdon-Morris offered his opinion that there was potential in Lowestoft due to the renewable energy sector in the town. He referenced the strategic vision of the previous administration to provide places for people to relax, live and work. Councillor Langdon-Morris concluded that a works were a continuation of the action already initiated.

Councillor Gooch questioned if there was a team working on the asset management rent review, queried if there was a strategy in place and if so, how was work being monitored.

Councillor Ashton responded to state that a team was working through the rent review. The team were working to catch up with tenancy agreements and rent reviews which had fallen behind schedule. It was approximated that rent had been increased by £200,000 and there was more financial gain to make. Councillor Ashton was confident there was now a professional approach to managing assets within East Suffolk.

Councillor Folley questioned what scrutiny East Suffolk could have regarding the Parish precept to ensure value for money and to know what funding was being spent on.

Councillor Langdon-Morris responded to state that he attends a number of parish council meetings and provides scrutiny to decisions made and expenditure taken.

The Chief Finance Officer added that scrutiny of parish work was within the parish areas, and it did not sit with the District Council.

Councillor Ewart requested towns such as Saxmundham and Leiston be referenced in future reports. Councillor Langdon-Morris noted the point made.

Councillor Topping congratulated Councillor Langdon-Morris, Councillor Wilson and the Finance team for the work they had done. Councillor Topping also offered thanks to the previous administration for the work they had carried out.

Councillor Wilson thanked the chamber for the attention this evening and referenced the reduction in reserves projected for the medium-term financial strategy. Councillor Wilson highlighted the work the team had carried out and in bringing the report to Council.

The vote was required to be a recorded vote. The Monitoring Officer conducted the vote and all Members present voted in favour of the General Fund Budget and Council Tax Report 2024/25.

Councillors present and voted 'for' were Councillor Ashdown, Ashton, Back, Beavan, Bennett, Byatt, Candy, Ceresa, Clery, Craig, Daly, Deacon, Dean, Ewart, Fisher, Folley, Gandy, Gee, Gooch, Graham, Green, Hammond, Hedgley, Jepson, Keys-Holloway, Langdon-Morris, Lynch, Molyneux, Ninnmey, Noble, Packard, Parker, Pitchers, Plummer, Reeves, Rivett, Scrancher, Smith-Lyte, Smithson, Specca, Starling, Thompson, Topping, Wakeling, Whitelock, Wilson and Yule.

RESOLVED

That Full Council approve:

1. The 2024/25 General Fund Revenue Budget as set out in this report and summarised in Appendix A5 to the report and notes the budget forecast for 2025/26 and beyond;
2. The reserves and balances movements as presented in Appendix A6 to the report;
3. A proposed Band D Council Tax for East Suffolk Council of £186.57 for 2024/25, an increase of £5.40 or 2.98%;
4. That the following Council Tax premiums be applied, following the enactment of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill on 26 October 2023:

the 100% premium for properties which have been empty and unfurnished for a period of between 1 and 2 years from 1 April 2024, and the 100% premium for second homes from 1 April 2025; and

5. That the Chief Finance Officer and Section 151 Officer be granted delegated authority to implement the introduction of the additional Council Tax premiums.

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

Councillor David Beavan Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing introduced report ES/1842 which related to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget Report 2024/25 to 2027/28.

Councillor Beavan talked through some of the financial information provided in the attached report. The report detailed how rents and service charges are determined, and the proposed increases for 2024/25 were set out for approval.

Councillor Beavan highlighted the 2020 Rent Standards which permitted the Council to increase its rents for at least five years to 2024/25 by up to CPI for September of the previous year plus 1%.

Due to high inflation, CPI was 6.7% in September 2023, which resulted in social housing landlords having the ability to increase rents by up to 7.7% (6.7% CPI + 1%). In line with government guidance a 7.75 increase was being proposed for 2024/2025 and was deemed necessary for the HRA to meet its' required investment in the housing stock and delivering the required services tenants.

Councillor Beavan outlined that every five to six years there are 53 Mondays in the rent year and 2024/25 was a 53-week rent year. It was proposed to continue to collect rents over the week as normal and still provide two rent free weeks over the Christmas period. To cover the Rent would be increased to an average weekly social rent of £96.78 for 2024/2025 an increase of £6.92 compared to the previous year.

The average grouped home service charge related to services provided to sheltered schemes and communal utility costs. The proposed general service charge for grouped homes for 2024/25 was set at an average weekly charge of £19.31. This was an increase of £3.21 compared to 2023/24.

Councillor Beavan noted the recent recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee which supported using as much funding as possible to provide housing across the district. A formal recommendation was noted which endorsed borrowing to invest in housing as interest rates come down, with use of an arm's length company and the Cabinet member for housing to explore options. It was noted that the action had been endorsed however would not impact on the budget report presented that evening.

Councillor Beavan made a speech which outlined the challenges faced by East Suffolk Council including budget constraints, new regulations, retrofitting aspirations and the demand for housing in general. Councillor Beavan concluded that a long-term, cross-party plan to deliver the promised new homes which were safe and sustainable.

Councillor Deacon asked if Councillor Beavan could repeat the recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Beavan responded to state that the Officers report outlined investment in housing as interested rates reduce, the use of an arm's length company and the investigation of new ways to finance retrofitting and building options.

Councillor Deacon added the request to increase the build of 50 units to 100 units.

Councillor Folley discussed an issue where properties were sold to housing associations in the South of the district. Flagship were understood to have sold several properties at a loss in auction. The money was not coming back into the area for new housing to replace it. Councillor Folley queried what the Council could do to get the money put back into the area, considering the need for emergency accommodation.

Councillor Beavan responded to state that the Council was unable to tell housing associations what to do, however the Council meet regularly and would encourage being given first refusal when properties were being sold on. At the present time there was no funding to be able to buy up such properties and therefore the exploration of other means such as borrowing or using, an arm's length company was desired to move things forward.

Councillor Byatt queried if the stock surveys and various inspection work had been completed. Councillor Byatt also queried if there was scope to receive Police Crime Commissioner funding for antisocial behaviour (ASB) and extra resources in tackling ASB in local communities.

Councillor Byatt noted the use of local companies in the report and questioned if there was any option to recover any materials used in the refurbishment of St Peters Court, prior to demolition.

Councillor Beavan responded to state that 90% of the stock surveys were completed. The foundations for Deben Fields were in place. Damp and mould work was continuing. With regard to ASB Councillor Beavan acknowledged there were problems and having additional resources would be useful to explore. He confirmed the willingness to use local companies for work and the awareness for use of consultants. The cost of demolition of St Peters court was currently around £2 million. Councillor Beavan concluded that regarding Community Led Housing, work in underway to explore opportunities.

Councillor Ewart raised that she was working with Suffolk County Council who were looking into liquidating some of its properties and that could be something East Suffolk could explore. It could create social or key working housing, as an example.

Councillor Beavan agreed that it could be something to explore and was part of work referred to as 'One Public Estate' and included buildings such as Suffolk County Council's building, like police stations and old fire stations.

Councillor Jepson raised that care was needed regarding borrowing and spending and ongoing costs needed to be considered.

Councillor Beavan responded to state the Council would borrow prudently and needed a minimum revenue to make business cases viable, investment was recognised as being needed to improve opportunities to increase income.

Councillor Beavan advised there would be the requested hot house in the summer where housing could be discussed in depth.

Councillor Lynch queried if money invested in solar panelling could be better spent on increasing Council Housing.

Councillor Gandy queried if the Council was going to explore a private rental licensing process.

Councillor Beavan responded to state that it could be explored and work was on-going in the private sector.

Councillor Langdon Morris thanked Members for their support and work on interrogating and reviewing the finances regarding housing in preparation for the meeting.

Councillor Beavan concluded the item to state that there was confidential work taking place with regard to solar panels, which he would update on when in a position to. Solar panels provided free energy to tenants and could provide energy back into the grid as well as being good for the environment.

On the proposition of Councillor Beavan, seconded by Councillor Langdon-Morris it was by unanimous vote

RESOLVED

That Full Council approve:

1. The draft HRA budget for 2024/25, and the indicative figures for 2025/26 to 2027/28;
2. Movements in HRA Reserves and Balances;
3. Proposed rent increase of up to 7.7%. In line with the Rent Standard September 2023 CPI + 1%.

4. Service charges and associated fees for 2024/25;

5. Rent and Service Charges to be charged over a 51-week period unless being used for Temporary Accommodation when a 53-week period will be applied, due to 2024/25 being a 53-week year.

That the following be noted:

6. Projected outturn position for 2023/24;

7. Changes affecting public and private sector housing and welfare;

8. Effects of the cost-of-living crisis to the HRA.

On the proposition of the Chair, seconded by the Vice-Chair, it was resolved by Members to extend the meeting beyond 3 hours.

It was noted that Councillor Ninnmey left the meeting at 9:20pm

11 Capital Programme 2023/24 to 2027/28

Councillor Langdon-Morris Cabinet Member with responsibility for Resources and Value for Money introduced report ES/1841 which related to the Capital Programme 2023/24 to 2027/28.

As part of the budget setting process, the Council was required to agree a programme of capital expenditure for the coming four years. The capital programme played an important part in the delivery of the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), which in turn supports wider service delivery. The report set out the Council's capital programme including revisions to the current programme for the financial years 2023/24 to 2027/28. The report also formed the basis of Scrutiny Committee's review of the Budget at its meeting on 18 January 2024 as required under the Budget and Policy Framework.

Councillor Pitchers queried why the funding related to the Lowestoft Tidal Barrier was included on page 183 of the report.

The Chris Finance Officer responded to state that when the papers were prepared the decision had not yet been made.

Councillor Langdon-Morris concluded the item to thank colleagues for their support and assistance with preparing the report.

On the proposition of Councillor Langdon-Morris seconded by Councillor Wilson it was by unanimous vote

RESOLVED

That Full Council:

1. Approve the General Fund capital programme for 2023/24 to 2027/28 including revisions as shown in Appendix B.
2. Approve the Housing Revenue Account capital programme for 2023/24 to 2027/28 including revisions as shown in Appendix G.

12 Capital Strategy 2024/25 to 2027/28

Councillor Langdon-Morris Cabinet Member with responsibility for Resources and Value for Money introduced report ES/1856 which related to the Capital Strategy 2024/25 to 2027/28

The Audit & Governance committee considered the report on 8 January 2024 and did not make any specific recommendations.

The Capital Strategy in Appendix A gave a high-level overview of how capital expenditure, capital financing and treasury management activity contribute to the provision of local public services in East Suffolk, along with an overview of how associated risk is managed and the implications for future financial sustainability.

There being no questions, on the proposition of Councillor Langdon-Morris, seconded by Councillor Wilson it was by unanimous vote

RESOLVED

That Full Council:

1. Approve the Capital Strategy for 2024/25 to 2027/28

13 Treasury Management Strategy Statement for 2024/25 & Treasury Management Investment Strategy for 2024/25

Councillor Langdon-Morris Cabinet Member with responsibility for Resources and Value for Money introduced report ES/1857 which related to Treasury Management Strategy Statement for 2024/25 & Treasury Management Investment Strategy for 2024/25.

The report sets out the Council's Treasury Management Strategy for 2024/25 and the Treasury Management Investment Strategy for 2024/25 and covers:

The current treasury position.

Treasury indicators which limit the treasury risk and activities of the Council.

Prospects for interest rates.

The borrowing strategy; and

The investment strategy

Councillor Smithson questioned the how confident the Council could be that money borrowed from other authorities was secure.

The Specialist Accountant for Capital and Treasury Management Financial Compliance advised that there was a matrix and scrutiny over any investments made and there was confidence in the lending decision made. If an authority issued a Section 114 Notice, or experiences financial difficulty there would be the option to utilise the Public Works fund to repay any borrowed money from Local Authorities.

Councillor Gandy queried how quickly some properties that were losing money could be removed from the Council's portfolio as referenced on page 235, table 1 of the report.

Councillor Langdon-Morris advised he would respond in written form to Councillor Gandy on her question.

Councillor Byatt questioned that investments were being made ethically.

Councillor Langdon-Morris responded to state that whilst there was consideration there was also work to be done and stated it would be good to follow up a discussion with Cabinet Members and the finance team to further explore ethical compliance.

Councillor Wilson added that there was a recent discussion about the choice of bank the Council used and that all options were considered and with a view to disruption and upheaval which was concluded not to be a viable option. Ethical investment was a consideration for conversations and decisions made.

Councillor Langdon-Morris concluded to state that it was a significant sum of money projected over 4 years.

On the proposition of Councillor Langdon-Morris, seconded by Councillor Wilson, it was unanimously

RESOLVED

That Full Council:

1. Approved the Treasury Management Strategy for 2024/25 and the Treasury Management Investment Strategy for 2024/25.

2. Notes the 2022/23 Outturn report at Appendix C and the 2023/24 Mid Year report at Appendix D.

14 Exempt/Confidential Items

On the proposition of Councillor Specca, seconded by Councillor Fisher, it was by a unanimous vote

RESOLVED

That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

15 Exempt Minutes

- Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

The meeting concluded at 9:42pm

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Chair