

District Council Report

2020/21 Budget Summary

Babergh Councillors are to review the 2020/21 budget in the coming weeks. While the budget this year is in a better position than was expected, the council is still facing many pressures. Details can be found on the Council website (<https://www.babergh.gov.uk/news/babergh-councillors-consider-budget-for-202021/>), but the main headlines include –

- A proposed increase of 3% to council tax – equivalent to just 10p a week or £5 over the course of a year for a Band D property (increases range from £3.33 per annum for the smallest Band A property to £10 for the largest Band H property).
- No change in the Council Tax Reduction Scheme that sees poorest residents pay just 5% of their bill.
- A change to empty property discount, reducing the period that unoccupied and unfurnished properties pay discounted council tax from three months to 28 days.
- An increase in long-stay car parking charges from £2 to £3. However, short-stay parking for up to three hours will remain free at many of our town centre car parks.
- After four years of reductions, the council is also proposing putting up council house rents by 2.7% meaning a £2.19 per week increase for tenants – although, even with this increase, rents are still lower than in 2015/6. Sheltered housing tenants also face an increase of £2 a week on their bills, but their utility payments remain static for another year.

Councillors are also considering the introduction of penalties to tackle council tax fraud, alongside the adoption of a new protocol produced by Citizens Advice and Local Government Association for the collection of council tax arrears, in order to help those in genuine need.

A payment of £1,055k will be received from the New Homes Bonus (NHB) compared with £683k in 2019/20, an increase of £372k. However, this figure is for 1 year not 4, and the NHB is due to be phased out by 2023/24. We are moving in right direction to remove reliance on NHB funding and generate a surplus to invest in the district, but there is more to be done over next 3 years

Of this £1,055K, £513K is being used to balance the budget and £542K is being used to supplement the transformation fund.

The Housing Revenue account (HRA) is looking healthy with a strategic reserve of £12.7M. The HRA Capital programme includes –

- Significant investment in new build and acquisition properties - £26.9m up to 2023/24
- Working with Iceni to identify development sites
- £24.3m proposed spend on maintenance and improvement programme to 2023/24

The Cabinet papers were in the public domain from 8th January. Cabinet Draft Budget report is due by 16th January. The budget will then go before Overview and Scrutiny and back to Cabinet before coming to Council on the 26th February.

Enforcement Service Update January/February 2020

The Council is currently undertaking a review of its enforcement processes and procedures. The intention is to make the way we respond to and investigate allegations reported to us swifter, more efficient and more transparent.

Whilst we're undertaking the review, we may take a little longer time than usual to respond to, acknowledge reports received and provide updates. We will nevertheless continue to prioritise cases in line with published policy and will ensure that we pursue investigations in a timely way.

The aim is to have this work completed, with revised processes and procedures in place, by the end of March 2020. The council apologises for any inconvenience caused whilst this work is undertaken and would like to thank everyone for their patience."

We would also encourage the use of the online "Report It" form for any new complaints. If the relevant questions are completed, then the support team can create a case without any delay.

Councils' £420k three-year guarantee to support Citizens Advice

At cabinet meetings last week, councillors at Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils gave the go ahead to support Citizens Advice (CA) with more than £420k.

Recognising the value of Citizens Advice which is estimated to have saved £8.1m across Suffolk, and with growing numbers turning to them for help - both councils have agreed a more sustainable funding approach with two three-year funding agreements.

In Babergh, funds of at least £160,500 for Sudbury and District Citizens Advice were also given the green light over the same three-year period, equating to £53,500 per annum.