

Brett Vale Annual Parish Meetings 2024

Babergh District Councillor's Report

New Administration

The Green, Independent and Liberal Democrat groups agreed to power-share at Babergh for the next four years after no party achieved an overall majority in the elections last May. Part of the agreement was to have a rotating leadership, with a change each May. Cllr David Busby was elected leader for the first year. Unfortunately, he had to step down in September and take a break from council business due to health issues, with me acting up temporarily into the leader's role. I will be handing over to Cllr Deborah Saw next month.

We set out our initial vision and priorities for the next four years and then held a major engagement exercise with residents, communities, businesses, stakeholders and partners – so they could tell us whether they think we are focusing on the right issues. It was a very useful exercise which confirmed that, for the most part, we have got the priorities right, but we did make some changes. The priorities are grouped into three themes:

- Revitalised and improved environment
- Thriving economy
- Resilient communities

State of the District reports

In October, we published our State of the District report, which provides a treasure trove of useful data on issues such as housing, environment, health and wellbeing, and the local economy. Insight from these reports is also helping influence future council priorities. The report is available on our website.

Planning

In November, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils formally adopted part 1 of our Joint Local Plan - the blueprint for the districts' future development until 2037. This followed examination by the inspectors over the Summer, followed by their assessment that the plan is sound. It is proving to be very effective – not only in giving clear guidance to developers, our planning officers and planning committee members, but also in defending appeals against planning decisions. Part 2 is now well underway.

We are also progressing a local listed building consent order to enable owners to install energy efficiency measures, including solar panels, in listed buildings, without the need for individual listed building consent.

Neighbourhood Plans

The number of parishes with Neighbourhood Plans is steadily increasing with 17 adopted now and another 21 are in progress. These have considerable weight as they form part of our planning policy

and, despite some cynicism, planning decisions are made on the basis of what a neighbourhood plan says, as Assington can attest.

CIL

Significant amounts of CIL continue to be collected from developers, with much going back to communities to fund community projects including play areas, cycle paths and village hall improvements, in addition to funding major infrastructure such as school extensions.

EV charging points in council car parks

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are installing 28 new electric vehicle chargers in our car parks, financed by a government grant. The government is encouraging councils to do this. This has proven to be controversial with many people questioning whether there is the demand. It may well be that we are ahead of the curve on this and, if it proves that demand is not as expected, we will return some of the bays to general parking until demand increases.

NG Pylons

The pylons saga grinds on.

The Norwich to Tilbury project non-statutory consultations took place last year and the 10-week statutory consultation started on 10th April.

Both Babergh and Mid Suffolk continue to oppose the plans and we have significant concerns, particularly over the impact on our residents and the environment. We continue to state our preference for a coordinated offshore grid as it provides the best technological solution for connecting the North Sea wind farms off the East Anglian coast with those further north, the interconnectors to the continent and delivery of the energy to London and the South-east. We don't believe this is being given the serious consideration it deserves. However, in the light of the recent NG ESO Review's assessment of underground HVDC we will look at this to determine how we respond to the consultation.

The Bramford to Twinstead Reinforcement project is progressing towards its Development Consent Order. We have continued to submit formal opposition to the proposals, with concerns with the site of the Dedham Vale East CSE compound and the overhead section between the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley underground sections.

Community Support

We continue with our varied and important programme of support activities for our communities and residents. This work is often under the radar as it is not a statutory service, but it is valued greatly and makes a huge difference to many. We have:

- Provided support for residents struggling with the cost of living crisis.
- Provided activities to help tackle loneliness for older residents.
- Introduced a new scheme to improve the wellbeing of young people in schools and connect them with their communities.

- More than 30 community projects in Babergh and Mid Suffolk have each received a share of more than £36,000 to keep residents warm and connected this winter.
- Other projects have received a share of £230,000 in grants and funding as part of our commitment to residents' wellbeing and ensuring communities have access to local community facilities.

Repairs and energy efficiency improvements in council houses

We are carrying out a major programme of repairs and installing energy efficiency measures in our council houses. The repairs programme has suffered recently for a number of reasons, but we have committed extra funding and are carrying out a major overhaul of the repairs service.

Babergh and Mid Suffolk received £1.6m of government funding last month to add to £2.25m already committed by the councils to install energy saving measures.

Homelessness Prevention

We continue to help households at risk of homelessness with more than 1,500 having been helped across Babergh and Mid Suffolk since 2019 as part of our homelessness reduction and rough sleeping strategy.

Changing Places Toilets

New fully accessible toilet facilities for those with additional needs are being installed with the help of a government grant. There will be one as part of the new café in Belle Vue Park in Sudbury, and I attended the official opening of another at Flatford Mill, managed by the National Trust, last month. Official openings of toilets – the glamorous life of a council leader.

Flood support

Emergency council teams worked to support areas impacted by floods this winter, particularly in the wake of Storm Babet in January, offering practical support, as well as information and advice on what to do for those whose homes or businesses were affected.

Budget

We have increased Babergh's element of council tax bills by 2.99%, the maximum we are allowed by government – any more would require a referendum to get approval. This is an additional £5.46 to £188.10 a year, or £3.62 per week, for a Band D home. Babergh's proportion is only 9% of the total council tax.

We have also 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.

We have also had to increase our council house rents to ensure that we can afford ourthe repairs and energy efficiency improvements.

Balancing the budget has only been achieved through the planned use of £1.1m of earmarked reserves. In total we are forecasting to use 48% of our earmarked reserves over the two years 2023/24 and 2024/25 – clearly not a sustainable position.

We are facing a forecast cumulative budget gap of £6.7m over the next four years and we will be undertaking a number of measures to address this: we are increasing the fees we charge for many of our discretionary services, we have identified further savings we can make in how we do things, we will reconfigure the senior leadership team, we will not fill staff vacancies unless the post is essential and we will postpone some capital projects, but we do want to try to maintain the services that many people want and value. There aren't any easy decisions, which brings me on to the most controversial: the decision to charge for short-term parking. The majority of stays will only cost £1 and we will be including measures to ensure those attending surgery appointments won't have to pay and to provide permits for parents dropping off and picking up children from schools. We simply have no choice but to do this and our charges will still be among the lowest in Suffolk – indeed the country.

Fears that businesses will suffer are simply not seen elsewhere – if this were true, it would mean that nearly every town in the country is struggling and councils everywhere would be rushing to remove parking charges. The truth is high streets thrive or fail for reasons unrelated to parking. What they have to offer matters.

Most councils are struggling: some have issued bankruptcy notices and other may well follow in the coming months. All, irrespective of political control, are critical of the current local government financing regime, which is no longer fit for purpose. A long-term settlement has been promised and postponed for many years. Along with other council leaders, I have called on the government to address the local authority funding crisis.

And finally...

Babergh, along with most county and district councils, was 50 years old on 1st April. Created by the Local Government Act 1972, the new councils came into being in 1974. Some, of course, have since undergone further reorganisation with the abolition of the short-lived metropolitan county councils and the on-going formation of unitary councils. It will be interesting to see what the future brings for us. The previous local government structure lasted 80 years so change is probably inevitable at some point.

For all its perceived shortcomings, Babergh does work extremely well for our residents in increasingly challenging circumstances. So, it was wonderful to see our staff and councillors recognised by Babergh and Mid Suffolk being named UK council of the year 2024 at the prestigious iESE Public Sector Transformation Awards. I was delighted to represent Babergh at the ceremony at Church House, Westminster, last month. More glamorous than the opening of a toilet!

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