

Brett Vale Annual Parish Meetings 2021

Babergh District Councillor's Report

A lot has happened at Babergh since this time last year, when we were really only at the start of our response to the Covid-19 crisis. As you will see from this report, in addition to the extra work that Covid-19 has required, we have been able to maintain a near normal service and we have made some notable achievements.

Covid-19

Since the start of the pandemic, we have distributed a large amount of government support to businesses in the form of an ever-increasing array of finance packages, distributed our own community grants, worked with our local government, health, probation and police partners to ensure all homeless people had somewhere to go and also worked with our partners in the county through the Suffolk Resilience Forum to support the vulnerable. At the same time, we have kept all our normal services running, with only temporary pauses of things like garden waste collection.

The Home, But Not Alone free phonenumber has helped thousands of people and families across Suffolk, who often didn't have a network of family or friends to call upon, to access emergency support such as food and medicine deliveries and befriending schemes during the lockdowns.

There is a lot of countywide information available for all things related to the current Covid-19 situation in Suffolk, including statistics, how to access testing and the latest on the vaccination rollout.

But we do now seem to be on steady path out of this crisis, due to the really excellent vaccination programme and a well-oiled testing system. Here is Suffolk, from being a laggard at the beginning of the year we are now the best performing county in England. The Covid infection rate has dropped from an alarming 650 per 100,000 in early January to about 14 per 100,000 now.

I want to thank all the volunteers in the district for everything they have done to support their neighbours during the pandemic – and also the Babergh and Mid Suffolk staff, many of whom have put in a huge amount of extra time to support the Covid response as well as their day jobs.

Planning

The Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan was approved at council meetings in November and, following the final consultation, we submitted it for examination on 31st March.

Both Councils also recently published their Five-Year Housing Land Supply position statement, evidencing that Government housing requirements can be met by the districts until 2025 and beyond.

We provided responses to the Planning white paper and also to the consultation document on changes to the current planning system.

It has been suggested that the white paper removes local control and favours large developers, although there are explicit statements to the contrary in the white paper. As is often the case, people read into these things what they want to see. The current planning system is too complex and inefficient, but some of the criticism from government aimed at local authorities is ill-informed. It remains to be seen what legislation is proposed but, through the District Councils' Network and

the Local Government Association, we will seek to influence and monitor whatever is laid before parliament.

Local Economy

Our businesses have had a tough time, but many have been able to keep going and others have had much-needed support. 28 businesses from across Babergh and Mid Suffolk were shortlisted in our first ever business Innovation Awards in November. These were held virtually and were a great success. Of the 11 winners, two were from Hadleigh: Challs International won the Most Innovative SME category and Ferguson's Deli won the High Street Innovation award.

Another success has been the Sudbury Virtual High Street that allows shoppers to enjoy the very best of Sudbury from the comfort of their front room. More than 100 businesses have now signed up to this and we will now be rolling it out to the other towns in the districts.

We are excited by the success of the Freeport East bid, which will encompass Felixstowe and Harwich ports and the new Gateway14 business park outside Stowmarket. We expect a boost with businesses wanting to locate in Babergh as well as neighbouring districts.

A new £300,000 funding programme for small businesses across Babergh and Mid Suffolk has been agreed - with funds to be allocated over the next three years. This will provide a much needed boost to businesses after the coronavirus crisis to help sustain and create jobs, provide opportunities to grow and innovate as well as react to the changing business landscape.

We have agreed to an £180,000 upgrade in CCTV provision for Hadleigh and Sudbury.

Babergh 2021/22 Budget

At the February council meeting, Babergh's budget for 2021/22 was approved and included an increase in council tax of £5 (2.96%) a year for a Band D property. The annual council tax for a Band D property will now be £173.86. There will also be a small increase of 1.5% in council house rents.

Our investments continue to be an increasing and necessary part of our income to replace lost government support and are forecast to provide 14% of our income this year. We have a balanced budget this year, with some spare funds to top up our reserves, but the medium term outlook still presents a challenge and we await a long-term funding settlement from the government.

We have, of course, suffered significant increased costs and income reduction due to Covid, but the government has provided extensive support, which covers much, but not all, of these losses.

Parking

We reviewed our parking provision across the district and whilst we recognised the need and desire to retain an element of subsidised parking, we have made changes to ensure the Council's finances are secure and also to encourage more sustainable transport options for the future.

We have also introduced the MiPermit app in our car parks so that users do not need to get a paper ticket.

Environmental Measures

Cabinets at Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have approved a raft of environmental measures to help the councils achieve their ambition of becoming carbon neutral by 2030. We have:

- Created action plans for Sustainable Travel and Biodiversity.
- Approved running our vehicle fleet on HVO – Hydro-treated Vegetable Oil – to cut their carbon emissions by up to 90%.
- Approved the installation of micro-generation and electricity storage solar carports in Sudbury and Stowmarket.

We have also been able to keep up our regular waste collections, despite periods of reduced staffing levels due to crew illness and isolation. We did, however, have to suspend the garden waste collection over winter, but this has now resumed.

New Pool in Hadleigh

Following construction delays and the lockdown restrictions, the new pool in Hadleigh will finally open this month when the leisure centre reopens. The facilities are a significant improvement on what was there before and I am sure it will be a great success.

Babergh top for life satisfaction in Suffolk

And finally, a recent survey by the Office for National Statistics has ranked Babergh as having the greatest life satisfaction in the county – reflecting the district's residents, businesses, heritage, and 'natural' beauty.

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