

Annual District Council Report

It has been an increasingly difficult year.

It was a year that included the Queens platinum jubilee in June. A time that brought the village, in fact many towns and villages, together in happiness. Unfortunately, this was sadly followed by her death, in September. However, our villages have all celebrated the coronation of the new King this week.

With the country also seeing inflation rocket, energy prices increasing drastically and strikes everywhere, the cost of living has been getting worse for us all. With no end in sight to the war in Ukraine the future still looks difficult.

The Council is not immune to this economic situation and the pressure to deliver a balanced budget this year increased. The net cost of delivering services is set to increase by almost 20% while the cost of running and maintaining the council's housing stock has already increased by 50%. To ensure that essential services are maintained the finance team leant on reserves, along with increases in Council Tax, rents, and fees to balance the books. With the outlook continuing to look bleak the next few years will be challenging.

Local matters

Within the village there have been a number of issues, which included the flooding of Canada Cottage garden, blocked ditches, flooded gardens in Crowcroft Glebe and issues in Crowcroft Road due to the building works ongoing.

I arranged meetings with Babergh planning and Councillor Lindsey arranged representatives from Suffolk County Council to meet with parish council representatives to try to resolve the ditch issues.

I have also called in planning enforcement a number of times regarding the two developments in Crowcroft Road. Planning enforcement spoke to each developer and visited the sites but took no further action.

Council Matters

Cost of Living -

In recognition of the difficulties that the residents of Babergh are encountering, the council developed a cost-of-living plan. This five-point plan aims at providing support for residents and staff by bringing together work already underway with new initiatives that provide a suite of measures focusing on providing advice and support, maintaining people's health, and building on work already underway since the launch of the councils' Communities and Wellbeing strategies.

The council has also had a key role in providing support packages to combat the cost of living, energy bills and council tax. The council tax reduction benefit was run alongside a number of national schemes put in place to help with rising bills.

Corks Lane, Hadleigh

Inflationary pressures in the construction industry put pressure on Babergh District Council, back in June. The pressures resulted in a shortening of tender validity periods - to a period of a few weeks and sometimes only days, compared with several weeks, or months previously.

The difficulties meant that the Babergh Cabinet had to agree to increase the peak funding threshold for Babergh Growth Ltd to £7m for use to deliver the redevelopment of the former HQ site in Hadleigh.

Work has started on the site now and despite concerns that have been raised about the chances that this project will lose money, the cabinet member for finance and asset management was confident that it is still on course for a profit.

Funding

The council continue to invest in local infrastructure projects via the Community Infrastructure Fund. More than £500,000 in funding was approved for the latest round of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) bids. 11 bids received support, including a 3G pitch for AFC Sudbury, an activity room and extension at Stutton Village Hall and a new play area in Capel St Mary.

Environment

The Council voted in favour of motions submitted to try to improve the waterways of our district and Council Homes.

In an attempt to reduce pollution in our waterways the motion was to hold Anglian Water to account for allowing increased sewage outflows from new developments. The Council home motion, submitted by me, was trying to improve the chances of retrofitting council homes and their energy efficiency.

Housing

There has been pressure on both councils following an in-depth review of the Councils' Building Services that identified that a number of properties in the districts were found to be failing Health & Safety compliance. The Council have self-referred themselves to the regulator for social housing and detailed investigations showed that some of homes were not compliant, and urgent action is being undertaken to resolve the issues.

A Regulatory Notice was issued for this breach of compliance, which means that it will now monitor Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils and will meet with the Council regularly to ensure the necessary changes are made.

Other Strategies –

Parking

The councils' approved their first ever joint parking strategy. The strategy includes prioritised recommendations to improve all types of parking, from council-owned car parks to on-street parking. The recommendations include updating signage and

markings, increasing safety provisions, providing more EV charging, and cycling facilities, and introducing resident permit schemes to allow overnight parking.

Tree Canopy Survey

A tree canopy survey that has been completed by the Council has identified key planting locations and significant benefits in increasing tree coverage across Babergh that will help tackle biodiversity loss and climate change.

The survey found that just over 10% of Babergh is covered by trees, ranging from 5.5% in the Lavenham ward, to 19% in the Orwell ward.

May Elections

The May elections produced a tremendous change in Babergh Council. With the election of 10 Green Party Councillors the party becomes the largest group within the Council. The rest of the Council is made up of 9 Independents, 8 Conservatives, 5 Lib Dems and 1 Labour. Negotiations are ongoing on the make-up of the new administration.