

District Council

Annual Report

Locally, I am pleased that County Council have agreed to reduce the speed limits on the main A1141 road to 40mph, although I understand that we are still awaiting completion of this work. Another issue locally, which is again a County matter but one that I have been involved with is the Ford in Rectory Road. It is disappointing that drivers continue to ignore the obvious, even when water is clearly too deep, but unfortunately this has happened on a number of occasions leading to numerous abandoned vehicles. I have asked the County council to review the signage, but as a district councillor I have no powers to force them to do this.

In terms of Babergh council, the year started with the District elections back in May last year. This turned out to be a particularly good time for Green Party councillors, who were successful in getting ten members elected. This did not just increase our numbers significantly but made us the largest group within the Council.

As the largest group on the new administration, we have had a major say in setting the **Councils key priorities** that will be the basis of all plans for the next 4 years. These are an Increase in climate change action, close collaboration with communities, and a focus on good housing.

The administration also set out short-term ambitions including ways of improving the energy efficiency of listed buildings; a relaunch of neighbourhood plans; identifying more land for community housing and improving planning enforcement using the considerate constructor's scheme, most of which have started.

In terms of the **Considerate Constructors Scheme (CCS)**. This is something I proposed a couple of years ago. Although approved by full council at the time, nothing happened. Thanks to our increased presence in the administration things have now moved on. The scheme sets out how construction teams should respect neighbours, minimise impact on the environment, and have an inclusive and healthy workplace.

When developers receive planning permission, we will encourage them to sign up to the scheme. We also aim to make it mandatory in communities where construction could have a severe disruptive impact. The council is looking to strengthen this approach in the future.

Part one of the Council's **Joint Local Plan** finally came in to affect. The decision which has been long in coming will provide the council with up-to-date policies to direct planning decisions. Meanwhile, over the next two years part 2 of the plan will review sites put forward for possible development. A call for these sites went out to landowners and parishes last year.

One area that is presenting significant challenges is **Housing**. The council was already facing compliance issues following their social housing referral in 2022. On top of this there was still a backlog of repairs dating back to Covid.

Unfortunately, we also discovered significant issues with the state of Council housing stock across the district. The group have made this matter a priority and will be pushing the council to improve on the situation as soon as is possible. To help with this the council have released £943,000 from reserves to help clear the repair backlog. The money would also support wider improvements to the council housing service in the district.

The housing team have also developed a new strategy to help tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. This strategy, developed by the new team, focusses on early prevention & intervention, and making rough sleeping rare, brief, and non-recurring, among other things.

The council have also approved higher tax premiums for owners of second homes and long-term empty properties in an effort to tackle the homes crisis without the need to rely on new builds.

The finance team highlighted the Councils financial issues at the backend of 2023, leading into this year. The **budget** received approval, but it was not easy and was only possible with use of earmarked reserves along with increases in council tax, rents, and fees.

The Council had to increase Council Tax by 2.99%, which equates to a rise of 10p a week on a band D home. Council tenants also saw an increase of 7.7%. Social rents increased by £7.92 a week and affordable rents increased £11.13 a week.

Ongoing financial pressures, however, still remain a concern for the council with a potential budget gap of £6.7m in the coming years. With income falling short of this the council needs to look at all income and funding streams.

The financial challenges led to one of the most controversial decisions that the Council have had to make, the introduction of **parking charges** in Hadleigh, Sudbury and Lavenham. The charging proposal, approved by the cabinet last month, start at £1 for an hour in the short stay parking and £1 for two hours in the long stay. This then increases by 50p an hour up to four hours in the short stay.

The decision was called-in to Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) last week by Hadleigh and Sudbury councillors. O&S reviewed the decision and decided that cabinet did not give the option of 1-hour free parking fair consideration. The car parking charges decision will now return to Cabinet for review in June. While implementation of the charges will happen now, the tariffs may be different.

Other news

- CIFCO, the council's commercial property arm, is still generating decent income for the council and is currently generating 11% of Babergh's income. This means that since establishing CIFCO Capital Ltd it has generated a net income of more than £12m for Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils. During previous administrations, the councils borrowed a total of £99.2m to invest in commercial property. This now comprises of twenty-two properties with eighty-three tenants based, mainly, in the eastern region split across industrial, retail and office sectors to balance risk. The income received from CIFCO covers the cost of the loan repayments, with further net income on top making a regular and significant contribution to the councils' finances.
- The Council have installed twenty-eight new electric vehicle chargers across their car park network this year, to help tackle climate change.
- Funding awarded to Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils will help ease financial pressures and reduce the carbon footprint of the districts' swimming pools. The successful bids for Sport England Phase Two Swimming Pool Grants funding will enable and Hadleigh Pool & Leisure to install important equipment over the coming months. In total, Hadleigh Pool & Leisure received £103,500, with the funding also going toward pool covers as well as the replacement of fluorescent lighting with LED lighting.
- Twenty town and parish councils across Babergh are set to receive more than £677K in developer contributions to help community infrastructure keep pace with housing growth. The latest bid round for communities wishing to benefit from future CIL funding is now open until Friday 31 May. Successful bids will receive their funding decision in Autumn 2024, subject to approval by Cabinet.
- The Council won the council of the year award at the iESE Public Sector transformation awards.