

District Council Report

Mar 2025

Devolution & Local Government Reform (LGR)

At the moment devolution and local government reform seems to be all encompassing at Council. Meeting after meeting, for some on a daily basis, are arranged to discuss the many permutations and possibilities of the proposals.

Babergh has engaged KPMG on a consultancy basis to assist with the development of proposals for LGR and they are working with other district and borough councils across the region to ensure that their interim plans are ready by the 21st of March target date. The councils will then need to firm up the initial proposals for submission by September this year.

Initially, they have agreed that creating multiple unitary authorities for Suffolk would achieve greater outcomes for residents, grow the economy and provide flexible solutions to meet the needs of local communities – in a way that a single council covering a vast geographical area would fail to do.

There is also no evidence that bigger councils with less councillors will provide you with a better service. Local government should be what it says – ‘local.’ The closer councillors are to their residents the more responsive they can be to local issues. In large councils with many more residents to serve, the councillors will become more remote with less local knowledge.

The governments reasons for doing this is supposedly to save money, reduce councillors and drive its growth ambitions. What it is currently doing is costing officer time and diverting everyone’s attention. The Cumbria devolution deal cost them £19m so how this is saving money is questionable.

There is currently a government’s consultation open until 13th April on this, and I would encourage everyone to have their say, if you have not already done so.

Budget

Last month the Council agreed a 2.99% increase to its share of council tax bills raising Babergh’s element of the bill for a Band D home from £188.10 a year to £193.73. Unfortunately, the major financial challenges facing the council made the budget difficult, with many fees and charges also increasing. However, it was necessary in order to protect services.

Babergh keeps less than 10% of the total council tax bill, to assist with services that include waste collection, planning, maintaining green spaces, supporting the local economy, culture, and communities, and helping those at risk of homelessness.

Despite making savings and additional income totalling £2.6million, the council had to use £633k from its financial resilience reserve to plug a budget gap, and still faces

a budget shortfall of £14.6m over the six years from 2024/5 to 2029/30 – at this rate it is due to run out of useable reserves by 2028/29.

It was also necessary to increase social rents by £3.01 a week, on average, along with increases on garage rents, sheltered housing service charges and sheltered housing utility charges.

The net cost of providing Babergh's services, after income and the use of earmarked reserves are considered, will rise by 8% to just over £15m in the next year. Despite this Rural Councils generally get less government grants than urban councils, which means that our residents pay, on average, 20% more per head in Council Tax. As an example, the Government's sudden removal of the Rural Services Delivery Grant just before Christmas, without notice, has left a £308,000 gap in Babergh's budget.

The plans to restructure the Councils is unlikely to resolve the funding crisis that local authorities face.

Planning notification consultation

At last month's Council meeting members also agreed to undertake a consultation on whether, to stop sending out notification letters to residents where minor planning applications or householder applications may affect them. There will be notifications posted on lamp posts, parish councils will receive notifications and they will also be available on the councils' website. The consultation will also propose that the Council continues to send out letters for major applications.

The reduction in printing and postage costs will generate savings subject to the level of planning activity in year. Forecasting based on previous years activity indicates that this could result in potential savings of c£18,000.

Remembering the impact of the pandemic

Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils planted special memorial trees at Beaumont Park in Hadleigh and in Green's Meadow, Stowmarket for the national Covid-19 Day of Reflection this Sunday (March 9) – marking five years since the pandemic and its impact on families, businesses, and communities.

The cherry trees will provide a lasting legacy, commemorating lives lost or forever changed by the pandemic, as well as honouring the dedication of our districts' key workers and community volunteers who worked tirelessly to support others.

National recognition for building control.

Judges crowned Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils' building control team winners of the prestigious 'Local Authority Building Control Team of the Year' award at the 2024 LABC Building Excellence Awards grand finals. They cited the team's dedication to raising industry standards, its exceptional problem-solving skills, and customer services.