

District Council Annual Report

Car parks - Babergh, unlike all other districts in Suffolk, had long been able to provide free parking in our main towns. It was a concession that we all cherished but it was something that the council was struggling to continue to fund. While the last administration initially put forward the proposals, continued pressure on the council budget meant that the council had to instigate the charges this term.

Finalised in the early autumn the charges came in to affect in January this year with charges in Hadleigh starting at £1 for one hour in the short stay car park or £1 for two hours in the long stay. Green Party councillors in Hadleigh and Sudbury strongly opposed the implementation of the charges, and I do feel that a free period of an hour or thirty minutes could have been worthwhile. However, although it is too soon to ascertain if there has been any detrimental effect on the towns, early reports indicate that takings are in line with the councils' predictions. The council will monitor the situation, and Scrutiny committee will review progress later this year.

The properties at **Corks Lane** finally started to go up for sale with some properties already purchased. The development which has been a difficult project for the council, will eventually see the original buildings transformed into new high-quality homes, with a mix of one, two, three and four-bedroom apartments and one cottage. Unfortunately, due to a number of factors including the pandemic and the rising costs of materials the cost of the project continues to rise. As the only party not to have been directly involved in the sell off, Green Councillors have called for a full independent inquiry into the way the whole venture has been handled.

Green Party cabinet members identified **Housing** as a serious concern early on and by working with the new housing team they have implemented a number of new policies. Also, more importantly, the full housing stock assessment is now almost complete. At the start of the current administration the team were saying that this would take at least four years to complete. The Green Party head of housing did not accept this target and through her persistence the stock check is now 80% completed already.

Another success for the council is the introduction of **Listed Building Consent orders** and **Listed Building Development orders** which allow owners of listed buildings to upgrade windows and install PV panels and other renewable technologies. Full council approved the initiative put forward by Green Party councillors, in Babergh and Mid Suffolk, back in the autumn.

Other topics discussed over the last year included the proposed changes to **waste collection**. Back in September the cabinet agreed that the collections will change to a three-weekly cycle with two separate recycling bins, for different materials, along with the introduction of new weekly food waste collections from 2026. The plan is for

one recycling bin for things like glass and cartons, while the other will be for cardboard and paper. The general waste bin will be the third bin, and one bin will be collected each week along with the food waste bin.

Kingfisher Leisure Centre in Sudbury has also been a big issue this year. Following routine maintenance to the roof in August contractors discovered more complex problems that left the pool closed until the New Year. The repair costs were unbudgeted and have placed an unexpected burden on the already difficult finances.

In terms of finance, **the budget** is a continuing concern to members and officers alike. Despite making savings and additional income totalling £2.6million, the council still had to use £630k 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. Further savings and, unfortunately, additional increases in council tax, fees and charges are unavoidable.

Late in the year came two big announcements from national government. Firstly, The new Labour governments commitment to build 1.5million homes has resulted in 86% uplift in Babergh's **housing delivery commitments**. The council now has a requirement to build 775 new homes a year across the district - 16,275 properties in 20 years including a 5% buffer requirement. This is a huge ask for the council and will have ramifications for every parish in the district. The Green Party head of planning is working with the planning team to encourage parishes and towns to develop neighbourhood plans. In this way the residents can have a direct say on where they will accept development and what that development will look like.

This announcement was shortly followed by the **Devolution and Local Government Reforms** plans that will see the creation of a single Mayoral Combined Authority for Suffolk and Norfolk, with Unitary Councils replacing County and District Councils in 2028. Following their acceptance onto the fast-track program, both Suffolk and Norfolk County Councils cancelled elections, planned for this May. Instead, elections for the new Mayor will take place in May next year. National government will decide the size and number of unitary councils at some point in the future. The Suffolk district and Ipswich borough councils have submitted a case for two or three unitary councils as their preferred choice.

Multiple unitaries are vital in order to keep councils truly local to the people they serve and to meet the differing needs and aspirations of our county's diverse communities. Providing a locally based unitary authority big enough to deliver but small enough to care.

The interim report submitted to Government by the borough and district councils said 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 mega-council covering a vast geographical area would fail to do.

Babergh has teamed up with Mid Suffolk and Suffolk Councils to offer companies access to the successful **Solar for Business initiative**. Businesses can now reduce their carbon emissions and save money on energy bills by signing up to have solar panels provided and installed on their premises, for free.

Electricity generated by the panels will be sold to the business at a rate lower than their current tariff, helping to slash energy bills and improve their bottom line.

Solar for Business has been running successfully in West Suffolk for nine years – helping more than a hundred companies to save a total of around £700,000 and 2,000 tonnes in harmful CO2 emissions per year.

To be eligible, businesses must be within West Suffolk, Babergh or Mid Suffolk's district boundaries, and must have a minimum electricity consumption of 5,000kWh per year. For a firm paying 25p/kWh this would mean electricity bills of around £1250 per year.

To find out more about the scheme, email: environment@westsuffolk.gov.uk, call 01284 757631 or visit: www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/solarforbusiness

Communities continue to receive funding from the **Community Infrastructure Levy** (CIL). Developers pay a fee when work starts on a development, which the councils then reinvest in neighbourhoods via their towns and parish councils. Twenty-two of Babergh's town and parishes receiving a portion of £274K.

A community development fund has been introduced to coincide with the start of the 2025/26 fiscal year and aims to streamline the administration of council grants.

The new Community Development fund encompasses both capital and revenue funding, making the application process simpler for organisations to complete and receive the funding they need.

Local VCFSE (voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise) organisations could apply for up to £20,000 toward new or existing projects that provide important services and support to their communities.

Two new electric bikes can now be hired in Sudbury thanks to a new partnership between the council and Suffolk-based electric bike company **EEZYBIKE**

From May this year, residents and visitors in Sudbury can hire an electric bike to make their journeys more environmentally friendly.

Two new electric bikes have been located by Kingfisher Leisure Centre, Situated within a solar-powered pod, the bikes make for an exciting new way to enjoy the local cycle routes and surrounding area.