

District Councillor's Report to the Bildeston Parish Council

Annual Parish Meeting

Monday, 15th April 2024

The local government elections in May last year did not give any political party an overall majority although the Greens secured the most seats. What was most important to us was to ensure that we could put together an alliance of parties that could work together effectively for all our residents and their communities. The Independents, Liberal Democrats and the Greens have built that effective partnership and a consensus about what needs to be achieved in the district.

We are all ambitious for our district and are committed to bringing forward fresh ideas and practical solutions that will make a difference to people's lives.

Issues that I have dealt with for residents in Bildeston include planning applications and advice; housing repairs; damage to listed buildings; inconsiderate parking and noise nuisance.

I was able to provide some funding for BNatural and so Bildeston Community Support could purchase two larger fridges to continue to give the families it supports fresh food.

We now have a Joint Local Plan for Babergh and Mid Suffolk. This is really important as before when the Council did not have a plan it was very difficult to refuse planning permissions. The new plan includes policies to tackle key social, economic, and environmental issues to guide future planning decisions until 2037. It is proving to be highly effective – not only in giving clear guidance to developers, our planning officers and planning committee members, but also in defending appeals against planning decisions. Part 2 of the Plan is now well underway and that will include site allocations.

We want to encourage the building of more affordable homes for sale or rent but we also want to encourage developers and builders to be sensitive to the communities in which they are working. The Council has become the only rural district in the country to partner with the Considerate Constructors Scheme (CCS). Through its Code of Considerate Practice, it sets out how construction teams working on larger developments should respect neighbours, minimise impact on the environment, and have an inclusive and healthy workplace.

We continue to help households at risk of homelessness with more than 1,500 having been helped across Babergh and Mid Suffolk since 2019 as part of our homelessness reduction and rough sleeping strategy. We are working hard to ensure that we help people before they have nowhere to go. This is also why we have increased council tax on empty homes to encourage owners to bring them back onto the market.

We are conducting a major programme of repairs and installing energy efficiency measures in our council houses. The repairs programme is our number one priority as it was delayed during Covid for obvious reasons. We have committed extra funding and are carrying out a major overhaul of the repairs service and will be upgrading our technology to ensure repairs are performed in the most efficient and timely way.

The cost-of-living crisis has brought the issue of energy efficiency to the forefront of everyone's minds. We are committed to helping communities with advice as well as seeking out funding to improve the energy performance of homes. We are extremely fortunate in having a great number of historic buildings in our district. They add to its character, but they are also very energy inefficient and if they are listed it is often difficult to improve their energy

performance. This why we are aiming to be the first rural council to achieve local listed building consent orders, (LLBCOs). LLBCOs lay out ways homeowners can install double and triple glazing, insulate their homes and access green technologies. We must conserve and protect our heritage, but at the same time this initiative could cut needless red tape for energy efficiency upgrades which are balanced and sensitively designed.

Our greatest challenge and we are not alone in this, is ensuring that the Council's finances are resilient. We have inherited a really challenging set of conditions. This year's budget setting was tough.

Balancing the budget has only been achieved through using £1.1m of the Council's reserves. In total we are forecasting using 48% of our reserves over the two years 2023/24 and 2024/25 and that's not sustainable.

We are facing a forecast cumulative budget gap of £6.7m over the next four years and we have to take action to address this: we are increasing the fees we charge for many of our discretionary services to actually reflect the cost of providing them; we have identified further savings we can make in how we do things; we have slimmed down our senior officer team, we will not fill staff vacancies unless the post is essential and we will postpone some capital projects. At the same time, we recognise that we must try to preserve the services that many of our residents want and need, and we are determined to try and maintain as many of these as we can.

There are tough decisions ahead and we must not be afraid of taking them. Council tax was increased this year by 2.99% but when residents look at their council tax bill, they should know that the district only receives 9 pence in every £ of council tax. The County and the Police and Crime Commissioner receive the lion's share I also recognise that no longer offering free parking is not going a popular move, but the Council cannot continue subsidising the cost of its car parks.

Most stays will only cost £1 for an hour, and we will be including measures to ensure those attending surgery appointments won't have to pay, refund arrangements for leisure centre users and to provide permits for parents dropping off and picking up children from schools. We are the only council in Suffolk that does not charge, and these new charges will still be among the lowest in Suffolk,

We met the financial challenge this year and it is clear that we will need to be innovative in our approach in the years to come so it was really satisfying to see our staff and councillors recognised by Babergh and Mid Suffolk being named UK council of the year 2024 at the prestigious iESE Public Sector Transformation Awards.

It was a privilege to be elected to the Council by residents in North West Cosford and it will be a great honour to serve as Leader of the Council from this May.