

District Council Report for 2016-17: District Councillor David Burn

Introduction - Another very busy year for Mid Suffolk District Council (the Council). Much behind-the-scenes work has been aimed at improving efficiencies in order to lower costs, without reducing the quality of service to our residents. Making savings, though, is not enough to compensate for the reduction in Government funding and a lot of work has been done on how more income can be generated.

The Councils' location and access to the public - For some time, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have been assessing cost and efficiency concerns about maintaining two separate headquarters. They also want to make it easier for the public to access the various council services. It has become clear that trying to operate the combined workforce from separate buildings is both inefficient and costly. Both councils have therefore resolved to move headquarters to Endeavour House in Ipswich, which is also the home of Suffolk County Council. That will be the hub for each council but there will be outreach locations in the districts that will serve for public access, the main ones being in Stowmarket for Mid Suffolk and Sudbury for Babergh.

Building a sustainable future - Our District, like many others, is facing major pressures to build more houses. A growing population, combined with factors such as increased life expectancy and smaller households, is driving demand for more homes. To ensure all residents understand what these pressures are, as well as what challenges and what opportunities they bring, the Council has been opening up the conversation on growth to the public. To help start this conversation, council officers hosted dozens of *Building a Sustainable Future* events throughout the District. All the events were open to all residents to drop in and talk with officers about the pressures we are facing and how we propose to respond to these without endangering the unique character and identity of Mid Suffolk.

New council houses, the first for many years - The first new council tenants to move into a council-built property in more than two decades cut the ribbon at a special opening ceremony in April 2016, where they were given the keys to their new home. Work began on site at Oakey Fields, Thurston, in September 2015 and has delivered a three-bedroomed, wheelchair-accessible bungalow for a local family. The new home is part of Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils' joint project to deliver 65 new council homes across both districts, 38 in Mid Suffolk, across six sites (in Bramford, Barking, Great Blakenham, Thurston and Laxfield) and 27 in Babergh, across two sites. New government initiatives made it easier for local authorities to build their own social housing and both councils seized the opportunity. Building out the remaining properties has continued throughout the year.

Joint Local Plan Review - Our present Local Plan, the District's collection of development policies against which all planning applications are judged, is presently undergoing a complete review. In the interests of efficiency for the single workforce, both Mid Suffolk and Babergh will produce a new Joint Local Plan which will replace the existing adopted plans of both Councils. The new Joint Local Plan will include the allocation of sites for residential, employment and other uses in order to meet the development needs of the districts up to 2036. A public consultation exercise will be conducted later this year and the hope is to adopt the plan some time in 2018.

Electoral review is underway - Levels of population inequality in some wards are triggers for the Local Government Boundary Commission to review the ward boundaries. Over 20% of wards in the District are 10% larger or smaller than the average, and so the Council decided that it should voluntarily request a review of its boundaries now, to ensure any changes can be incorporated in time for the next district council elections in 2019. The review will consider how many councillors Mid Suffolk District Council needs; it will also consider where the ward boundaries fall throughout our districts. Parish boundaries will be unaffected.

Devolution deal withdrawn - Despite four Norfolk councils voting against the Norfolk and Suffolk deal, it still remained on offer for the others and it went to public consultation last summer. However, at the final vote of the remaining councils in November two more Norfolk councils rejected it and it was subsequently withdrawn by the government. All the Suffolk councils are now in discussions with the government to see if a deal for Suffolk can be salvaged. If such an idea were to move forward it would probably involve bringing in councils from north Essex and south Norfolk in order to build an economic area large enough to be considered viable.

Investing in housing in Eye and Needham Market - In March this year the Council completed the purchase of two redundant sites from the County Council, which it will now develop to provide much needed new housing. One of the sites, Paddock House and former Day Care Centre in Wellington Road, Eye, includes a 30-bed redundant care home and a detached three-bedroom bungalow in the grounds. The other is located in Walnut Tree Walk, Stowmarket and includes the former Middle School and Community Education Centre located on Childer Road. These two latest acquisitions, together with the former Middle School site in School Lane, Needham Market, which was bought last year, demonstrate the Council's determination to invest in its market towns and provide new homes to meet the needs of local people. In addition to this, it is anticipated the construction phase will bring more jobs into both areas and give local businesses a vital boost through increased footfall. Work to appoint development partners for these sites will begin this summer and any proposals that are drawn up will be subject to a public consultation through the usual planning processes. It is hoped that work on both sites will start next summer.

David Burn

Mid Suffolk District Councillor for Palgrave Ward

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