Brett Vale Annual Parish Meetings 2022

Babergh District Councillor’s Report

As the Covid situation has eased, and restrictions started to get lifted last Summer, we have been able to concentrate more on our programme of delivery and have achieved a lot in the past year at Babergh. We do now seem to be on a firm and permanent trajectory to getting back to normal following the past two years of the Covid pandemic. We must, however, put the problems we have endured into some perspective: the poor people of Ukraine are suffering a far worse tragedy and we must do all we can to help them.

The Babergh Infographics brochure that I have provided gives an excellent summary of all we have done, but I would like to highlight a few things in more detail.

# Economy

Our towns are getting busier and business does seem to be picking up for many. Vacancy rates – 10% in Sudbury and 11.6% in Hadleigh – are lower than the national average, which is clearly due to the greater prevalence of small independents rather than chain stores.

The Virtual High Street has really helped many businesses survive lockdown and I was delighted to attend the iESE conference and awards ceremony last September where Babergh won three awards: a gold for the Virtual High Street, silver Planning Enforcement Service Improvement and bronze in the Council of the Year category. The Digital Skills Programme, initially launched for businesses on the Virtual High Street, is now open to all businesses in the districts.

We have also launched our Innovate Local programme to support business innovation on our high streets. This comprises Innovation Labs that provide small businesses with access to a work space, mentoring programme as well as advice and training, and market stalls for start-ups that include a free pitch for a set period, along with advice, training and support. The Hadleigh market stall is well-established now and I visited the Innovation Lab in Sudbury recently as it prepares for its opening.

# Communities

One of the high points of the past year was the opening of the new pool at Hadleigh Leisure Centre. It is an excellent facility and a testament to all the partners who made it possible to enable a project like this for a small town.

Our £180k investment in CCTV in Hadleigh and Sudbury is fully operational. We have 21 cameras in Sudbury and 8 in Hadleigh. There is also one mobile camera and we will monitor its use to determine if more are going to be needed.

# Housing

In the past year we have added 98 new homes to our housing stock, bringing the total for the past seven years to 232. All have been built to an EPC rating of B.

Our retrofitting programme to improve insulation, install new heating systems and address damp and mould is proceeding well and significant progress can now be seen on the Springlands estate in Sudbury. In addition, we are installing external wall insulation and replacement windows elsewhere in the district.

We are completing a desktop study into the energy performance of our housing stock, and aligning our ambitions to improve the worst performing homes to an EPC rating of C or above. Indications are that works required will affect approximately 2,700 homes.

Babergh and Mid Suffolk were recently awarded £324,000 from the government’s new Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme. This will allow us to build specialised emergency accommodation units for those who have been excluded and marginalised due to complex needs and will add to the existing 80 temporary units and 11 rough sleeper units our districts already have.

This latest round of funding will also allow us to build on work made possible due to the previously successful Rough Sleeper Initiative Funding bid, which was used to create a dedicated outreach and mental health support service for rough sleepers.

# Environment

We have made a huge amount of progress towards our net zero by 2030 target and I just want to highlight the key achievements so far:

* The single biggest contribution has been the replacement of diesel with HVO in our vehicle fleet. Our vehicles were accounting for 25.9% of the total CO2 emissions of the two councils.
* A total of 730 solar panels have been installed on our two leisure centres and at the Wenham depot. The Babergh leisure centres were accounting for 18.9% of the two councils’ CO2 emissions.
* A new filtration system, saving both energy and water, has been installed at the Kingfisher leisure centre in Sudbury.
* Solar car ports are being installed in the Station Road car park in Sudbury.
* Across the two districts, we have installed solar panels on 2,000 council houses in the past year and 250 more now have air-source heat pumps.
* We have undertaken a tree canopy survey and a biodiversity mapping exercise.
* Last year 281 trees were planted and 4,690 hedgerow plants distributed to towns and parishes. This is only the start of a long-term programme to increase our tree canopy.

Although we have been successful in getting grants for a lot of this, it has all nonetheless been achieved within our budget and not spending on things that won’t provide a measurable impact – just as we promised when we developed our Carbon Reduction Management and Biodiversity Action Plans.

# Planning

The only real setback concerns the suspension of the Joint Local Plan examination process while we address changes required by the inspectors. Although this is not unusual, it is disappointing as it means more delay. We have agreed with the inspectors’ proposals to proceed with a two-part plan.  Development control policies, including important social, economic and environmental objectives, will be put in place first, while remaining work on spatial strategy matters and site allocations are addressed in part two.

Late last year we published out latest five-year housing land supply position statement which shows that we can again meet the statutory housing requirement, with a housing land supply of 6.86 years – a slight improvement on 6.75 years in the previous year. This means that our current planning policy, the Core Strategy, is still valid when determining planning applications.

The National Planning Policy Framework requires councils to identify and update a supply of specific deliverable sites which are capable of providing a minimum of five years’ worth of housing against their housing requirement.

# Babergh 2022/23 Budget

## At the February council meeting, Babergh’s budget for 2022/23 was approved and included an increase in council tax of 2%, or £3.48 a year for a Band D property. The annual council tax for a Band D property will now be £177.34. There will also be an increase of 4.1% in council house rents, which is equivalent to an average increase of £3.72 a week for social rents and £5.23 a week for affordable rents.

# Devolution and the Suffolk County deal

Late last year the government finally published its Levelling Up White Paper which contains the framework for the county devolution deals that are on offer. Following the expression of interest submitted by the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders’ Group last year, we were successful in becoming one of the nine counties to be offered a County deal. We will now start an intensive period of negotiation on the powers and flexibilities that will form the deal we eventually secure. These powers are likely to cover the economy, environment, transport and skills development.

# Summary

In addition to the IESE gold award I have mentioned, we also won silver for process improvement and use of new technology by the planning enforcement team, and bronze in the council of the year category. It is great to know that we are being recognised by others in the country and that we must be doing something right for our residents. But there is room for improvement: gold for council of the year would be nice one day.

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