

Monthly Report - Jan'24 - Sproughton & Pinewood Ward

Babergh Budget 24-25

Work is continuing on the 2024/25 budget in Babergh. Essentially the amount of government funding falls short of projected costs. The government is assuming a 2.99% increase in council tax will be imposed by District Councils (£5.46pa /10p a week for B&D homes) along with a 4% increase in funding. Unfortunately, costs have increased by 21% since last year mostly due to inflationary pressures e.g. interest rates & salary costs. There has also been a reduction in planning fees as potential development stalls due to the economic downturn. Babergh is increasing fees & charges to reflect the actual cost of providing licences and services as opposed to the current 'subsidised' cost. There is the ongoing (very) heated debate over the possible introduction of new parking tariffs in Sudbury, Hadleigh & Lavenham (potentially brings in £425k) - the survey put out by opponents of introducing car parking charges has 10,000 people saying 'no' to charging. This debate is creating a lot of noise but no suggestions as to alternatives. A savings programme is expected to achieve savings of £557k. However, there is still a £1.8m gap. We need to figure out how to fill that gap. We all know we shouldn't spend more money than we have coming in. Most of us have probably been making decisions about how to save money - Babergh needs to do the same, this isn't easy as the priority has to be providing core services. Babergh has some reserves that can be used but this is a one-off as there is no money to do this next year and we will probably be presented with an equally difficult situation for 2025/26. We are waiting on a paper that suggests various options - I'm expecting the next full council meeting to be noisy and lengthy!. Any ideas on how to make savings or generate income gratefully received.

Planning

There was a contentious planning application in December - the development of four homes & a storage unit behind the Red Lion pub in East Bergholt. This was recommended for approval by the planning officer. This application went against East Bergholt's Neighbourhood Plan and was narrowly approved. As I pointed out - approving applications that go against a Neighbourhood Plan sets Babergh up to fail - why would anyone do a Neighbourhood Plan if they are not honoured upon being made! That said around 16 parishes are currently working on a plan and another 15 are thinking about 'Neighbourhood Plan Lite' or 'Neighbourhood Priority Statements' which is the new official term.

It has been noticeable that the Planning Committee is sitting less often. There are two housing applications for Bildeston and Leavenheath coming up, but nothing local currently. I have been working with Bentley on their Solar Farm application. This isn't as large as the Bramford/Burstall/Somersham solar farm but could be the first of several if that area is considered appropriate.

I have contributed to the updated Planning Charter and am now waiting the working group to be convened. I really hope my changes with regard to asking for an application to go before committee make it through.

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The JLP working group meets monthly to discuss progress & issues and contribute our ideas to the plan. The 'call for sites' has just completed. After due consideration by the planning team we will get to see the proposed sites for development - everyone wants to know whether their village or town will be impacted - unfortunately we couldn't wheedle it out of them where the sites were in our wards - we have to wait! To date some areas have been impacted worse than others e.g. Sproughton which brings the question of spatial strategy to the fore. I'll be gathering people's thoughts on this - this includes other councillors as well as parish councils. There will be a public consultation in summer on possible methodologies as well as asking for feedback on the sites deemed appropriate for development. Ideally the JLP WG define those spatial strategy options.

Two supplementary planning documents have been issued for review i) affordable housing & ii) biodiversity net gain. I've submitted comments on i) but need to start on ii) this week. I've also asked Rob Hobbs to distribute the collated councillor comments to see what other councillors think. I have heard that a SPD for renewable energy is being worked on - better late than never but it won't be ready in time to guide the Bentley Solar Farm application 😞

I am still waiting to see a draft of the JLP project plan - I've even offered to write it myself!!

Warm Spaces

Organisations in both parishes provide 'warm spaces' for their residents. Both Babergh & Mid-Suffolk are still providing funding to provide warm spaces this winter. More than 30 community projects in Babergh and Mid Suffolk have each received a share of more than £36,000 to keep residents warm and connected this winter. The 'Living Well in Winter' grant was introduced in 2023 to support local VCFSE (voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise) organisations in providing new accessible spaces and activities, or expand upon existing projects, in order to provide warm spaces and help tackle social isolation within the districts. A wide range of organisations have now received grants between £500 and £2,000, with successful projects offering warm spaces, coffee mornings, movie nights, skill development workshops, lunch clubs, activity sessions, and safe spaces for a range of ages, from toddlers and teens to senior citizens.

Funding available for community action on climate change

Applications are being invited for The Suffolk Climate Action Community Match Funder. It is available to charities, community interest companies, parish councils, voluntary groups and other not-for-profit organisations, whose projects contribute to Suffolk's Climate Emergency Plan. The fund is provided by the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders group, which includes Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils. It is administered by the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership, as part of its work on climate action. [Visit the Green Suffolk website](#) for full eligibility details and to submit an application.

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A bit of good news

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have completed 128 new affordable council homes over the last 12 months - 42 in Babergh & 86 in Mid-Suffolk. This brings the total housing stock to almost 7,000 homes in the region; with 3,526 homes in Babergh and 3,373 homes in Mid Suffolk. More than you would have thought??!! The new properties include several built on repurposed council land in Mid Suffolk. The former Stowmarket Middle School and Needham Market Middle School sites were bought from Suffolk County Council when the schools closed, with the brownfield sites then earmarked for social housing. During 2023, 17 homes have been completed in Needham Market, and the first four homes were also delivered in Stowmarket, with a further 38 homes on the site scheduled for completion during 2024. The councils also secured a number of new homes through Section 106 contributions. The additional homes have enabled residents to move off the council housing waiting list, and also helped more people onto the property ladder with the additional provision of 18 homes available to buy under a shared ownership scheme.

In addition repairs to social housing continue at pace - this was supported with the £943k approved towards the end of last year.

Casework

The amount of my casework seems to be increasing. Its noticeable that nearly half of it centres around something to do with traffic. Typically, that is the area that is harder to influence as that falls to Suffolk County Council.

Description	#	%
Flooding	3	21%
Gritting	1	7%
Lighting	1	7%
Locality grants	3	21%
Planning	1	7%
Public Transport	1	7%
Traffic - air quality	1	7%
Traffic - noise	2	14%
Traffic - High St	1	7%
	14	100%