

Overview

The most significant issue for Mid Suffolk for the second year has of course been COVID 19. When the pandemic started numbers of staff were transferred to Covid related duties, particularly organising the distribution of Government grants to businesses. Staff have worked from home virtually 100% until the last few weeks and still in significant numbers. Information Technology, particularly applications such as Microsoft Teams have allowed that to be done efficiently, in fact people tend to be more productive, with the time that would be spent travelling to work and to meetings used productively. I have certainly received reports back at 20:00 for questions raised during the working day.

Deployment of people to Government funded work without back filling of positions has reduced core spend and helped the council reach a very good financial position.

This home working will be an on-going feature of our way forward and has allowed the council to reduce its workspace at Endeavour house and save £675k over the next five years.

Priorities

The Council's six priorities are: the environment, the economy, housing, wellbeing, our customers, and our communities. To deliver on these it has produced an "Outcomes Framework" of 18 long term and 66 short term outcomes. The Cabinet has agreed additional funding of 5.1 million for these. Details of the framework are on the www site.

Planning

It's been a difficult year as we have dealt with the conflict between the need to increase the number of houses built to meet population growth and people's natural desire to have their "place" remain unchanged, as they have always known it. This has not been made easier by the delays that the Council's Joint Local Plan has suffered. In addition a number of policies in the MSDC 1989 plan and later reviews do not conform to the requirements of the Government's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

Government inspectors have asked that the Local Plan is split into two parts: the main policies and the site allocation plan, a process that will take to the end of the year for the first part and perhaps 18 months to complete. The Government's significant changes to the overall process appear to have been kicked into the long grass in the Queen's Speech so it is possible this schedule will hold. Neighbourhood plans are vital to guide planning the way communities want and it's a pity there is not one for Great Blakenham.

At the moment Mid Suffolk has almost a ten-year pipeline of development proposals at various stages of approval.

Planning Reviews

I am on the working parties set up to respond to the recent planning peer review, the Local Plan and the review of Planning Enforcement. The processes should lead to: up-to-date policies in the Local Plan, to much shorter, clearer and more consistent officer reports to planning committees, and to more rapid and effective enforcement. Better reports should mean that decisions are easier to understand and accept.

Building Improvements

We all believe that building environmental performance must be improved and the planning committees have been trying to push developers in that direction. Revised building regulations dated June 2022 and enforced for new build after June 2023 will help. However, the fabric-first methodology being adopted is now only for a minimum 30% improvement in insulation. More dramatic action, a 70% improvement, will come in 2025 when the future homes standard comes into force.

Unfortunately the major builders are still resisting changes to heat generation techniques claiming that gas boilers capable of burning 20% Hydrogen now and 80% after a retrofit are a solution. That is despite the problems of delivering that gas mixture over the current network of iron pipes. The fitting of air or ground source pumps is something only some are undertaking. A frequently cited reason is that the way the Government SAP calculations work drives builders to a gas boiler installation which will need retrofit.

The Environment

Climate change and biodiversity

To reach net zero carbon emissions by 2030 and protect and strengthen the district biodiversity we have, transferred our waste fleet to Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) reducing its emissions by 90% and the councils CO2 by 25% and reached halfway investment a £2.8m Government grant in 604 solar panels at Stowmarket and Stradbroke leisure centres to generate 235.6kW

Net Zero for Housing Guidance

The Green and Lib Dem group proposed, and Council accepted, adoption and promotion of a “Net Zero Carbon Toolkit” document. It is a useful guide for small developers and individuals to the actions necessary to move to net zero for housing and industrial premises.

Sustainable travel

We have produced and agreed a Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan an LCWIP. This works with the County’s plans and uses Government funding to improve the walking and cycling facilities in the district. There are short-, medium-, and long-term proposals for improvements. The footpath along Blue Barn Lane from Great to Little Blakenham is a local example.

Freeport East Port 1 and Gateway 14

Freeport East

The full business case for Freeport East has been submitted to Government. The council is a core partner and a member of the Shadow Supervisory Board. Once approval has been gained the Freeport will exist officially with all customs and tax powers for 25 years.

Both Port one at Great Blakenham and Gateway 14 at Stowmarket are incorporated in the freeport, so it is important to the district. Sites can opt to enjoy the Taxation or the Customs benefits

I want to see sound actions by Mid Suffolk to help create a range of high-quality local jobs in growing industries that have high value add. The hope is that these can pay salaries significantly above the living wage while providing good working conditions and sound careers. Clearly not all jobs can meet those criteria, but the freeport gives an opportunity for progress providing we push beyond the restrictions of the leisure, tourist, and logistics industries.

However I am concerned at the possible impacts on existing businesses of competitors in the freeport who, exempt business rates, national insurance and import duty, have a cost advantage. If those exemptions attract new investment in industries that we currently do not have then that’s largely good. If they just succeed in moving businesses from one site to another, then we have a problem.

Gateway 14

Work at Gateway 14 has commenced with a ground-breaking ceremony last week and we are told that the first deal is nearing completion.

Little Blakenham developments

The Valley Ridge issues are yet to be resolved although the proposal for a solar farm within view of the proposed leisure development has been dropped.

If you have queries, please phone me on 07756292320 or email me at: john.field@mid.suffolk.gov.uk