

Great Blakenham

Budget

The MSDC budget was agreed with Green and Lib Dem support. There are no major new initiatives but the £5.1 million additional spend from reserves on many small items, on the basis of which we withdrew our budget amendments last year, are included. The MSDC council tax has been frozen so the district charge for a Band D property remains at £171.59

Sheltered housing charges and garage rents also remain frozen at 2021/22 levels, but Mid Suffolk District Council tenants face a proposed increase of 4.1% to their rents, to cover inflationary pressures and allow investment in improving the quality of council homes. This means average weekly social rent will increase by £3.45 to £87.84 and affordable housing rents by £4.99 to £126.33.

I found the rent proposal inappropriate when other cost increases, particularly fuel bills, are so dramatic and it is set against a council tax freeze. The Green and Liberal Democrat Group opposed it, but we were again defeated by the Chair's casting vote.

I proposed an amendment to the budget to fund two new zero carbon electric buses to deliver scheduled rural community transport for Mid Suffolk residents. The cost estimate was £560,000 capital and £130,000 revenue for two years, figures I had derived after discussions with BSEVC at Red Gables and the county public transport officers. The amendment was accepted so we must now ensure rapid delivery.

A new 'County Deal'

Suffolk is one of nine counties invited to negotiate a devolution deal, bringing more control by local leaders over areas such as transport, infrastructure, and skills to the region. Such deals are proposed in the Levelling Up White Paper as part of a strategy for improving living standards, opportunity, and prosperity across the country. This could deliver London style public transport and a skills programme to help local people gain the high quality, high paying jobs of the future.

Digital Skills Programme for businesses

Business owners in Babergh and Mid Suffolk who want to learn new or improve their digital skills can now access free courses as part of a new business support programme. The Digital Skills Programme is part of post-covid recovery strategy and is being run by MENTA using funding from Suffolk Inclusive Growth Investment Fund.

The workshops, which are held virtually, cover topics such as online security, digital and social media marketing, e-commerce, and information management. It will help businesses understand which platforms they should be using and how to make them work for them.

New library for Needham Market

As part of the development of the former Middle School site, Needham Market now has a new library. The building offers a bigger and more modern space for library events and activities, and bookable meeting rooms for the local community. Located at the newly created Teachers Close, just off School Street, the library is part of a new development of 41 homes: houses, flats and bungalows. It has a new children's area, with a special sensory wall and more dedicated space for children's events and activities, such as Wordplay and story time sessions for young children.

Additional funding to support rough sleepers

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' have awarded Babergh and Mid Suffolk £324k to provide specialised emergency accommodation for rough sleepers and those at risk of homelessness. It will provide four new self-contained "Mbloc" emergency accommodation units, two in Stowmarket and two in Sudbury.

These new energy efficient homes will provide dedicated long-term emergency accommodation for entrenched rough sleepers – allowing for their complex needs to be addressed in a more comprehensive way.

People who have been historically excluded and marginalised will be able to get the help, support and life skills they need to hold down a secure tenancy and stay off the streets. Training, guidance and advice will be delivered by health, social care and voluntary organisations, supporting the councils' goal of ending all rough sleeping by 2024.

Building Regs Improvements

In June revised building regulations will require a 30% improvement in insulation and importantly, for all heating systems to be designed for a 55° C feed temperature to allow easy retrofit of a low carbon heat source. At the same time a good practice guide for installation of heat pump systems will be issued.

This is a useful step towards the standards we must adopt to limit climate change. It will help our endless fight to get builders to work build homes that wont require upgrading in the near future.

Planning

Progress with the Local Plan has been slow and the formal copy of the report from the peer review of the planning committee's operation is not yet with us, so action to correct the reported shortcomings is delayed.

Judicial Review

A judicial review instigated by Thurston Parish Council led to a judgement that the District Council Officer mis-directed the development control committee in the position the Thurston neighbourhood plan took on a development of 210 homes.

The QC involved said the planning officer's report to the committee wrongly concluded the application should be permitted. He said: "On the correct interpretation of Policy 1 and of the underlying spatial strategy and objectives of the neighbourhood plan, the release of the site for the development is not in accordance with the neighbourhood plan". He also found that the planning officer's analysis of the position in relation to paragraph 14(b) of the NPPF "was vitiated by his misunderstanding of Policy 1 and the underlying strategy and objectives of the neighbourhood plan".

This really underlines Green and Liberal Democrat concerns about our planning department and suggests significant training is necessary if it is to deliver the service residents expect.

Greenhouses

You will have heard reports that the tomato growing activity by Sterling Suffolk at the greenhouses on Bramford Road has ceased, a victim of the vastly increased gas prices triggered by post covid shortages and Russia's invasion of the Ukraine.

As you are probably aware the original scheme was to supply heat from the Incinerator, in fact it was Suez looking for a lead user in a heating grid that triggered the creation of the business. When it came to the crunch Suez and the County in the form of Matthew Hicks wanted to charge a market value for what most of us regarded as waste heat. It is dumped to atmosphere by the condensers you can see from the Bramford Road. They also wanted Sterling Suffolk and their Dutch backers to fund the installation of heat exchangers at the plant. We did have the turbine designed to supply heat at some cost to electricity output but it was claimed that an additional £5 million was required to match the steam take off and its temperature to the form necessary to go some 0.5 to 1 Km to the greenhouses.

We are trying to get Mid Suffolk to help but just what help could be provided is difficult to guess without sight of the books. To fund short term losses might be possible but I have no idea of the sums that would be involved and "short term" might be measured in years with the current world situation and the need to move to less carbon intensive heat sources. Heat pumps might fit the bill but would need to be large and ground sourced I would have thought but are no doubt things the company would have considered and rejected. Since Port One have a local deal for incinerator electricity something might be possible.

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