

Dave Busby, District Councillor's Annual Report for 2020/21

The past year has been dominated by Covid 19, its restrictions, its implications, its financial impact, and its effect on parish and human life. Most of the staff and all of the councillors have had to work from home and meetings have become virtual. The District Council has distributed over £30 million to nearly 4000 eligible businesses – this is in addition to maintaining a near normal service, where we have made some notable achievements.

We have also been able to keep up our regular waste collections, despite periods of reduced staffing levels due to crew illness and isolation. We did, however, have to suspend the garden waste collection over winter, but this has now resumed. HWRCs remain on an appointment system and, unfortunately, we have seen a rise in fly tipping incidents and recycling (blue) bin 'contamination'. The Suffolk Waste Partnership embarked on an awareness campaign to remind householders what should, and should not, be in the recycling bin.

Finance:

Our investments continue to be an increasing and necessary part of our income to replace declining government grants and are forecast to provide 14% of our income this year. We have a balanced budget this year, with some spare funds to top up our reserves, but the medium- term outlook still presents a significant challenge.

We have suffered significant increased costs and income reduction due to Covid, but the government has provided extensive support, which covers much, but not all, of these losses.

Car Parking:

We reviewed our parking provision across the district and whilst we recognised the need and desire to retain an element of subsidised parking, we have made changes to ensure the Council's finances are secure and also to encourage more sustainable transport options

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Planning:

Following consultations in 2017 and 2019 the new Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan was approved, in November, for submission to the Secretary of State for an Independent Examination. The Plan provides for 416 dwellings per year, or 7900 dwellings by 2037, but around 4000 of those already have permission, so the plan allocates sites to meet the remaining need. Policies in the Plan seek to balance growth requirements with the need to protect our wonderful rural landscape and rich heritage. They recognise the importance of Affordable Housing, Employment, Town Centres, Tourism, Infrastructure, The Environment and Climate Change.

Environmental Measures:

Cabinets at Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have approved a raft of environmental measures to help the councils achieve their ambition of becoming carbon neutral by 2030. We have:

- Created action plans for Sustainable Travel and Biodiversity.
- Approved running our vehicle fleet on HVO – Hydro-treated Vegetable Oil – to cut their carbon emissions by up to 90%.
- Approved the installation of micro-generation and electricity storage solar carports in Sudbury and Stowmarket.

Local Economy:

Our businesses have had a tough time, but many have been able to keep going and others have had much-needed support. 28 businesses from across Babergh and Mid Suffolk were shortlisted in our first ever business Innovation Awards in November, held virtually. Of the 11 winners, two were from Hadleigh: Challs International won the Most Innovative SME category and Ferguson's Deli won the High Street Innovation award.

Another success has been the Sudbury Virtual High Street that allows shoppers to enjoy the very best of Sudbury from the comfort of their front room. More than 100 businesses have now signed up to this and we will now be rolling it out to the other towns in the districts.

We are excited by the success of the Freeport East bid, which will encompass Felixstowe and Harwich ports and the new Gateway14 business park outside Stowmarket. We expect a boost with businesses wanting to locate in Babergh as well as neighbouring districts.

A new £300,000 funding programme for small businesses across Babergh and Mid Suffolk has been agreed - with funds to be allocated over the next three years. This will provide a boost to businesses after the coronavirus crisis to help sustain and create jobs, provide opportunities to grow and innovate as well as react to the changing business landscape.

We have agreed to an £180,000 upgrade in CCTV provision for Hadleigh and Sudbury.

New Pool in Hadleigh:

Following construction delays and the lockdown restrictions, the new pool in Hadleigh will finally open this month when the leisure centre reopens. The facilities are a significant improvement on what was there before and I am sure it will be a great success.

Babergh top for life satisfaction in Suffolk:

And finally, a recent survey by the Office for National Statistics has ranked Babergh as having the greatest life satisfaction in the county – reflecting the district's residents, businesses, heritage, and 'natural' beauty. In a similar vein, if you haven't completed the Census may I encourage you to join the 90% that have.