

District councillor's report, June 2014

1. Accommodation review

As part of the process of meeting the financial challenges we face, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, have now launched a review our accommodation needs. This review is being carried out by commercial property consultants Lambert Smith Hampton. We have made it clear to them that the right office accommodation is critical to the development of Mid Suffolk and Babergh District Councils' partnership and that it must improve the efficiency of staff and provide effective access for the public of both districts.

It is important to be clear that **no decision has been taken to move or otherwise reassign office space at this stage**. This accommodation review aims to inform any such decision the councils may make in the future and ensure that any dangers of reassigning office space are clearly indicated and considered before any decisions are made.

Once it is clear what the costs and the benefits of any change in accommodation may be the councils will be in a better position to decide what, if any, changes need to be made to where staff are based across our two districts.

Lambert Smith Hampton aim to present their findings later this summer.

2. Woolpit demolition paves way for new affordable homes

Outdated council homes at Steeles Road, Woolpit have been demolished to make way for a brand-new £2.7 million development which will create 25 much-needed modern homes for affordable rent.

The scheme will create four one-bedroom flats; eight two-bedroom houses, ten three-bedroom houses and three four-bedroom houses. All the properties will be for affordable rent and will achieve high levels of energy-efficiency, meeting Level Three of the Code for Sustainable Homes. The scheme includes 46 parking spaces as well as changes to the road layout to create a cul-de-sac style development.

The homes which were demolished were of non-standard construction and failed to meet the Council's Decent Homes Standard which requires properties to be warm and weather tight with modern facilities.

3. Planning department

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils now have a single team of Officers serving, what are still two sovereign Councils. As part of the continued integration of staff we are involved in a project to redesign how planning services are delivered. Planning is about much more than just dealing with planning applications. It also covers the creation of Local Plans, policies and specific guidance documents; the delivery of Heritage and Conservation services, Community led planning and the development of Neighbourhood Plans, as well as protection against unlawful and inappropriate development. The Council also employ Officers who ensure that the developments submitted for approval will also contribute appropriately towards the delivery of affordable housing or open space and leisure facilities.

With ever changing Regulations, as well as some of the helpful “simplification” of Planning by central government, it’s no wonder that this complex set of services is often difficult to comprehend.

We want to make it easier to understand the Planning Services we offer. What those Services do and how we may be able to help you on a more local level. But first we need to ask you how best we can do that.

We know some of the issues that are important to you. From previous conversations we know that planning enforcement is often an issue. Neighbourhood Plans and the constant stream of new regulations also seem to be of interest (and concern), to others. Also Localism, Land Bids, the Community Infrastructure Levy, how applications are presented at Planning Committee.

In order to find out more about how we can most effectively help our Parish and Town Councils in relation to our Planning Services we will be having some short sessions during the upcoming Parish Liaison Meetings, to discuss how best to communicate with you about the changes being made to those services as well as the regular changes made to Planning regulations, how to help you ensure that you feel confident in responding to planning consultations and that you understand how your comments influence planning committee.

We hope these sessions will feel different from before and enable honest conversations about the range of issues around Planning. This will help us understand how we can communicate better and enable you to have more informed involvement in the process.

4. Community Infrastructure Levy – a new way to fund local infrastructure

We are looking at introducing the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), a new levy that local authorities can charge on developments in their area to encourage local development but also to make sure that infrastructure in the region can afford to keep up with new homes and businesses. Money raised from CIL charges can be used to fund a wide range of infrastructure that is needed as a result of the development, from improved roads to flood defences to schools and hospitals.

In the next few weeks we will be opening a consultation with the public on the introduction of CIL. We are particularly keen for feedback from Town and Parish Councils and local developers, who will be most affected by the new charge. A Preliminary Draft Charging Schedule has been prepared in accordance with the recommendations of a CIL Viability Study report for Babergh and Mid-Suffolk and we will shortly be contacting you directly with information on how to take part in the consultation. The Town and Parish Council Liaison Meetings will include an opportunity for you to put your questions on CIL to council officers. This is just the first stage of the process of drawing up plans for how CIL will be introduced in Babergh and Mid Suffolk, with more consultation and public exhibition of plans planned for the coming year.

CIL is designed to be faster, more transparent and fairer than the previous agreement developers had to enter into under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. By charging a clear, set levy on each square metre of a development, CIL avoids the costly and time consuming negotiations and agreements that could lead to confusion and uncertainty in Section 106 agreements. The charges will be set by the local Council, based on the size and type of the new development. The money raised from the CIL can be used to support development

by funding infrastructure that the Council, local community and neighbourhoods want, like new or safer road schemes, park improvements, education facilities or a new health centre. The Community Infrastructure Levy:

- Gives local authorities the freedom to set their own priorities for what the money should be spent on;
- Gives local authorities a predictable funding stream that allows them to plan ahead more effectively;
- Gives developers much more certainty from the start about how much money they will be expected to contribute;
- Makes the system more transparent for local people, as local authorities have to report what they have spent the levy on each year; and
- Rewards communities receiving new development through the direct allocation of a proportion (15% or 25% depending on whether a Neighbourhood Plan is in place) of levy funds collected in their area.

Local authorities can also charge different CILs on different parts of their district, encouraging development in some areas while imposing higher costs on areas where development is not considered desirable. Both the CIL level and details of any variations across the district in question will need to be published and consulted on before being implemented.

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