

District councillor's report, January 2013

1. Visit of Parliamentary Under Secretary of State to Mid Suffolk and Babergh District Councils

Brandon Lewis, MP for Gt Yarmouth and Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, visited councillors and staff from both Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils on December 6, to find out more about the key achievements of these two rural councils as well as the particular challenges, constraints and obstacles they face.

The Minister was given a full briefing by councillors on the success of their joint strategy to integrate and transform in order to remove inefficiencies and make significant savings. Initiatives such as the Shared Revenue Partnership, joint back office functions and the Suffolk Waste Partnership were highlighted as models where Babergh and Mid Suffolk have also embraced other councils such as Ipswich Borough Council and Suffolk County Council to better support delivery of services.

Councillors also had a strong message for Mr Lewis to take back to the government, particularly in relation to the challenges that prudent rural district councils face in delivering services when there is virtually no fat left to trim.

MSDC Leader Derrick Haley said, "We are keen to ensure that the Minister clearly understands the issues we face and is able to convey these to his colleagues. In particular, we would like more recognition from the government of just how tightly we are already run. Yesterday the Chancellor announced that the pot of government money available to local government will be maintained for 2013-14. I think this is good news but we don't yet know what that means for us here in Suffolk and it would be really good to see government acknowledge the work we have done to integrate our services and make savings by rewarding us in our 2013-14 funding settlements. I made that point to the Minister and we shall see what happens?"

2. Changes to Housing Benefit

The Government is reducing the amount of Housing Benefit or Council Tax support that people can claim from April 2013. Mid Suffolk and Babergh are preparing for these changes by informing residents what is proposed and offering as much advice and support as possible. Information leaflets have been produced and circulated, as well as put on the website: <http://bdc.onesuffolk.net/council-tax/changes-to-council-tax-benefits-and-discounts> and articles are in the Tenants Newsletter.

3. Planning enforcement

There are currently 278 live enforcement cases at Mid Suffolk. Councillors have been forwarding comments from Parish Councils about the enforcement cases in their wards, to guide the Enforcement Department as to which are a particular priority. Please let me know if there are any such cases in the parish which you would like to have prioritised.

On a separate note, an enforcement summons was issued in Bury St Edmunds magistrates court against Mr Roy Humphrey in respect of a mound of earth at Church Farm, Hoxne Road, Eye. Mr Humphrey attended the meeting and pleaded guilty. He

was given a conditional discharge for 12 months and told to remove the mound by the court. Costs of £876 were awarded to MSDC.

4. Benefit Fraud (with a French Connection)

An investigation by Mid Suffolk District Council fraud staff has uncovered how a man and woman from Stradbroke, dishonestly claimed more than £35,000 in Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Income Support.

Daren and Susan Ward of Stradbroke appeared in Ipswich Crown Court on December to be sentenced for offences of fraud, counterfeiting and forgery. For the six offences of fraud, Daren Ward was sentenced to 10 months suspended for 18 months and for the two offences of counterfeiting and forgery he received a 6 month sentence suspended for 18 months. He was also ordered to complete 200 hours of unpaid work. Susan Ward was order to complete 100 hours of unpaid work and received a 6 month sentence suspended for 18 months.

Daren Ward, 42, began claiming Income Support as a single parent in August 2007. The following year he proceeded to claim Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit for a privately rented property in Stock near Chelmsford.

These claims were false because at the time he was living and working in France, his children attended a French school and his wife would travel to join the family at weekends. Meanwhile Susan Ward occupied the address in Stock, which was a convenient commute to her job at HM Treasury in London.

When Daren Ward returned to the UK in 2009 the whole family moved to privately rented accommodation in Stradbroke, Suffolk. He continued to maintain he was a lone parent but in fact his wife Susan was living with him and still working, in a responsible position, for HM Treasury, this time commuting to their offices in Norwich.

The court heard officers became suspicious when the letting agents for the property in Stradbroke wrote to the Council to advise that the new tenants were a Mr and Mrs Ward. It was then that the tenancy agreement supplied by Ward was found to be false.

After a lengthy and painstaking investigation, Council investigators identified other false claims made by Ward and uncovered a further counterfeit tenancy document that had been supplied to Chelmsford Borough Council for the address in Stock.

Cllr Derrick Haley, Mid Suffolk Portfolio Holder for Finance said: "Thanks to the hard work and determination of the Benefits Investigation Team this case has been vigorously pursued and is an excellent example of our success when working with our partners in other local authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions to tackle benefit theft. We are committed to deterring those considering fraud as well as detecting fraud when it does occur. Benefit thieves take money intended for the most vulnerable in our society, which is why we are determined to ensure those who attempt to cheat the system are brought to justice and don't get away with it."

Charles Tilbury
01449 767857

cmw_tilbury@btinternet.com
07710 376555