

Annual Report from District Councillor John Matthissen May 2022

Covid Community Response	I first pay tribute to all who have contributed by supporting local people through a second year of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Babergh & Mid Suffolk (BMSDC) staff have taken on a variety of extra tasks and maintained a reasonable service despite the practical difficulties of working from home and safe procedures.
Governance	<p>Many decisions are being decided on the Chairman's vote and there has been little collaborative working between the administration group and the Green and Liberal Democrat group. The Green party had a very successful result in a by-election in the Thurston Ward, so the Council remains hung at 17 each side. The opportunity to reconsider the Cabinet model was rejected.</p> <p>Council meetings are now being held in person, but virtual platforms continue to be used for briefings and internal meetings. It is hoped that the Council will in future be able to hold 'hybrid' meetings where voting Council members need to be physically present at meetings, but some officers and members of the public will be able to make presentations and representations online.</p>
Financial	Mid Suffolk's general fund budget continues to be in a healthy condition, and the District element of council tax will be frozen. The council agreed the proposal from the Green and Liberal Democrat group to spend some of the Growth and Efficiency Fund to provide 2 electric bus services to help residents get into Stowmarket for a 2 year period. The Council's investment in CIFCO continues to provide revenue despite the value of the assets deteriorating..
Climate Change and Biodiversity	<p>The Council has recently adopted the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure plan to encourage more residents to travel actively.</p> <p>As part of the Tree and Hedgerow planting scheme over 200 trees and c2,500 hedgerow plants have been delivered to parishes. Over 250 trees were given to celebrate births during 2021 as part of the 'Tree for Life' scheme.</p> <p>The construction of a solar carport is well underway at the Leisure Centre and the new visitor centre at Needham Lake will be opened this summer.</p> <p>The waste lorries are now all operating on hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO) which should cut carbon emissions by 90%. MSDC adopted a Net Zero Carbon Toolkit as technical guidance for both developers and homeowners to help reduce the carbon footprint in new and existing buildings.</p>
Housing	<p>The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget was agreed by full Council, and as the Government have now lifted the rent cap, Council tenants will see a 4.1% increase in their rent. The HRA business plan is to be developed and hopes to include a programme of improvements to existing Council stock as well as building and acquiring dwellings.</p> <p>Part of the housing development on the old HQ site in Needham Market has been completed and this included 3 new council homes, and a further 15 affordable homes were acquired across the district in 2021. Over 100 residents were prevented from becoming homeless and the Council provided 16 dedicated beds for Rough Sleepers courtesy of grant funding.</p>
Ukraine war	As part of the response to the Ukraine crisis, BMSDC officers are carrying out housing checks on the properties which will be accommodating Ukrainian refugees, once the applications have been processed by the Home Office.
Planning	Following the examination interim report on the Joint Local plan, the Councils have agreed a 2-part local plan process with the inspectors.. This will enable the important social, economic and environmental objectives to be published in a Part 1 Joint Local Plan which will be adopted first, whilst the remaining work on spatial strategy matters and housing allocations will be addressed in a Part 2 Joint Local Plan. MSDC currently has over 9 years housing land supply.

Wellbeing	The council adopted its first Wellbeing Strategy this year. A number of initiatives across the district took place during the year including <i>Family Park Cooking</i> session in Stowmarket, free Christmas Holiday activity session , <i>Our Parks</i> (free outdoor fitness sessions) in Stowmarket and the <i>Active Schools</i> programme. MSDC together with Suffolk County Council and Stowmarket Town Council supported the launch in July of the Chilton Fields parkrun held every Saturday morning.
Economy	The Council continues the development of Gateway 14 which is now part of Freeport East. The business case has now been agreed by Cabinet. Almost 200 young people attended the Careeriosity event focussing on science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) and cultural industries. The Council held a Local Energy Showcase which attracted over 200 visitors and several local businesses. BMSDC's Virtual High Street project won an award.
Communities	Almost £400,000 worth of grants were distributed to support communities across the district. I was pleased to be able to allocate all my locality budget to community groups. A list is in current village magazines. The next tranche of locality funding is open for bids, so please get in touch with requests.
Combs	Homes opposite the Tannery - improved designs have been submitted, and this is likely to be approved shortly. It has been great to see the Oaks Meadow making excellent progress. A District-wide Governance review will see the Boundary change with Battsford considered at last. I believe the Infrastructure Levy payment for homes near The Punchbowl has come to Combs.
Little Finborough	It is good to see the village is hosting the Oaks Meadow project, with residents getting involved.
Onehouse	Working with the Parish Council I continue to try and resist the town encroaching towards the village. The fate of the final section of hedge in Union Road was sealed 18 months ago, when the principle of development was forced through on the casting vote of the planning committee chair. The County Council requires a visibility splay, but I am pleased to have persuaded the developers to retain hedges on the other 3 sides of the site. Next week I will be arguing in the planning committee that there is no need to breach policies to allow another 20 houses opposite the bungalows on Forest road. After months of argument, the idea of building on the land between Paupers Graves and the village has been withdrawn. Overall, too much large scale development is taking place, which is inevitably damaging, and has often not been carried out sensitively. I can only hope the end results will eventually mature into proper communities.
Great Finborough	It was good to attend the opening of the refurbished playground, good work by the parish council and all involved. Development proposal at Buxhall Lodge seems finally halted after a failed appeal. More affordable homes are on the way at Pear Tree Place fairly soon. I was very pleased to be able to persuade MSDC to buy the 3 acres of land beside the river at Wash Lane, preventing attempts at a very unsuitable housing development. It has been bought to protect and enhance the biodiversity corridor along the valley.
Harleston	It has been heartening to see the exceptional community energy and enthusiasm continued with new leadership from Andy and Hilary. The rewilding project brings a new dimension. I understand and share the frustration at the empty bungalows and continue to pressure MSDC housing officers to move forward with the refurbishment project.
Shelland	It is good to see residents supporting and getting involved in rewilding project with Harleston.

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