

Annual Report 2016/2017 by John Matthissen, MSDC Councillor for Onehouse ward.

The last 12 months have been a period of change within Mid Suffolk, in Europe and in America. Who would have predicted Brexit and Trump? Like it or not, Brexit and decisions being made by the Trump administration will affect us all for many years to come. Decisions made locally are having and will continue to have more direct impact upon residents of Mid Suffolk.

Devolution of power from Westminster to a combined Suffolk and Norfolk Authority was very much on the cards but some Norfolk councils found the terms of the offer unacceptable and, with no compromise possible, the offer was withdrawn.

Nick Gowrley became Leader of the Conservative administration at Mid Suffolk in May 2016. Charlie Adan resigned as Chief Executive of Mid Suffolk and Babergh councils and has been replaced by Arthur Charvonia. Staff of the two councils will be moving to Endeavour House in Ipswich around September 2017 where they will take over part of Suffolk County Council's headquarters building. The Needham Market offices will be closed and a 'call in centre' will open in Ipswich Street, Stowmarket. A complete overhaul of IT and telephone systems will be complete in time for the move. The promise is of a clear website that is simple to use for people to do a range of transactions on-line, such as pay council tax, claim benefits or order a brown bin. A single phone number will reach the council with callers then directed to the correct team.

The Council's finances continue to defy gravity and the national headlines, with a further large underspend and accumulated New Homes Bonus set to top £10 million by the end of 2017.

A fundamental change to the way MSDC makes decisions will come in from May 2017 with the setting up of a cabinet system of governance. Instead of key decisions being debated in Executive Committee meetings where representatives of all political parties are permitted to take part in a public debate, decisions will be made by cabinet or even by a single cabinet member.

Major development continues to affect us locally, with Chilton Leys homes being built, sold and occupied at the pace Taylor Wimpey expected, about 50 a year. Less expected is the application by Hopkins Homes to develop 300 homes off Union Road, an area of land which had been a "reserve allocation" expected after 2020. This is expected to go to committee soon. The struggle to get enough affordable homes and infrastructure from each development remains a losing battle. Our policies remain subordinate to the National Framework (NPPF) due to the continued failure to maintain a 5 year land supply.

There has been a review of sheltered housing, as homes in some schemes were hard to let. In Mid Suffolk there are 391 sheltered properties in 23 schemes. 145 out of 675 residents across Babergh and Mid Suffolk have signed a waiver saying they do not want or need a visit. 15 schemes across Mid Suffolk and Babergh will be de-sheltered. However, no tenants will be required to move if they do not wish to do so and those who wish to continue to receive support or an emergency alarm, will do so. Right to Buy sales continue to deplete our council housing stock, but it is pleasing to report the purchase of a house locally from the proceeds.

Mid Suffolk and Babergh District Councils plan to borrow £50m at low interest rate then use an incorporated structure to invest in commercial property. A motion by the Green Party that 50% of this investment by Mid Suffolk District Council should be in the District was rejected as "too risky".

A review of the wards across Mid Suffolk District Council is being carried out by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. This has been triggered by so-called "electoral inequality" – in this case because 11 out of the 30 wards have a variance (in electors) of over 10%. (The ward of North Stowmarket has increased in size by more than 30% since the last review, in 2001). The review determines total number of councillors, (a reduction is likely), number of wards, boundaries of each ward, number of councillors in each ward and the name of each ward. There will be public consultation on the proposals later in 2017.

My own role has continued as a member of the Joint Audit & Standards Committee, and the Mid Suffolk Regulatory Committee. In addition I substitute on Planning Committee when another of our group is unavailable.

I am pleased to tell you that each councillor will have a locality budget for 2017/18, and I will be inviting bids from local groups from June onwards.