

## **District Councillor's Report – Aug 2022**

### **Blueprint for the future of social housing approved**

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have approved their blueprint for the future of social housing. It will ensure that our tenants have good quality and sustainable homes, in safe neighbourhoods.

The business plan outlines how the councils will invest more than £30m in improving existing homes, to ensure they are energy efficient. This supports the councils' commitment to tackle climate change, as well as deliver new homes that provide good quality, affordable social housing for residents across the districts.

The HRA business plan sets out seven key priorities for council housing for the next five years:

#### **Tackling and adapting to climate change**

- investing in council homes to improve their overall energy efficiency, helping the environment, and reducing tenants' energy costs
- ensuring that each property possible has a minimum of an energy efficient C rating by 2030 through a £30m retrofit programme (£16m in Babergh and £14.5m in Mid Suffolk)

#### **Developing new council housing**

- aiming to build/acquire 65 new homes in each district per year, for each of the next six years

#### **Investing in current homes**

- improving the quality of existing homes and communal areas.

#### **Involving tenants in the running of the housing service**

- putting tenants at the heart of decision-making and ensuring they have a say in shaping housing provision and the service they receive

#### **Improving services for tenants**

- learning from every complaint and aiming to exceed the new Regulatory Framework and Standards

## **Improving the neighbourhoods that we manage**

- improving existing parking provision, including EV charging and improving the quality of estates through the development of a neighbourhoods strategy

## **Implementing digital transformation**

- building tenants' digital skills and ability, and using digital tools to put information at tenants' fingertips whenever they need it'

### **Energy Rebate scheme to be extended**

Residents in Babergh and Mid Suffolk who have been unable to access financial support through the Council Tax Energy Rebate Scheme may now be able to do so through a discretionary fund. Launched in February, the one-off rebate worth £150, aimed to help households in Council Tax bands A to D with the rising cost of energy.

In addition to the main Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme, Government has made £300,000 available as a discretionary fund to Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils meaning people in need of support who were not eligible for the main fund can now access the £150 rebate.

The discretionary fund is for people who live in a house where the Council Tax is paid by the property owner or for those in a house of multiple occupation, in any Council Tax band that was not eligible for the Council Tax Energy Rebate. To claim the rebate, individuals must provide evidence to the Council that they are responsible for energy bills (gas, electricity etc) and are in receipt of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit. In addition, the £150 rebate will be offered to Households in bands E – H who on 1st April 2022 were in receipt of Council Tax Reduction, a Council Tax discount or certain exemptions. The scheme is also open to Households in bands F – H who are in receipt of Disabled Band Reduction.

Anyone who believes they are eligible to access the discretionary fund must apply online through the Council website where they can submit the required information.

### **Wildflowers to spring up across Babergh and Mid Suffolk**

Babergh and Mid Suffolk have begun trialling wildflower verges across their districts, as part of efforts to tackle biodiversity and climate change. The step sees the councils reduce grass cutting in specific council-maintained areas to give existing wildflowers a chance to thrive. Initially, the grass is being left to grow to see which

wildflowers already exist. The councils will then cut and seed the areas with complimentary flower mixes as needed, in the Spring in a way that encourages more flowers to grow over coming years.

So far, trials have largely begun in Stowmarket and Sudbury, however, the councils will be continuing to expand into other areas over coming months, where it is safe to do so. For example, where the visibility of drivers isn't affected. These areas will be marked with new signs to make residents and visitors aware. In areas where they don't have responsibility for maintaining land, the councils are also working with others, including town and parish councils. This includes as part of [their trees, hedgerows and wildflowers scheme](#) which is currently open for applications until 31 August, following a successful round last year with nearly 5,000 trees and hedgerow plants planted.

The schemes form part of the councils' Biodiversity Action Plan, aiming to protect and strengthen the districts' plant and wildlife for generations to come. It has seen the councils invest funds in new specialised mowing equipment, as well as a dedicated biodiversity officer, to ensure maximum environmental benefit. The wildflower verges are also part of the councils' project with the [Design Council and LGA's Design in the Public Sector programme](#), with residents being asked for their feedback both on the trial areas and for ideas on where they'd like to see more wildflower areas set up. Feedback can be sent to the councils' biodiversity team at [biodiversity@babergmidssuffolk.gov.uk](mailto:biodiversity@babergmidssuffolk.gov.uk).

### **£450,000 more funding for community causes now available**

Babergh and Mid Suffolk community groups can now bid for a share of £450,000 to improve their neighbourhoods, thanks to the two new Community Development Grants. Projects such as including new play areas and equipment, protecting or enhancing our natural environment, provision of cultural experiences, improving digital access, reducing social isolation and supporting renewable or net-zero energy projects are all eligible to be supported by the new funds.

Each application is eligible for an award of up to £20,000, with £250,000 available in Mid Suffolk and £200,000 in Babergh. Groups can only make one application, but applicants can still apply for other community grant schemes for the same project.

This announcement is in addition to the new £150,000 [Suffolk Climate Action Community Match Fund](#), available to groups in Babergh and Mid Suffolk with projects supporting the county's vision to become carbon neutral by 2030.

## **Councils lead the way towards sustainable travel vision**

Babergh and Mid Suffolk are among the first district councils in Suffolk to take the next step towards a sustainable travel solution, aiming to increase active travel and help tackle climate change.

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are among the first district councils in Suffolk to progress a detailed Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP).

The recent Mid Suffolk's full council meeting welcomed the plan, which sets out the councils' approach to improving and developing the local cycling and walking network across the district over the next 10 years. Its aim is to encourage and support residents in a more permanent shift towards more sustainable transport, playing a key part in reducing air pollution and supporting the districts' Covid recovery.

The plan includes a list of almost 200 potential sustainable travel infrastructure schemes across the two districts. These have been prioritised based on Government-recommended criteria to help the councils bid for local, regional, and national funding.

Examples of the types of potential infrastructure projects included are:

- cycle parking facilities
- new pedestrian crossings
- improved surfaces on footpaths and bridleways
- segregated space for cycling alongside carriageways
- junction reconfigurations to improve cyclist and pedestrian safety
- accessibility improvements to the public rights of way network

By approving a LCWIP sustainable transport will continue to be considered as part of future developments in the districts, and Community Infrastructure Levy monies collected from developers are available to support for proposed initiatives.

Regards

*Rick*

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