

REPORT TO HADLEIGH TOWN COUNCIL

Thursday 18th April, 2018

Report by District Cllr Dr Siân Dawson (Hadleigh North Ward)

Introduction

It would be an understatement to say that the last year has been a turbulent time for Babergh District Council. Since the last Annual Meeting, 6 Conservative District Councillors have formed an Independent Conservative Group. All are loyal to the principles and policies of a Conservative administration, but a number of have deep concerns about the way business is being conducted by the current Babergh Conservative leader(s). Speaking personally, I am concerned about the move to Ipswich (we still don't have any information on costs/benefits); the decision to press for merger with Mid Suffolk without proper consultation (this cost Cllr Jennie Jenkins her role as Leader); we have yet to see the business plan that would support merger. Most recently, a decision has been taken to put the whole thing on whole because of a decision by Colin Noble to explore a unitary option for Suffolk without any prior consultation with the District Councils. There is an on-going failure to communicate with Members and there is a clear need to think through options before ill-considered solutions reach a point of no return.

Public Access

As I reported in February, there are some moves to have a "public access" location provided in Hadleigh to meet with Council Officers. This was proposed at a recent Council meeting when a Motion was moved by a Member to demand this additional facility. I SUPPORTED THIS MOTION and again forced to vote with the Opposition. The Cabinet have rejected the rejection and I will put in a request to call in the Motion for further discussion. For this reason alone, it would be wrong to offer any assurances that it will succeed. However, I am still keen to see some form of public access support provided in Hadleigh and not reliant on unmanned computer terminal in the Guildhall Offices or expect Hadleigh Town Officers with limited time to facilitate this idea.

Leisure

The expenditure of £3.8 millions to replace the Hadleigh Leisure Centre Pool and to redevelop the Kingfisher Leisure Centre in Sudbury is proceeding apace. Tenders will be sent out shortly with target completion dates of Sept 19 for the Sudbury facility and Jan 20 for the Hadleigh Pool. Although I am disappointed no facilities for the disabled have been considered to the pool and this is something I have requested to be addressed.

Public Sector Housing

Babergh DC has recently agreed to fund the provision of additional council housing (27 new build units at Holbrook), but frustratingly, I am currently not able to provide any further detail in the case of Angel Court in Hadleigh. It is evident that work on this project will not start in the timeframe that was originally anticipated, and it could be 2021 before we see a result – from my perspective this is a highly undesirable delay and the residents of Hadleigh deserve a clear explanation why the project has been subject to such delay.

Private Sector Housing

The Sec of State (Javid) has issued new guidance to help facilitate the building of more private sector houses. As you know, we are now required to build 440 houses a year rather than the 335 that was already a serious challenge. The issue for Babergh DC has been seriously complicated by the absence of a 5-year land supply and I suspect that the introduction of new regulations will only slow/complicate the process. For what it's worth, in the last year the Babergh Planning Committee approved 74% of the applications considered and a new issue of the draft new Local Plan is expected to go before the Cabinet this month with a further public consultation in the summer of 2018. Last time there were 13,960 comments submitted and I strongly recommend that you encourage individuals and Hadleigh Town Council to remain engaged in this important exercise.

Merger of Babergh & MSDCs

It gives me no pleasure to report that the expression "dogs breakfast" come to mind when updating the Babergh/MSmerger proposals. Initially the chief Executive and the Babergh DC Conservative Administration were pressing for an early decision on merger – which was not helped by additional pressure from Mid Suffolk to "get on with it". As you know, a small group of Conservative Councillors including myself sided with the Opposition to prevent it happening without another referendum of Babergh voters, who had rejected the option 7 years ago by a 60% to 40% margin. A failure to listen to the concerns of Ward Members out in the field cost Cllr Jenkins her position as Leader of Babergh DC. The new Leader Cllr John Ward subsequently agreed to a referendum but the Motion that required a referendum also required that no public funds to be spent on the project - Catch 22 ... i.e. it's not now possible to explore the merger option as it would require Officer time and money. Fortunately (or unfortunately depending on your view), the Leader of Suffolk CC (Colin Noble) has resolved that particular issue when he **informed the Districts** that he had contracted with an external agency to examine and report on a Unitary Council option for the whole of Suffolk. **He did not consult with the Districts** before initiating the study and the Leaders of both Babergh & Mid Suffolk called for the exercise to be stopped until the option had been discussed between Suffolk CC and the Districts. That call was rejected so any consideration of merger between Babergh & MS is now on the back burner for the foreseeable future as the Babergh/MS merger solution could become irrelevant if the Unitary option is adopted. **These exercises are all about saving money.**

Cllr Dr Sian Dawson

17th April, 2018.