

District councillor's report, October 2010

1. Merger with Babergh District Council

In the last week of September both Councils approved the recommendations within the Detailed Business Case, to create a new Council from April 2013, covering the whole of south and central Suffolk.

This is believed to be the first time in the UK that two existing District councils have agreed in principle to press ahead with their own abolition and replacement with a new authority.

Engagement at local level is seen as critical to the success of creating a new single Council. We will now start work with communities, councillors and staff to examine what democratic and staffing arrangements are needed at a local level, and what level of interest communities, including Town and Parish Councils, have in becoming involved with the delivery of services and decision making at a local level.

To summarise:

- The business plan expects to save over £7million between both councils over 4 years
- The grant we receive is likely to be cut over the same period by a similar amount
- The government has already agreed a £4 billion budget cut for next year. This will affect monies for areas such as housing, planning, regeneration and economic development
- There will be a nil council tax rise for at least 2 years
- Feedback from council staff is overwhelmingly positive and in favour of pressing on with the merger and provide absolute certainty for the future. They are fed up with prevarication and delay, particularly in light of the LGR debacle
- Failure to provide a clear lead is a failure of leadership and an abdication of responsibility by elected members
- The business plan figures have been exhaustively tested and reviewed. They are very cautious and are therefore likely to be underestimates
- Only a full merger provides this level of savings as there will only be one senior management team
- The lack of money will impinge on the most vulnerable members of society as there will be less money available for affordable housing, community transport, voluntary bodies, community grants, CAB and rural services such as the Coffee Caravan in the more remote areas of both councils
- It will be more difficult to find the resources for economic development in areas such as Stowmarket and discretionary areas of activity such as arts and leisure
- Less resources for leveraging in funding from other sources of government and the private sector
- A joint council covering a third of the county's geographic area will have to be listened to and thus has more influence in critical areas such as the economy, education and healthcare. This is particularly important following the changes being proposed by the county council
- We can also co-ordinate services better with other bodies - health, police, emergency actions etc
- Greater economies of scale when new contracts are signed for leisure, procurement, IT and others
- Arrangements for localities are being drawn up by the constitutional working group. The group is collating evidence from the recently formed unitary councils, outside bodies, parish councils and individuals

- We need to keep the momentum going full steam ahead
- Government is said to be particularly interested in our proposals and will do all they can to assist us.

2. Waste & recycling

We are continuing our efforts to reduce the amount of waste going into landfill (which attracts a rising amount of tax we have to pay). The contractor is making a concerted effort to check the recycling bins and teams are informing residents of the “do’s and don’ts” of recycling. Between the two of them, the message seems to be getting through, as recycling rates have inched up to 44.96% in June, the best achieved so far.

3. Hartismere Hospital

Agreement appears finally to have been reached with the PCT on the future of the site. One possible complication is the presence of beds in Paddock House, which are funded by the PCT, and the future plans the County has for residential care. The size of the project is such that it will not require interference from the Strategic Health Authority, which has never understood the needs of more remote rural communities such as ours, and the disadvantaged residents who live there.

4. Audit Commission

The announced abolition of the Audit Commission should save local authorities such as ours significant sums of money, both in terms of fees (which we have long argued were inflated, were non-negotiable, and did not provide value for money) and in terms of officer time in meeting their requirements. It will be replaced by firms from the private sector, which will be subject to competition, and thus we expect significantly lower costs.

5. Travellers and gypsies:

In September Communities and Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles announced that travellers who play by the rules will get the same rights as other mobile home residents and could benefit from more authorised sites. At the same time, top-down Whitehall planning rules on travellers which ministers believe have undermined community cohesion and harmed the countryside will be scrapped.

Instead, councils will get financial benefits for building authorised sites where they are needed.

The Government has already freed councils from the top-down Regional Strategies and the associated building targets; this now allows councils to decide for themselves how many traveller pitches are necessary in their area according to local need and historic demand.

The Government is concerned about the growing number of unauthorised developments and encampments and the problems they cause within communities. The Secretary of State is looking at ways to strengthen the powers available to councils to more effectively tackle unauthorised development. This will include action against speculative, unscrupulous private developers.