

Report from DCllr Peter Patrick, December 2017

1. My apologies for not being with you. Since the operation four weeks ago, I'm afraid I still continue to feel tired in the evenings, and the stent in my kidney will not be removed until the New Year. I still have to get to Council meetings and briefings during the day. Classically, this is one of the busiest weeks of the winter.
2. I am pleased that Shotley and Chelmondiston emerged relatively unscathed from the boundary review, albeit that Chelmo's full name was consistently misspelled (that will be put right). The incorporation of Bentley may seem somewhat anomalous, but shouldn't create too many problems. It made the numbers work. The new, single-member wards will be effective for the elections in May 2019.
3. As you will come to hear, there is much discussion now about the future of Babergh District Council. It was only created in 1974, and as I have pointed out before, never had a controlling political group before 2015, when a significant Conservative majority was put in place. We now have a Cabinet system, and I have been given responsibility for Finance.

My view is that Babergh's finances are feeble. They have always relied on Government funding, and while there was regular support through the Rate Support Grant, Council Tax could be kept low and there was no incentive to introduce parking charges in the principal towns of Sudbury and Hadleigh. Councillors did not generally need to take difficult decisions and so could agree to disagree on most things. Since the recession, agreement was reached to combine the workforces of Babergh and Mid Suffolk under a single Chief Executive – a sensible decision which has achieved considerable savings.

We are now facing the disappearance of Rate Support Grant. The New Homes Bonus which was intended to replace the RSG was initially helpful, but the Government has reduced the period for which it is payable, in order to find the money for social care, and the failure of Babergh to achieve new homes in the past few years has led to a significant, and painful, reduction in funding. We are faced with making difficult decisions over the next few years with regard to services unless firm action is taken.

The move to Endeavour House, recently completed, will achieve savings in running costs, and release the Hadleigh site for hopefully profitable development. Like our other strategic investments, however, that will take time to come to fruition. We have, in the meantime, been working as an Administration closely with our colleagues in Mid Suffolk, and we are pursuing a Joint Strategic Plan. We have much in common.

Mid Suffolk, for a variety of reasons, enjoys significant cash resources which Babergh does not. Mid Suffolk's administration has expressed an enthusiasm to restructure, so that they and Babergh dissolve and form a new administrative area. That would, in my view, be very helpful and administratively sensible. I believe that deferring a decision on this matter, for whatever reason, will not be in the best interests of the population as a whole. We are already having to consider next year's budget, and an increase in the Council Tax will have to be under consideration. It will not be enough to cover shortfalls foreseen in subsequent years.

I am explaining my position to you; it will not come as a surprise. The Cabinet will be deciding how to proceed at its meeting on Thursday of this week. I am hoping that public consultation can start promptly thereafter.

4. Despite all the 'smoke and fury', the Cabinet will hopefully be pressing on with other business. We have a new Leisure Strategy to consider, and the Hadleigh Swimming Pool to worry about. We have recently appointed an Assistant Director with responsibility for Customer Access, and I have asked her to review the way the recent changes in communications with the Council have impacted on the peninsula.

5. Finally, may I take the opportunity to wish you all a Happy Christmas? The past year has seen the wonderful progress with the Shotley Pier, and I hope we're beginning to get to grips with Pin Mill. I know you all beaver away without much thanks, but you always have my support. As a matter of interest, in Endeavour House we have created a number of meeting rooms, named after villages with windmills (it's a long story!). Easily the most convenient and comfortable isthe Shotley Room.

With kind regards,

Peter PATRICK
Cllr Berners Ward, Cabinet Member for Finance, Babergh DC"