

Peter Patrick 30/04/2018

I hope the attached is helpful. I really have been plagued, healthwise. No sooner was my kidney finally sorted out on 14th April than I find I have an infected prostate, requiring antibiotics. As someone who has never needed much hospital treatment before now, I find this incessant discomfort very frustrating. I shall therefore start my Report with an apology.

‘ Ladies and Gentlemen, it is with much regret that I have to absent myself this evening. I find it risky to drive far, and I cannot give you my full and proper attention if I need to be worrying about the proximity of a loo! Strange to think that we celebrated Teresa’s 70th birthday with a lunch – in glorious weather – at the Butt and Oyster last September. I have been restricted in my movements since early November, and am fully conscious that you may be wondering what I look like. Dare I say, you haven’t missed much.

I have, nevertheless, had to keep working and it has been a busy year. As I have explained before, in 2015 the electors in Babergh returned a Conservative majority so that, for the first time since its formation on 1974, Babergh was able to have an Administration. I have had the privilege of being part of the team since then, and in May last year the Council introduced a Cabinet system, used by nearly every local authority in the country. I was asked to be Cabinet Member for Finance, and I was also nominated to be one of the two Babergh members on the steering group for the All Together programme, which was responsible for overseeing the move of our staff from the Headquarters at Hadleigh and Needham Market to Endeavour House in Ipswich.

The move was completed by November. It involved a considerable amount of planning; negotiation with Trade Unions; the scanning of over 1million paper documents; the introduction of new computers and software, and related staff training; the opening of ‘touch-down’ points for staff, e.g. building control experts, who do not need to come into the Ipswich offices; and the establishment of customer access points, particularly in Sudbury. We are still exploring the need for similar access points elsewhere, but the need is to keep manpower to a minimum.

The end result is a workforce which is capable of working more flexibly, in a much improved office environment. We councillors have had to ‘learn new tricks’: I can now hold multi-party conferences via Skype sitting at the dining-room table. The move will save us several millions of pounds.

On the matter of money, you’ll be aware of the parlous state of Babergh’s finances. I managed to present a budget to Council for 2018/19 in late February. A few members voted against it, but no alternative was offered. We end up with very limited reserves, but having to face a likely deficit of getting on for £1m in 2019/20. To my mind, the only reasonable way forward was to proceed with a ‘merger’ with Mid Suffolk. Not only does that make sense administratively, but Mid Suffolk has cash resources which Babergh lacks.

However, that prospect became bogged down in petty politicking, engineered, I’m ashamed to say, by disappointed Conservative colleagues who thought they should be leading the Council, and supported with relish by the Socialists, Lib Dems and Independents. The erstwhile Leader, Cllr Jenkins, was effectively stabbed in December, and the new Leader, Cllr John Ward, is desperately trying to keep the show on the road. I’m afraid the sight of the anarchic fun-and-games at Council so disenchanting members of Mid Suffolk DC, that they lost enthusiasm for working more closely with us. This will cost us dear. I see no signs of a greater sense of responsibility prevailing. Cllr Davis, somewhat surprisingly given his record of opposing most of what we do, has joined our Cabinet, and I hope he comes to see that local government is not simply a matter of social media shenanigans, but involves full-time commitment in mastering a portfolio and working closely and supportively with staff and colleagues.

To give credit where it is due, I know that Cllr Davis is closely involved in planning matters, and this past year has been difficult for Babergh in trying to progress its Local Plan and secure an appropriate Land Supply for new houses. Not only do we need new homes; we also need the Government funding that comes with it. We supported a bid for money from the Housing Infrastructure Fund to help nudge the Ganges development forward, but alas we were not successful. We shall, however, keep pushing.

Not only does Babergh need New Homes Bonus. It is coming to rely increasingly on Business Rates. Our difficulty in Babergh is that much of our Business is in the retail sector, which is going through a difficult time. We are facing a £1.2m hit from a revaluation of Tesco's at Copdock, and we have yet to learn what will be the impact of the closure of ToysRUs.

If much of the above is gloomy, I apologise, but that is the reality. In the meantime, our Administration has a new Housing Strategy, to create more affordable housing, and a Leisure Strategy which will see, inter alia, a much needed replacement swimming pool in Hadleigh. We have supported the enlarged AONB, and the Shotley pier. There is so much to celebrate in Berners Ward, but as a member of the Cabinet, I have to beaver away on behalf of the District as a whole.

On a purely local matter, I set in train the involvement last year of our senior Director, Mike Evans, in trying to bring together the Parish Council and the Pin Mill Bay Management Company. I'm not sure that we were entirely successful, but unfortunately Mike was on sick leave most of last year and has now left the Council. I understand, however, that his successor, Jonathan Stephenson, has been pursuing contacts with the numerous authorities involved in the management of the river frontage, and our officers are still determined to ensure that river users obey the law. I hope that relations improve.

I regret that I am not able to directly answer questions, or get involved in lively discussion. I hope, however, that this report gives some idea of what I have been doing during the past twelve months. Thank you for your patience.

Peter Patrick
Cllr Berners Ward, Cabinet Member for Finance Babergh DC'

I hope that's adequate. Let me know of any gaps.

Many thanks and kind regards,

Peter P.