

Creting St Peter Annual Parish Meeting. May 2016

Report by Keith Welham, District Councillor for Stowupland and Creting St Peter.

I find it hard to believe that I have completed a year as your District Councillor. The year has been very rewarding but challenging at times, not least dealing with planning applications for large housing developments in Stowupland and an expansion of the Poundfield works in Creting. I've already given my thoughts on planning applications so I'll say no more about those.

I am pleased to have been able to help some council tenants with housing repairs and adaptations and to obtain advice, which isn't always easy to find on the MSDC website. Not everyone has access to Council Headquarters or to a computer, so I am happy to help. If you know of someone who might need some help, please ask them to contact me by telephone.

At a strategic level, **Devolution** has been much talked about but not a lot has been agreed. Following weeks of negotiation between Government and local councils and Local Enterprise Partnerships a deal which may be worth over £1bn for East Anglia was announced in the budget on 16 March by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. As part of the deal East Anglia could receive:

- £900m (£30m a year for the next 30 years) to invest in infrastructure
- £175m to invest in housing

If this deal goes ahead, there would be a fundamentally different relationship between Government and local public services. It is being negotiated by Leaders from councils across Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and the New Anglia and Greater Cambridgeshire and Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnerships. However it is important to note, it's not a 'done deal' it requires ratification by each of the local councils and the LEP boards. The Deal requires the creation of a Combined Authority and directly elected Mayor and it is proposed that the first mayoral elections would be in May 2017 alongside county council elections.

The Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Strategic Plan is being refreshed following the election in May last year. Both are now Conservative administrations and they jointly decided to review and update the strategies of the two Councils, in light of key local, regional and national factors that have changed since the previous Joint Strategic Plan was developed in 2013/14. It will set out how the Councils aim to provide services to deliver positive, sustainable change in our individual and business communities over the next five years. A focused management review has been undertaken to ensure that we make the best use of our resources and direct them to the activities and interventions needed to secure delivery of our new Strategic Plan. This has resulted in many experienced people in key positions opting for early retirement and we have a number of temporary staff and others who are new to Suffolk. This is taking a long time to settle down and many programmes are falling behind schedule as a result and one of the projects which had slipped from its target before the timetable was even issued is production of the Joint Local Plan.

We are told in council papers and at briefings that all is going smoothly but the real concern is that if we don't have an approved Joint Local Plan we will not get New Homes Bonus and also lose out on other funding and we will continue to have little defence against speculative developers. The revenue support grant from central government is being phased out and will be zero next financial year. New homes bonus is supposed to replace this but New Homes Bonus is being reduced and

there is no certainty that it will continue long term. Add to this the directive that, rather than an increase in line with inflation, council rents must be reduced by 1% per year for possibly 3 years before they can start to be increased again, you can see that central government are forcing cuts upon local authorities without giving them the flexibility to deal with financial shortfalls. The Conservative Administration at MSDC are very cross about these cuts, as are the opposition parties, but seem incapable of forcing the Chancellor to reverse any of these measures. This is a gloomy picture; the only way to increase income is encourage developers to build huge numbers of houses and huge business parks. But then the income only starts when the properties are occupied.

One way to get money from developers for community and infrastructure projects is through Community Infrastructure Levy or CIL. Charging started on 11 April meaning that any planning permission granted on or after this date may be liable to pay CIL. The MSDC Infrastructure Team will be providing further information over the coming months and at Parish Liaison meetings with further details on what CIL charging means for communities and how Parishes can take advantage of the opportunities it presents.

On the housing front, MSDC have planning consent for 38 new council homes supported by Homes and Communities Agency grant funding. These are the first houses to be built in a generation and will be completed by the end of 2016/17.

A revised tenancy agreement was approved for Mid Suffolk's Council tenants.

MSDC is promoting the **Decent Homes Standard**. This is a targeted campaign to encourage landlords and homeowners to take up grants and loans to bring their homes up to the Decent Home Standard. This funding was made available under the Housing Renewal Policy approved by both councils in February 2015.

Food Enterprise Zones (FEZ for short) Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have each been awarded a grant to set up two new Food Enterprise Zones – one in Wherstead called the **Orwell FEZ** and the other at the Mill Lane Business Park in Stowmarket called the **Gipping FEZ**.

Unfortunately cuts have been made to the grants budget, and the locality funding will not be available this year. But we do have some good officers who have been very successful in getting grants from outside bodies for community projects, so please let me know if you have a need for funds and we'll see what we can do.

Charlie Adan, the Chief Executive, resigned last month. The vacancy will be advertised shortly. In the meantime, the Council is seeking to appoint a Deputy Chief Executive. This is a new post. The Council has a new political leader – Nick Gowrley, who was until a couple of years ago a chief officer at MSDC.

I finish with a word of thanks for electing me last year. I feel strongly that, once elected, politics should not and do not play a huge part in my duties as your District Councillor. I look at every issue on its merits and I've been elected to serve every resident and that is the aim I try to fulfil.