

MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL REPORT TO CREETING ST PETER ANNUAL PARISH COUNCIL
MEETING 17TH MAY 2021

This report is on behalf of both District Cllr. Steve Phillips and myself.

Covid-19.

Obviously the past year has been a year like no other due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

On Mid Suffolk and Babergh District Councils many meetings had to be held online, either via Skype or lately, via Microsoft Teams. The most significant impact on the Councils' financial governance arrangements for 2020/21 came from managing and responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Making assumptions on which to base the impact on income and expenditure was challenging as nothing similar had been experienced before. The Suffolk Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Network has been used extensively as a place to share information, resulting in a degree of consistency of approach, which has strengthened governance arrangements both internally and across the County. A Covid-19 reserve was established under CFO delegation for each Council in early May 2020 to enable critical unbudgeted expenditure to be made in the Councils' response to the pandemic. Responding to requests for financial information from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) meant that regular updates were provided to the Senior Leadership Team and the Cabinets, to monitor the financial impact and take any necessary action. From the combination of additional funding being provided to local government from MHCLG and savings identified across the Councils' operations during 2020/21, it is anticipated that both Councils will be able to absorb the additional costs incurred as a result of the pandemic.

Support for local businesses.

During the pandemic, each Council has administered over £30m of grants to date, which the Government has made available to local businesses. This has been through a combination of payments following Government guidance or the development of new discretionary policies. All discretionary policies have been approved in accordance with the Councils' Constitutions. On top of this, 100% business rates relief was also administered for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors following a Government policy announcement. New arrangements have been put in place during the year to manage, monitor and report upon the range of grant schemes and business rates

2019/20 Annual Accounts.

The Joint Audit and Standards Committee meeting on 29th March 2021 reviewed the draft 2019/20 Annual Accounts for both MSDC and Babergh District Councils. There had been a delay in having the 2018/19 Accounts signed off by the Councils' external auditors, Ernst & Young (EY), however this had resulted from resourcing issues within EY rather than any issues with the accounts, which were subsequently signed off with an unqualified audit report.

The delay in completing the 2018/19 audit had a knock-on impact to the audit of the 2019/20 Accounts. It is anticipated that the final audit report will be issued before the end of this month and that an unqualified opinion on the accounts will again be the outcome. It was resolved that delegation be given to the Councils' S151 Officer (Responsible Financial Officer) and the Joint Committee Chairs to sign off the accounts, including the auditors unqualified opinion, once completed.

Development Control (Planning).

Development Control (Planning) has been an interesting experience over the past year with several quite contentious planning applications to consider, mainly driven by Central Government's requirement for increased housing allocations. The Coronavirus has also had an impact on the way in which Development Control Committee meetings took place and meetings have been held online via Skype/Microsoft Teams, although with the usual invitations and opportunity for parish councils, objectors and supporters to participate, as is normal.

Continued overleaf:

Local projects.

As ward members we have been involved in a number of local issues on behalf of residents – for example I am a member of the local working group for the 'Access for All' project at Needham Market railway station. The Coronavirus situation has inevitably had an impact on the delivery of this project, as it has also on Mid Suffolk's Visitor Centre project at Needham Lake, which we are both on the member working group for. The intention was that the Visitor Centre should be open by the end of this summer season, however due to a request for a redesign of the kitchen area the actual opening date is as yet unconfirmed.

I hope that this report gives you an insight into some of the areas that we have been involved in – there are several other matters that we have been involved with, but I think this report is quite long enough already.

That concludes my report, if there are any questions I will endeavour to answer them, or I will obtain an answer for you.

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