

## **Borough Councillors Report 2015/16**

Almost a year has passed since the elections both local and general and it has been an extremely busy 11 months keeping up with new government directives and local pressures on services and collaboration with partners.

The Conservative administration at St Edmundsbury consist of 36 Conservatives, 4 UKIP, 4 mixed group of Labour, Independent and a Green member, 1 lone Independent.

As the majority group the Conservatives have elected a leader who in turn appoints the cabinet.

The Cabinet have the following responsibilities:

Leader: Cllr Griffiths

Deputy Leader and Housing portfolio: myself

Resources and Performance: Cllr Houlder

Planning and Growth: Cllr Pugh

Leisure, heritage and parks: Cllr Rayner

Families and Communities: Cllr Everitt

Operations: Cllr Stevens

We continue to work closely through shared services with Forest Heath, our management team and staff are now fully integrated. We are now exploring ways for closer political integration.

**Leader:** Cllr Griffith's time has been increasingly taken up on meetings with outside bodies and government ministers. The government priorities are around economic growth and housing. We have been successful in achieving funding from both Local Enterprise Partnerships, for 2 enterprise zones 1 in Haverhill and the other on the new Suffolk Business Park. In addition to multiple negotiations over the Rougham Relief Road, which I am delighted to say has now been started with a projected 18 month timescale.

**Devolution:** This has taken up an increasing amount of time and the proposal was announced by the Chancellor in the March budget. The proposal is for 23 councils to work together with an elected mayor for the East. This initial proposal will be put to the individual councils during the summer and how to

engage with the public is at present under discussion. The offer as it stands is for £150 million capital grant for new homes and £30 million per annum for 30 years for infrastructure and economic growth.

Community governance review is ongoing and the Boundary Commission visited the Borough last week. Many thanks to the Parish council for their input into the parish boundary consultation. The fight continues as they say!

**Housing Portfolio:** There continues to be great demand for housing especially affordable housing. Our housing waiting list remains fairly constant with 1490 on the list in St Edmundsbury and 946 in Forest Heath, demand for 1 and 2 bedroom properties being the greatest. Although those with the most urgent need are often families wanting 3 bedroom properties. Our Housing Option Team work with all clients to help them find suitable accommodation whether in the private sector or housing association properties. In addition we have purchased 2 properties for conversion into single and family accommodation for temporary homeless people. This is to reduce reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation which is both unsatisfactory for the client and costly for the council. The council stands to save £100,000 in bed and breakfast costs by the use of our own properties which are managed by Anglia Care Trust. I am delighted to say that together with the Housing Associations we achieved the completion of 200 affordable homes this year.

In addition St Edmundsbury together with Forest Heath and Suffolk County Council have set up a Housing Company to build houses initially on council owned land. Called Barley Homes Group it has recently been registered at Company House and we are working on the first business plan and submission of potential sites. Meanwhile, we are waiting for the Housing and Planning Bill to complete its passage through Parliament. At present the Government is putting their emphasis on Starter Homes which I feel is too prescriptive and will not suit everyone.

**Families and Communities:** Our locality officers together with councillors are out and about working with local community groups to support initiatives and give advice over possible funding opportunities and grant applications. Each councillor now has a budget of £2,500 to spend within their area. I have been very pleased to support the Mouse Lane Area play initiative, a Theatre Royal

Arts performance at Rougham School along with community initiatives in my other villages.

**Recourses and Performance:** Work here has been primarily around the budget. Through our medium term financial strategy we have made assumptions that our revenue support government grant will cease by 2019. We continue to work to minimise this impact and are putting time and effort into new initiatives like the Housing Company and Suffolk wide Business Rates retention scheme. We are also lobbying government around the United States Airforce council tax exemption, this mounts to over £500,000 for forest Heath and £120,000 for St Edmundsbury. We are told that this cost is covered by the Revenue Support Grant but if that is to cease in 2019 how will the council's be reimbursed for this exemption.

**Planning and Growth:** This portfolio is increasingly being driven by government through the National Planning Policy Framework. The emphasis being "Presumption in favour of sustainable development". With the assumption that Councils will work proactively with applicants to find solutions which mean that proposals can be approved wherever possible. This policy has been published by the Planning Inspectorate and is required to be included in all Local Plans.

A number of our vision 2031 sites are beginning to come forward including the Taylor Wimpey Homes in Rougham Parish, the Sybil Andrews Academy and the Suffolk Business Park. I thank the Parish Council for all the work they have done on these plans. Meanwhile the Council continues to press for improved infrastructure alongside the need for housing and growth.

**Operations Portfolio:** The main work in this portfolio has been with the West Suffolk Operational Waste Hub. The aim being to deliver a single site for a centrally located waste transfer site. This work is ongoing and further information will become available when the full consultation is evaluated and reported on all the suggested sites, with a decision made by the end of June.

The introduction of a charge for the brown bin collection was a difficult decision but due to the reduction in the gate fee from Suffolk County Council, financially we have been unable to absorb that cost. The charge brings us into line with Mid Suffolk and Babergh and 49% of council tax payers have taken up the service.

**Leisure and Culture:** The Apex goes from strength to strength with several sell out shows, bringing a really positive enhancement to the night time economy in Bury St Edmunds. The Christmas Fayre continues to be extremely popular and successful. Our parks have all won the prestigious Green Flag award. We continue to explore ways to increase income from our leisure assets working with partners like Abbeycroft Leisure.

This is a very brief overview of the work going on in the Borough at present. I can only thank you all for your support and look forward to the challenges ahead.