

DISTRICT COUNCILLOR

REPORT TO THE 2023 ANNUAL PARISH MEETINGS IN THE CLAYDON & BARHAM WARD

The 2023 parish annual meetings give the opportunity to look back on the District Council year 2022/23 and set out briefly thoughts on some matters, both locally and more district-wide.

District Elections

Elections to the 26 wards that comprise Mid Suffolk District Council took place on Thursday 4th May 2023. All the wards were contested in this election. Turnout across the district wards varied from a high of 45.2% to a low of 26.5% with the Claydon & Barham ward being midway with a turnout of 35.3%, which was somewhat higher than the 31/0% in 2019. The 26 wards comprise of 34 seats with some wards, such as Claydon & Barham, being twice the electoral size of a single member ward and therefore represented by two councillors.

Across the district, the election saw a seismic change in the composition of the council. Previously the council had been finely balanced with a Conservative & Independent Group of 17 councillors running the administration with a coalition of 12 Green councillors and 5 Liberal Democrat councillors forming a joint opposition. That has all changed now, with the new council comprising 24 Green councillors, 6 Conservative councillors and 4 Liberal Democrat councillors. Clearly, the Green Party has a substantial majority and will form the new administration.

Locally, the Claydon & Barham ward elected both a new Green Party councillor, David Penny and a returning Conservative councillor, John Whitehead. With the first parish meetings falling within a week of the declaration of the election results and with them following a long weekend of several Coronation events and then a great deal of councillor induction activity, I am writing this report in the first person to meet the deadline for the first meetings. This also seems appropriate given the backward-looking nature of an annual report but I look forward to working in close collaboration with my fellow ward councillor both when reporting to parish councils and when working on matters affecting our individual parishes and individual residents.

Planning Matters

This past year, like 2021/22, has been thankfully quieter than 2020/21 when we were faced with three major applications in Barham, Claydon and Whitton Rural but it has not been without its challenges. The Barham application for 269 houses returned for matters of important detail, such as design and layout, although the previously granted outline application had established approval for housing up to that number on this large site. The developer held appropriate consultation meetings with residents and took a lot of that feedback into producing their designs and layout. There is the agreed mix of affordable housing, well interspersed across the site, good use of open space and a diverse offering of house sizes. The spine road has houses set back with service road access and should be a major feature. Development meanwhile has continued at a pace on the Whitton site off the Old Norwich Road. That has had its challenges with traffic issues, site levels and flooding attenuation causing concern to existing residents. Meetings have been held, dialogue has been established and matters are being monitored on a site where construction will continue into 2025.

The Ely Road site that spans both Claydon and Barham with 70 homes approved at outline has now been sold on to a social housing developer but their detailed plans appear stalled at present.

A modest but locally controversial housing development in Henley has raised challenges during its delivery but elsewhere in Henley it is pleasing to see so much activity and work at the Cross Keys pub site. A great deal of energy and time was spent over several years by the ward member, Henley parish councillors and local residents with the aim of preventing the former pub's conversion to a domestic dwelling. Our end goal was achieved, a great result for the local and wider community.

Despite best endeavours, a great deal of time spanning the pandemic and extensive lobbying, a similar success story sadly eluded us at Pipp's Ford in Coddendam. Pipp's Ford is an isolated hamlet of Coddendam set in the Gipping Valley between the river and the A14. Residents, although few in number, were united in opposition to the development of a construction training site in close proximity to their homes. Supported by Mid Suffolk's economic development team, this application was passed by the planning committee in 2022/23.

Planning matters can be controversial and emotive and as ward members we are here to represent our communities. Our attendance at parish council meetings where they discuss applications as 'statutory consultees' provides us as ward members with vital intelligence but individual residents are also encouraged to contact us going forward so that we can diligently represent your views. Often the national planning framework and house building targets create an uneven playing field but I feel confident to speak for both of us ward members that we will do our utmost to represent your views and opinions on applications that affect our local communities.

Finances

I believe it more a statement of fact, rather than an overtly political statement, to say that our district finances are in a very robust position. Whilst freezing the council tax precept for two years we have still found ourselves to be in a surplus position with growing reserves. Real efforts have been made to spend some of these reserves on special worthwhile projects with £5million set aside over the last couple of years. A large percentage of that spend required new staff to deliver the projects and recruitment of new, experienced people, often on fixed-term contracts, has proved challenging in an era of low unemployment. Progress has been made, albeit slower than anticipated, and the hope is that some of these pilot initiatives will prove to be very successful and become permanent features of future budgets.

Localities Grants

In 2022/23 your two ward councillors had a collective pot of £14,700 plus a modest amount of brought-forward money. This was fully spent across seven parishes in the ward on twelve projects, ranging from new play equipment, speed indicators, defibrillators, street lighting upgrades, picnic benches, litter bins, noticeboards and signage, an electric hob, iPads and laptop, storage units. This coming year has a similar amount of finance baked into the 2023/24 district council budget and as ward members I know that we will look forward to working with parish councils and community groups in putting this budget to good use.

John Whitehead

Claydon & Barham Ward Member for 2022/23

Your ward members for 2023/24 onwards are Dave Penny and John Whitehead. Our contact details are available on the Mid Suffolk website and hopefully on parish noticeboards across the ward.