

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

FROM: Head of Corporate Services

REPORT NUMBER **F114**

TO: COUNCIL

DATE OF MEETING 31 October 2006

STATE OF THE DISTRICT DEBATE

1. **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The Council holds an annual State of the District Debate as part of its policy and budget-making framework. This report sets out the results of a consultation exercise that has been undertaken to inform the Debate.
- 1.2 Members are asked to discuss the issues raised through the consultation exercise and to decide which should be considered further as part of the 2007/08 Corporate Plan and Budget process. The Corporate Plan Working Group will then work on a detailed revised Corporate Plan in the light of the decisions made and the Service and Financial Planning Group will work with officers to deliver a budget that reflects the Corporate Plan changes and the Financial Strategy.
- 1.3 Members are advised that the 2006/07 Corporate Plan should be referred to when considering this report. This was adopted by the Council through Report E273.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That Members discuss the issues that have been raised through the State of the District Event and decide which should be considered further as part of the 2007/08 Corporate Plan and Budget process. These could include the areas raised for further consideration: sustainability, diverse groups and elderly people, and the Local Government White Paper.

3. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1 Financial implications will be considered as part of the ongoing Service and Financial Planning process.

4. **KEY INFORMATION**

- 4.1 The Council holds an annual State of the District Debate as part of its policy and budget-making framework.
- 4.2 Last year the Council reviewed its corporate priorities and set out in the 2005/07 Corporate Plan what it would do to achieve these. The integrated timetable for the Corporate Plan and Budget for 2006/07 then included provision for consultation on this Plan with the public, partners and voluntary groups prior to the State of the District Debate. The consultation exercise focussed on the Plan to measure its alignment to public expectations, and to determine whether any changes should be made through the 2006/07 Corporate Plan.

- 4.3 This year, the State of the District Event focussed on themes emanating from three of our priorities where it was felt there may be gaps in the action we should take in 2007/08:
- A safe and sustainable environment
 - Easy, convenient access to quality services
 - Raising individual and community ambitions, and encouraging active citizenship
- 4.4 Through workshops, participants were presented with the key objectives for each theme as set out in the 2006/07 Corporate Plan and asked to consider:
- Were any key objectives missing?
 - What were the most important key objectives?
 - What were the least important key objectives?
 - How should the Council go about achieving the key objectives?
- 4.5 The results of this exercise are attached at Appendix 1.
- 4.6 To assist Members in determining whether new actions are required, or whether existing ones need further development, Appendix 2 gives examples of the actions already included in the Corporate Plan under the three themes

A safe and sustainable environment

- 4.7 Babergh is one of the safest places to live in the UK - actual levels of recorded crime are low. However, high levels of the fear of crime continue to have an impact upon people's quality of life in the district.
- 4.8 The council leads the Babergh Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, and is working in partnership with other organisations on a number of initiatives to reduce the incidence and fear of crime, to address anti-social behaviour and improve quality of life. For example, the council is currently involved in the implementation of Safer Neighbourhood Teams.
- 4.9 The council is conducting a review of its approach to sustainability, and whilst a great deal is being achieved and can be demonstrated through its role as a planning authority; and as a landlord, manager of built assets and consumer energy; it does seem as if more clarity is required in defining what is meant by 'sustainability', and how the council will tackle this through its policy formulation process, and the promotion of sustainability and best practice to the wider community.

Areas for further consideration could include:

- 4.10 Members may wish for the above points on sustainability to be highlighted within the terms of reference for the review on sustainability.

Easy, convenient access to quality services

- 4.11 The council has a Customer Access Strategy in place and this is being implemented.
- 4.12 It is acknowledged within the current corporate plan that the council may not be providing services that effectively meet the needs of all of its groups such as people with disabilities, the elderly and young people. This point was stressed at the State of the District Event – especially with regard to the elderly.

- 4.13 25.4% of our residents are aged over 60, compared with the UK average of 21%. 13.9% of our residents are over 70, compared with a UK average of 11.5%. This age group has seen a 19% increase over a ten year period.

Areas for further consideration could include:

- 4.14 It is important that the council's services are available to all, and that all groups are considered in any decisions made by the council. Whilst that is understood by Members and officers, Members may wish more to be done to make this more explicit within service delivery and within the corporate priorities. In order to do this, the council must understand the make-up and needs of all of its groups, and any growth trends. For example, it is known that there is an increasing elderly population, and future service planning and delivery needs to take this into account.

Raising individual and community ambitions, and encouraging active citizenship

- 4.15 The need for community leadership and neighbourhood engagement is becoming increasingly prominent, and the council is always looking for ways to engage with local communities to give people greater influence and involvement over the future and type of services provided to them, and the places where they live. Community leadership requires the active involvement of individuals and communities, and the council has in place a number of robust mechanisms for communication and consultation to turn local aspirations into reality within a transparent democratic process.
- 4.16 The Local Government White Paper is due to be published very soon and is expected to include some commitment to wider devolution of central government functions and powers. It is also anticipated that it will clarify the role of the 'frontline' councillor, giving ward councillors the role of responding to community concerns. The Paper should also include new powers to delegate to neighbourhood and parish level. It is also expected to include a new duty on public sector partners to co-operate with Local Area Agreements and Community Plans.

Areas for further consideration could include:

- 4.17 Although the White Paper has yet to be published, at this stage Members may wish to highlight the emerging themes within the corporate plan.

5. **APPENDICES**

- (a) Appendix 1 - State of the District Event
- (b) Appendix 2 – Current Corporate Plan Actions

6. **BACKGROUND PAPERS REFERRED TO:**

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Head of Corporate Services

STATE OF THE DISTRICT EVENT

NB – any proposed new key objectives are shown in italics

A Safe and Sustainable Environment

Key objective	Ranking	Notes / further action
Decrease the amount of crime and disorder, and incidents of anti-social behaviour		Requires the integration of services
Decrease public perception that the district will become less safe in the next 10 years		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High visibility policing • ‘Presence of authority’ • Media is very influential in this area • Environment Task Force • Community Wardens • Social problems
A plan to reduce energy consumption and move to greener energy sources		
Provide leadership to the community on sustainability		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council needed to discharge its duty regarding the social, environmental and economic well-being of communities • Work with parishes and neighbourhoods • Develop an information programme • Develop service standards in this area
A greater coherency on sustainability through the Council’s policies		Transport policies in particular
Protect and improve the quality of the built environment and street scene		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roads • Planning process • Infrastructure
Protect and improve the quality of the green space environment, and improve access to green space within the built environment and the countryside		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Plan very important here • Grants for local initiatives
Minimise environmental pollution.		Transport

The workshop felt unable to rank the key objectives but did point out that clear engagement with communities and neighbourhoods was important, as was affordability. Whatever we did we should implement, monitor and then review to ensure it had made a difference.

The workshop’s discussions mainly dealt with the ‘sustainability’ element. It was felt that there needed to be a greater understanding of what ‘sustainability’ meant and that the Council needed to be very clear of its actions, address local issues and “put its money where its mouth is”. It was also felt very important to integrate with all other agencies and work in true partnership.

Easy, Convenient Access to Quality Services

Key objective	Ranking	Notes / further action
Adopt Customer First ethos		This was seen as an aim rather than an objective
Resolution at first point of contact for 80% of enquiries	Joint 1st	Sceptical of achieving 80% resolution
Use website, email and phone as main access channels		
Fully accessible transactional website		Essential to deliver other aims
Joined-up packaged services within Babergh		
Joined-up packaged services with key partners, particularly services for vulnerable people	Joint 1st	Crucial to identify key partners to do this i.e. Age Concern, DWP etc
Appointment or call-back service where enquiries cannot be dealt with on first contact	2nd	
Extend opening times for phone service (currently 9 to 5 - Mon to Fri)		
Increase easy access to web facilities in the community		
Increase IT literacy and skills in the community	Lower priority	
Continue to provide walk-in centres in Sudbury and Hadleigh, but not open new ones	Lower priority	
<i>Set up a mobile office</i>		Proposed key objective
<i>Give more consideration to access to services to the elderly and /vulnerable</i>		Proposed key objective. It was considered there should be increased focus on services provided to the elderly and vulnerable, and closer working with partners. The focus could be improved by having a Member Champion and/or an officer dedicated to working with these groups

The group felt that some objectives were very dependent on other objectives being met, and also that some of the objectives were too subjective.

Whatever the Council decided to do, they must ensure that it is fully inclusive and customer focussed. Customer consultation and continued dialogue was essential throughout the whole process.

Raising Individual and Community Ambitions, and Encouraging Active Citizenship

Key objective	Ranking	Notes / further action
Increase the participation and inclusion of individuals, communities and hard-to-reach groups in the council's democratic processes	1st	<p>How to increase participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link between governors, head teachers, students of Schools and BDC • Use best communication channels to reach specific target groups e.g. literacy issues with travelling communities • Focus on 'how' • Link to community ambition objective: need to integrate all area of Council work with communities, not just democratic process • Need to tap into community ambition. Possibility of using our grants system to achieve this
Increase election turnout.	Lower priority	
Individual ambition – access to skills and employment opportunities, remove barriers to ambition e.g. childcare, caring, benefits, return to work, volunteering.	2nd	<p>How to increase individual ambition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the provision of new educational/training opportunities that are accessible to Babergh residents • Positive role modelling – as an employer • Supporting the business community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lobbying ○ Business centres ○ Planning
Community ambition – encourage participation, resourcing activity and projects	3rd	<p>How to increase community ambition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of grants • Use of community to run projects e.g. community shops • Better use of parish plans by local authorities. Resource activity – inform strategy • Use of parish plans to galvanise communities • Volunteering – some people face barriers to participate e.g. disadvantaged • BCT: need to have an organised and supported voluntary sector in the district – training and funding • Voluntary sector under-represented amongst BME community • Sport and leisure to engage community and to raise ambition

Key objective	Ranking	Notes / further action
Strengthen infrastructure through Babergh Communities Together to create a forum for public agencies and the voluntary sector and improve service delivery	Lower priority	
Democratic change	Lower priority	Proposed key objective

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CURRENT CORPORATE PLAN ACTIONS

A safe and sustainable environment

Babergh is one of the safest places to live in the UK. Actual levels of recorded crime are low. However, high levels of the fear of crime continue to have an impact upon people's quality of life in the district.

Whilst the council is not primarily responsible for crime prevention and detection, it leads the Babergh Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, and it works in partnership with other organisations on a number of initiatives to reduce the incidence and fear of crime, to address anti-social behaviour and improve quality of life. For example, the council is currently involved in the implementation of Safer Neighbourhood Teams.

The council uses the powers available to it to reduce the amount of crime and anti-social behaviour, and where appropriate it uses highly visible deterrents such as CCTV to offer reassurance to local communities.

The council also takes into account community safety issues when planning and delivering all of its services.

The council protects the local environment and the people who live in it by monitoring and reducing pollution, and by protecting the countryside and its diverse ecosystems. It also acts to prevent pollution and contamination, and where appropriate takes action to deal with instances of these, including enforcement action where necessary.

The council is conducting a review of its approach to sustainability in relation to:

- Its role as a planning authority;
- Its role as a landlord, manager of built assets and consumer energy;
- Its policy formulation process;
- Promotion of sustainability and best practice to the wider community.

The review will also look at ways in which the use of local Post Offices might be supported, as part of an overall consideration of issues relating to sustainability, particularly of village communities.

A great deal is already being done to improve sustainability, and the first stage of the review is to undertake an audit of what is already being done, with a report being prepared by the end of 2006, so that decisions can be made on whether and what further steps should be taken to improve sustainability.

The council already:

Safe:

- Has a dedicated Anti-Social Behaviour Network Officer
- Issues Anti-Social Behaviour Orders
- Is a key member of the Babergh Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, and is producing a new crime and disorder and drug strategy with its partners
- Applies the Building Safer Communities Initiative to provide safer environments on new developments

- Seeks advice from the Police Architectural Liaison Officer on the safety and crime prevention aspects of proposed residential developments
- Participates in the Prolific and Priority Offenders Scheme
- Has worked with Sudbury Town Council to develop a “Community Warden” scheme for Sudbury that is now run by the town council
- Supports a Domestic Violence Forum and gives financial support for Women’s Refuges
- Provides CCTV systems in Hadleigh and Sudbury, and a mobile camera facility
- Has a Young People’s Steering Group for the Be Active project.
- Seeks to increase rural area road safety in conjunction with the county council

Sustainable:

- Is conducting a review of the Council’s approach to sustainability
- Ensures new development is of a sustainable form, which facilitates journeys on foot and by bicycle.
- Obtains contributions from residential developers towards the provision of additional public open space or play facilities in the vicinity
- Adopts a cross-divisional approach for identifying local needs for Section 106 agreements.
- Undertakes air quality monitoring and seeks to improve climate issues through exploring whether initiatives/new programmes can be developed with partners
- Works with Suffolk County Council in monitoring the impact of new traffic reduction schemes and pollution in the built environment of Sudbury, and continues to encourage the county council to work towards a Western By Pass as soon as possible
- Ensures that all LAPPC (pollution control) requirements are fully integrated into departmental monitoring programmes
- Is implementing a contaminated land strategy
- Is developing and implementing a Green Travel Plan.
- Implements Local Plan policies to retain existing village shops.

Easy, convenient access to quality services

The relatively sparse population of the district means that both public and private sector services can be more difficult and costly to deliver, and may be less accessible to parts of the population. The council is also concerned that it may not be providing services that effectively meet the needs of all of its groups such as people with disabilities, the elderly and young people.

Last year's State of the District Debate showed that around 87% of the public were likely to contact the council by telephone, 28% by e-mail or through the website, 22% by letter and 27% would come to the offices. The council's Customer Access Strategy reflects this research and seeks to enable the public to access information and transactional services through the website, or for staff to use the same website sites to respond to telephone calls, letters or visits to the offices.

The council already:

Improve Access:

- Has a Customer Access Strategy, which seeks to ensure: that all our services can be accessed electronically, that customers have a choice of methods and times to access the council's services, that access is improved to other public services.
- Is developing and publishing Service Standards for access to council services
- Provides a telephone service between 8am and 6pm for council tax, Business Rates, Benefits and Rents
- Responds to customer's telephone calls and communications efficiently and within the advertised response times
- Is improving the Babergh Website, enabling payments and other transactions to be made as well as providing information, making it a more user-friendly site
- Has made it possible to pay bills via the telephone or internet
- Has easy-to-use Information Points located in various parts of the district
- Supports the Sudbury Advice Centre

Elderly and Vulnerable:

- Seeks to improve the quality of life for older people, especially through the Suffolk Strategic Partnership
- Has developed and is implementing an action plan to deliver the requirements of the Children Act that apply to the council
- Provides a visiting service to help people to resolve service issues in their own homes and is looking to extend the role of visiting officers to enable them to provide services in people's homes on all aspects of the council.
- Provides housing advice to prevent homelessness where possible and to help people with housing difficulties to help themselves.
- Runs a local housing surgery in Sudbury
- Has a drop-in Centre at Poplar Road, Great Cornard
- Administers a concessionary travel scheme
- Provides a Contact Care service to over 1,000 clients enabling them to remain independent in their homes
- Supports the Care and Repair Agency to assist the elderly in improving their homes
- Provides support to Sudbury and Ipswich CABs
- Gives Disabled Adaptation Grants for private properties and make disabled adaptations to council houses
- Provides specialist housing for people with mental health problems
- Works in partnership to provide supported housing schemes for people with special needs.

- Is working towards level 2 of the Equalities Standard
- Works with various organisations to develop arts activities and improve access for vulnerable members of the community.

Raising individual and community ambitions, and encouraging active citizenship

While community leadership has always been part of what councils provide and are expected to provide, it is now firmly established in statute. Councils are able ‘to do anything’ to promote the well-being of their area as a whole, and are encouraged to look beyond immediate service delivery to the wider economic, social and environmental well-being of their area. One of the main vehicles for achieving this is through community strategies delivered by the Local Strategic Partnerships.

Community leadership requires the active involvement of individuals and communities, and Babergh has in place a number of robust mechanisms for communication and consultation to turn local aspirations into reality within a transparent democratic process.

Babergh’s skills base needs to be developed and the low wage economy tackled. The council is working with the Suffolk Development Agency and the Great Haven Partnership to develop initiatives that increase employment and training opportunities for local people. There are also plans to provide a university in Suffolk.

The council already:

Individual and Community Ambition:

- Has two active Local Strategic Partnerships
- Encourages active citizenship by increasing the number of people actively volunteering in the delivery of sports courses
- Works with sports volunteers in the district.
- Supports and develops community ambition e.g. CANN – the Community and Neighbourhood Network
- Has developed the Sudbury Area Forum
- Encourages parish/town councils to produce Parish Plans
- Works with parish and town councils, Housing Associations and others to identify and meet the need for affordable housing
- Provides grants for recreational and community facilities and has developed funding streams which unlock the potential of community and voluntary groups to directly contribute to village hall and sports clubs schemes, and community transport programmes
- Grants rate relief for village halls, community centres, post offices, shops, pubs, petrol filling stations and non-profit making sports clubs
- Contributes to village hall and other community projects
- Is a partner in Babergh Communities Together
- Has Community Achievement Awards for active citizens
- Is supporting the creation of a Suffolk University Campus in Ipswich
- Participates in a school inclusion and training programme at Great Cornard Upper School.
- Is participating in an exercise being conducted by Suffolk County Council to determine the extent to which young people in the district continue their education after 16
- Is developing communication, consultation and involvement through electronic means
- Is considering the expansion of area forums
- Is looking to develop customer focus groups.

Democratic Consultation and Participation

- Has implemented a Public Consultation Strategy to improve the quality of public consultation and to adopt best practice
- Has implemented a Youth Strategy and hosts an annual Youth Conference
- Supports Councillors visiting schools to talk to young people
- Has Sheltered Tenants' and Tenants' Forums
- Promotes local tenants' and residents' groups
- Allows citizens to attend and speak at Committee on planning applications
- Has increased the involvement of citizens in decision making, such as in the "State of the District" debate
- Holds annual meetings with parish and town councils
- Sends "Babergh Matters!" twice a year to 36,000 households
- Consults with and give feedback to citizens on a wide variety of service issues