



**Babergh &
Mid Suffolk**
District Councils

Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan

Engagement Strategy - October 2026

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1. Purpose and context

1.1 Purpose of this strategy

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are preparing a new Joint Local Plan to guide development across the two districts over the next 15–20 years.

This Engagement Strategy sets out how the Councils will involve communities, businesses, Town and Parish Councils, statutory bodies, infrastructure and service providers, neighbouring authorities and other stakeholders throughout the preparation of the Joint Local Plan.

It provides a framework for engagement rather than a fixed programme of individual activities. The methods used at each stage will be tailored to the purpose of the engagement, the people and organisations we need to reach, and the issues on which we are seeking views.

The strategy will help us to:

- provide meaningful opportunities for the community and stakeholders to influence the Joint Local Plan at appropriate stages;
- reach a broad and diverse range of people and organisations;
- make engagement accessible and proportionate;
- support early and continuing dialogue with communities and key stakeholders;
- be clear about what is open to influence and the decisions that need to be made;
- demonstrate how feedback has been considered and has informed plan-making; and
- learn from each stage of engagement and adapt our approach where necessary.

Government [guidance](#) expects local planning authorities to have a well-defined community engagement strategy that identifies its purpose, target audiences and objectives, starts engagement early and uses a mix of methods to enable broad participation.

1.2 Engagement in the new plan-making system

There are three formal public consultation stages during preparation of the Joint Local Plan:

Scoping consultation – early engagement about what the Local Plan should contain, how communities and stakeholders should be involved and other matters relevant to its preparation;

Proposed Local Plan content and evidence consultation – consultation on the emerging plan content and supporting evidence; and

Proposed Local Plan consultation – consultation on the proposed plan before it progresses towards submission and examination.

Consultation summaries are published following these stages, providing a summary of the feedback received and explaining how it has been considered.

The Councils will also undertake proportionate engagement between formal consultation stages where this will help develop evidence, explore issues and options, address matters raised or support effective preparation of the Joint Local Plan.

1.3 An evolving strategy

This strategy has been informed by engagement already undertaken during the early preparation of the Joint Local Plan.

In particular it reflects:

- feedback from the Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Scoping Consultation undertaken between 5th June and 31st July 2026;
- Suffolk-wide stakeholder engagement undertaken with statutory consultees, infrastructure providers and other key stakeholders;
- evidence about the characteristics and needs of our communities; and
- national guidance on community engagement under the new plan-making system.

The strategy will be reviewed as the Joint Local Plan progresses. The Councils will use evidence about who has participated, the effectiveness of different methods and feedback from participants to refine future engagement where appropriate.

2. Our engagement objectives and principles

2.1 Our objectives

Our overall aim is to provide *meaningful, inclusive, accessible and transparent opportunities for communities and stakeholders to help shape the Joint Local Plan.*

1. Involve people early enough to make a difference

We will create opportunities for communities and stakeholders to contribute while issues and options are still being developed and there is genuine scope for their knowledge and views to inform the plan.

2. Broaden participation

We will seek participation from across Babergh and Mid Suffolk, including people and communities who may be less likely to take part through conventional planning consultation.

3. Make participation as straightforward and accessible as possible

We will communicate clearly, explain planning issues simply and clearly and use a mix of engagement methods appropriate to different audiences and circumstances.

4. Support informed and constructive dialogue

We will explain the purpose and scope of engagement, what decisions need to be made, the constraints within which those decisions are being taken and where there is an opportunity to influence the plan.

5. Show how engagement has informed the plan

We will provide appropriate feedback about what we have heard and explain how comments have been considered as the Joint Local Plan develops.

2.2 Our engagement principles

Early and continuous

We will engage as early as possible and maintain dialogue at appropriate points throughout plan preparation. We will not rely solely on formal consultation periods where earlier or continuing engagement would help develop evidence, understand issues or find solutions.

Inclusive and accessible

We will consider the needs of different audiences when designing engagement, including people who may experience barriers because of disability, location, digital exclusion, age or other circumstances.

Information will be presented as clearly as possible, using plain English and accessible formats. We will seek to make venues, digital platforms and engagement materials accessible and respond appropriately to requests for reasonable adjustments.

Digital-first, but not digital-only

Digital engagement will not be appropriate or accessible for everyone. Digital methods will therefore be complemented by appropriate non-digital and face-to-face opportunities.

This also reflects feedback from the 2026 Scoping Consultation, where online consultation was the preferred approach, but respondents also supported drop-in events, workshops and wider direct community outreach.

Clear and transparent

We will explain why we are engaging, what we are asking people to consider and what is—and is not—within the scope of a particular consultation or engagement exercise.

We will ensure information is easy to digest and understand for all audiences.

Meaningful and responsive

Where suggestions cannot be taken forward, we will seek to explain why. Consultation summaries will provide a transparent record of the principal issues raised and how these have been considered in preparing the plan.

Proportionate and purposeful

Different issues, audiences and stages of plan-making require different forms of engagement. We will choose methods according to the purpose of the engagement and the people we need to reach rather than applying the same approach in every circumstance.

Collaborative

Where issues are strategic or cross-boundary, we will seek opportunities for co-ordinated engagement, evidence sharing and joint working where appropriate and practical.

3. What we have learned so far

3.1 What our communities told us

The Joint Local Plan Scoping Consultation ran **from 5th June to 31st July 2026**. It received **1,146 responses**, with an average survey completion rate of **80%**. Responses could be submitted online, by email or by post.

Respondents told us that:

- online consultation was their preferred approach, followed by drop-in events and workshops;
- wider community engagement through direct outreach and leafleting should be considered;
- engagement with Town and Parish Councils should continue; and
- schools could provide opportunities to involve younger people.

3.2 What stakeholders told us

There was strong support for *early, planned and continuing engagement*. Stakeholders asked for regular dialogue, advance notice of key milestones, clarity about information requirements, feedback on how their comments have been considered and opportunities for topic-based discussions and workshops.

They also highlighted a practical challenge: many statutory consultees have limited capacity and will be responding to several Suffolk Local Plans being prepared over broadly similar timescales. Participants therefore supported greater consistency, coordination, evidence sharing and cross-boundary working where appropriate.

3.3 How this is shaping our approach

What we have learned	How our approach will respond
People value the convenience of online participation.	Digital engagement will normally be our principal participation route.
Digital engagement alone will not suit everyone, and respondents also value face-to-face opportunities.	Our approach will be <i>digital-first but not digital-only</i> , using appropriate drop-ins, workshops and other methods where they add value.
Communities want engagement to extend beyond people who already participate in planning consultations.	We will use targeted approaches and community networks to help broaden participation.
Town and Parish Councils are important local partners.	We will maintain ongoing engagement with Town and Parish Councils and draw on their local knowledge and networks.
Younger people can be under-represented in conventional consultation.	We will explore appropriate opportunities to work with schools, young people and relevant networks.
Organisations and statutory consultees want earlier and continuing dialogue and face significant resource pressures.	We will engage key organisations between statutory consultation stages where this can help develop evidence, identify constraints or address issues. We will seek to provide advance notice, make requests clear and proportionate and coordinate engagement where practicable.
People and organisations want to know what happens to their feedback.	We will explain how comments have been considered and how engagement has informed the plan.

4. Who we will engage

The Joint Local Plan affects people who live, work, study, visit, invest or provide services in Babergh and Mid Suffolk. Different audiences have different interests in the plan and different ways in which they can contribute.

We will identify the audiences relevant to each stage or issue and tailor engagement accordingly.

4.1 Our communities

We will seek views from across the two districts, including towns, villages and dispersed rural communities, and seek to broaden participation beyond people who regularly respond to planning consultations.

4.2 Town and Parish Councils and Neighbourhood Planning Groups

We will maintain dialogue with Town and Parish Councils throughout preparation of the Joint Local Plan, including providing information about key stages and opportunities to participate.

4.3 Businesses and the local economy

We recognise that small businesses may have limited time and capacity to engage with lengthy formal processes. We will therefore consider proportionate and targeted ways of involving them, including through representative organisations and established business networks.

4.4 Statutory bodies, infrastructure and service providers

We will seek technical knowledge and evidence early enough to inform development of the plan and maintain dialogue where issues require continuing consideration.

4.5 Neighbouring authorities and strategic partners

We will continue work with neighbouring authorities, other Suffolk planning authorities and relevant strategic partners on cross-boundary matters and shared evidence where appropriate.

4.6 Development sector and site promoters

We will engage with the development sector where appropriate, while ensuring that preparation of the Joint Local Plan remains transparent and follows the proper plan-making process.

5. Inclusive engagement and broadening participation

People may face barriers because of where they live, disability or accessibility requirements, access to technology, age, available time, confidence in engaging with formal processes, language or socio-economic circumstances.

Our approach will therefore focus on identifying and reducing barriers to participation rather than expecting one method to work for everyone.

5.1 Understanding our communities

Babergh and Mid Suffolk are predominantly rural districts with dispersed populations and an older age profile than England as a whole. There are also residents with disabilities and long-term health conditions, people at risk of digital exclusion, pockets of socio-economic disadvantage and smaller communities whose views may be difficult to identify through large-scale consultation alone.

We will use available demographic, equality and participation evidence to help identify audiences who may require different or additional approaches.

5.2 Rural communities

We will take account of geography when planning face-to-face engagement and consider how established local networks can help information reach more dispersed communities.

Digital engagement can also make participation easier for people who would otherwise have to travel, reinforcing the value of combining digital and locally accessible non-digital approaches.

5.3 Children and young people

Children and younger adults can nevertheless be under-represented in conventional planning consultations. The 2026 Scoping Consultation specifically identified schools as a potential route for engaging younger generations.

We will explore appropriate and proportionate opportunities to involve younger people, including through schools, colleges, youth organisations or existing youth engagement networks (a new “Youth Parliament” presents a new opportunity for engagement) where these provide an effective route. Learning from the Mid Suffolk Youth Parliament can be used across Babergh district to reach young people.

5.4 People at risk of digital exclusion

Digital methods provide an efficient and convenient way for many people to participate, including those living in rural locations. However, not everybody has the same access to, confidence in or ability to use digital services.

We will therefore maintain non-digital ways of accessing relevant consultation information and making representations during statutory consultations.

We will not assume that age alone determines people's preferred method of engagement. Instead, we will provide appropriate alternative routes and monitor how different methods are being used.

5.5 Disabled people and people with additional accessibility needs

We will seek to ensure that digital information and engagement materials are accessible and that face-to-face venues are selected with accessibility in mind.

Alternative or accessible formats will be provided where appropriate, and we will respond to reasonable adjustment requests.

5.6 Communities less likely to be represented through general consultation

This can include minority ethnic communities and Gypsy and Traveller communities, as well as other communities with particular engagement needs.

Where appropriate, we will consider targeted engagement and work with representative organisations, community contacts and trusted intermediaries rather than relying solely on general consultation publicity.

5.7 Socio-economic and other participation barriers

We will seek to make engagement straightforward and proportionate, provide clear information in plain English and avoid unnecessary planning terminology.

6. How we will engage

We will use a mix of methods selected according to the purpose of the engagement, the audience we need to reach, the stage of plan preparation and the complexity of the issues.

6.1 Digital engagement

Digital methods will normally provide the principal means of accessing consultation information and submitting responses.

These may include:

- Joint Local Plan webpages;
- the Councils' online consultation platform;
- email updates;
- social media and other digital communications;
- online meetings, webinars or workshops where appropriate; and
- digital maps, visual material and interactive tools where these help make planning information easier to understand.

6.2 Face-to-face engagement

Depending on purpose and stage, this may include:

- drop-in events or exhibitions;
- workshops or facilitated discussions;
- targeted meetings with communities or stakeholder groups;
- meetings with Town and Parish Councils;
- technical or topic-based stakeholder workshops; and
- participation in suitable existing community events where this provides an effective route to engagement.

6.3 Direct and community-based communication

Depending on the audience and purpose, these may include media activity, social media, email, posters, printed material and communication through Town and Parish Councils, libraries, community organisations, business networks and other established networks.

6.4 Formal representations

The online consultation platform will normally be the preferred method because it helps respondents navigate consultation material and supports efficient analysis.

Alternative methods, including email and post, will be available so that people without suitable digital access are not excluded.

7. Engagement through the Local Plan process

Stage	Purpose and engagement
Early preparation	Early engagement to understand issues, gather evidence and prepare for formal plan-making. This has included Suffolk-wide strategic stakeholder engagement.
Scoping Consultation – completed 2026	Formal early consultation on what the Joint Local Plan should contain, how communities and stakeholders should be engaged and other relevant matters. Feedback has informed this Engagement Strategy and will inform preparation of the plan.
Gateway 1	The Councils publish a self-assessment of their readiness to start the formal 30-month plan preparation process. Gateway 1 is not an additional public consultation stage.
Preparing plan content and evidence	Continuing and targeted engagement where appropriate to develop evidence and explore the emerging vision, spatial strategy, infrastructure and other matters.
Proposed Local Plan content and evidence consultation	Formal consultation on emerging plan content and evidence. The statutory minimum consultation period is six weeks . A consultation summary is subsequently published.
Gateway 2	The Planning Inspectorate assesses progress and provides advice and observations to help identify and address potential issues as the plan develops. This follows consultation on proposed plan content and evidence and publication of the consultation summary.
Preparing the proposed Local Plan	Further work and engagement where appropriate, taking account of consultation feedback, evidence and Gateway 2 advice and observations.
Proposed Local Plan consultation	Formal consultation on the proposed Local Plan and supporting material. The statutory minimum consultation period is eight weeks . A consultation summary is subsequently published.
Gateway 3	Assessment of whether the plan is ready to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for examination.
Submission and examination	The Local Plan is submitted for independent examination. Information will be provided about the examination process

	and opportunities to participate in accordance with the applicable procedures.
Adoption and monitoring	Following examination and adoption, the Councils will publish the adopted Joint Local Plan and monitor its implementation.

8. Strategic collaboration and partnership working

Preparing the Joint Local Plan requires continuing collaboration with organisations responsible for infrastructure, services, environmental matters and other strategic issues.

The Suffolk-wide stakeholder engagement undertaken in 2026 demonstrated strong support for early, coordinated and continuing dialogue between Local Planning Authorities and strategic partners.

Across Suffolk, Local Plan Timetables have been broadly aligned. Many stakeholder organisations operate across Suffolk (or other geographies beyond individual Local Plan boundaries) and provide essential input throughout plan preparation. Therefore, where possible, the Suffolk planning authorities are collaborating on their approach to ongoing stakeholder engagement. This is likely to take a number of forms, including workshops and meetings on specific matters.

8.1 Early technical engagement

Where appropriate, this may include:

- technical meetings;
- topic-based workshops;
- evidence sharing;
- discussion of emerging spatial options;
- infrastructure planning discussions; and
- continuing dialogue on matters identified during consultation.

8.2 Cross-boundary working

We will work with Suffolk planning authorities, neighbouring authorities and relevant strategic organisations to consider these issues at an appropriate geographic scale.

Where practical, we will seek opportunities to align evidence, engagement or information requirements where this can improve plan-making or reduce unnecessary duplication.

8.3 Efficient and proportionate engagement

We will therefore seek to:

- provide reasonable advance notice of important engagement points;
 - be clear about what information or input is required and when;
 - avoid unnecessary duplication;
 - use consistent information and formats where practical;
 - share relevant evidence where appropriate; and
 - use meetings and workshops purposefully.
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9. Feedback and transparency

9.1 Being clear about the scope for influence

At each formal consultation we will explain:

- the purpose of the consultation;
- the matters on which views are being sought;
- what is outside the scope of that consultation;
- relevant constraints or requirements affecting the choices available; and
- what will happen after the consultation closes.

Meaningful engagement does not mean that every suggestion can be incorporated into the Joint Local Plan. Different views may conflict and decisions must also take account of evidence, legislation, national policy, infrastructure requirements and other considerations.

Our commitment is to *consider representations properly and explain how they have informed the process*, rather than promise a particular outcome.

9.2 Reporting what we have heard

These summaries will provide a transparent account of the feedback received and explain how it has been considered in preparing the Joint Local Plan.

9.3 Consultation information and technology

Consultation responses and personal information will be handled in accordance with relevant data protection and information governance requirements. When making comments and representations at the formal stages of the plan-making process, these will be published on the Councils' online consultation system and will be attributed to the named individual / organisation.

Where digital or automated tools are used to assist with processing or analysing large volumes of consultation information, appropriate officer oversight will be retained. Technology may support efficient analysis, but it will not replace professional judgement about the planning issues raised or decisions made through the plan-making process.

Any use of Artificial Intelligence or automated tools will be consistent with the Councils' applicable policies, information governance requirements and relevant consultation privacy information.

10. Monitoring, learning and review

Successful engagement is not measured simply by the total number of consultation responses received.

We also need to understand *who is participating, where responses are coming from, how people are choosing to engage and where there may be gaps.*

10.1 What we will monitor

Area	What we will consider
Overall participation	Number and nature of responses and participation in engagement activities.
Geographic reach	Whether participation is being achieved across Babergh and Mid Suffolk, including towns, villages and rural communities.
Participation by different communities	Available equality and demographic information, where voluntarily provided, to help identify significant gaps in participation.
Engagement methods	How people participated, including online, email, post, events, workshops and stakeholder submissions.
Targeted engagement	Whether activities intended to reach particular audiences achieved useful participation.
Stakeholder engagement	Participation by statutory bodies, infrastructure providers, Town and Parish Councils, businesses and other relevant organisations.
Feedback and transparency	Whether consultation summaries and other appropriate feedback have been published and communicated.

10.2 Learning and adapting

If significant gaps in participation are identified, we will consider whether changes to publicity, methods, timing, locations, partnerships or targeted engagement could improve reach at the next appropriate opportunity.

Plan → Engage → Listen → Report → Learn → Adapt

The Engagement Strategy will remain under review throughout preparation of the Joint Local Plan and may be updated where evidence, experience or changes to national requirements indicate that this would improve our approach.

Our aim is not simply to undertake consultation because it is required, but to use engagement effectively to help prepare a Joint Local Plan informed by evidence, local knowledge and constructive dialogue with the communities and organisations it will affect.