

Report for Lavenham PC by County Councillor Robert Lindsay 4.11.24

Green Willows footway – a test case for future funding?

Following our visit with Highways and Babergh officers to the site of the proposed footway, the officer from Babergh in charge of agreeing the necessary CIL bid has begun conversations with SCC Highways to work out how best to reduce uncertainty over costs.

Historically, until the new political regime took over at Babergh in May 2023, Babergh and Mid Suffolk always refused to provide CIL money to communities for Highways purposes such as cycling and walking infrastructure. The new leadership at Babergh rightly over-turned this. But Babergh officers have not worked with Highways before on infrastructure projects and are now having to build a relationship with Highways officers to work out what happens should costs overshoot Highway's estimate. Green Willows has become a bit of a test case.

I want to allow Babergh officers some time to try to find a way forward with Highways but I have made it clear to them that time is of the essence and that I am prepared to contribute to the £5k costs of obtaining a firmer estimate if this will satisfy Babergh and allow the CIL bid to succeed.

Flooding prevention – Storm Babet a year on.

The County's cabinet will on November 5th allocate an extra £1.5m to deliver flood prevention work it has identified in the parish-based investigations it has by law to conduct (seven out of an estimated 50 total investigations done so far). It is asking for another £20 million from government.

The Council has already committed £12.25m but only £2.25m of this was related to Babet directly. A further £10m was allocated over three years to try to address the massive ten year backlog of drainage repair work it already had, even before Babet.

Separately, cabinet in October agreed to contribute £2m to a scheme to protect Benacre, south of Lowestoft. The Environment Agency is contributing £30m and Sizewell C £27m.

The scheme will protect the A12 with a bank but will allow the valley, drained years ago, to be reflooded by the sea, creating hundreds of acres of saltmarsh habitat which will also act as a powerful carbon sink.

Warm Homes

The council announced a new £3m fund for interest-free loans to home owners wishing to undertake energy efficiency upgrades such as insulation, solar panels, batteries,

glazing, or heat pumps. The loans (up to £15,000) to be repaid over a maximum of seven years at 0% interest.

The scheme will be open to homeowners across Suffolk from November, but you can register your interest now at:

<https://www.lendology.org.uk/warm-home-suffolk-loan>

Unlike the earlier Warm Homes grants, which failed to get adequate take up, these loans are not means tested.

Pavement safety and preventing trips and falls

At Council on 17th October my political group brought forward a motion that the County review its priorities for repairing pavement defects in order to ensure quicker interventions where tripping incidents are most likely. Currently, if there is a difference in the surface level of the footway of 20mm or more, this will be repaired, but we argued that in areas of high footfall or where a trip or fall had been recorded, this threshold was too high.

Most members of the public who trip or fall are over 65, and it would make sense for the repair policy to be more flexible.

The administration at the Council voted down our motion. They claimed a review of highways processes was being undertaken.

Our group will try our best to input into this. My feeling is that there ought also to be some flexibility over the maximum width of pavement that highways will clear of encroaching vegetation – currently no more than 50cm.

Some devolution after all

After the new Government scrapped Suffolk's plan for devolution, it is now "exploring" whether to put the County in charge of some £9.4million a year (60% of the £16m a year on offer in the original devolution deal) to have control of adult education schemes. That includes funding the three Suffolk further education colleges – currently directly funded by Central Government. A cabinet report is recommending the Council take up the offer of an annual "Adult Skills Fund" and officers have drawn up a "Strategic Skills Plan".

NB Part of this plan identifies that Babergh residents have the lowest median annual pay of any district in Suffolk (£30,901) and that unlike other Suffolk areas, that median rate fell from 2021 to 2022. Babergh also has the lowest proportion of adults with higher education certificate or above qualifications (equivalent to first year of a degree). The figure is 30.6%, compared to 37% for Suffolk and 48% nationally.