

Dear town/parish clerk,

We apologise for the length of this email, but we wanted to give you a timely update in relation to the recently published Devolution White Paper, the new National Planning Policy Framework, and the Local Government Funding Settlement, which is now due on 18th December.

Devolution White Paper

On Monday, the Government published its White Paper setting out its approach to devolution and the proposed reorganisation of Local Government.

You can read it [in full here](#) and there is also an [LGA briefing available online](#). While there is much detail we still need to go through, we thought it would be helpful for you, and your town and parish councillors, to be aware of some initial details and would be grateful if you could share this information with your members.

It is important to note there are no specific proposals for Suffolk in this document – however, the White Paper does set out the Government’s support for unitary councils and it will be inviting reorganisation proposals from ‘two-tier’ areas such as ours. This will see the district, borough and county councils replaced by unitary councils.

The first thing we would like to stress is that while the official Government term is ‘two-tier’, both officers and councillors at Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils absolutely recognise the indispensable role of Town and Parish councils at grassroots level, and we continue to champion the importance of local decision-making.

The White Paper says it would expect any new unitary councils to have a population of 500,000 or more, but there may be exceptions. There is no fixed timetable at this stage, but the Government’s ambition is to have Mayoral Strategic Authorities and unitary councils universally in place across England by the end of this parliamentary term.

Mayoral Strategic Authorities will have devolved powers around infrastructure and development projects, housing, transport, and skills.

There is a lot to digest and, for now, we want to stress that our councils are united in our position that local democracy and accountability is vital in any future successful devolution and restructuring arrangements.

Together, we know our communities and how best to deliver local solutions – and that needs to be enhanced rather than risked. We were also encouraged to see this paragraph in the White Paper, although it needs further development:

"We know people value the role of governance at the community scale and that can be a concern when local government is reorganised. We will therefore want to see stronger community arrangements when reorganisation happens in the way councils engage at a neighbourhood or area level. We will also rewire the relationship between town and parish councils and principal Local Authorities, strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice."

We will now go through the paper in detail and await the Government’s formal requests for proposals in January 2025. We are proposing to arrange town and parish liaison meetings early in the new year so that we can discuss this and the changes announced by the Government last week to the National Planning Policy Framework.

New National Planning Policy Framework

The Government has set new annual housing targets.

In Babergh, our Joint Local Plan, adopted in 2023, sets out the need for 416 homes a year – but the Government has increased this to 775.

In Mid Suffolk, our Joint Local plan sets out the need for 535 homes a year – increased by the Government to 734.

We all want the same thing – good quality, affordable homes in vibrant communities – and we reject any narrative that councils are ‘blockers’ to planning. We simply want to ensure we get the right homes in the right places with the right infrastructure.

We are strongly urging the government to take a collaborative approach - it must work with the housebuilding industry, housing associations, councils, and communities to address the challenges our communities face.

While we continue to work through the detail, we would again champion the benefits of towns and parishes developing an up-to-date Neighbourhood Development Plan. These are an important and powerful tool that give communities statutory influence to shape how their local area develops.

These can be time and resource intensive, but *Locality* is the main source of support nationwide. You can apply for grant funding of up to £10,000, and get technical guidance. Locality's website - neighbourhoodplanning.org – has more information.

You can also visit our website - www.babergh.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning or www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning- for more information and advice.

Local Government Funding Settlement

Finally, we are also awaiting news of the Local Government Funding Settlement today, which will help us to finalise our budgets for 2025/26.

Our provisional budgets were discussed by Cabinets last week. The financial positions of our councils remain very different, and you can see media releases about [Babergh](#) and [Mid Suffolk's plans](#) on our websites.

All these major announcements outlined above have resulted in an even busier period than usual in the lead up to Christmas, but we wanted to take the time to share the latest information with you.

Thank you for all you continue to do for our communities, and we look forward to working with you in 2025.

We wish you all a peaceful and happy Christmas.

Kind regards

Cllr Andy Mellen

Leader, Mid Suffolk District Council

Arthur Charvonja

Chief Executive, Babergh & Mid Suffolk District Councils