

## Somersham

**Building Regs Improvements**

The revised building regulations are beginning to drive an improvement in environmental performance of the dwellings offered in recent planning applications. Unfortunately although the fabric first methodology is being adopted it is only to the minimum 30% improvement in insulation required in 2022 with more dramatic action delayed to 2025 and the future homes standard.

The major builders are still resisting changes to heat generation claiming that gas boilers capable of burning 20% Hydrogen now and 80% after a retrofit are a solution. That is despite the problems of delivering that gas mixture over the current network of iron pipes. The fitting of air or ground source pumps is something only the smaller organisations are undertaking. The excuse today was that they don't have an agreement with a supplier.

It is concerning that the UN warning that we are in the last chance saloon and that action to limit climate change is necessary now takes second place to the financial considerations.

**Planning Peer Review**

We now have the formal copy of the peer review report covering the planning committees' operation. A working party has been set up to provide member input to the improvements proposed and I am involved with that. We will be starting shortly, and the process should be quick, much shorter reports is a target but I want to see much less variation between officer assessment of similar applications.

**Net Zero for Housing Guidance**

Reduce heating demand to point at which it can be balanced by solar panel generation

At the last council meeting the Green and Lib Dem group proposed adoption of a "Net Zero Carbon Toolkit" document which has been produced by Levitt Bernstein, Elementa, Passivhaus Trust and Etude commissioned by West Oxfordshire, Cotswold and Forest of Dean District Councils, and funded by the LGA Housing Advisers Programme. This forms a useful guide for small developers and individuals to the actions necessary to move to net zero for housing and industrial premises. It was agreed that it will be promoted by Mid Suffolk and Babergh and we believe across Suffolk when the County makes the formal decision.

**Progress against climate change and biodiversity ambitions**

The Babergh and Mid Suffolk have published their first climate change and biodiversity annual report. Over the last year, we've reached some significant milestones on the way to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2030 and protect and strengthen the districts' biodiversity. These include:

- Becoming the first rural UK councils to transfer our fleet to Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) reducing our fleets emissions by 90%
- Reaching the halfway mark of a £2.8m investment of Government grants in solar PV at our leisure centres - this has seen over 1,000 solar panels placed on the roofs to help power them with renewable energy

**Sustainable travel**

Cabinet have agreed to endorse its "LCWIP" a Sustainable Travel Vision & Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan. This works with the County's plans and uses Government funding that County Highways have obtained to improve the walking and cycling facilities in the district. There are short, medium and long term proposals for significant improvements

## Freeport East

The full business case for freeport East was agreed by Cabinet for submission to government by 15<sup>th</sup> April. The council is a core partner and a member of the Shadow Supervisory Board. Once approval has been gained the Freeport will exist officially with all customs and tax powers for 25 years.

One of the government's questions that illustrates my fears on what otherwise appears a significant opportunity to enhance the Gateway 14 activities is: "What considerations and mitigating actions will be taken into account for potential negative externalities (including the displacement of local economic activity from nearby deprived areas)".

I want to see sound actions by Mid Suffolk to help create a range of high-quality local jobs in growing industries that have high value add. The hope is that these can pay salaries significantly above the living wage while providing good working conditions and sound careers. Clearly not all jobs can meet those criteria, but we would support a push beyond the restrictions of the leisure, tourist, and logistics industries.

While we all want Freeport East to succeed, particularly the Gateway 14 and Port One elements I am concerned at the possible impacts on existing businesses of competitors in the freeport who are exempt business rates, national insurance and import duty. If those exemptions attract new investment in industries that we currently do not have then that's largely good. If they just succeed in moving businesses from one site to another, then we have a problem.

There is also an issue where exempting businesses from some relatively small overhead costs just pulls in those that are not really viable and creates unstable employment and investment risk.

So overall, this to me appears an opportunity that should be taken up and progressed as effectively and competently as it can be. However it needs us to be alert for the downsides I have mentioned and ensure the guiding body has the expertise to encourage and support the industries that will be successful and send the others elsewhere. It does promise a boost to employment, but we must choose wisely what we encourage and help.

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