

Wendling Annual Parish Meeting 30th May 2022

Dear Resident,

The last year has been a busy one for Breckland Council. In addition to its normal work it has helped communities get through the Covid 19 pandemic with additional staff resources and the distribution of Government grant funding to assist businesses and community groups. I believe that its communication and support for ward members and communities throughout this period has been very effective and I commend the Leader and senior management team for this. The council has achieved some notable work such as:

- The opening of the £1.8M Elm house project in Thetford to provide temporary accommodation to help people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. I fully support this scheme and it is my hope that we can soon identify a development opportunity for a similar project here in the north of the district.
- Provide £100K through its Community Green Grants Scheme to community projects aimed at promoting environmental sustainability. I know this funding has been well received by those communities applying for grants.
- Providing mental health training for 100 community mental health champions. Here in the Lincoln Ward myself and representatives from two parish councils have undergone extensive mental health first aid training provided free of charge by this scheme to help us assist any residents in need.
- Work with partners such as the Daisy project to provide support for survivors of domestic abuse. This work is vitally important especially as incidents of domestic abuse increased during the period of the pandemic restrictions.
- Develop its 'Future Breckland' initiative to identify significant projects that can be delivered for our five market towns to help them thrive. I have actively engaged in the work relating to Dereham and made representations about the need for better and more public toilets, a new bus terminal to help devise a better public transport strategy for the town and better road links for villages north of Dereham to be able to access the A47 easier.
- Development of the Ellenor Fenn Garden in Dereham to transform old waste ground for public use. This is clearly a considerable improvement in this location which I welcome.
- Development of a new Food Bus service which will be visiting certain communities throughout the district. This service commenced in early May and is a membership service offering discounted food products to help those people in most need.
- New household waste, street cleaning and grasscutting contract with Serco. Despite getting off to a difficult start I am now confident that the new service has bedded down and that the service is considerably better now in 2022. I suggested to the Overview & Scrutiny Commission that a Task and Finish Group of Councillors should be set up to oversee this contract. I am delighted that this was agreed and I am one of the group's members. Our discussions with Breckland Council officers and Serco have been very productive and this scrutiny will be ongoing over the coming months.

I am a member of the Planning Committee which continues to meet monthly to deliberate on the larger and more contentious development proposals as opposed to the majority of applications which are determined by planning officers under delegated powers. There continues to be a great deal of uncertainty around at the moment because the Government has for some time now been promising significant changes to the planning system. The

indications coming from Whitehall is that they wish to reform the system to make it easier for developers to get planning permission and remove the requirement for developers to provide a percentage of new build homes as 'affordable' type homes. Instead, developers would be required to pay a levy to Breckland Council and it would be for the Council to build the affordable homes. I have serious misgivings about these proposals and I believe it would result in less local accountability and fewer affordable homes being built. Over the last ten years Breckland residents like the rest of the country have been subjected to what feels like constant top down planning policy changes designed to try and achieve arbitrary housing number targets. The term 'affordable homes' means different things to different people. It covers social rented, shared ownership and first homes. In reality our young people earning wages in Norfolk's rural economy are finding it increasingly difficult to become homeowners as the gap widens between house prices and mortgage affordability.

Recently a stop has been placed on all planning permissions containing overnight accommodation in Breckland because Natural England provided advice to around 40 Local Authorities on 16th March 2022 that high levels of nutrients (mainly phosphorus and nitrogen) in protected water bodies were resulting in poor water quality. The sources of nutrients generally include sewage treatment works, septic tanks, livestock, arable farming and industrial processes. Where sites are already in unfavourable (poor) condition, extra wastewater from new housing developments can make matters worse. This affects the Broads and River Wensum tributary areas. Work is underway to more accurately define and map the areas affecting the River Wensum. I am advised that Wendling Beck is also an area affected by this. Breckland Council is also working with other Norfolk councils to come up with suitable mitigation requirements to allow new developments to proceed. I am advised by Breckland Council's Planning Director that this could take a couple of years to properly resolve although it is hoped that areas outside the defined tributary maps could commence much sooner.

Work has commenced on the review of the Local Development Plan. I am pleased this work is underway but I continue to have misgivings about the approach being taken and the timetable proposed. At the present time the Council has not produced a draft development strategy. Instead, it has decided to first carry out a public call for more development sites and once the outcome of this is known it will produce a development strategy designed around these sites. In my view this is just an easy exercise in development by numbers, making policy fit the available land. I believe that a well considered strategy should be making clear where is the best place to build new homes in the district taking account of current infrastructure, utilities and services and identifying what improvements to these would be needed to accommodate the new homes. Once the strategy is devised, landowners in key identified development areas should then be approached. I am appalled at the timetable given to complete this Local Plan review with a proposed adoption date of 2027. It was clear from the Cabinet meetings I attended that this was done primarily for financial and resource reasons. My concern is that if the Local Plan is not reviewed and updated in a more timely manner a number of existing key planning policies will start to carry less 'weight' in the determination of planning applications and developers will find it much easier to obtain planning permission, sometimes to the detriment of local communities. I believe that this work can and should be carried out faster.

This year Breckland Council's community grant scheme is once again open for applications of up to £5000 match funding and I would be pleased to support applications for projects in the village.

I was also pleased to be able to help with the recent litter pick in the village and I would like to place on record my thanks to the volunteers who helped on the day. It was lovely to see so many people turn out to help.

As always, I am available to help residents where I can and would encourage anyone who needs assistance with a Breckland Council related matter to either call or email me.

Yours Sincerely

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Ward member – Lincoln Ward

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