

Communications: BAPTC/BDC on Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2018

<b>Attendees - BAPTC</b>	<b>Attendees - Babergh</b>
John Foster (Sproughton), JF, Helen Davies (Sproughton), HD, Michael Bamford (Bentley), MB, David Marsh (Chat & Hint), DM, Andrew Searle (Lavenham), AS, Beryl Calver (Pinewood), BC	Jonathan Stephenson – Strategic Director Kathy Nixon – Strategic Director

**QUESTIONS FOR THE MEETING**

1. BAPTC’s initiative has re-opened channels (‘e.g. this meeting’) but how can we “better shape our policies and priorities” as was Babergh’s aim back in 2014?
2. Do Babergh recognize the situation as described?
3. What are Babergh’s wider communications aims now?
4. How do you intend to implement them?
5. How can Parish & Town Councils “shape policies and priorities” when the consultation processes all too often pre-determine the response? (re the very poor quality of recent telephone survey, BAPTC response to draft JLP setting out alternative approach).
6. Can we set up a structured approach for ongoing dialogue (including draft JLP)?
7. Can we achieve “mutual understanding” – the UK definition of communication and maybe progress to the US definition: “help an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other” which can only come about if we have a better understanding of Babergh’s challenges and objectives plus the opportunity to debate them in a constructive environment?
8. On a practical note, one way of moving forward would be for the Agenda for the Parish Liaison Meetings to be decided equally between parishes and DCs.

**NOTES FROM THE MEETING: COMMUNICATIONS**

**1. Organization Structure of Babergh**

There are two strategic directors – Jonathan Stephenson & Mike Evans (Kathy Nixon is currently covering for Mike Evan). Eight Assistant Directors below them covering both councils (JS agreed to send their org chart).

**2. Perception of Babergh & How Communication Influences this**

- 2.1. JF explained that there is a perception of Babergh in regarding its dealing with local councils - the general feeling is that Babergh does not listen or respond to parish town/council concerns. Communication covers all forms of contact with the local communities and should be key for Babergh. Views & opinions of Babergh will be influenced by how well it communicates and hence how it is perceived.
- 2.2. Government planning policy has put parish & town councils on an almost continuous collision course with Local Authorities. In Babergh this has been exacerbated by a loss of confidence in the application of policy and in the executive’s handling of failures in the application of policy. (e.g. executive overrules planning decision made by elected members then refuses to reveal process by which executive decision was made, then stalls Fol applications for two years...)

- 2.3. There is a general perception that Babergh is “not listening” on a range of issues e.g. the merger of BDC & MSDC, availability at local level (i.e. offices), does talking to councillors make any difference i.e. do they know what is going on and do the officers take any notice etc.
- 2.4. Communication is obviously key to many of these issues; parishes want to be able to see the effect of being listened to and to believe communications has been a genuine two-way-process.
- 2.5. Historically Babergh/ Mid Suffolk devolved its communications function to 33 middle managers and implemented “Community Voice” which was meant, amongst other things, to “Empower our communities, especially our less engaged communities, by offering a specialist communications resource to help them better shape our policies and priorities”. It was a highly laudable aim, albeit driven by a need to cut resources, but when its inception was reviewed in 2014 by its initiator it was rated only partially successful (and that was his public opinion).

### 3. Comments – BDC & BAPTC

- 3.1. Both directors are new so don't have the deeper knowledge of Babergh that longer standing employees would have. JS recognized some of the points the group made and commented on similar complaints from other council areas. JF agreed that from his experience our perception could be reflected across other councils. JS commented that little funding available which is influencing their direction of travel. JS is now trying to open up a dialogue between BDC & local PC's.
- 3.2. JF asked whether or not we can see the justification for the merger and full documentation, including the business case. A binding local poll (local poll is the new name for a referendum) is to be done in summer (2018), will take place on this, but can't spend money on it for several months due to motion passed during recent council meeting. Babergh have done a high level study on this, now doing an in-depth business case. This will go through Cabinet and then be published – Autumn due date. The directors were not certain when the business case/feasibility study was started (the group suggested it was a bit late in the day to do it now and that the process was in the wrong order).
- 3.3. Babergh's policy is to put info out on their website, social media, local magazines, newspapers, surveys – online & phone. The question was asked 'How are you going to communicate with Parish/Town Councils?' The group suggested that the website should make it easy for people to sign up to topics they are interested in, number the communications so it is easy to see if things are missed. Also, how do you reach non-internet using people?? The reply; In-Touch, newspapers, posters to schools, churches, parish noticeboards. The group suggested it would be useful to have a 'Dummies guide' to a topic highlighting key dates (as per the Planning section on BDC website).
- 3.4. Merger: JF raised issue of a sub-standard phone call – apparently made by an agency subcontracted by ComRes (the agency employed by BDC to undertake local survey) regarding the merger although this was not made clear; questions were designed to generate a particular response. MB had also looked at online survey – also poor, again being funnelled towards what would seem to be the desired answer. JF & MB did not regard this as open & honest communication. JS agreed to look into this.
- 3.5. JS wants to be able to better communicate with parish councils. Wishes to be able to get things out in a timely manner – things often change so it is difficult to keep up to date.
- 3.6. 5yr land supply discussed with JF proposing that councils that appear to withhold essential information will earn the suspicion of local communities and risk claims that by withholding the information the Council was acting in its own interest rather than in the interest of the community. BAPTC are aware that BDC are meeting with Sajid Javid (MP, Secretary of State for Housing) facilitated by James Carlidge to discuss five year land supply issues. BAPTC members expressed interest in the outcome of that meeting.
- 3.7. HD felt that there had been a lack of willingness to disclose information to the public; witness the number of Fols submitted during the Wolsey Grange planning application.

- 3.8. JS & KN felt that reports should be split up into confidential & non-confidential sections and be more careful about scrutinizing reports to see if they can go up on the website.
- 3.9. JS said he would commit to pass on his details to BAPTC if we need info but he would prefer contact via one representative. HD agreed to be that contact.
- 3.10. JLP (section 18), JS is thinking about putting out a comment on the comments rather than go straight onto the plan. BAPTC would welcome a discussion on the principles espoused in the JLP and the data that support the principles. JF asked if BAPTC could talk to the JLP team on some areas of the JLP - would be helpful. Next stage is for BDC to discuss the next steps – do they come back to us with interim thoughts – HD asked for clarification on why a particular conclusion had been reached bearing in mind the comments received – this would give a better understanding of their rationale.
- 3.11. MB asked if BDC are monitoring the impact of changed arrangements re Endeavour House and outreach site. JS stated that this was a work in progress. Learning curve underway especially re recent snow – would like feedback.
- 3.12. HD put forward the idea of themes for discussion at the Town & Parish Liaison meetings. Given few questions are asked and not much debate takes place it may be more productive to split up into groups to discuss particular topics as these forums will be easier to manage and facilitate two-way communication rather than the monologue we currently have.

## SUBSEQUENT FOLLOW-UP

An email containing suggested actions was sent to BDC by BAPTC as follows:-

1. Provide BDC organization chart to BAPTC – JS/KN (received, now on BAPTC website)
2. Establish direct route for communication of questions raised by BAPTC members (inc. directing the request to the correct person & facilitating the response), including those that might previously have resulted in Fol requests - JS to be initial point of contact for HD.
3. Agenda for the Parish Liaison Meetings to be decided equally between parishes & DCs – JS
4. Consideration to be given to facilitating smaller ‘break-out’ groups at Parish Liaison Meeting on specific topics, this should encourage more participation from members – JS to progress.
5. Investigate possible sub-contracting of merger survey and potential impact on quality of results; BAPTC concerns about survey protocol to be relayed to relevant officers and councilors – JS/KN.
6. JS/KN will implement changes to format of communications with parishes, giving full consideration to the need for:
  - 6.1. Appropriate advance notice (e.g. to assist parishes that meet bi-monthly)
  - 6.2. Provision of clear timelines
  - 6.3. Supporting data to be made available to those who are interested and to flag up means of access.
  - 6.4. Review of ‘confidential’ reports to see whether redacted copies could be made available.
7. JS/KN to discuss BAPTC request for further discussion of key draft JLP issues with planning team prior to completion of next draft and report outcome to HD. BAPTC, as the representative body of Parish and Town Councils in Babergh, also requests explanations of the DCs’ initial response to consultation submissions (by topic, not on an individual basis).
8. BAPTC will consult with members and provide feedback on BDC arrangements for local contact, in light of move to Endeavour House – HD.

## CURRENT STATUS (NOV’18)

Response received to initial email with the organization chart attached. No further updates

**COMMENTS RECEIVED FROM BDC UPON RECEIPT OF THIS REPORT (FEB'19).**

- 1. Town and Parishes have previously made contact with Officers directly asking for various issues to be discussed at these meetings, this would then form part of the agenda.*
- 2. We acknowledge that there have been break-out groups at some of the T&P meetings but not at all.*
- 3. Concerns noted around survey protocol to be relayed to officers and Councillors.*
- 4. The date of next meeting is added to the bottom of the Agenda to give advance warning.*
- 5. The practice in relation to Council and Cabinet reports is to make as much of the report as is possible available in the public domain and only retain the most confidential information within a separate section.*
- 6. Following the publication of the new National Planning Policy Framework in July 2018 a significant amount of further work has been required to ensure that draft policies comply with the new framework and importantly so that more detailed information relating to infrastructure matters and site viability can be provided as part of the preferred options draft that will be the subject of consultation later in the year. A briefing note is being drafted which will provide more information to Parishes in the coming weeks.*