**District Councillor Andrew Brown – May Report**

1. UKRAINIAN REFUGEE SUPPORT

I am proud to report we have confirmed the appointment of a support worker to help people settling in our district from the Ukraine. Assistance will be given to help with accessing health, education, language, support and finding employment for those arriving under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. There will also be a welcome hub at the Council to provide immediate support on arrival. We have about 30 residences with families approved already spread around the district.

1. SECOND HOMES AND HOLIDAY HOMES STUDY

We have set up a call for evidence across all departments of the Council to collect statistics on the economic effects of holiday lets and second homes. It was announced in the media that outside London we have the highest concentration of second homes in the country. Sharrington and Brinton combined have 21.4% or 17 out of 126 properties recorded as second homes in 2021. Salthouse in first place has 50.3 % but Thornage 26.3% Briningham 25% and Brinton 21.4 % are in the highest concentration bracket in Stody Ward. Obviously, holiday lettings do contribute to the tourist economy to a greater extent than second homes which are not let. The study will help to consider Council policy on the extent to which we should impose controls through council tax surcharges, planning restrictions, landlord tithes, second home registers and other measures adopted by Councils elsewhere with similar challenges.

1. NUTRIENT NEUTRALITY

In March, the Environment Secretary suddenly announced (via their consultants Natural England) an embargo on all new building across most of the district. Councils must evaluate whether a planning application will present a risk by increasing nitrate and phosphate discharges into watercourses feeding the River Wensum and the Broads. This is a serious setback to the local economy, meeting our building targets set by Government and calculating future housing need as part of the Local Development Plan. The Council in common with most district councils in Norfolk are seeking legal advice on whether this can be challenged. Significant pollution by water utility companies is not affected by the embargo which has caused some concern in national media. Only 12% of our watercourses meet purity standards and the Government require the Council to monitor pollution from development to avoid further environmental damage.

1. SHARED PROSPERITY FUND

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund replaced EU funding after Brexit and will provide DEFRA with additional funding for rural communities and provide resources to local partnership groups of people and businesses to have rural representation. There is concern that the £2.6 billion fund available up to March 2025 might not be sufficient to support rural areas to reach their full potential as part of the Government levelling-up agenda. The rural services network announced that rural communities has been historically underfunded and has lagged 33% or £105 per person behind the funding of urban areas in the Government's Settlement Funding Assessment for 2022/3.

1. PLANNING SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Council has decided to survey a random selection of applicants across various types of domestic planning applications for feedback on the service provided by the planning department. This is part of a review to inform the Council as part of the launch of a new Planning Service Improvement Plan. Applicants will be asked to answer a series of survey questions on all aspects of the planning process. The survey will assist in reviewing peoples' experiences and will inform the planning department where improvements are most needed.

1. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN PROGRESS

Progress has been seriously interrupted by the guidelines from the Government on nutrient neutrality (outlined above) because there will need to be further policy amendments to take account of the required Habitats Regulations Assessment before building can begin again. Policies will need to be amended in the current draft to clarify how developers will need to keep nutrients neutral and if not, how a mitigation strategy will work. The calculation of the 5-year land supply and the housing delivery test will be affected which has the potential to increase the number of houses the Council are required to build in future.

1. CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL (CAA)

The final draft of the Village CAA circulated earlier this year was considered by the Planning Policy and Built Heritage Working Party on the 25 April. Stody village will be confirmed as a new village conservation area in a single document and become separate from the Glaven Valley rural conservation designated area which will continue to surround both Stody and Hunworth. This will achieve consistency with other village appraisals having individual arrangements. Following some minor amendments, we expect to approve the appraisal in the next meeting on 25 May and the Council will then launch the Glaven Valley rural consultation. Dates will be confirmed later.

1. 2021-22 ANNUAL DISTRICT COUNCIL PERFORMANCE REVIEW

It is a year of change in leadership with Cllr Tim Adams taking over from Sarah Butikofer.

Operationally, we have carried out a zero-budgeting exercise to ensure the Council's spending is more in line with its corporate priorities. We delivered a balanced budget in February to maintain services in a climate of cuts elsewhere in local authority spending. The Council's strong finances allow us to provide services that are good value for money to residents. Our increase in council tax was kept lower than the other components like County Council and PCC precepts.

During the year we have delivered the new Reef leisure complex at a cost of £12.7 million, planted 60,000 of the 110,000 trees pledged when elected back in 2019, installed 69 vehicle charging points (more than any other district Council in Norfolk), refurbishing beach chalets and invested £4million in new refuse trucks. None of this has been funded by borrowing money and incurring interest costs by Council taxpayers.

For next year, the Council will be providing new and refurbished toilets in Wells, Fakenham, North Walsham and Sheringham. In the autumn, the next phase of a £3.9 million Cromer Coastal management scheme will start which together with the previous £2.9 million Mundesley Scheme will protect 750 homes from coastal erosion. Investment is planned in Cromer pier and the purchase of at least 2 temporary homes to add to the 16 acquired since 2019 to reduce the expense of putting homeless people in unsuitable bed and breakfast facilities. Investment of £900,000 in the Fakenham Urban Extension will allow a higher percentage of more affordable homes to be built across all new development phases.

All of this is being achieved despite the Government withdrawal of loans via the public works loan board for commercial investment. The Council is being forced instead to look at grant applications from Government, public bodies, and the private sector as well as business rates opportunities to support its initiatives.

We take the duty to make services more efficient and cost effective very seriously. Some examples of this are identifying three vanity projects of the previous administration which we needed to close because of their high risk; no longer outsourcing revenue and benefits enquiries; purchasing more temporary accommodation to save costs incurred by homeless families in bed and breakfast arrangements.

The Council sends out the demands for council tax but more than 90p in every pound goes elsewhere. This does not prevent the Council tax in our district being one of the lowest in England. The Government controls 58 % of the funding provided and continue still to make a one-off annual settlement which makes forward financial planning very difficult. Despite these challenges, we will strive to work in the best interests of our residents and the fact that the Council has won awards for its financial performance confirms that the strategy is successful.

Thank you for reading.