

## **OPENING SPEECH TO OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Committee Meeting: 4:00 PM, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2021

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*[invited by Chair to begin opening speech]*

Thank you, Chair.

As Members of this Committee may be aware, in the run-up to this meeting, I learnt that the Monitoring Officer took a much narrower view than myself on the remit of the review to be carried out by this Committee. Because of the limited remit which this Committee has now been advised that it has, I am unsure if the Committee – through no fault of its own – will be able to conduct a full and fair review of my petition's rejection.

In addition, to have the same people who oversaw Babergh's refusal to accept my petition – the Monitoring Officer and the Deputy Monitoring Officer – be advising the Committee on what it is and isn't allowed to do in its review, and what is and isn't in its remit, seems likely to me to be a conflict of interest.

However, with this dispute over the Committee's remit, and all the other roadblocks upon roadblocks that I have faced in appealing Babergh's decision, it is easy to lose sight of the most important part of all of this – the actual points raised within the petition. Democracy is damaged when processes become more important than issues themselves – as has happened here, in the dispute over my petition's validity.

These issues *will* affect real people – from the businesses that would be harmed with the rash removal of free parking from Sudbury, to the heritage that could be lost if the Belle Vue land sale is not handled with care, to the most vulnerable in our community that will suffer from Babergh's plans to move the Customer Access Point to Sudbury Library and staff it for only 2 full days a week. This is why I find it disgraceful that Babergh – instead of focusing on the actual issues at hand – has continuously placed barrier after barrier in the way of allowing the issues at the heart of all of this to be properly heard at all. This is why I am pushing for this petition to be accepted – so that these issues, which *will* affect real people, can be properly heard and debated at Babergh Full Council.

Babergh District Council are fully aware of the strength of feeling that has been transmitted through this petition, whether they choose to accept it or not. They know that over one thousand, six hundred signatures have been obtained during a time in which Sudbury was in Tier 4 – and then lockdown – restrictions. To quote an email to Babergh from the Chair of the Sudbury Society, in which they comment about the individual sheets of paper that make up this petition:

*You can throw them away, burn them or just disregard them but the opposition they represent won't go away and you know it.*

I'd like to take the opportunity to address some inaccuracies and confusing statements in report B/RP/20/1 from the Monitoring Officer, presented to this Committee. With the time limit I have for this speech, I am not able to respond to every statement in the report that I object to, so I will respond to the ones that I believe are the most inaccurate.

Paragraph 4.7 in this report states that signatories' names and addresses are checked against the open electoral register. However, this method of signature verification is still possible when only postcodes are provided – even without full addresses, the postcodes can

still be matched against the electoral roll. It is not explained within the report why such a method of verification is not possible with only postcodes provided.

Paragraph 4.11 states that, quote, “the validation of the full name and address of each signatory also enables the council to avoid accepting any signatures which may have been submitted fraudulently”. However, no information is given for how this would be possible at all, and for why it is not possible with postcodes instead of full addresses.

Paragraph 4.13 states that, quote, “not all of the petitioners had endorsed all three issues contained in the petition”. This statement is misleading and seems to deliberately lack context. Babergh District Council know full well that only 11 signatories signed a ‘partial petition’. This is in comparison to the 1,662 people that signed the petition as-is. Without the context, I accept that this could be seen as a problem – but when the context is provided, it becomes clear that this issue is so minor as to be completely irrelevant.

Paragraph 4.17 states and strongly implies that my invitation to attend Full Council would have produced the same outcome as, quote, “if the petition had been validated”. This is patently false. It was made clear to me that, if I attended the Full Council debate on the Hadleigh car parking petition, car parking would be the only matter allowed for discussion – not any of the two remaining issues on my petition. If my petition is accepted, I will be able to address a Full Council debate on all three issues. It is therefore clear to see that the opportunity I was given to address Full Council would not, quote, “have been the same outcome”, endquote, as if this petition had not been rejected.

To close, I mentioned earlier in my speech that I was unsure if the Committee would be able to conduct a fair review of my petition’s rejection, with the remit that it has been told that it has. However, I still hold out hope. I urge this Committee to recommend to Full Council that this petition be accepted – so that the issues raised, all of which *will* affect real people, can be properly debated by the **Full** Council.

Thank you. I would of course be happy to answer any questions.

*[end of opening speech]*