

WICKHAMBROOK ANNUAL PARISH MEETING – 28th May 2026

I am so sorry to be unable to attend this year because I am actually on leave for three days.

We have just had the delayed County Council election and happily Cllr Bobby Bennett has been returned as the Councillor for the redrawn Clare Division. 2027 should be my end of term as your District Councillor as District Councils are being replaced by Unitary Authorities in 2028. Currently it is anticipated that District Councils will remain in place in 2027 and then disappear along with the County Council in 2028 so rather than hold an election for a post lasting only one year, I will remain the District Councillor until the Unitary Authority comes into being but I will not seek election to either a new District Council or a new Unitary Authority. The Government is currently debating this issue and a decision is expected in the Autumn.

2027 should see elections for the new Unitary Authorities which will form Shadow Authorities for a year to enable Councillors to get up to speed on their responsibilities and the rules that govern them. Unitaries are, effectively, combined District and County Councils.

As things stand at the moment, there are to be three Unitary Authorities in Suffolk, replacing the one County Council system that we have at present. We in West Suffolk have been briefed on what this new West Suffolk Unitary Authority is likely to look like in terms of numbers of Councillors and areas that we will work jointly with neighbouring authorities on. Wickhambrook will see it join with Withersfield to make one Ward and the remainder of the current County division will join with other villages from Babergh to form a new Ward called Chadacre.

The three unitary authorities' model is already raising concerns in the farming community where some farms straddle all three authorities which will result in different planning and other rules – a nightmare quite frankly! A further complication is that the new Reform administration in Suffolk have said they want to cancel the proposed changes and stick with what we have now. My best

guess for you all is that in the Autumn, the Government will set out its plans for moving forward and thereafter, Reform will either challenge it in the Courts or have to work with it.

In 2028 we are expecting to see the election of the Mayor for Suffolk and Norfolk and then 2029 will be a General Election. Again, the creation of a Mayor is dependent on the will of Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils which now are very different. Nothing is certain.

Another huge change this year has been the introduction of new recycling rules and the arrival of new bins for everyone. This has been a huge logistics issue for the Council, requiring us to hire more staff, buy more vehicles and expand our facilities in Bury St Edmunds. During May you will have received a detailed information pack and collection calendar. **If you didn't get this information, please let me know.**

Another large portion of my work as the District Councillor is in planning. The longer I do this job, the more need I see for planning reform. Rural properties are penalised for being off-grid, listed and built in very different materials to those being used today. It makes it very challenging to achieve any efficiencies in terms of heating and sustainability. Planning restrictions don't appear to be keeping up with the changes in technology, building materials and the like.

You will recall that West Suffolk District Council was one of the few authorities allowed to progress their Local Plan when the Government changed in 2024. The plan set out the rules for building 800 homes per annum and lasts until 2041. It was adopted by the Council in 2025. Now, however, the Council has been forced by the Government to start work on writing a new local plan following the new timetable (condensed to 2 years) which requires the construction of 1200 homes per annum. This new house building volume would then come into force immediately it is adopted, anticipated 2028. The Council took the decision to engage in this process rather than have the Government decide where 1200 homes were to go, which I personally think was the right decision. However, it is disappointing that we are doing this when we had spent 5 years

creating the previous plan and are one of the few authorities with sufficient land supply.

The huge price increase in heating oil has been reported as a big issue for rural communities and there are increased thefts of fuel oil being reported across the county. The police are aware but with only three full time members of staff in the rural police team, they can't be everywhere at once.

There is another huge Anglian Water pipeline coming to this area which will impact part of Wickhambrook as far as I can tell. It is coming from Bar Hill to Rede, bringing drinking water so expect the inevitable road closures and diversions when you venture out and about. I despair as much as all of you when I see the dreaded Road Ahead Closed signs. If only they would remove them as fast as they put them out!

If anyone has any questions for me, please do ask. You can always contact me on email sarah.pugh@westsuffolk.gov.uk . I do try to check my in box twice a day.

Thank you.

Sarah Pugh
Ward Member for Whepstead and Wickhambrook