

Councillor Andrew Mellen

Ward Councillor for Bacton ward (Bacton, Cotton, Finningham, Westhorpe and Wyverstone parishes).

Mid Suffolk District Councillors' Annual Report (2024/25) For Annual Parish Meetings in April / May 2025

- **New devolution and local government reform affecting Mid Suffolk**

Following on from the election of the Labour government in July 2024, the new government has proposed widescale changes to local government across the UK: devolution and council re-organisation. This includes two proposals affecting Suffolk as a whole, including Mid Suffolk District Council, which may lead to its eventual abolition.

The first proposal is a strategic authority covering both Norfolk and Suffolk, which is likely to have a directly elected Mayor for the 2-county area, and an increase in local powers. The election for the Mayor is currently scheduled to take place in May 2026.

The second is the re-organisation of the current two-tier system within Suffolk into either a single or multiple Unitary Authorities, where all of the councils' services are ran by one coherent entity. Should this proposal go ahead, it will result in the abolition of all Suffolk's current district borough and county councils, and the formation of a new unitary council or councils. Suffolk has applied to be on the fast-track for this scheme, which has resulted in the postponement of the Suffolk CC elections that were due to take place in May 2025. The election for any new authorities is currently unclear, but is likely to be held after the Mayor election, possibly in May 2027.

Talks for both are currently ongoing, although new information will likely be updated frequently throughout the year.

- **Budget**

For 2025/26, the council was able to agree a 0% increase in council tax. Council home rents increased by 7% and sheltered housing service charges also increased. This has been done to ensure the Council can afford the repairs and maintenance that are needed. All these increases are due to inflation, costs of energy and other cost increases.

The Council has reserves of over £28 million as at the end of the last financial year plus an expected dividend from the Gateway 14 business park. Plans to use this are on a variety of work including new foot/cycle paths, land for biodiversity and green spaces, regeneration of Stowmarket town centre, improved sports provision in the district and enabling community-led housing.

Approval was also given to increasing council tax on empty homes in 2024/25 and implementing increased council tax on second homes in 2025/26.

For the 2025/26 budget, recently agreed in the February council meeting, the administration committed to a capital programme of £36m for the district, which is partially funded by the council's reserves. This includes investment in health facilities, primarily including the ongoing SHELF project, investment into new skills and innovation within the district, and an increase in funding for the communities across Mid Suffolk's smaller towns and villages. Finally, the council is additionally estimated to have a surplus of £2.4m at the end of the 2025/26 financial year.

- **Thriving towns and villages**

We are providing a significant amount of funding to improve the revitalise our town centres – in Stowmarket initially and then in our other towns across the district. One part of this is the Stowmarket Gateway Fund, which has £1.5 million of funding available to bring empty shops back into use and to provide support for new enterprises, as well as a subsidy scheme to improve high street shop fronts.

As part of Mid Suffolk's Rural Transport Grant Scheme, two new community transport routes were launched, utilising the council's new Taxi Bus scheme, connecting Stowmarket with the surrounding villages and communities across Mid Suffolk. Initially, there were the two routes looping around villages of Mid Suffolk, beginning in Stowmarket, the first of these goes via Thurston, the second via Bacton, with further communities eventually being added, including Eye and Debenham. These have allowed for further

connectivity between the villages across Mid Suffolk and Stowmarket in the heart of the District. We are also supporting a separate scheme through Communities together which is serving the northern part of the district.

- **Environmental sustainability**

Mid Suffolk District Council previously launched their Cosy Homes scheme for Winter 2024, which provides improved insulation and energy efficiency within private homes across Mid Suffolk. The scheme is targeted at low to medium income households and properties with an Energy Performance Certificate in band D, and first involves an assessment of the property to see what measures are most suitable to improve a home's performance. Once agreed, our contractors install the new measures at no cost to the homeowner. We also have a similar scheme improving several hundred council houses.

- **Planning and Housing**

Mid Suffolk and Babergh's Joint Local Plan (JLP), which was agreed in November 2023, has been in place now for over a year. The purpose of the plan was to provide essential clarity for communities about how the district was to develop until 2037, and assisted in allowing for a structured response to housing and planning targets, and delivered Mid Suffolk's planning requirement of 535 new houses annually. In January 2025 we have begun a review process, as a result of new housing targets set out by national government. Whilst MSDC have previously over-delivered housebuilding targets, there is a possibility that the new national housebuilding guidelines take priority over the JLP if the council cannot prove there is a 5-year land supply for housing. So after taking advice we have agreed to start the process of reviewing the JLP so that our policies are kept fully up to date.

- **Supporting the community**

We support local events and community groups where we can and particularly link local groups with external fundraising via the Mid Suffolk community team. Almost £550,000 was allocated by Mid Suffolk District Council Direct to communities across the district from Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

Mid Suffolk District Council information is available via www.midsuffolk.gov.uk or by phone **0300 123 4000**

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