

Mid Suffolk District Councillors' Annual Report for 2023/24 For the Annual Parish Meeting – May 2024

New Administration

The result of the May 2023 elections was that the 24 elected Green Party councillors officially became the administration at Mid Suffolk. Councillor Andy Mellen, as Leader outlined our initial priorities to lead and work with other bodies to address the challenges faced by our communities: cost of living, affordable homes, local services, public transport and climate change. A Plan for the next few years was adopted which places environmental and social responsibilities at the heart of everything the Council does.

A cabinet of six members was formed and, in addition to representing the Palgrave ward as your district councillor, I was appointed to Cabinet with the portfolio of Environment, Culture and Wellbeing. In line with the administration's position on collaborative politics, roles on key committees were given to Council members from across the chamber irrespective of political affiliation.

Budget

For 2023/24 the General Fund budget was for approximately £15.5 million with an expected £2.3 million surplus which will go into reserves. Funds have also had to be provided from the Housing Revenue Account for the backlog of repairs that has built up.

For 2024/25, net expenditure on services is budgeted at £18.5 million with a 2% increase in council tax. Council home rents increased by 7.7% 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 at the end of the financial year plus an expected dividend from the Gateway 14 business park in Stowmarket. A variety of work plans against this reserve are prioritised to include 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.

Thriving Towns and Villages

A group of Councillors have been working on issues around sustainable transport. A new rural transport grants scheme with a pot of £600,000 was set up to help provide passenger transport options across the district.

Approval was gained for the financing of a Green Skills and Innovation Centre at Gateway 14. This will in part act as a centre of excellence for local businesses and a training site for adults needing new skills. Also on the site, The Range is due to move into the largest building and a deal with a major producer of sustainable building materials was recently agreed.

In Stowmarket, the first part of the sports project was approved and work will commence this year for new pitches, an athletics track and other improvements at Chilton Fields and next to the high school.

In conjunction with Suffolk County Council, Mid Suffolk provided much support to residents and businesses affected by the floods of Storm Babet and Storm Ciaran.

Mid Suffolk and Babergh District Councils were jointly awarded *Council of the Year* for their collaboration and innovations in working with different partners, to improve services and focus on communities.

Environmental Sustainability

The Council launched the *Cosy Homes* scheme, a £2 million project to insulate homes for free. Separately, a grant of nearly £1 million was received for retrofitting council homes.

A new *Pride in your Place* grant was established to provide every parish with additional funds to improve the environment for their community.

The Council continues to encourage local groups to improve areas for wildlife and a call for sites from landowners was made so that more trees can be planted across the district. The annual Tree for Life scheme was again a success and tree, hedging and wildflower packs for communities across the district were provided.

The Council published its Carbon Reduction Management Plan with a focus for this year on improving sheltered housing and further work on the leisure centres.

Planning and Housing

In November 2023, Part 1 of the Joint Local Plan (JLP) for Mid Suffolk and Babergh was approved and adopted. The JLP sets out a planning framework to guide development in the districts over the period to 2037. JLP Part 1 provides a set of strategic and local development management policies against which planning applications and appeals will be assessed. There are 10 strategic policies (such as on affordable housing, climate change and tourism) and 32 local policies (such as on biodiversity, historic environment and sustainable construction).

With regards to Part 2, the Inspector had acknowledged that 90% of Mid Suffolk's housing target is already allocated (either via existing permissions or sites allocated via Neighbourhood Plans) and that this is central to future policies. Work has been continuing on this with public consultation expected later in 2024.

Separately, to support this, the Council is working on Supplementary Planning Documents. The first three, currently at draft stage, are on Housing, Biodiversity and Intensive Livestock and Poultry.

The Council continued to oppose the Norwich to Tilbury pylon project raising significant concerns, particularly over the impact on the environment and the effect on local communities.

Mid Suffolk's annual monitoring report showed that 1,257 new dwellings were built in the district in 2022/23, of which 299 were affordable. This met 144% of the Government target. There are 6,916 outstanding planning permissions (as at 01/04/23) which are either not started or under construction. Mid Suffolk has 10.88 years of housing land supply, well above the Government target of five years.

Over £1.5 million was provided to parish and town councils in the form of the Community Infrastructure Levy during the year.

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 the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

I'd like to convey my thanks, via the Parish Meeting, for the hard work undertaken by many residents on a voluntary basis in making Stuston a wonderful place to live, work and visit.

I'm always happy to hear from residents if there's anything either Mid Suffolk District Council or I can do to support.

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