

District Councillor's Report – Feb 2022

Council tax freeze proposed but investment in recovery to continue

Mid Suffolk District Council is considering freezing its element of council tax this year – helping residents through post-pandemic recovery, while still investing in priority areas to improve quality of life.

A budget report going before Cabinet next month proposes no increase to council tax – despite the impact of Covid-19 and the additional demands and challenges caused by the pandemic over the last two financial years. Mid Suffolk District Council cabinet member for finance, Cllr John Whitehead, said:

“The pandemic has seen many residents with reduced income and, while only a small percentage of each household’s total council tax bill stays with Mid Suffolk District Council, freezing our element of this year’s bill will help everyone facing increasing living costs.

“Thanks to the prudent management and careful investment of public funds, our finances remain in a robust position. Last year, we were able to allocate an extra £5.1m towards our local economy, housing, our communities, and residents’ wellbeing, as well as supporting climate change and biodiversity initiatives.

“This budget will allow us to provide further support this year – particularly to residents in greatest need – and help us to ensure the district’s ongoing recovery in the months and years ahead.”

The freeze would mean the annual Mid Suffolk proportion of the council tax bill for a Band D property would remain at £171.59. Sheltered housing charges and garage rents will also remain frozen at 2021/22 levels, but Mid Suffolk District Council tenants face a proposed increase of 4.1% to their rents, to cover inflationary pressures and allow investment in improving the quality of council homes. This means average weekly social rent would increase by £3.45 from £84.42 to £87.84. For affordable housing, weekly rents would increase by £4.99 from £121.34 to £126.33. Cllr Whitehead, said:

“The decision to increase rent for our tenants is not something we take lightly, but for five years up to 2020 we saw annual rent reductions. This increase simply brings rental back in line with inflation, plus provides a small, but vital contribution to improving our housing stock.

“We cannot allow our homes to fall into disrepair and must be able to invest in improvements in order to give our tenants the quality of home they expect and deserve.”

If approved by Cabinet on February 7, the proposed budget will go before Mid Suffolk's Full Council on February 24, ahead of council bills landing on doormats from April.

Update on Gateway 14

Gateway 14 is set to have a significant impact on the wider Mid Suffolk district as well as Stowmarket and surrounding villages - bringing in £75-250m per year and creating between 1,800 and 6,200 direct and indirect jobs. In order to keep everyone updated on progress, a new quarterly bulletin has been launched to keep local residents, businesses and stakeholders fully informed. A copy of the update is attached.

A warmer, energy efficient future secured for residents in low-income homes

Residents in low-income homes across Babergh and Mid Suffolk can look forward to a warmer, more energy efficient future thanks to £1.9m in Government funding. Neighbouring West Suffolk Council led a successful £7.1m bid, on behalf of all of Suffolk's district councils, for money from the Government's Sustainable Warmth Competition - designed to support improvements to low income, low energy efficiency rated homes. The money will enable work to be carried out to 750 homes in Suffolk.

In Babergh and Mid Suffolk, £1.9m of the funds will be targeted at installing green measures in around 80 of the districts' least energy efficient homes. The range measures include solar panels, air source heat pumps, as well as a variety of home insulation. Initial surveys have now been carried out on the first eligible properties identified and occupiers are due to be contacted soon.

Councils chosen for pilot to ensure neighbourhoods have say on planning

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have been named as part of a pilot scheme to allow residents an easier way to shape and influence development in their area.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has confirmed that Babergh and Mid Suffolk are among 11 areas nationwide to be chosen as part of a pilot scheme to boost participation in neighbourhood planning. The ability to create a Neighbourhood Plan was introduced as part of the Government's Localism Act 2011, and gives communities the opportunity to develop a shared vision for their area. Unlike a parish plan or village design statement, a

successful Neighbourhood Plan has statutory weight and, once adopted, is used to help decide planning applications.

Across both districts, around 50 parishes have embarked on the neighbourhood planning process. To date, 16 Neighbourhood Plans have been successfully adopted, with many others at an advanced stage. The councils will now receive an award of £45,000 in Government funding to go towards a new post, designed to encourage even more people in the districts to engage with the planning system.

Omicron business grants available to hospitality and leisure businesses

Businesses in Babergh and Mid Suffolk that have been severely impacted by Omicron can now apply for a one-off grant payment through one of two Covid-19 support grants. The Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant (OHLG) is open to businesses with a rateable value in hospitality, leisure and accommodation premises who offer in-person services.

The Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) is discretionary grant open to hospitality, leisure and accommodation businesses who are excluded from the OHLG scheme, as well as personal care businesses and wholesale businesses who supply over 51% of their goods to the hospitality, leisure and accommodation sectors.

Businesses applying for the ARG must be able to demonstrate that they have been significantly impacted by the Omicron variant in December 2021 and January 2022. ARG applications will be reviewed by a grant panel with decisions communicated after the closing date and payments being made by the end of March 2022.

The grant allocation for the OHLG ranges between £2,667 - £6,000 depending on the rateable value while the grant allocation for the ARG is up to a maximum of £6,000 depending on turnover and demonstrated impact of Omicron on the business.

Regards

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