

## **District Councillor's Report – Feb 2023**

### **Council tax freeze for Mid Suffolk**

Budget proposals for Mid Suffolk District Council include a council tax freeze for residents, despite rising costs and increased demands on services. While other councils are being forced to put up bills in order to balance their books, Mid Suffolk is proposing to freeze its share of council tax – absorbing rising costs, rather than passing them on to residents.

The freeze would mean the annual Mid Suffolk proportion of the council tax bill for a Band D property remaining at £171.59. The Council also previously agreed a reduction of up to 100% for residents with the lowest incomes and a simplification of the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme for residents on Universal Credit.

The budget report outlines the scale of the financial challenge face by the council as a result of global events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Putin's illegal war in Ukraine, plus rising inflation and interest rates. Figures show the council's net cost of delivering services are set to increase by 41% from £8.77m in 2022/23 to £12.41m in 2023/34. This means this year's expected surplus will be reduced, with just over £3m now expected to go into earmarked reserves.

Sharply increased costs have also impacted the Housing Revenue Account, with a 40% increase being recorded. This means a 7% increase in rents for council housing is required to try to keep pace with the increased costs whilst also allowing the necessary investment in repairs and maintenance across the council's social housing stock. This would mean average weekly social rent increasing by £6.16 a week from £87.99 to £94.15. For affordable housing, weekly rents would increase by £9.03 from £126.96 to £137.99.

The proposed budgets will go before Full Council on February 23 and, assuming they are accepted, any changes to council tax or rents would take effect from April 1.

### **Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils Take Action Over Housing Issues**

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are taking action to improve their Building Services - which maintain their council housing - and urgently resolve a number of issues. The councils began a programme of work to improve the service last summer, and in-depth assessments arising from this work subsequently identified issues around health and safety compliance. Of their 6,788 homes, 344 do not currently have up-to-date electrical safety reports. Gas inspections are also overdue on 92 properties, and asbestos reinspection surveys are not up-to-date on 33 homes. Urgent work to address these issues is already underway – including additional inspections, an

overhaul of existing processes, and obtaining more robust data around health and safety compliance to provide tenants with complete reassurance.

The councils voluntarily referred themselves to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) as soon as they became aware of the issues and contacted all its tenants. The RSH has now confirmed the councils' findings and issued a Regulatory Notice, meaning it will monitor the councils and meet regularly until it is assured sustainable, long-term improvements are embedded. The regulator has confirmed it does not intend to take statutory action against the councils because an urgent programme of work is already in place to rectify the problems. The councils are confident their action plan will promptly result in full compliance with the required standards but welcome the support of the regulator in ensuring that robust procedures and practices are embedded. Tenants at every home where an additional inspection is required have already been contacted.

## **Ground-Breaking At Gateway 14, Stowmarket, For The Range**

Construction of a state-of-the-art distribution unit for garden and leisure products retailer The Range is officially underway at Gateway 14. The ground-breaking ceremony (Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2023) saw Mid Suffolk District Council leader Cllr Suzie Morley and Alex Simpkin, CEO of The Range put the first spades in the ground to officially mark the start of the development.

Once completed, The Range, one of the fastest growing retailers in the UK, is set to create around 1650 jobs for the district. The Range already has two existing major distribution centres in the UK and the new site will help meet consumer demand in the South and South East of the country while also supporting operations across the UK including 100 new stores across the UK and a rapidly expanding e-commerce business.

The development of the 1.17m sq ft high specification distribution centre, is the first building at Gateway 14, a new business, innovation and logistics park located outside Stowmarket, Suffolk. Winvic Construction Ltd have been appointed to deliver this new facility.

Gateway 14 Ltd (wholly owned by Mid Suffolk District Council) and development partner, Jaynic, will provide a new base for manufacturing, logistics and R&D businesses with a particular focus on innovation and sustainability at Gateway 14 as well as providing innovation space for smaller and start-up businesses that will boost the local economy and attract investment into the region.

## **Freeport East Receives Final Government Approval**

Freeport East has received final Government approvals allowing it to move forward into the delivery phase. The development of the Freeport, which is expected to create

up to 13,500 new jobs, will be boosted by £25 million in Government funding to support infrastructure development.

The Freeport has three main development sites at the Port of Felixstowe, Harwich International Port and Gateway 14 near Stowmarket. Freeport East will be able to collect and deploy 100% of the business rates growth generated on these sites for the next 25 years, providing millions of pounds of financial backing to invest in regeneration, skills and innovation across the local area. Work has already commenced on the Gateway 14 development and there are ambitious plans to develop a green energy hub in Harwich to serve sectors including offshore wind.

All the developments have an emphasis on supporting innovation, skills development and net zero as well as acting as anchors for wider economic impact. The Universities of Essex and Suffolk as well as a range of other partners in the region have committed to working with Freeport East and its businesses to accelerate innovation across operations, products and services. They will also help unlock further investment in research and development to boost development of the area's knowledge-based economy.

## **Full Business Case To Be Developed For Stowmarket Wellbeing And Leisure Hub**

Progress of the Stowmarket health, wellbeing, sports, education, and leisure facilities will be presented to Mid Suffolk District Council cabinet in February, with approval being sort for the next phase of the business case. The Stowmarket health, education, leisure, wellbeing, and sports hub will bring together a range of modern, accessible, facilities together in one place for use by the local community, sports groups, and clubs as well as local schools.

At Mid Suffolk District Council's forthcoming cabinet meeting, members will be asked to approve the submission of a full planning application and to carry out detailed design for the scheme. Members will also be asked to approve the next round of funding to cover the completion of the full business case, funding strategy and optimal operating model for the scheme.

The draft masterplan for the scheme was presented to cabinet and council members in June 2022, when funding was agreed to develop a detailed design and hold a series of public consultation events.

The masterplan was then showcased to residents, students, community groups and sports clubs during a series of events through the summer and autumn as well as being available online. The feedback from these events was collated, including over 200 written comments covering a range of topics from sports to community events, which has helped shape the facilities and programme for the scheme.

Some of the revisions to the draft masterplan have included a new sports pavilion, a multi-use games areas, four indoor sports courts (for multiple sports such as netball and badminton) and a multi-agency wellbeing hub.

## **Elections this May**

As you will know, the local and parish elections are due to be held on Thursday 4 May. There are still positions that need to be filled to ensure the elections are run smoothly across the districts. If you want to get involved, or know someone else who is interested, email the Babergh and Mid Suffolk elections team to find out more.

The UK Government has introduced a requirement for voters to show photo ID when voting at a polling station. The local and Parish elections in May will be the first time that electors will need to show voter ID. To ensure you are able to vote you may need to take action now. Listed below is a summary of the accepted form of photo ID that can be used in polling stations:

- Passport (even if expired, so long as the photograph is recognisable)
- Driving licence (including provisional license)
- Blue badge
- Certain concessionary travel cards
- Identity card with PASS mark (Proof of Age Standards Scheme)
- Biometric Immigration document
- Defence identity card
- Certain national identity cards

Residents without any of the accepted forms of photo ID should apply for a free voter ID document, known as a Voter Authority Certificate,. An application can be made online via the following website:

<https://www.gov.uk/apply-for-photo-id-voter-authority-certificate>.

Applications can also be made by post with the necessary applications forms again being available online through the link above .

Regards

*Rick*

**Rick Meyer**

[Richard.meyer@midsuffolk.gov.uk](mailto:Richard.meyer@midsuffolk.gov.uk)

Tel: 07771703668