

# **Walsham Le Willows**

## **Mid Suffolk District Council Annual Report May 2025**

### **Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation**

The government's devolution and local government agenda is basically bringing an end to our district and county councils in the next couple of years. These will be replaced with unitary councils covering all services, very significantly fewer councillors to do the work. There is some expectation that parish and town councils will fill the gaps in local community support, but there isn't much Government guidance on this currently.

Alongside this, the establishment of an elected mayor for Suffolk and Norfolk combined, with their own offices and staff, may hopefully raise the profile of our county in terms of grants etc., so the character and priorities of that elected mayor will be crucial.

Mid Suffolk council will ensure a seamless transfer of our services to the new Unitary system, whatever that may be, and a smooth continuation of those services into the future. Alongside this, we are advocating for retaining transparency and democratic process for residents and local communities.

In the meantime, the Green administration is pressing on aiming to achieve as much as we can do for our residents over the next few years.

### **Council Finances**

Mid Suffolk District Council is generally in a healthy financial position.

For 25/26, we have committed to a capital programme of £36m across the district and c.£80m over the next few years.

We only raised Council Tax by 2% last year and didn't raise Council Tax at all this year as we are mindful of the cost-of-living pressures for our residents.

Unfortunately, our ring-fenced Council housing service is not in a good financial state – see below.

## **Supporting thriving communities**

We have launched a £2.5m programme to develop the high street in Stowmarket (our largest town) as well as targeted support for our smaller towns and rural communities.

For example, in Stowmarket we are working with landlords to bring under-utilised properties (including empty shops) back into use. This involves us buying buildings, renting buildings in the short term or helping to support their refurbishment and improve the look of the shop fronts. The council is especially keen to develop the town with arts and cultural experiences, tourism, community activities, retail, small business workspaces, leisure, food and drink. Namely activities that bring something new to the town.

We are proactively assisting our core cultural and arts organisations such as the Food Museum and the John Peel Centre.

Sports activities are also a high priority including a new 3G football pitch, multi-use games area and mini athletics track in Stowmarket and the refurbishment of our leisure centres in the district. The launch of a rural sports facilities fund of £1.5m over the next two years allows local sports clubs to bid for project funding.

## **Support for biodiversity**

Protecting biodiversity is a major concern, and the council has a multi-prong approach to bring improvement. In September 2024 the council organised a call for land to help put landowners in touch with organisations that can support them in managing their land better for wildlife.

We are also purchasing several specific areas of land to protect priority habitats while allowing controlled public access. These sites range from small pieces of land under the stewardship of local village organisations to larger sites of over 50 acres where we will work in partnership with organisations like Suffolk Wildlife Trust.

Then there is our work to improve the river quality of the Dove, Gipping, Rat and Deben – working with stakeholders and landowners to support and enable sustainable management.

## **Planning and housing development**

The current Labour government has increased Mid Suffolk's housing target by 37%. Our response is to work with our communities to create a local planning framework and to support the creation of neighbourhood plans. This brings greater assurance that the required houses will be built while taking into account local priorities such as the exact locations for housing, the affordable housing mix, the tenure types and the

desired biodiversity requirements. This is a more nuanced approach than just focusing on housing targets councillors believe more likely and very importantly to receive community buy in.

Our Joint Local Plan Part 1 has been up to date since 2023 and we've been meeting Government targets and using the Plan to have some control over where and how housing development can happen.

Government have now shifted the goalposts in terms of the number of homes across the district and increasing the powers of developers. Our decisions at planning committee are constrained by this legislation of course, and our local plan is being revised to take Government changes into account.

We have increased council tax for second homes and for long-term empty properties.

We are also making the process of gaining approval for energy efficiency measures for listed buildings more straightforward.

### **Council Housing**

Mid Suffolk would like to build more council houses for local families. However, many councils are restricted in doing this because of the significant historic housing debt. We inherited a debt of over £115mn. Currently 25% of council rents are being spent just to service the debt. Therefore, this money is not being spent on our housing.

Nonetheless the council are still extremely focused on improving our existing council housing and are investing over £10mn in improvements this year for items such as roofing, kitchens and bathrooms. The scheduling of this work is based on a detailed exercise we have recently completed to assess the condition of every single council house in Mid Suffolk.

We have also been working hard to improve the service that we provide to out tenants.

### **Home insulation**

A core priority for the council and the Green Party is to improve the insulation of our homes. This reduces costs for householders, reduces energy use and keeps people warmer. We are currently investing over £2mn in Cosy Homes scheme for the private sector where we offer a free assessment and installation service while ensuring the right technical standards are applied to any installation work. A further £2mn is being invested to create energy efficient council homes.

### **Enhanced recycling**

Comprehensive changes are being made to significantly improve our recycling processes. Mid Suffolk is not even in the top 200 councils for recycling.

The enhanced recycling initiative will involve weekly food waste collections.

Residents will receive a food waste caddy for use in the kitchen and an outdoor caddy which will be emptied each week.

There will also be two recycling bins. One just for paper and cardboard which will result in higher recycling performance. The other bin will be for general recycling and extended to accept glass and later soft plastics and tetra-paks. Special arrangements will be made for residents with limited space either via smaller bins or shared facilities.

The council is investigating other areas of recycling – small electrical items, textiles, batteries – to improve the district's efforts to reduce and reuse.

### **Gateway 14**

The Council owns the Gateway 14 Business Park. The Range which is the first business operating at Gateway 14 already employs over 600 people. 200 of these are from the local area and most had been unemployed for over 2 months.

Two sustainable building companies Bauder and Assan Panels have been attracted to Gateway 14 in the last 18 months. This will bring a further 100 jobs to the area.

A significant grant-funded investment is being made in a purpose-built Skills and Innovation Centre. The centre will help address the region's skills gap and have a particular focus on digital, AI and green skills. The project will cost £18.8m of which £16.66m is funded by Freeport East and the remainder by Mid Suffolk. The centre will offer office space for high growth start-ups and will be used for training, working in partnership with the Universities of Suffolk and Essex, West Suffolk College, Suffolk New College and Colchester Institute.

### **Grant support for the Community**

Our Community Team is friendly, approachable, and happy to help community groups to access grants within Mid Suffolk and externally.

The Locality Budget has increased to £10,000 per district councillor, and I am always pleased to be approached about possible grant applications.

### **Finally**

I would like to express my thanks to the Parish Council and to all the church, community and charity groups for all their hard work this year. Those involved don't get paid for what they do. They are all trying to do the best for our community.

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