

Mid Suffolk District Councillors' Report – March 2022

By-election in Thurston

A by-election was held in the Thurston Ward on Thursday 17th February. The incumbent Green Party councillor had resigned and moved away for family reasons. On a turnout of 28%, the Green candidate, Austin Davies was elected with 845 votes. The Conservative candidate was second with 399 votes and the Liberal Democrats and Labour a distant third and fourth with 37 and 32 votes respectively. The balance of the Council remains the same, with the Conservative & Independent Group having 16 + 1 and the Green and LibDem coalition at 12 + 5. The Conservative & Independent Group continue to form the administration but clearly things are very finely balanced.

Budget 2022/23

The General Fund Budget for 2022/23 was presented to Full Council on 24th February. As signposted in our January Report, the Mid Suffolk administration was able to freeze its share of the council tax precept for the new year at the same rate as in 2021/22. Although Mid Suffolk DC is the collecting authority for all local council tax, the amount it retains for its own use is only about 8% of the total billed and collected – the rest going mainly to County, plus the Police and to towns/parishes. That 8% share equates to £6.667million. Despite the freeze, the amount collected is up about 4.5% from the previous year, mainly due to the increase in the tax base – an increase in the number of houses within the district.

The budget and the forecasts shown in the Medium Term Financial Strategy point to there being surplus income generated over and above that needed to deliver a balanced budget. Cabinet will therefore be investigating the opportunity to increase grant funding, including councillor localities grants, to aid local communities as we now emerge from the Covid pandemic.

At the council meeting, the Opposition put forward an amendment to the budget. This usually happens but in a change from the previous norm where a number of alternative proposals were put forward, the Opposition this time just put forward one amendment. This was for the introduction of an electric bus project to run within the district and with the funding coming from accumulated reserves. With a finely balanced council, 17/17 if all councillors are present, and with desire within the administration to further explore this innovative project, the amendment was accepted and the budget, with the inclusion of this amendment was then supported by a unanimous vote of the Full Council. Councillors present, could not recall any earlier instance of a budget meeting with universal support.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget which is the ring-fenced budget for the council's social housing provision included a rent increase of 4.1%. This increase is calculated based on government guidelines which are generally adopted throughout England. The Opposition did not support this HRA budget and it was only passed by the Chairman's casting vote. The rent increase, which will generate nearly £6million over a 10-year period, will be used to improve the standard of the housing stock including better insulation and the move towards zero-carbon heating. Over the next 8 years, all the council's homes must be improved to an EPC rating of C or better.

Mid Suffolk DC welcomes new 'County deal'

Both Babergh and Mid Suffolk have welcomed the news that Suffolk has been chosen as one of nine counties invited to negotiate a ground-breaking devolution deal. This will be driven by the County, but it should result in local leaders having more decision-making powers and control over areas such as transport, infrastructure and training. These devolution deals arise from the Government's Levelling Up White Paper.

A new bigger and better local library in Needham Market

Suffolk Libraries, the charity that runs Suffolk libraries, and Mid Suffolk DC are pleased to announce that the new Needham Market Library is now open. Mid Suffolk purchased the former Middle School site in Needham Market, adjacent to the old, small library and the Community Centre. As part of the redevelopment of the school site, Mid Suffolk has funded a new library building which offers bigger and more modern space for library events and activities along with bookable meeting rooms for the local community. Suffolk County Council has also helped fund this new facility through section 106 housing developer contributions.

Additional Funding to support the districts' rough sleepers

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Council have been awarded £324K to provide specialised emergency accommodation for rough sleepers and those at risk of homelessness. The funding, from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government's Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme, will see new energy efficient homes in Stowmarket and Sudbury, to provide emergency accommodation for vulnerable adults at risk of living on the streets.

A Brief Policing Update (from Tim as PCC)

The fallout from the appalling situation in Ukraine is deeply concerning. The one area we need to be mindful of is personal cyber security. Do everything possible to maintain your firewalls and be suspicious of any strange emails and communications. There is no cause for alarm but additional vigilance at this time would be sensible.

At this stage there is no information on the arrival of refugees - if any

The new police and fire station in Stowmarket is progressing well and should be opened in the autumn at the latest.

A major investment programme in the control room to improve the 101 and other communication services is due to start next month - this is for additional staff and new technology.

The new police and crime plan has a greater emphasis on crime prevention and reducing re-offending rates.

Suffolk Police has been funded to recruit an extra 72 full-time officers during the year which is very good news. We are always looking for more volunteers and to expand the Special Constabulary

Tim Passmore & John Whitehead

(our contact details are on parish noticeboards and on the MSDC's website)