

Mid Suffolk District Councillors' March 2021 Report to the parishes in the Claydon & Barham Ward (including Policing update)

Budget 2021/22

The district council's General Fund budget was presented to Full Council at its meeting on 18th February and was narrowly approved. The government has rightly focussed its attention on the fight against Covid-19, getting us through this deadly pandemic and devising very generous financial packages for residents, businesses and for local authorities. In the early stages of the pandemic last year, first projections indicated that we would have to use a significant part of our accumulated reserves just for survival and the council's finances would have emerged significantly weaker. But generous central government assistance means they have absorbed most of that pain. The downside though to their intense focus on Covid, is that the government has only announced a one-year finance settlement. The three-year Comprehensive Spending Review has been delayed, as has the Fair Funding Review, Business Rates Review and a business rates reset. We await to see what new scheme emerges from the consultation on a New Homes Bonus replacement. So, the financial outlook, beyond March 2022 is distinctly uncertain.

Given those inherent uncertainty going forward, the budget recommendation was for a 1.66% increase in Mid Suffolk's share of the Council Tax. For a Band B house, it is only an extra 18p a month, for a Band C house an extra 21p per month and for a Band D 23p per month. Approximately two-thirds of all our houses fall into those three bands. This modest increase of a few pence per month generates £104,000 and all of the money will be going into a ring-fenced Covid Business Recovery Fund.

The major announcement in the budget however was the creation of four pots of funding from Reserves. There will be a pot of one million pounds each for the Economy, Housing, Communities and Wellbeing to fund truly ambitious plans for our district as it emerges from Covid. A further half-million pounds has been added to the Climate Change & Biodiversity Fund.

The opposition Green and LibDem Group put forward a very detailed list of amendments to the budget in a paper circulated in advance as part of the agenda. The administration invited the opposition to withdraw their amendments, and either support or at least abstain on the budget and then join in cross-party workshops and other mechanisms to establish how to spend these significant sums of money for the real benefit of all our residents. The opposition agreed to drop their amendments and in a recorded vote, the budget was passed by 17 votes For, 16 voted Against and 1 abstention.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget was also passed by 17 votes to 16 with one abstention. Council house rents will increase by 1.5% - an average increase of £1.25 per week. The HRA budget includes an ambitious Capital Programme for the next four years from 2021 to 2025. The Council has identified development sites for 254 affordable homes and 119 shared ownership homes. New builds and acquisitions are forecast to cost £42.2million and the Housing Maintenance Programme £15.8million. A new, comprehensive 30-year HRA Business Plan, to incorporate new build specifications, the Design Guide, environmental 'retrofit' improvements and new safety enhancements, articulating our vision for Council Housing will be presented to Cabinet and Council by this summer.

Other Matters

The March Cabinet meeting will be looking at plans to erect solar carports and a battery storage system at the Stowmarket Leisure Centre which will be 50% match funded from central government funding administered by the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership. Approval of Community Infrastructure Levy spend of £370,000 will also be requested at that meeting to fund projects in Haughley (car park improvements and pavilion secure storage), Mendlesham (GP surgery expansion), Gislingham (school running track) and Stowmarket (tank HVO fuel for council refuse freighters).

POLICING UPDATE

Covid 19

Infection rates and hospital admissions are continuing to fall. Mid Suffolk remains as having one of the lowest infection rates in the country – currently 299 out of 315 districts and boroughs.

The vaccination programme is proceeding really quickly with over 40% of all adults receiving their initial injection. Suffolk has the 5th best track record for vaccinations in the country – a superb result and thanks for all those involved

Lockdown Violations

Very few people are breaking the rules. Only 1.2% of the calls to the control room are Covid related and nearly all concern people travelling for the wrong reasons. Generally, Suffolk people are very compliant with only 62 calls in the last week. Very few penalty tickets have been issued as the enforcement approach remains the last option but will be used if necessary

Funded PCSO

There has been no further news from Gt Blakenham parish council so I can only presume this option will no longer be viable without their support

New Police / Fire Station for Stowmarket

Work starts on the new £3.2 million construction project by the middle of March and will take around a year to complete. As part of the contract there has been a large emphasis on using Suffolk based suppliers, labour and other contractors to support our local economy. Mid Suffolk has generously supported this with a CIL grant of £420 k.

Council Tax Rise

The 30p per week for a Band D property will raise an extra £3.8 million for the policing budget and will enable a further 25 police officers and a similar number of police staff to be recruited. By this time next year there will be more than 1330 fulltime officers in Suffolk (more than I can remember) – this includes the benefit from the national uplift programme

Tim Passmore & John Whitehead

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