

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

Budget 2021/22

The Council's annual budgets, for the General Fund and ring-fenced Housing Revenue Account, go through a system of thorough examination and scrutiny by Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny Committee before Full Council votes on the proposals in late February 2021. Budget work actually begins back in the Summer, both strategically at Cabinet/Senior Leadership level and by a process of "budget challenge sessions" where Corporate Managers take a group of peers through their departmental budgets line by line where savings and efficiencies are identified. This preparation work has continued during one of the most challenging and uncertain times due to the ongoing impact of Covid19 on the Council's finances and the only gradual emergence of an extensive and very generous support package from Central Government. On the downside, government has only announced a one-year Spending Review and have delayed the Fair Funding Review, Business rates Review and a business rates reset and they have yet to consult on a replacement for the New Homes Bonus scheme. We are therefore budgeting in an environment of considerable uncertainty, both short-term as lockdowns continue and with little visibility for finances beyond 2022. We do find ourselves with both significant brought-forward reserves and we are forecasting future budget surpluses but with the prospect of considerable uncertainty on fees, income and government grants which together form a large element of our financing. Accordingly, we are recommending a modest 1.66% increase in the Mid Suffolk DC share of Council Tax – this is only 23p per month for those in a Band D home paying by monthly direct debit. On the Housing Revenue Account – for council housing – we are increasing housing rents by 1.5% but, due to earlier governmental imposed rent reductions, rents are virtually unchanged in 2021/22 from their 2016 levels (11p/week on average). Sheltered Housing service charges will increase by £1.00 per week after two years in which these charges have been frozen.

Council Tax parish taxbase reductions and compensatory government grants to Parish Councils

The effect of Covid19 on employment and earnings has resulted in more residents becoming eligible for the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme and hence lower council tax payment obligations. This does however lead to some modest reductions in the tax-base of most parish councils. The government has created a compensating scheme with grants for parish councils to be distributed via the district councils. These will be received by affected parish councils in early April from Mid Suffolk along with the first half of their annual precept.

Council's Refuse Freighters to run on Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil

Cabinet agreed at their January meeting to transfer over the council's vehicle fleet to run on Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) as part of the Council's phased move to a carbon-neutral position. The council's fleet of vehicles is the second largest emitter of CO2 after the Leisure Centres. Refuse freighters ('bin-lorries') average around 4-5mpg so the conversion of these 35 vehicles alone is the equivalent of taking about 350 45mpg diesel taxis off the road. HVO lowers overall life cycle greenhouse gas emissions by up to 90% and the Council's source of HVO is being specified without any Palm Oil content. The fuel does cost a little bit more than conventional diesel and a new fuel tank will be installed at the Stowmarket depot but operational and maintenance savings are also anticipated.

POLICING UPDATE

Covid 19

The lockdown clearly demonstrates how serious this public health epidemic is and why there is a greater focus on trying to ensure all of us follow the rules / guidelines for everyone's sake. The vast majority of people are being very sensible. The police will still only be using enforcement as a last resort. Approximately 50 penalty notices have been issued in Suffolk since the new lockdown started on Boxing Day

If you need to travel to work or be out for another reason it is helpful if you have some means of identification/ email/ letter / other evidence from your organisation to verify where you are going or why if at all possible. We do not live in a police state and it is all about lowering the risk of infection transmission.

Vaccinations

By the end of this week most vaccinations centres should become operational in Suffolk – some already are. The main constraint will be vaccine supply, so people do need to be patient. Those people eligible for vaccine will be contacted by phone / text and allocated a time – beware of hoax callers and letters or emails, especially those who are elderly and insecure. Some individuals who cannot drive can be taken by friends or neighbours to the centres provided they take all precautions as necessary (face mask etc) and sit as far away from the driver as possible. If you are helping someone please travel straight to the centre and back and do not go to other places.

A new vaccination website will be up and running for Suffolk residents by the end of the week providing as much information as possible.

Crime Rates

Most crime rates have reduced but up until early December domestic abuse and related crimes has (sadly) increased by 22% - please look out for those who may be in difficulty and contact the police and other agencies as necessary. Help is available.

Police Council Tax Survey (On Suffolk PCC website)

Regretfully I am asking people to pay an extra 30p per week / £15 per year for their policing portion of the Council Tax (Band D). The extra £3.8m if it goes ahead will help provide more officers to improve visibility (overall an extra 75 police), 26 more staff to help deal with increased levels of domestic abuse, drug related crime and gangs, fraud prevention, improved communication via 101 and other channels and work with young people. Please spend five minutes completing the survey if you can. Suffolk remains the fourth lowest funded force in the country per head of the population and I would not ask for the extra funds if it was not absolutely necessary to keep people safe and reduce crime

Tim Passmore & John Whitehead

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