

## Mid Suffolk District Councillor Annual Report 2024/25 – Onehouse Ward

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

Government's large-scale proposals for reorganisation in recent months are basically bringing an end to our district and county councils in a couple of years, to be replaced with unitary councils covering all services, very probably with 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 any 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.

The priority of Mid Suffolk council is to 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.

### **Budgets:**

**Housing Revenue Account** – funding is mainly spent on managing and improving our housing, including a backlog of repair work from previous years which we've now just about caught up with. We are actively challenging Government's requirement that the HRA is self-funding, as this means the housing budget for all councils is very tight and therefore building or buying more social housing is very difficult, although we're very aware of the urgent need for it.

Our **General Fund** is comparatively healthy. The council has reserves for ongoing costs such as standard grants, running elections, legal contingency funds, and public emergencies – standing at £28m at the end of the financial year. We are better off than a lot of councils and not raising our council tax for the coming year is a reflection of that. For 25/26, we are committed to a **capital programme** of £36m across the district. The principal items are the Innovation Centre and the Sports development in Stowmarket. A particular feature of this green-led Administration has been increasing grants to meet local community needs and initiatives across Mid Suffolk, and the application process for many grants has also been simplified so that they're more accessible.

### **Rural Transport:**

The new taxi bus scheme is now established, with journey fees recently reduced from £6 to £4.

### **Nature Recovery and Flood Alleviation**

Our council has continued to take opportunities to buy and protect land of high biodiversity value, and to support projects to encourage sustainable land management and lessen flooding. As Onehouse ward approximates to the catchment of the River Ratt, it is especially good to report some practical progress locally.

### **Energy Efficiency and Environmental Sustainability:**

The Cosy Homes scheme helps with insulation and energy efficiency in private homes and has made quite a significant difference. Increasing council tax on long-term empty properties and

making the process of gaining approval for energy efficiency measures for listed buildings more straightforward have also been welcomed.

### **Planning and Housing:**

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 tilting the policy balance to further favour developers. Our decisions, both by officers and at planning committee are constrained by this legislation of course, and our local plan is being revised to take Government's new numbers and other changes into account. And Government requires that planning officers strive to *approve* proposals by negotiating changes to make them *sustainable*.

The struggle to ensure development complies with all the plans and conditions continues in every parish, and ours are no exception. **Enforcement action** starts with asking nicely and occasionally leads to stopping work on site and to prosecution. Delays and appeals are built into the legislation, so it can be slow and time-consuming.

### **Supporting the Community:**

Our Community Team is friendly, approachable, and happy to help parishes and community groups to access grants within Mid Suffolk and externally. Our Locality Budget has increased to £10,000 per district councillor, so I am always pleased to be approached about possible grant applications. I also wish to express thanks to the Parish Councils for all their work this year.

Cllr John Matthissen  
27.04.25