

Mid Suffolk District Councillors' Annual Report (2024/25) for the Annual Parish Meeting

Budget

In 2024/25, net expenditure on services was budgeted at £18.5 million with a 2% increase in council tax.

Council home rents increased by 7% and sheltered housing service charges also increased. This was to ensure the Council could afford the repairs and maintenance that are needed.

Approval was given to increase council tax on empty homes and on second homes to support the best use of homes in the district.

The council began the year reserves of £28 million and received a further boost of £20 million from the Gateway 14 business park dividend. This fortunate position has enabled the district council to support several schemes and projects, including:

- Launching the Cosy Homes scheme with grants to add insulation to homes.
- Continuing for the second year the Living Well in Winter Grant, to help local organisations deliver accessible spaces and activities during the colder months.
- Continuing for the second year the Pride in Your Place grant, available to all communities in the district, to promote local identity, explore the area's heritage and history, and improve the appearance of the environment.
- Community Grants to improve sports and play facilities and upgrade village halls.
- Introduction of the Mid Suffolk Tax Bus scheme connecting the surrounding villages and communities with Stowmarket.
- Support for the Stowmarket Town Rangers scheme to provide additional cleaning and improvement of the local environment.
- Creation of a Skills and Innovation Centre at Gateway 14, to bring businesses and training together in one centre with a focus on the green economy, and digital and AI technology.
- Establishing a £1.5 million fund for the enhancement of Stowmarket town centre.
- Funding feasibility work towards introduction of a residents parking zone scheme in Stowmarket.

The budget for 2025/26 sets out a commitment to a capital spending programme of £36 million covering items including:

- Commitment to invest further in sports and health facilities across the district, primarily the ongoing Stowmarket Health, Education and Leisure Facilities (SHELF) project.
- Further investment in the Skills and Innovation Centre at Gateway 14.
- A £300k fund for projects in market towns and rural communities outside Stowmarket.
- A fund to acquire land to boost nature recovery and flood resilience in the district to support the objectives of our Biodiversity Action Plan
- Investment in cycling and walking infrastructure to support the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan
- An increase in Locality Grant awards to £10,000 for each ward.

Planning and Housing

Mid Suffolk and Babergh's Joint Local Plan had its first year of full operation. The purpose of the plan was to provide essential clarity for communities about how the district was to develop until 2037, delivering the government required number of 535 new dwellings annually.

However, in December 2024, the government revised our housebuilding targets increasing them to 734 dwellings per year. If we cannot demonstrate that this target will be met via a 5-year land supply, there is a risk that National Planning Policy would take priority over our Joint Local Plan. This situation could force the Council to approve planning applications on sites contrary to the Local Plan.

Consequently, the Joint Local Plan is now under review and will continue to carry planning weight whilst the review takes place. Additionally, it is important that Parish Neighbourhood Plans are brought up to date with the new figures and Parishes currently without a Neighbourhood Plan are recommended to consider preparing one.

The Council is continuing to work on Part 2 as well as publishing Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD's) to support the JLP including the Housing SPD, Biodiversity and Trees SPD and the Intensive Livestock and Poultry SPD.

In Willisham plans to create 11 homes and commercial space in Willisham was not granted permission by Mid Suffolk District Council and an appeal has been lodged with the Planning Inspector against the decision. The plans, which included footpath upgrades, affordable housing, recreation facilities, and accommodation for a shop were widely supported by Offton and Willisham Parish Council.

In Offton Mid Suffolk is working to ensure the hedge is planted on the Tollemache Grove site as part of the ecological mitigation works for that development. We will resume enforcement proceedings when the planting season returns in autumn.

In Battsford Mid Suffolk is working with builders and residents of Bowl Meadow to complete the scheme of works on the landscaping plan including a range of bird, bat boxes, hedgehog access and tree planting.

Waste and Recycling

Mid Suffolk has developed plans to comply with the forthcoming new requirements for waste and recycling set out by National Government. New procedures will be publicised in advance of implementation scheduled for 2026.

Communities, Public Realm and the Environment

Two new community transport routes were launched utilising the MSDC Taxi Bus scheme connecting Stowmarket with the surrounding villages and communities across Mid Suffolk. These currently serve Thurston and Bacton. A third route through Debenham will eventually be added.

Mid Suffolk have published a new and more ambitious Biodiversity Action Plan with a focus on priority habitats and species in our district. The plan aims to inform how we manage our land and open spaces and carry out our statutory functions such as housing and development.

The Cosy Homes scheme re-launched for Winter 2024 to improve insulation and energy efficiency within homes across Mid Suffolk.

Mid Suffolk has supported the establishment of a Community Rail Partnership for the Ipswich to Cambridge line to help develop and promote services along the route.

Mid Suffolk has funded a Highways design engineer to work exclusively on progressing the schemes included in the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan including a segregated cycle path connecting Stowmarket with Haughley.

In Willisham, residents and councillors planted 750 new hedge trees adjacent to a public footpath near Willisham Church. We planted a mixture of native species including Hawthorn, Hazel, Goat Willow, Hornbeam, Dog Wood and Guelder Rose provided by the Suffolk Tree Warden Network.

The Suffolk Tree Warden Network have also kindly provided a range of hedge and fruit trees for planting in the parishes of Battisford, Great Bricett and Offton and Willisham. Thank you to Cllr Pinson-Roxburgh for helping with distribution.

Supporting the community

Almost £550,000 was allocated by Mid Suffolk District Council Direct to communities across the district from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

Offton and Willisham Village Hall were awarded the Rural Communities Fund towards the costs of installing a new rooftop photovoltaic panel and battery scheme. The setup currently provides the village hall with around 95% of it's electricity requirements.

Orchard Barn in Ringshall were awarded a Community Development Grant towards ongoing works to reinstate a Suffolk long house which will function as an education building.

Battisford and District Cricket Club (located just outside of Battisford) were awarded CIL funds towards a new wastewater treatment facility.

The following projects in Battisford and Ringshall ward were support from the Locality Budget:

- Barking Village Hall – funding for village hall kitchen refurbishment
- Battisford Punchbowl Inn CIC – funding for re-rendering works
- Battisford and District Cricket Club – funding towards the installation of a new sewage system
- Great Bricett Community Woodland – funding for pond plants
- Offton and Willisham Village Hall – funding towards rooftop solar panel and battery installation
- Orchard Barn CIC – funding towards volunteer flooring project in the Education Building

Mid Suffolk District Council information is available via www.midsuffolk.gov.uk or by phone **0300 123 4000**

I would like to thank the Parish Council for all their work done throughout the year.

Dr Dan Pratt

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