

Mid Suffolk District Councillors' Report – July/August 2022

Gateway 14 – Stowmarket

At the end of June, we were pleased to announce that the first occupier on the Gateway 14 commercial site to the north-east of Stowmarket had exchanged conditional contracts to develop a distribution unit. This will be one of the largest distribution warehouses in the UK at just under 1.2 million square feet. The purchaser is The Range, the home, garden and leisure products retailer and this site will be their third large distribution centre and will facilitate their ambitious expansion plans in the south east. A reserved matters planning application is being prepared aiming for a start on site at the beginning of 2023 and completion in Autumn 2023. This occupier alone should bring 1,650 new jobs to the Mid Suffolk area. We are confident, given the amount of expressed interest, that this announcement will be just the first of many over the next twelve months for the Gateway 14 logistics park given its new 'Freeport' status and its excellent transport links.

Stowmarket Health, Education and Leisure Hub Proposal

The council has agreed to develop a comprehensive business / project plan for a state-of-the-art facility in Stowmarket which will encompass leisure and sporting facilities, educational initiatives and general health and wellbeing facilities for all ages. This will contribute to making the district a more attractive place to live and work in and is a long-term investment in our future especially for younger and older residents. The objective is to have the new facility fully operational by 2025/26.

Energy Rebate Scheme Payments

The £150 energy rebate scheme payments to those living in houses in council tax bands A to D have now been substantially paid out to eligible residents. Payments to those who pay by direct debit were made automatically from May onwards. Those that paid by means other than direct debit (card, cheque or cash) were required by central government to go through a proper validation process. We have now processed payments to 34,081 households in Mid Suffolk which is approximately 98% of those homes eligible. A smaller, discretionary scheme has now opened to help those in need that were not included in the main scheme such as those in houses of multiple occupancy and those in higher council tax bands but in receipt of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit. Full details are on the Mid Suffolk website and we encourage those that believe they meet the eligibility criteria to apply for this discretionary rebate as soon as possible. The government has announced further rebate schemes but these will be processed via the utility companies rather than via the councils.

Housing Revenue Account 30-year Business Plan

A substantial amount of work has been carried out over the last year and a half to produce a robust and financially sustainable Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan for the period 2022-2052. The 'HRA' covers the council's social housing stock and is a ring-fenced account totally separate from the council's General Fund which covers all other services. The

work involved stock condition surveys for all our 3,300+ council owned houses and energy performance appraisals for each home. Those houses not in EPC bands A to C will need to be upgraded to meet future government energy standards and this has now been fully costed. The plan also sets out ambitious new build plans for the next five years. The finalised business plan was approved by Cabinet at their July meeting.

Financial Outturn 2021-22

Cabinet in July were also presented with a report setting the financial outturn for the council's General Fund for the year 2021-22. Overall, there was a surplus of £1.208million driven primarily by additional planning income and by staff vacancy savings. The surplus must also be viewed in the context of the budget setting for that year which took place in winter 2020 when we were in lockdown and was prepared on a pessimistic basis given the levels of uncertainty about the timing of any recovery. The council has also experienced serious challenges in back filling vacant posts when staff have left the organisation. Posts have been left unfilled for longer periods than expected during the year 2021-22 due to the difficulties in attracting suitable candidates. Given the inflationary pressures being experienced as we start the new year, half-a-million pounds of the surplus has been placed in an Inflationary Pressures Reserve to cover the impact from pay inflation, fuel increases, energy costs and interest rate increases in this present year (2022-23). Mid Suffolk remains confident that we can manage these significant pressures given our healthy reserves and our established external income streams.

More details on our website

These reports can only ever be a very brief update and both parish councillors and residents are encouraged to visit our council website for regular news announcements and to obtain more details. The council also regularly uses social media to reach and inform residents.

Tim Passmore & John Whitehead

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