

DISTRICT COUNCILLOR'S REPORT NOVEMBER 2024

Household eligibility for winter support schemes

The Department of Work and Pensions' Cold Weather Payments are an automatic bank top-up of £25, triggered to be paid to eligible households (see <http://www.gov.uk/cold-weather-payment/eligibility>) when the average temperature has been recorded as, or is forecast to be, zero degrees Celsius or below for seven consecutive days at the weather station linked to an eligible person's postcode.

The £25 payments will be paid automatically to households receiving certain benefits including, Pension Credit, Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Universal Credit and Support for Mortgage Interest.

This comes alongside the £150 Warm Home Discount to support eligible customers with energy bills, extension to Household Support Fund and Winter Fuel Payment (for those claiming Pension Credit).

MSDC Public Realm Enhancements

On 8th October MSDC Cabinet agreed to the formation of a new REACT service to deliver non-scheduled, demand led street cleaning, grounds and environmental enforcement services outside of Stowmarket, across Mid Suffolk.

The formation of RACT in Mid Suffolk will allow a wide range of response to street cleaning issues covering litter/detritus hotspots, fly-tipping, graffiti, flyposting, access clearance and the gradual introduction of enforcement to include the use of Fixed Penalty

Notices. This will allow non-REACT operational street cleansing staff to continue with their routine duties without distraction. We intend to provide in-year funding for additional operative(s), hiring of a sweeper and scrubbing machine as well as the purchase of a street hoover.

Renewable Energy Initiatives

Along with other councillors from Mid Suffolk and Babergh I was invited by Simon Rothwell of Clearstone Energy to look at the proposed site for their battery storage planning proposal, off Bullen Lane, Bramford. If granted permission they intend to landscape the area by planting trees and building a bund which would screen the development from the remaining half of the field and from Sproughton direction. When asked about fire safety the Clearstone personnel assured us that the battery blocks would be housed in separate structures inside the external wall. We have all been given large-scale drawings of this projected development. There is a smaller area alongside the site where we were told another operator was planning a battery storage facility.

The Council's Borrowing Position & Funds

The Council's short-term borrowing costs (from other Local Authorities) have remained high with the currently high Base Rate and short-dated market rates. The average rate on Mid Suffolk's short-term loans was 5.47% which compares to 4% 12 months ago. Mid Suffolk has reduced net overall borrowing by making repayments on long-term Public Works Loan Board annuity loans. Mid Suffolk and Babergh also had £9m each of externally managed pooled equity, property and multi-assets funds which at 30 September 2024 have generated an average total income return of £3.9m for Mid Suffolk. The UBS Multi-Asset Income Fund closed on 16th September. Mid Suffolk made a loss of £498K on their initial investment. However, they received net interest of £666K.

Reducing Right to Buy discounts and enabling councils to keep all the receipts generated by sales

On 30 October the Government announced in the Autumn Budget the protection of existing social housing stock by reducing Right to Buy discounts to their pre-2012 regional levels (ranging from £16,000 to £38,000). This followed a review of Right to Buy discounts which was published alongside the budget.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-review-of-the-increased-right-to-buy-discounts-introduced-in-2012>

The secondary legislation to enact the discount reductions will come into force on 21 November this year.

This legislation will also increase protections for newly built social homes from being sold under the Right to Buy, by increasing the “cost floor” period – during which discounts can be reduced to account for money spent building or maintaining the property – from 15 years to 30 years.

The Budget also confirmed that councils will be able to keep all receipts generated by Right to Buy sales.

Social and Affordable Housing

Consultation on future social housing rent policy

On 30 October the government introduced a consultation regarding a new social housing rent policy to be introduced from 1 April 2026.

This will effect:

- Private Registered Providers (including housing associations that are Private Registered Providers)
 - Local authority Registered Providers (such as local authorities with retained housing stock)

The consultation web page can be found on:

<https://consult.communities.gov.uk/social-rents/social-housing-rents-consultation/>

Money for the Affordable Homes Programme (announced in the Budget)

This will include an immediate one-year cash injection of £500 million to top up the existing Affordable Homes Programme which will deliver up to 5,000 new social and affordable homes in England, bringing total investment in housing supply in 2025/2026 to over £5 billion. This brings total investment in housing supply to over £5 billion and supports the delivery of 33,000 new homes through £128 million for housing projects across the country.

Meanwhile, the stock of social housing will be increased through a new 5-year social housing rent settlement.

Competition & Markets Authority's Housebuilding Study

The government's response to this study includes bringing in a new consumer code for housebuilders and a New Homes Ombudsman service which will empower homeowners to challenge developers for any quality issues they face in their new home. In response to the CMA's recommendations, Housing and Planning Minister, Matthew Pennycook said the government would consider the best way to address the injustice of 'fleecehold' private housing estates to bring unfair costs to an end.

Public health update

Covid-19 Activity

COVID-19 activity remained stable or decreased slightly across most indicators and was at low levels. By week ending 27th October 43.5% of all people aged 65 years old and over who are living and resident in England had been vaccinated with an autumn 2024 booster dose. 15.9% of all people aged under 65 years old and in a clinical risk group who are living and resident in England had also been vaccinated with an autumn 2024 booster dose.

Flu Surveillance Data

On 25 October, the UK Health Security Agency published weekly flu surveillance data which shows that influenza positivity – the rate of laboratory confirmed flu cases – among school children aged 5 to 14 years is higher than any other age group, at a weekly average positivity rate of 5.7% compared with a whole population weekly average of 2.5%.

All school-aged children, up to and including year 11, are eligible for a free nasal spray flu vaccine. The vaccine usually produces a better immune response in children and evidence from last year's flu season shows strong effectiveness for children in England with a 54% reduction in hospitalisation for those between 2 and 17 years of age.

Delivery of the flu vaccine in schools started in early September and the local Immunisation Teams will move from school to school across their region throughout October and November, with school vaccination sessions completed by mid-December. Local authorities are encouraged to make parents aware and sign the consent form.

Flood and Coastal Innovation Programmes – mid-term report

The Environment Agency has today (28 October) published its mid-programme report for its £200 million Flood and Coastal Innovation Programmes. The report details what has been achieved so far and the lessons learnt including:

- 97 new natural flood management schemes delivered, using natural processes to slow the flow of floodwaters through techniques such as leaky dams, wetland ponds and enhanced marine habitats;
- Almost 600 new monitoring sensors around the country to measure river levels and provide accurate and timely warnings ahead of flooding;
- 25 PhD positions funded to train the next generation of flood experts and develop new approaches to the challenges of climate change and extreme weather.

*Adrienne Marriott
Blakenham District Councillor
04/11/2024*