

STOWLANGTOFT ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

**MONDAY 19 MAY 2025 AT 7.15 PM
ST GEORGE'S CHURCH, THE STREET**

Present: Parish Cllrs D'Lima (Chair), Bourne, Cuff, Marsh and Suggett. A Osman (clerk) was also in attendance along with County Cllr Mellen, District Cllr Richardson and 2 members of the public.

- 1 **Apologies for absence.** Parish Cllr Catchpole sent apologies.
- 2 **Minutes of the meeting held on 20 May 2024.** The meeting agreed the minutes of the 20 May 2024 meeting.
- 3 **County Councillor report.** A report from County Cllr Mellen was pre-circulated, copy attached. The Chair summarised the key points.
- 4 **District Councillor reports.** Reports from District Cllr Bradbury and Richardson were pre-circulated, copies attached. District Cllr Richardson summarised the key topics in his report
- 5 **Annual Reports from Village Groups:**
 - SpeedWatch. Parish Cllr Cuff reported that since the A1088 bridge reopened, the SpeedWatch group has noticed a reduction in speeding vehicles.
 - St Georges Church. Parish Cllr Cuff stated that a new Church Warden and Treasurer were in place. Work to provide external signage to show Church events and to provide water to the building was ongoing. A new monthly maintenance/tidy up group was working well.
 - Friends of Stowlangtoft. Parish Cllr Suggett indicated that the group was looking to hold a summer BBQ social event and the Newsletter appears to be well received in the village.
7. **Chairs Report.** Parish Cllr D'Lima, as Chair, thanked his fellow Parish Councillors and the Clerk for their continued hard work within the village over the past year.
8. **Date of next meeting:** Monday 18 May 2026 in St George's Church.

The meeting concluded at 7.35pm.

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Chair

Annual Parish Report – 2024/25

Councillor Andy Mellen

Division: Thedwastre North

Councillor Contact Details:

Mobile: 07790 992619

Email: andy.mellen@suffolk.gov.uk

Motions

My group passed three successful motions at council over the year:

1. In May 2024, we proposed that the council lobby the government for proper, long-term funding for local councils and support policies to address the long-term funding of adult social care. We tabled this motion as the Local Government Association had recently estimated that councils in England will have a funding gap totalling £4bn over the next two years. Suffolk County Council is predicting a 'budget gap' of £33.1m for 2026-27 so this is a very real concern for Suffolk and will affect Suffolk's local services.
2. In July 2024, my group tabled a motion that the council would do everything it could to avoid delays with local infrastructure funded by developer contributions. We were aware that a lot of local projects that are due to be paid for by developers are very overdue, in some cases for years – for example, new pedestrian crossings for roads where there is new housing. Sometimes these works are due to be undertaken by the developer and the delay is caused by them, but our motion acknowledged that the design and programming of works by Suffolk County Council was also often delayed.
3. In December 2024, my group successfully proposed a policy for the council of 'Roofs before Rural' regarding solar panels. The motion noted that the new Labour government was proposing to triple the amount of solar power in the UK by 2030 and set out the council's position that rooftop solar was preferable to 'solar farms' which are becoming an increasing sight across the county. The council agreed to write to the government to seek assurances Suffolk's best quality agricultural land would be protected.

My group also proposed the following motions which were voted down by the Conservative administration at council:

1. In October 2024, my group tabled a motion to revise the Highways Maintenance Operating Procedure so that repairs to footways and pavements would be prioritized in areas with heavy footfall, or where a recent fall had been reported. This motion was rejected by the Conservatives.

Devolution and Local Government Reorganization

Since the publication of the government's White Paper in December, Suffolk councils have been scrambling to develop their proposals for reorganizing local government. Under the new system, Norfolk and Suffolk will have a joint mayor (with elections held in May 2026) leading a mayoral authority, with two tier government (county councils and district/borough councils) replaced by unitary councils – single councils that undertake all local services like education, adult care, waste collection, housing and highways. Suffolk County Council's administration have been clear that they would prefer a single unitary council for Suffolk, and they ratified this decision by voting for it in the council chamber on 13 March and at Cabinet on 18 March. Opposition councillors, like my group and the Labour group, are less convinced that one massive council would bring decision-making closer to the communities, which is what devolution is supposed to enable. Councils have to submit interim plans to the government by 21 March, then detailed proposals in September, with a decision from government by the end of the year on what will happen. It is likely that councillors

for the new council/s would be elected by Suffolk residents in May 2027, a year after the mayoral elections.

Suffolk's Library Service

At Cabinet in March 2025, the council administration voted to bring Suffolk's libraries back in-house at the end of the current contract for the library on 31 May. Suffolk Libraries, who have held the contract since the service was divested in 2012, were the only bidder for the contract, but negotiations broke down and the council felt it had no alternative but to bring the libraries back under council control. The proposal to do this was passionately opposed not just by Suffolk Libraries, but also Suffolk residents and the many volunteers and Friends groups who work for and raise money for libraries in their communities.

Following the Cabinet meeting, both my group and the Labour group submitted requests that the decision be 'called in' – a process by which an issue can be tabled at a meeting of the council's Scrutiny Committee to be looked at more closely. Both the requests were rejected by the council on Wednesday 27 March after being reviewed by the council's monitoring officer.

Norwich to Tilbury Pylons

At Cabinet in May 2024, the council voted to object to the proposed Norwich to Tilbury 400kV grid reinforcement and call for a pause until alternative options had been explored. The proposals which were reviewed included 183k of pylons, with four sections of underground cabling through and near the Dedham Vale National Landscape (the new name for an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the Waveney valley. The council were keen that more underground cabling take place in the Waveney valley than proposed, and it was agreed more generally that energy projects in the county needed to be coordinated better to reduce the impact on residents and the local environment, particularly as so many of them are due to be under construction at the same time. Other councils in the area have also objected to the plans. Since then, the National Grid has confirmed it will not be proposing any further underground cabling in the plans, holding several consultations with local residents which have been largely negatively received.

State of Suffolk's Roads

In July 2024, a report was brought to Scrutiny Committee which looked into the condition of Suffolk's roads, the amount spent by the council to repair them and how repair works were prioritised. The findings were that amount of funding available for repairing highways was around £17m per year, but £50m per year would be needed for an optimal programme of resurfacing. Works are prioritised by the council's Highway Maintenance Operational Plan, which sets out the parameters for repair work and the order of priority repairs. Unsurprisingly, main roads and roads which have a lot of traffic are prioritised over quieter roads which do not. Having said this, the council is currently undertaking a scheme of resurfacing residential roads which have fallen into disrepair, having announced an additional £10m of funding for this project in May 2023.

Council Budget 2025-26

In February 2025, the council voted to adopt its proposed budget for the 2025-26 financial year. This included approving a maximum rise in council tax this year of 4.99%, including the 2% social care precept for adult care. The budget this year does not include borrowing from the council's reserves, which was a concern last year. Instead, the budget relies on delivering £28.4m of savings across many council services. Cost pressures for the council include care purchasing for adult social care, Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and placements for children in care. There is still a lot of concern about the level of debt the council is carrying from the Designated Schools Grant (DSG), a debt which is due to increase this year by £62.175m.

Councils are allowed by the government to hold this 'negative reserve' until March 2026. The government is yet to come up with a solution for this issue after that date; many councils are holding enormous levels of this debt which they would not be able to pay off if they had to. In addition, the councils have to borrow money to cover the interest on the debt which affects their finances every year: over 2025-26, the debt will cause a £6.8m cost pressure for the council. The rising DSG debt is mostly for council services for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

The council is also forecasting that in the next few years, it will have budget 'gaps' that will only grow: £33.1m for 2026-27, and £96.2m in 2028-29. The council has lobbied the government for better funding – my group proposed a successful motion on this in May 2024. The council hopes that Local Government Reorganization (see above) will make enough savings to improve the medium and long term picture for local services.

Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services

In June 2024, the council was subject to an Ofsted inspection of its social care services for children and young people, known as an ILACS inspection (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services). These inspections are undertaken approximately every three years to judge how the council are performing in their function to support children who are vulnerable and in need of protection. Previously, in 2019, the council had been rated as 'Outstanding', but in 2024 it had dropped two grades and was assessed as 'Requires Improvement'. This meant that the council had to prepare an action plan for improvement, which was submitted to Ofsted and the Department for Education. The council has recruited extra staff and has organized peer reviews with other local authority to learn how to improve practice. It has also established a new Strengthening Services for Children and Families Board chaired by the council's Chief Executive, Nicola Beach. The council particularly needs to improve services for care leavers and ensure that young people leaving care are aware of the support they can access until they turn 25.

Improving Services for Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND)

Following the poor Ofsted/CQC inspection report published in January last year, the council has been trying to improve SEND services. In May last year they produced and submitted a SEND Strategy, and in June they produced a Priority Action Plan for improvement, including extra funding of £4.4m to recruit more staff, including Educational Psychologists. In July the council approved an additional £9.1m over three years to increase capacity to clear the council's backlog of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and Annual Reviews. This was funded from council reserves.

In January 2025, the council's Public Health team presented a SEND Needs Assessment for the county at the Health and Wellbeing Board, which forecast that SEND demand in Suffolk has risen sharply in recent years and was likely to continue to rise. It also found that delays in EHCP assessment, ADHD and autism assessment and support, and access to mental health services for young people were unsatisfactory and in some cases getting worse, like speech and language therapy.

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service Inspection

In February 2025, the government published a report following its recent inspection of Suffolk's Fire and Rescue Service. Inspections for fire services are relatively new, with the first ones undertaken by the Home Office in 2018. The inspection report was not complimentary; it found that the service was good at preventing fires, protecting the public and that it met requirements for responding to major incidents, but also that it needs improvement in several areas, including improving culture and morale, and behaviour of senior leaders, who it advised should act as role

models and show they are committed to the values of the service through their behaviour, improving communication with fire service employees and making sure they felt confident about raising concerns. This report was followed shortly afterwards by allegations in the press by the Fire Brigades Union that Suffolk County Council had made mistakes processing firefighter pay and pensions for years and has not addressed them properly or listened to employee concerns about the errors. The council subsequently announced additional investment of an extra £1.6 million over two years to improve the service.

Warm Homes in Suffolk

This year saw the end of the Warm Homes Grant fund, in which £5m of government money intended to improve insulation and make houses more energy-efficient was returned to the government unspent by the council. The reason given for this was that the criteria for the scheme, which was set by the government, was too stringent and meant that many Suffolk families who needed help were unable to access the funding. There are still schemes available to help with making homes more energy-efficient though – The Suffolk Loft Insulation Offer is funded by the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Group (which includes Suffolk County Council) and this scheme will only close once the allocated funding has all been spent. Suffolk County Council is also running a new scheme to offer residents interest-free loans to upgrade the energy efficiency of their homes, that includes insulation but also solar panels, glazing and heat pumps. Loans are from £2k to £15K to be repaid over a maximum of seven years at 0% interest, but in order to be eligible, properties must have an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) band below C. Increasing insulation and making homes more energy-efficient will not only save people money on their heating bills, it is also helping the environment as less fuel will be consumed to keep homes warm. Please signpost people to these schemes using the links below:

- For the Suffolk Loft Insulation Offers, residents should visit <https://highloft.co.uk/pages/suffolk-council-200-loft-insulation-contribution> and fill in the form to receive a discount code
- For the interest free loan scheme, homeowners can check to see if their property has an existing Energy Certificate with an EPC band and record of their property size at gov.uk/find-energy-certificate. They can apply for the vouchers by visiting suffolkenergyassessment.co.uk. This scheme started in November and vouchers are being distributed on a first-come, first-served basis.

Update on Flooding

Following the Storm Babet flooding in October 2023, the council announced it was investing an extra £1m in investigating the causes of flooding and taking action to prevent further floods. As the lead local flood authority, the council undertakes investigations into flooding in the county regularly, but the level of flooding in autumn 2023 meant that far more investigations would need to be made than in other years. A year later, in November 2024, the council announced it would be allocating a further £1.5m from its reserves to deal with recommendations made in the 10 investigation reports published so far. A further 38 investigation reports have been commissioned by the council relating to Storm Babet flooding. The council also announced it would be writing to the government to request £20m to protect Suffolk from flooding, given that extreme weather will become more likely due to the effects of climate change.

In October 2024, Cabinet agreed a £2m contribution from the council towards protecting the A12 from flooding at Benacre, south of Lowestoft. Erosion of the coast meant that road would likely be flooded at that location at nearly every high tide within a couple of years. The total cost of the works, which includes two new pumping stations, clay embankments and a new saltmarsh, will be many millions, with the Environment Agency committing over £30m and Sizewell C agreeing to fund the rest. Since then, it has been revealed that the cost may be higher than expected, and the

council has agreed to allocate and put aside an additional £2.7m contribution in case it is needed later in the construction period.

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New devolution and local government reform affecting Mid Suffolk

Following on from the election of the new Labour government in July 2024, the new government has proposed widescale changes across the UK regarding devolution and council re-organisation. This includes two proposals affecting Suffolk as a whole, including Mid Suffolk District Council, which may lead to its eventual abolition.

The first proposal is a strategic authority covering both Norfolk and Suffolk, which is likely to have a directly elected Mayor for both counties, and an increase in local powers for Suffolk. The election for this Mayor is currently scheduled to take place in May 2026.

The second is the re-organisation of the current two-tier system within Suffolk into either a single or multiple Unitary Authorities, where all of the council's general services are ran by one coherent entity. Should this proposal go ahead, it will likely result in the abolition of MSDC in the late 2020s. Suffolk has applied to be on the fast-track for this scheme, which has resulted in the postponement of the Suffolk CC elections that were due to take place in May 2025. The election for any new authorities is currently unclear, but is likely to be held after the Mayor election, in May 2027.

Talks for both are currently an ongoing matter, although new information will likely be updated frequently throughout the year.

Budget

For 2024/25, net expenditure on services is 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 has been done to ensure the Council can afford the repairs and maintenance that are needed. All these increases are due to inflation, costs of energy and other cost increases.

The Council has reserves of over £28 million as at the end of the financial year plus an expected dividend from the Gateway 14 business park. Plans for this are on a variety of work including new foot/cycle paths, land for biodiversity and green spaces, regeneration of Stowmarket town centre, improved sports provision in the district and enabling community-led housing.

Approval was also given to increasing council tax on empty homes in 2024/25 and implementing increased council tax on second homes in 2025/26.

For the 2025/26 budget, recently agreed in the February council meeting, the administration committed to a capital programme of £36m for the district, which is partially funded by the council's reserves. This includes investment in health facilities, primarily including the ongoing SHELF project, investment into new skills and innovation within the district, and an increase in funding for the communities across Mid Suffolk's smaller towns and villages. In addition to these spending plans, there was also no planned increase in council tax, which was frozen at its current rate of £175.03 for a Band D property. Finally, the council is additionally estimated to have a surplus of £2.4m at the end of the financial year.

Thriving towns and villages

As part of Mid Suffolk's Rural Transport Grant Scheme, two new community transport routes were launched, utilising the council's new Taxi Bus scheme, connecting Stowmarket with the surrounding villages and communities across Mid Suffolk. Initially, there were the two routes looping around villages of Mid Suffolk, beginning in Stowmarket, the first of these goes via Thurston, the second via Bacton, with further communities eventually being added, including Eye and Debenham. These have allowed for further connectivity between the villages across Mid Suffolk and Stowmarket in the heart of the District.

Environmental sustainability

Mid Suffolk District Council previously launched their Cosy Homes scheme for Winter 2024, which included plans to improve insulation and energy efficiency within private homes across Mid Suffolk. This is a readily available scheme for residents, and has made great progress in improving energy efficiency and sustainability across homes.

Planning and Housing

Over the last year, Part 1 of Mid Suffolk and Babergh's Joint Local Plan (JLP), which was first created back in November 2023, 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, and assisted in allowing for a structured response to housing and planning targets, of which Mid Suffolk had always excelled at, and delivered Mid Suffolk's aim of 535 new houses annually. In January 2025, the plan has since come under review, as a result of new housing targets set out by national government. Whilst MSDC have previously exceeded with housebuilding targets, there is a possibility that the new national housebuilding guidelines take priority over the JLP if the council cannot prove there is a 5-year land supply for housing.

Supporting the community

We support local events and community groups where we can and particularly link local groups with external fundraising via the Mid Suffolk community team. Almost £550,000 was allocated by Mid Suffolk District Council Direct to communities across the district from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Both ward councillors (Harry & David) had a budget of £7350 for local projects which has been awarded to groups such as a baby & toddler group, Stowlangtoft parish council (quiet lanes project) and a village hall refurbishment.

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

District Councillors' Annual Report 2024 / 25

- **Devolution and Local Government Reform**

In February 2025, Suffolk was confirmed as one of the areas selected for the government's Devolution Priority Programme. As a result, the 2025 County Council elections have been postponed until May 2026, aligning with the election for a new 'Mayor of Norfolk and Suffolk.'

According to the government's proposed timeline, the District and Borough Council elections planned for May 2027 will be replaced by elections for a 'shadow unitary authority.' The County Council and District/Borough Councils are set to be dissolved in April 2028, replaced by the new Unitary Authority. The shadow unitary councillors elected in May 2027 will then transition to full Unitary Councillors.

The County Council has expressed its support for a single, Suffolk-wide authority. Meanwhile, the District and Borough Councils have suggested alternative models: one with two authorities (East and West), or one with three authorities (East, West, and 'Greater Ipswich'). Under the two-authority model, West Suffolk, Mid Suffolk, and Babergh would form 'West Suffolk,' while East Suffolk and Ipswich would form 'East Suffolk.'

In the three-authority model, 'Greater Ipswich' would encompass the areas surrounding Ipswich, including parts of Babergh (e.g., Sproughton and Pinewood), Mid Suffolk (Claydon, Barham, etc.), and East Suffolk (Rushmere, Kesgrave, and Felixstowe). The fate of the remaining areas is still under discussion, but combining West Suffolk and Babergh, as well as Mid Suffolk and East Suffolk, into the two remaining authorities is actively being considered.

The initial plans were submitted on 21st March 2025, and the government will provide feedback (though the format of this feedback is unclear) before final plans are due by 26th September 2025. The government will then make its final decision. The government has indicated that new unitary authorities should have a population between 500,000 and one million.

With a population of around 760,000, a single, Suffolk-wide authority would be the only option to fulfil the government's criteria, although they have said that exceptions may be made in special cases. Furthermore, the government expects the existing Districts and Boroughs to serve as the foundational units for any new authority, which could undermine the feasibility of a three-authority model that would require significant division of existing Districts.

- **Budget 2025/26**

On 27th February 2025, Mid Suffolk District Council approved its budget for the 2025/26 fiscal year. This budget freezes Council Tax and all current fees and charges for the year, while continuing a significant capital investment programme aimed at Stowmarket. This includes the development of a new health, education, and leisure facility, as well as a new Skills & Innovation Centre at Gateway 14.

The Administration rejected an Opposition amendment to the budget that would have allocated £1.5 million to a fund for villages and rural communities. However, they did agree to repurpose an existing fund ('regeneration in towns outside of Stowmarket') into a broader 'Rural Support Fund,' which will total £2.1 million over five years (2025/26 to 2029/30)—with £300k allocated for the first two years and £500k for the remaining three.

- **Local Plan Update**

During the Full Council meeting on 27th February 2025, it was announced that Part 2 of Mid Suffolk's Local Plan (which contained site allocations) would be scrapped and replaced with a 'Local Plan Review.' This change comes in response to the government's decision to revise the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and increase housing targets for local authorities.

The new Local Plan Review will expand upon the existing Part 1 (which outlines planning policies), incorporating new site allocations based on the updated housing targets. The plan will cover a 20-year period from 2024 to 2044, with evidence gathered for Part 2, including site submissions, being incorporated into the review.

The development of the new plan will follow this timeline:

- Scoping and participation stage (minimum four months) – March 2026 to July 2026
- Plan visioning, strategy development, and first public consultation – August 2026 to March 2027
- Evidence gathering and draft plan – April 2027 to December 2027
- Second public consultation and submission – January 2028 to June 2028
- Examination and modifications – July 2028 to March 2029
- Adoption – April 2029

This process brings significant uncertainty, especially since the adoption of the plan will occur after Mid Suffolk District Council is slated for dissolution.

- **Changes to Refuse Collection**

On 26th September 2024, Mid Suffolk District Council approved changes to waste collection, set to begin on 31st March 2026. These changes include:

- A shift to three-weekly refuse collections instead of the current fortnightly schedule.
- A weekly food waste collection.
- Separate recycling for glass, cartons, and plastic films, as mandated by the Environment Act 2021.

Though the Act was intended to prevent local authorities from reducing refuse collections to three weeks or longer, Mid Suffolk District Council has opted to implement this change. The new waste collection pattern is outlined in the graphic in the appendix.

- **Community Rail Partnership**

Mid Suffolk District Council has supported the creation of Greater Anglia's new Community Rail Partnership for the Ipswich to Cambridge line. The partnership aims to improve and promote rail services along this vital regional corridor, aligning the development of services with local needs.

The partnership will focus on communities served by the line, including Ipswich, Needham Market, Stowmarket, Elmswell, Thurston, Bury St Edmunds, Kennett, Newmarket, Dullingham, and Cambridge. Funding will come from Greater Anglia, Suffolk County Council, the Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority, West Suffolk Council, Cambridgeshire County Council, Ipswich Borough Council, and Cambridge City Council.

- **Investment in Stowmarket Town Centre**

Mid Suffolk has committed £1.5 million from the Gateway 14 development to regenerate Stowmarket town centre, focusing on bringing empty units back into use. The Stowmarket Town

Centre Gateway Fund is now open for applications from property agents, landlords of vacant units, and potential tenants, to identify the best uses for the funding in fostering new businesses and community ventures.

Additional proposals include:

- A £400,000 grant scheme for existing retailers to enhance their shopfronts, focusing on small and medium-sized businesses (national chains are excluded).
- A £225,000 investment in enhanced street cleansing and public realm services.
- Feasibility work to assess demand for hotel accommodation.

The shopfront improvements could include new signage, canopies, lighting, or the restoration of traditional or historic features that have been lost over time.

I hope that this report has been helpful but if you have any further queries then please do not hesitate to contact me via the details below.

With best wishes,



- **Cllr Harry Richardson**
Leader of the Mid Suffolk Conservative Group
Conservative Councillor for Thurston ward*
Mid Suffolk District Council
E: harry.richardson@midsuffolk.gov.uk
T: 07842 322913