

ANNUAL REPORT MAY 24 TO APRIL 25 – Highlights from District Councillor Reports

Simpler recycling reforms

On 9th May, the government announced the next steps of the Simpler Recycling reforms, saying that reforms to business bin collections and a crackdown on unscrupulous waste carriers will boost recycling rates and protect the environment.

A simpler common-sense approach to recycling means people across England will be able to recycle the same materials, whether at home, work or school, putting an end to confusion over what can and can't be recycled in different parts of the country.

The government proposed new exemptions to make sure that waste collectors will be able to collect dry recyclables together, in the same bin or bag, and collect organic waste together, to reduce the number of bins required.

The new plans for simpler recycling were to make sure that households would not need an excessive number of bins. The reforms would bring in a more convenient and practical system while making sure all local authorities collect the required recyclable waste streams: glass; metal; plastic; paper and card; food waste; and garden waste.

This meant manufacturers could design packaging and know it could be recycled across the nation, ensuring there was more recycled material in the products we buy and allowing the UK recycling industry to grow.

Further details of Simpler Recycling were given in my October 24 report. MSDC would need to ensure that from that date collections were made for glass, cartons, glass and food. From 2027 a further collection for plastic film would take place. Suffolk Authorities had already approved the introduction of weekly food collections by end March 26.

The Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) which processes Suffolk's recyclables would need to be retooled to cope with the new mix of hard materials, including glass. This means that significant changes will need to be made to the plant through the contract with Biffa which is managed by SCC for all the district and borough councils in Suffolk. Such changes and their implications are currently being discussed at the council.

Options were to continue collecting all materials in one bin (co-mingling) or to provide an extra wheelie bin, box or re-usable bag (twin-streaming). The recycling would then be separated out by the households into one container for plastics, metal, cartons (including Tetra-Pak) and glass bottles and jars - let's call this Recycling A, and another container for paper and card – let's call this Recycling B.

Cabinet and the Full Council approved recommendations for twin-stream recycling to include three weekly collections for refuse, one-weekly collections for food waste and two-weekly collections for garden waste. In every three weeks there would also be one collection for Recycling A and another for Recycling B.

Special arrangements could be put in place for large families and families producing greater residual waste. Thought would need to be given to the disposal of nappies. Alternative and more easily manoevrable receptacles, e.g. a box or a bag could be provided for elderly/disabled residents. There would be an overall need to communicate the new strategy effectively with further implications for people for whom English is not a first language, e.g. using visual materials.

CIFCO and other Council investments

CIFCO, as the councils' commercial property arm, is set up specifically to generate revenue for the councils. CIFCO Capital Ltd has now generated a net income of more than £12m for Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, since being established jointly by councils in 2017.

During previous administrations, the councils borrowed a total of £99.2m to invest in its commercial property portfolio. This now comprises of 22 properties with 83 tenants, based mainly in the eastern region, strategically split across industrial, retail and office sectors in order to

balance risk.

The cost of the loan repayments to the councils is then covered by income received from CIFCO, with further net income on top making a regular and significant contribution to the councils' finances.

A report that went before the councils' joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee in May, showed how high inflation and interest rate rises have hit commercial property values nationwide. As a result, the value of the CIFCO portfolio decreased 2.58% since March 2023. However, the report also detailed how CIFCO was outperforming the rest of the market – with rental arrears consistently below 5% and empty properties representing just 3.4% of the portfolio compared to a market benchmark of 8.3%.

CIFCO was also investing in the reducing the environmental impact of its portfolio, with 50% of its properties holding an EPC rating of C or above – and it was on track to meet its target of ensuring all properties have a C rating or above by 2027.

Both Babergh and Mid Suffolk also invest directly in property within the districts, to help regenerate towns and communities and to provide social housing.

Previous acquisitions in Mid Suffolk have included vacant units in Stowmarket town centre, including the former Aldi unit, which is now PureGym, and the former NatWest, now leased to the John Peel Centre. It has also invested in Gateway 14 in Stowmarket and the redevelopment of its former council offices in Needham Market delivering affordable and market homes.

The councils have also built or acquired 624 new council houses in the districts over the last eight years.

Rapid Flood Guidance trial for England and Wales

I reported on this in May. On 14 May, the gov.uk Flood Forecasting Centre launched a trial of the Rapid Flood Guidance (RFG) service to run until 30 September. The RFG service gives short notice updates for England and Wales to supplement the flood guidance statement. It aims to support the responder community to be better prepared to mitigate the impacts from rapid flooding. Following a [successful trial in 2024](#), the RFG service will return for summer 2025.

The 2025 service will run between 2 June and 17 October 2025.

Improvements for the 2025 service

The 2025 service will include improvements based on user feedback from the trial. These include:

- the ability to sign up to receive the RFG for local authority areas (rather than regions) – providing a more tailored service
- clearer mapping – so that the location of the risk area can be more easily identified
- more consistent written content – improving clarity
- amendments to the threshold for RFG issue – meaning that there will be fewer RFGs when there are no or minor impacts
- faster production – so that there is more time to respond

The service aims to support the responder community to be better prepared to mitigate the impacts from rapid flooding. The service provides a new:

- advisory badge on the front page for days when there is a heightened risk of rapid flooding
- RFG product that will be issued on heightened risk days

Signing up will also mean that you will receive RFG tests in the run up to the launch and invitations to RFG webinars.

River Gipping Trust

I attended the Trust's annual meeting at Needham Market Community Centre on 14th June 2024 having been invited to join them.

The first (guest) presentation was a brief history of the River Stour Trust, showing what can be done to encourage engagement by the public, such as trip boats, clean water areas for swimmers, canoeists, anglers, all of which is relevant to the Gipping.

The River Gipping Trust Restoration Manager then presented an overview of the restoration work along the River Gipping carried out by the Trust's volunteers during the year. They have been clearing riverside paths of vegetation to allow better access. They are gradually working towards clearing the vegetation immediately adjacent to the river to give better river views and wider paths. Himalayan Balsam is a major problem and they want to cut as much down as possible before the seedpods burst and allow more plants to establish.

They described the use of "stop planks" to provide a method of temporarily damming the canal off either to drain a limited section of canal for scheduled engineering work, or in an emergency (such as a breach or structure failure) to limit the loss of water. Apparently the canal at Great Blakenham is leaking and the Trust will need to stop the water flow in order to investigate but the repairs may take some time. I shall get in touch with the Trust again shortly to check on progress.

£1.5 Million Fund to Enhance Stowmarket Town Centre

I wrote about this fund in my July 2024 report. The Stowmarket Town Centre Gateway Fund was made possible thanks to the council's income from its investment in the Gateway 14 Business Park. It would be working with landlords to bring under-utilised properties, including empty shops back into use – buying, renting or refurbishing them. The aim is to increase arts and cultural experiences, tourism

and community activities in the town, encouraging retail opportunities, small businesses and leisure and food and drink activities. Round 1 of the fund closed on 15 November 2024 and a second round was to be launched in spring 2025. An external stakeholder panel of town representatives would be reviewing proposals.

Additional funding approved to allow vulnerable residents to stay in their own homes

I reported in September 2024 that Babergh and Mid Suffolk cabinets had agreed to increase funding to support more households to carry out home adaptations for family members with a disability, long term illness or change in health. The enhanced grants included doubling minor adaptation grant limits and introducing offers of a 'top up' of up to £20,000 above to the national disabled facilities grant limit.

Independent Living Service grants available were:

- repairs adaptations grant up to £10,000
- minor adaptations grant - for residents living with dementia, to help cope with the challenges of living at home for those facing terminal illness or end of life care increased from £7500 to up to £15,000
- discretionary relocation grant up to £7,500
- discretionary disabled facilities grant (top up grant) of £20,000

Also in September I wrote about Suffolk Recycles Campaign from the Public Realm Team:

MSDC Suffolk Recycles campaign

Use Your Loaf

<https://www.foodsavvy.org.uk/use-your-loaf>

MSDC's latest Food Savvy campaign is focusing on reducing wasted bread. National research shows that a whopping 25 million slices of bread are wasted in the UK every day. That's a lot of bread!

The Use Your Loaf campaign aims to highlight this serious problem and find solutions. It is packed with tips and advice on how to use up stale bread, store bread correctly and freeze it for later use. With lots of fun recipe ideas including stale bread pasta from local chef Rowen Halstead.

Batteries and electrical fires

Every year, hundreds of fires occur across the waste and recycling sector in the UK. This can cause damage to services and equipment and most importantly can put people in danger.

The majority of fires are caused by batteries which have been wrongly placed in rubbish or recycling bins. Batteries can be damaged during the collection and treatment process and this can cause some batteries, particularly lithium-based, to explode or ignite.

Many products, including vapes, contain hidden batteries that cannot be easily removed, so people can easily discard them without realising the possible consequences. Monitoring shows that thousands of vapes are placed in Suffolk's recycling bins every week. Some small fires, which fortunately were contained and rapidly dealt with, have already occurred.

Mid Suffolk Growth Ltd. and Babergh Growth Ltd.

At the Joint Audit and Standards Group meeting on 23rd September there was considerable discussion among members regarding the financial outcomes of these ventures.

Both councils owned 50% of the respective companies, Babergh Growth and Mid Suffolk Growth whilst the other 50% was in each case owned by Norse Group Holdings Ltd., a property management company based in Norwich. At Needham Market the development of the old Mid Suffolk Council offices was to be in two phases. Phase 1 has now been

completed but Mid Suffolk have now pulled out from the second phase, aiming to sell the remaining development land to generate a capital receipt for the council. They aim to repay the remaining loan by November 2024.

The decision not to proceed may have been affected by the loss undertaken by Babergh District Council on the development of their former council offices in Hadleigh. It was anticipated that Babergh will make a loss of around £3m.

MSDC Public Realm Enhancements

In my November 24 report I wrote that 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 REACT 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.

Treating tenants with respect and combatting social housing stigma

My December 24 report noted that Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils were among the first in the country to sign up to a new campaign to stop social housing stigma. An introductory workshop saw tenants, councillors and council officers come together to explore how to tackle the unfair stereotyping of council tenants.

A 'tackling stigma journey planner' was drawn up by the campaign together with the University of Durham, Sheffield Hallam University,

the Chartered Institute of Housing, TPAS and YD Consultants. The councils will now work to develop commitments in line with this planner.

The Wilder Communities Partnership

Last December I noted that Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have joined forces with Suffolk Wildlife Trust alongside neighbouring councils to help local communities to protect and restore nature as part of a new partnership initiative. The Wilder Communities Partnership has received funding of £373,356 from the Suffolk Public Leaders Group (of which the councils are members) – to be distributed over the next three years for projects such as supporting local groups to create habitats for diverse species, providing guidance on habitat management, giving training sessions on species conservation.

Existing initiatives have created valuable habitats for swifts, water voles, hedgehogs and stag beetles and have helped to preserve Suffolk's species-rich ancient grasslands.

New government housing targets

What has changed?

In January 25 I wrote that In December 24, the Government had announced new housing requirements for every District and Borough Council in the country. These increased the housing requirement in Mid Suffolk up to 734 (up 37%). To ensure the housing requirement can be met, councils must demonstrate there is a 'housing land supply' for the next five years. This is assessed every year, and the figures are published alongside the Annual Monitoring Report. Whilst the current housing land supply is determined against the adopted Joint Local Plan requirement of 535 homes for Mid Suffolk, the Council wants to ensure that we give our communities confidence by maintaining a plan-led approach to decision making whilst acting promptly to respond to the Government's new policy and deliver what is expected of us.

What does this mean for Mid Suffolk's Joint Local Plan?

There was to be a formal review of the Joint Local Plan, building on the work that had already taken place. This work would be considered during the review, but it is unavoidable that the council would have to gather further evidence and carry out additional engagement ahead of the formal review process. If the Council couldn't demonstrate a five-year land supply there was a risk that national planning policies would start to take priority over the Joint Local Plan. To guard against this scenario a revised timetable, our Local Development Scheme, was published in March 25.

Council agrees to full support for farmers

In February 25 I reported that at its full council meeting on 23rd January, Mid Suffolk District Council agreed unanimously to consider all "reasonable and practical measures" to support local farming communities. This comes in the wake of Suffolk farmers protesting against the changes to inheritance tax rules which some have said will threaten the future of the family farm. Andy Mellen, Green Leader of the Council spoke of his farming heritage, the difficult financial challenges being faces by farmers and the problems they faced from climate change.

Recommendations from MSDC Council Meeting 27/2/25

In March 25 I reported on these recommendations where the General Fund Budget and Medium-Term Financial Position were discussed and it was agreed that

- there would be no increase in 2025/26 for the Band D Council Tax of £175.03 due to the healthy position of the Council's General Fund.
- The Director of Finance and Procurement would explore increasing locality grant funding to a minimum of £10,000 p.a.

Following a consultation with residents last autumn the council are working on introducing new community transport services, retrofitting their council housing stock (starting with the poorest performing properties with a rating of E and below) and delivering new local cycling and walking infrastructure.

After discussing the housing plan revenue account 2025/26 budget and 30 year business plan it was agreed to implement

- a CPI +1% increase for social rents equivalent to an average rent of £2.78 for social rent and affordable rent of £4.05
- a 0.29% increase in garage rates
- a charge of £6.41 per week per tenancy in a block in respect of General Needs
- a rent tolerance of 5% on Social Rent properties.

Sheltered housing service charges and utility charges would be capped at 10% overall.

Local Government Reorganisation

I wrote in my March report that Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils held workshops on the 3rd to consider both reorganisation and devolution. We were told that Suffolk County Council is in favour of one unitary authority for the whole of Suffolk; however, other options are for two or three unitary authorities for Suffolk. If Ipswich were to combine with East Suffolk for one authority and Mid Suffolk, Babergh and West Suffolk formed another authority there would be roughly equal populations in each of these two areas. Another option which would give three unitary authorities might consist e.g. of a Greater Ipswich Authority taking in parts of Mid Suffolk and Babergh with other areas of Mid Suffolk combining with East Suffolk and finally a West Suffolk Authority.

Boost for community projects thanks to developer funding

In my April report I wrote that in the latest round of CIL funding £181,861 has been allocated to five projects in Mid Suffolk. £75,000 is to be awarded for a rebuild of Little Blakenham Village Hall. Other grants will be made to upgrade the Gipping Valley River Path, for additional solar PV and onsite battery storage at Blackbourne Community Centre, Elmswell, for a community courtyard and social space at Badwell Village Hall and for the installation of a new sewage system at Battisford and District Cricket Club.

2.9m boost to make council homes warmer and lower bills

In April I wrote that Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils have provisionally been awarded 2.9m by the Warm Homes Social Housing Fund which will be added to the £8 million already committed by the Councils to install energy-saving measures in social housing. Work has begun on upgrading 100 council properties with the lowest EPC ratings with improvements such as cavity and loft insulation, new windows, PV Panels and air source heat pumps. Another 150 homes are to be added to the list as a further step towards achieving a good standard of energy efficiency by 2027.

Expansion of Port One Logistics Park

Port One's plan to expand into the abandoned SnOasis site in Great Blakenham was reported in Bury Free Press on 31st March. It was reported very favourably in terms of the creation of thousands of jobs. Curzon de Vere Ltd. And Valley Ridge Holdings Ltd. had previously submitted a scoping report to Mid Suffolk District Council. The new site would comprise another 304 acres and would house a vertical farm, a technology hub, a farm shop and café plus a permanent market. A concrete production facility would be built at Port One created from the recycled by-products of the waste-to-energy plant opposite.

Also included in the proposal is a reworking of Junction 52 of the A14 to include a new lorry lane. Formal plans for the expansion should be lodged in October this year.

Further reforms to overhaul the planning system

I wrote about these reforms in my April 25 report. I find that “narrowing” down of the number of statutory consultees worrying but this appears to be in line with the government’s rush to build.

On 10th March the government set out further reforms to the planning system which they say will help deliver 1.5 million new homes.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bureaucratic-burden-lifted-to-speed-up-building-in-growth-agenda>

Under the new plans, organisations such as Sport England, Theatres Trust and The Gardens Trust will no longer be required to input on planning decisions. The scope of other ‘statutory consultees’ will be narrowed to focus on heritage, safety and environmental protection making much better use of standing guidance in place of case-by-case responses. Councils should now only consult statutory consultees where necessary and decisions should not be delayed beyond the 21-day statutory deadline unless a decision cannot otherwise be reached.

*Adrienne Marriott
Blakenham District Councillor
06/05/25*

