

Somersham

Finance

General Fund Outturn 2021/22

Mid -Suffolk has again underspent its budget, this time by around £1 million. This is clearly much better than finishing up with an overspend and in financial difficulty as is the case with many councils. However, it does show a failure to deliver to the maximum of our financial capability and encourages the Government to believe that we have more than enough funding and don't need other grants. We do of course have a range of plans to deliver relatively minor projects but spending to our full capability would help both reduce poverty and boost the economy.

Housing Revenue Account Draft Outturn 2021/22

Housing has suffered from the delayed effects of Covid and a need to use agency staff to catch up on delayed repairs. The overspend has been covered by housing reserves but this budget is always tight as all expenditure, (management, responsive repairs, refurbishments on tenant change (voids) and periodic replacements for instance of kitchens and bathrooms, debt interest and repayment of capital borrowed) must be covered from rental income.

Housing Revenue Account Business Plan

A new business case has been approved which covers projected management and maintenance costs over the next 30 years. It includes acquisition of some 60 new properties per year for five years to more than compensate for right-to-buy sales. It also covers work necessary to improve house environmental performance up to EPC-C level. A range of options were explored including expansion of the numbers of new-build to 500 and level and the costs and feasibility of improvement of environmental performance up to a carbon zero level.

The funding constraints are considerable despite the freedom to borrow for housing purposes as interest and repayments must still be covered from income. This put paid to most of the options including one to freeze rent increases for one year in the current financial conditions which are challenging for our residents. In response to my question on the impact of a CPI plus 1% rent increase next year, perhaps 11% in total, it was implied that the Government may be looking at just that.

However available Government funding is being explored so we may see numbers improve. The plan will not be frozen but will develop: a welcome change, which may lead to more ambitious targets. It is accompanied by a design guide and technical specification for new housing.

Q4 PERFORMANCE

The Q4 performance report is available online but at 30 pages is difficult to summarise here. There are bad points like call handling that at 3 min & 55 sec average wait time has increased from 2 mins 22 in Q3 due to Council tax billing and storm Eunice call increase. This sounds disastrous and goes with a call abandon rate of 22% but is much better than the 40 min delays that people recount from banks for instance. However much of the data is reassuring. You might want to take a look!

Stowmarket Health, Education Leisure Facilities

An extensive remodelling of sports facilities in Stowmarket adjacent to the leisure centre, "a Masterplan", has been proposed and will go to full council for funding. It includes:

- 4g football pitch
- A 2g pitch (a range of sports and activities can be played on the pitch)
- A mini track athletics facility
- A new Sport pavilion to replace existing

- A multi-agency wellbeing hub for use by a range of partners
- A Multi Use Games area
- 4 new indoor sport courts
- Additional parking at the Wellbeing hub and pavilion
- Reshaping of the current car parking on the Chilton Fields site
- New cricket square and new nets
- Multi surface perimeter track to encourage information walking and cycling

This looks exciting but will need careful examination of the proposed funding before we give approval.

Planning

Plans and Processes

The Local Plan working party has agreed the modifications to the part 1 plan for re-submission to the inspectors. Just how quickly they will respond is not clear. The planning peer review working party is progressing, but the issues are not easy to resolve. The review of Planning Enforcement has also made progress. I can't pretend that our requests for much shorter, clearer, and more consistent officer reports to planning committees and for more rapid and effective enforcement, don't raise objections but we are making headway.

Port One

Today the Planning Committee approved the "reserved matters" for another phase of the Port One development at Great Blakenham. I supported the decision as the site has good access to the A14 and I find the rapid progress excellent. The developer appears to be willing to go further than required on issues such as EV charging for staff cars, roof mounted solar panels, and battery powered shuttle buses to collect staff. This is a pleasant change from the uphill struggle it is to persuade housebuilders to take a long-term view of the actions we need to take to limit climate change. They will also be planting some 1,300 tree whips on a bund between the site and the Blakenham estate and 1628 whips plus 38 trees in the perimeter landscaping.

This latest set of sheds will provide some 260 new jobs, not the high-tech well-paid jobs we would like but sound employment that will enhance the local economy.

Energy infrastructure in the east

Babergh and Mid-Suffolk District Councils are calling for an urgent Government review of the number and scale of 'potentially devastating' energy infrastructure projects in local communities. This covers the various wind farms, solar farms grid scale battery storage and other power assets. All Suffolk councils, and the local MP's are advocating an under North Sea "ring main" as the best solution to the need to collect power and transport it to the users in London and the south.

Gateway 14

Gateway 14 Ltd, wholly owned by Mid Suffolk District Council, has exchanged conditional contracts to develop a distribution unit with home, garden, and leisure products retailer The Range. This will be a multi-million £ development which will provide some 1600 jobs in The Range's third and final distribution depot in England.

If you have queries, please phone me on 07756292320 or email me at: john.field@mid.suffolk.gov.uk