

Somersham

Service Charges

Mid Suffolk Council has reviewed the charges it makes for services it has no duty to provide, but that residents need. Recycling bin collection and dog waste bin emptying are examples. Here the administration wants to recover its costs. The total of these fees and charges for 2023/24 will be £5.407m, an increase of £256k on last year. The proposed increases range up to 73.8% but the overall average is 5%. Bulky Items collection up 10% to £49.50 and new Garden Waste collection up by 15.9% to £69, (renewals increase by 8.3% to £59) will perhaps affect us most. It is concerning that these increases will impact on people struggling to make ends meet and give an additional twist to inflation.

Tenancy

Some years ago the Council was persuaded to introduce "flexible" fixed term tenancies. It has never actually used these, and they are largely ineffective in reducing housing waiting lists. Managing and administering these tenancies has proven to be costly and time consuming for landlords, and unsettling for tenants, particularly vulnerable tenants, and those suffering with mental illness.

Mid Suffolk and Babergh have produced a new tenancy policy and consulted tenants on its features. It provides information on how their occupation of council homes will be managed. It is consistent with the current political agenda for social housing and prioritises long-term security. "This will allow tenants and their families to create a home in council properties and build thriving and diverse communities in our housing estates."

The councils will create a new, separate policy encouraging tenants to downsize. It may include financial incentives, advice, and practical support to assist and encourage tenants to free-up larger homes for families.

photo ID to vote in May

From May 2023, voters have to show photo ID at polling stations before they are given a ballot paper. Valid photographic IDs include:

- passports issued by the UK, the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man, a British Overseas Territory, a European Economic Area (EEA) state or a Commonwealth country.
- photographic driver's licences (including provisional) issued by the UK or an EEA state.
- EEA photo ID cards, biometric residence permits or identity cards that bear the hologram
- Blue Badges and a concessionary travel pass for instance an older person's bus pass or a disabled person's bus pass.

Only original documents will be accepted, however expired documents are accepted if the photo is still a current likeness.

Council tax freeze for Mid Suffolk

Budget proposals for Mid Suffolk District Council are now available for cabinet approval and are heading for the next full council meeting on February 23. They show the net cost of delivering services increasing by 41% from £8.77m in 2022/23 to £12.41m in 2023/34, the major driver being salary increments and a review which is underway to address our current difficulty retaining staff.

The current view is that the total for the pay award, increments and pay review will be £2.45m, and the increased cost of short-term borrowing, higher interest rates on £50m @ 3.5% will be £1.75m.

This year's and next year's expected surpluses will be reduced, with just over £3m for 2022/3 and £3.045m for 2023/4 now expected to go into earmarked reserves. That is still a substantial amount for a small district council and should be judged against a failure to spend the £5m assigned to six strategic priorities last year. If we have surpluses from investment, retained new homes bonus, and renewable energy business rates, we should deploy them to the advantage of Mid Suffolk residents not just keep it in the bank.

Council Housing

There is a similar picture with the council's Housing Revenue Account, with a 40% increase to cost of services. The administration was proposing a CPI +1% increase in rents for council housing but the Government has reduced the limit to 7%. Cabinet intends to use this figure to keep pace with price rises and to ensure the necessary investment in repairs, maintenance, and refurbishment.

This means a social rent increase of £6.16 a week to £94.15 and an affordable housing, weekly rent increase of £9.03 to £137.99. My view is that this year when we are keeping the MSDC council tax rise, but not the Police or County components, to zero it would be best to limit the rise. However, to fund major improvements to environmental performance, the deferred rise would need to be recovered in later years, something the Government makes difficult,

For sheltered housing an increase of 7% in service charges, or £10.83 a month, and an increase in utility charges of £27.93 a month, 30% for heating and 62% for water is proposed. That's a £38.76 month increase for people often between 80 and 95 years old who are on a basic state pension. Obviously "sheltered" does not extend to financial issues!

Urgent Housing Issues

As I reported in December, Babergh and Mid Suffolk must take urgent action to improve their Building Services and resolve a number of issues. Work to improve the service began last summer, and in-depth assessments arising from that work identified health and safety compliance issues.

Of 6,788 homes, 344 do not currently have up-to-date electrical safety reports. Gas inspections are overdue on 92 properties, and asbestos reinspection surveys are not up to date on 33 homes. In Mid Suffolk alone the figures are 235 electrical safety inspections outstanding, 22 gas inspections and 2 asbestos surveys.

Urgent work to address the issues is already underway – including additional inspections, an overhaul of existing processes, and obtaining more robust data around health and safety compliance to provide tenants with complete reassurance. A contract has been let to install smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors in all properties.

As soon as they became aware of the issues the councils referred themselves to the Regulator of Social Housing and contacted all their tenants. They are now under the regulator's remit as are private landlords and housing associations.

The regulator has now confirmed the councils' findings and issued a Regulatory Notice, meaning it will monitor the councils and meet them every two weeks until it is assured sustainable, long-term improvements are embedded.

The regulator has confirmed it does not intend to take statutory action against the councils because an urgent programme of work is already in place to rectify the problems.

The councils are confident their action plan will promptly result in full compliance with the required standards but welcome the support of the regulator in ensuring that robust procedures and practices are embedded.

Tenants at every home where an additional inspection is required have already been contacted.

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