

DISTRICT COUNCILLOR REPORT FEBRUARY 24 SOMERSHAM

Households to receive cost-of-living support from today (6th February)

The Department for Work and Pensions has announced that eligible low-income households in the UK will start to receive a £299 cost-of-living payment from 6th February until 22nd February.

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/eight-million-householdsto-receive-25-billion-cost-of-living-support>).

The payment will be sent out automatically and recipients do not need to apply to receive it. This includes tax credits-only customers who will receive the payment from HM Revenue and Customs between 16 and 22 February.

People in need of additional support over winter are encouraged to check their eligibility through the government's Help for Households website (<https://helpforhouseholds.campaign.gov.uk/>) for the various cost-of-living schemes that are available.

Reforms to social housing allocations consultation

On 30th January the Department for Levelling Up and Communities launched a consultation on how social housing is allocated (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-social-housing-reforms-to-crack-down-on-rule-breakers>). The aim of the consultation according to the government is to make the system fairer and not available to those who abuse it.

Measures which could ban those who blight communities and repeatedly make their neighbours' lives hell through anti-social behaviour or evict them through a 'three strikes and you're out' policy, are part of the consultation.

At the same time, new measures will prioritise households who have a close connection to the UK and their local area.

The consultation seeks views from the public, councils, social housing tenants and providers on a range of reforms to how social housing is allocated in England, including to eligibility and qualification criteria, as well as proposals for the social housing waiting list and grounds for eviction.

The consultation will run for eight weeks and closes on 26 March.

The Future Homes and Buildings Standards: 2023 consultation – reminder

On 13 December 2023, DLUHC launched a consultation on changes to the Building Regulations for dwellings and non-domestic buildings.

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/the-future-homes-and-buildings-standards-2023-consultation>).

The government is committed to improving the energy efficiency and reducing the carbon emissions of new homes and non-domestic buildings. Energy efficiency requirements for new homes and non-domestic buildings are set by Part L (Conservation of Fuel and Power) and Part 6 of the Building Regulations 2010 (“the Building Regulations”).

The consultation sets out DLUHC’s plans for achieving the Future Homes Standard and Future Buildings Standard. It sets out technical proposals for changes to the Building Regulations, the associated Approved Document guidance and calculation methods.

The consultation closes on 6 March.

Public health update

Latest measles statistics published and guidance for education settings

The latest number of measles cases in England have been published by the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) in an updated epidemiological overview.

UKHSA is seeing an increase in cases of measles with a particular cluster in the West Midlands amongst unvaccinated children. On 19 January, the UKHSA warned that further outbreaks of measles will spread to other towns and cities unless urgent action is taken to increase measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination uptake in areas of greatest risk.

Measles spreads very easily among those who are unvaccinated, especially in nurseries and schools. The best protection against measles for children and adults is to get both doses of the MMR vaccine. It is never too late to have these vaccinations.

The Department for Education has published an education health blog (https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/01/22/what-to-do-if-you-think-your-child-has-measles-and-when-to-keep-them-off-school/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery) with guidance on measles and the MMR vaccine for parents, nurseries and schools.

UKHSA has also produced [a measles communications toolkit to support councils with messages on measles and the MMR vaccine](#).

New Disability Action Plan launched

On 5th February the government launched its Disability Action Plan (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/disability-action-plan>)

setting out 32 steps it is taking to make the UK accessible for disabled people to live, work and thrive.

The Disability Action Plan actions include:

- building an online information hub for councils on creating accessible playgrounds
- a new working group to educate businesses on the legal rights of assistance dog owners and make it simpler to report when they are refused access to a business
- leading new research into emerging issues affecting disabled people in the UK over the next 20 years.

Small grants made available to village halls in England

The Defra funded grant scheme reopens for those managing rural community buildings, this time with a lower award threshold of £2, 000 to support smaller projects and make it accessible to more groups.

In 2023, a £3 million village halls fund was launched to provide support for the modernisation and improvement of village halls in England.

Managed by Action with Rural Communities in England (ACRE), the fund has already awarded over £1 million to rural communities, helping them undertake ambitious improvements to their building. Works undertaken or scheduled to take place include new roofs, insulation, extensions, and more energy efficient heating systems.

On 1st February, the grant fund re-opened to new applicants who wish to undertake smaller projects such as disability access, toilet upgrades and new kitchens. Grant awards of between £2,000 to £5,000, and up to 20 per cent of eligible project costs, are on offer. Project expenditure must take place before 31 March 2025.

A streamlined on-line application process and simplified eligibility criteria will make it easier for smaller projects to come forward for support. The scheme will remain open during 2024 until available funding is fully allocated.

Final local government finance settlement 2024 to 2025

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, presented the final local government finance settlement 2024/ to Parliament on 5th February

The settlement includes support for all of local government through the sector-wide Funding Guarantee, ensuring all councils will see a minimum 4% increase in Core Spending Power before local council tax decisions – an increase from the 3% Funding Guarantee in 2023-2024.

Mid Suffolk reveals draft budget to deliver new vision

MSDC have pledged to limit a rise in Council Tax to 2% which means that the proportion of the council tax bill for a Band D property, which is currently £171.59, would increase by £3.43 – around 7p a week.

The district's share is less than 10% of the total bill, with the remainder going to Suffolk County Council, the Police and Crime Commissioner and town or parish councils.

A report for Mid Suffolk's Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Monday 22 January showed that the cost of providing its services to residents and communities is expected to rise by £3.3m to £15.75m in the next financial year – a 27% increase.

This is mainly due to inflationary pressures, particularly interest rates and salary costs, while there has also been a reduction in planning fees as potential development continues to stall in the national climate.

The report notes the council has already been working on efficiencies and savings. There will be additional income from fees and charges, with the cost of garden waste collections rising from £59 to £62 a year for renewals.

Meanwhile, council tenants would also see a 7.7% increase in rents to try to keep pace with increased costs, and to ensure the necessary investment in repairs and maintenance across the council's social housing stock.

This would mean an average weekly social rent increasing by £7.35 a week from £95.46 to £102.81. For affordable housing, weekly rents would increase by £10.65 from £138.33 to £148.98.

The draft proposals go before Mid Suffolk Cabinet on 6th February.

Following Cabinet, the proposed budget will go before Full Council on 22 February. Any changes to council tax or rents would then take effect from 1 April.

Community Rail Partners

At the last full council meeting on 25th January, Mid Suffolk councillors unanimously backed the introduction of a community rail partnership (CRP) in the district.

A CRP is an association comprised of the railway industry, local councils and the voluntary sector, working together to try to increase passenger numbers by promoting economic development, community engagement and sustainable travel.

Residents in and around Thurston, Elmswell, Stowmarket and Needham Market may be set to benefit from much-needed attention and investment to their local stations

The establishment of the CRP and funding from Greater Anglia can open the door for the partnerships and projects focusing on accessibility, mental health, exclusion and isolation, and general station improvements through murals or floral displays.

£18m Skills and Innovation Centre - Update

In partnership with West Suffolk College and the universities of Suffolk and Essex, the Centre, within the Gateway 14 complex, aims to address the skills gaps locally and within the Freeport area and seize opportunities around growing sectors such as the green economy and digital/AI technology.

Careers and recruitment advice would be available on site, and a new local labour market data observatory would be created to record and identify areas of skills demand and supply.

Mid Suffolk's Cabinet approved the full business case at the end of last year. At the latest full council meeting, on Thursday 25 January, councillors agreed to use £10.75m of council reserves up-front for the project, but these would be replenished from business rates once the centre is operational.

Outline planning permission is already held for the whole Gateway 14 site. Gateway 14 Ltd, wholly owned by Mid Suffolk District Council, would need to submit a reserved matters application for the new Skills and Innovation Centre.

*Adrienne Marriott
Blakenham District Councillor
06/02/24*