

DISTRICT COUNCILLOR'S REPORT JANUARY 2025

Amber Cold Weather Alert

Parts of Suffolk woke up to wintry scenes on the morning of Sunday 5th January. Snowfall was seen in most parts of the county with it settling on roads and pavements during the early hours and a serious amber cold weather alert was issued by the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and Met Office. The amber alert, which is the second most serious alert issued by the UKHSA, means the forecast cold weather is expected to impact health and social care services. The alert was extended at the weekend until 12pm on Wednesday, January 8. The UKHSA is advising people to keep their homes to at least 18C and keeping windows and doors closed to reduce drafts.

Councils across the county activated Severe Weather Protocols (SWEPs) to help rough sleepers as temperatures drop below zero. Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils urged people to report anyone sleeping in their car, empty buildings or the open so that the rough sleeper outreach team could find them and offer support or assistance.

Devolution

The English Devolution White Paper was published on 16th December 2024.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

The White Paper sets out the Government's support for unitary councils and it will be inviting reorganisation proposals from two-tier areas such as those in Suffolk. However, it gives no specific proposals for Suffolk.

It says it would expect any new unitary councils to have a population of 500,000 or more, but there may be exceptions. There is no timetable, but it expects some unitary councils to be created in this parliament.

The Government also makes it clear that it sees Mayoral authorities being introduced nationwide, with additional devolved powers around infrastructure and development projects, housing, transport and skills.

The role of district, town and parish councils

According to the paper, in areas with two tiers of local government, before moving to a single tier, the government will establish Combined County Authorities but not Combined Authorities. In those cases, while districts will not be constituent members, the government expects effective levels of collaboration to be demonstrated between constituent members and district councils, especially where the district council covers the primary city or economy in that county.

It says it also wants to rewire the relationship between town and parish councils and principal Local Authorities, strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice.

New government housing targets

What has changed?

In December, the Government 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?

The Council met with the Planning Inspectorate just before Christmas and the Joint Local Plan Member Cross Party Working Group met recently. It is concluded that there will be a formal review of the Joint Local Plan, building on the work that has already taken place. This work will be considered during the review, but it is unavoidable that the council will have to gather further evidence and carry out additional engagement ahead of the formal review process. If the Council can't demonstrate a five-year land supply there is a risk that national planning policies would start to take priority over the Joint Local Plan.

A revised timetable, our Local Development Scheme, will be published no later than March on our websites following agreement at meetings of the Councils.

In the meantime, Part One of the Joint Local Plan remains in place and will continue to carry statutory weight when planning decisions are made in Districts, alongside Neighbourhood Plans and national policy. Our websites will continue to be updated with the latest information at www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/jointlocalplan.

A Press Release is about to be issued which describes the housing supply over the last five years:

	Mid Suffolk		Babergh	
Year	Housing requirement	Housing completions	Housing requirement	Housing completions
2023/24	535	1,014	416	604
2022/23	534	1,234	420	624
2021/22	529	862	417	758
2020/21	513	672	403	402
2019/20	535	451	416	293

It can be seen that Mid Suffolk have exceeded their housing requirement in the last few years.

Changes to fast-track planning approval process

On 9th December the government announced that planning decisions are set to be fast-tracked as part of new measures set out to increase economic growth and housebuilding:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-overhaul-of-planning-committees-to-get-britain-building>

Under new plans to modernise the planning approval process, applications that comply with local development plans could bypass planning committees to help tackle delays.

The measures would see a national scheme of delegation introduced, the creation of streamlined committees for strategic development and mandatory training for planning committee members. *(Note that in Mid Suffolk District Council there is already extensive training for planning committee members which is updated on an ongoing basis).*

Under the new plans, local planning officers will also have an enhanced decision-making role to implement agreed planning policy.

There will be new immediate mandatory housing targets for councils to increase housebuilding. While remaining committed to a brownfield first approach, the updated National Planning Policy Framework will require councils to review their greenbelt boundaries.

For any enquiries about this working paper, please contact: planningcommittees@communities.gov.uk

Plan for Change:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plan-for-change>

New council powers to increase housebuilding and infrastructure

On 19th December, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government set out proposals to empower councils to buy cheaper land through the use of Compulsory Purchase Orders and build homes and infrastructure as part of the government's Plan for Change.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-council-powers-to-boost-housebuilding-and-infrastructure>

The proposed changes mean councils, Mayoral Combined Authorities and other public bodies, including Homes England, will be able to directly take control of vacant and derelict land from landowners paying a fair price and not inflated 'hope value' costs, where they are delivering in the public interest.

The reforms expand existing legislation allowing 'hope value' to be removed in more circumstances where social and affordable housing is being built, accelerating housebuilding.

The consultation on Compulsory Purchase Process and Compensation Reforms will be open for eight weeks and closed on 13 February 2025.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/compulsory-purchase-process-and-compensation-reforms>

Funding to prevent homelessness and help rough sleepers off the streets

On 18th December) the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government announced almost £1 billion of funding for councils to help prevent families from becoming homelessness and to help rough sleepers off the streets.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/largest-ever-cash-boost-to-turn-the-tide-on-homelessness>

This includes £633 million for councils through the Homelessness Prevention Grant, to help prevent homelessness before it happens, reduce reliance on temporary accommodation and target resources where it is needed most.

Reminder: Reforms to the Right to Buy consultation

On 20 November, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government launched a consultation seeking views on how the Right to Buy should be reformed to deliver a fairer and more sustainable scheme.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reforming-the-right-to-buy/reforming-the-right-to-buy>

The consultation follows the reduction in maximum Right to Buy cash discounts announced in the Autumn Budget 2024

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-11-20/hcws238>

The consultation closes on 15 January 2025. If you have any questions, please email:

righttobuy.consultation@communities.gov.uk.

New Business Growth Service announced

On 7 December, the government announced [a new service that will support businesses to grow and thrive](#).

The Business Growth Service will include a revamped web offer, launching in the first half of 2025. It will be developed and will work in partnership with small businesses, local and devolved governments in the UK, with locally led delivery at its core, to ensure the service provides the information and resources smaller firms need from the government.

Councils are encouraged to share this information as appropriate.

Consultation: Reforms to The Bathing Water Regulations 2013 – closes soon

On 12 November, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Welsh Government launched a consultation inviting people to share their views on modernising bathing water regulations.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reforms-to-the-bathing-water-regulations-2013>

Defra and the Welsh Government are seeking views on:

- The removal of automatic de-designation after five years of 'poor' water quality
- Changes to the designation criteria of bathing sites
- Removing the fixed dates of the bathing season from regulations

The consultation closes on 23 December. Councils are encouraged to share this information as appropriate.

Public health update

Government accepts advice on spring 2025 COVID-19 vaccination programme

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has advised that the following groups should be offered COVID-19 vaccination in spring 2025:

- adults aged 75 years and over
- residents in a care home for older adults
- individuals aged 6 months and over who are immunosuppressed

Flu and COVID-19 surveillance report - Latest update 3rd January 2025

This report (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/flu-and-covid-19-surveillance-report-published>) brings together the latest surveillance data, along with the latest public health advice for COVID-19, flu and Respiratory Syncytial Virus RSV.

In week 52:

- COVID-19 activity decreased across most indicators and was at baseline activity levels
- Influenza activity increased across most indicators and was at high activity levels

- Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) activity decreased across most indicators and was circulating at low levels of activity

Government announces COVID-19 Day of Reflection 2025

The government has confirmed that a COVID-19 Day of Reflection will take place on 9 March 2025 to remember the pandemic and its impact on communities.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-announces-covid-19-day-of-reflection-2025>.

To mark the fifth anniversary of the pandemic, people in the UK are invited to come together to remember and reflect on this period of our history as well as their own experiences.

The day will be an opportunity for the public to remember and commemorate those who lost their lives during the pandemic, reflect on the sacrifices made and the impact on our daily lives, and pay tribute to the work of health and social care staff, frontline workers, researchers and all those who volunteered and showed acts of kindness during this unprecedented time.

NHS England's Pharmacy First campaign

NHS England has produced a campaign toolkit to help councils encourage their audiences to visit their community pharmacy. The campaign aims to increase the public's awareness of the breadth of support community pharmacists can offer to patients. It focuses on the Pharmacy First service that allows pharmacists to provide some prescription medicine for seven common conditions, if needed, without the need to see a GP or prescription, i.e.

- Earache
- Impetigo
- Insect Bite
- Shingles
- Sinusitis
- Sore Throat
- Urinary Tract Infection (UTI)

Councils would have to register for an account to get the resources.

<https://campaignresources.dhsc.gov.uk/campaigns/help-us-help-you-primary-care/think-pharmacy-first/>

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Blakenham District Councillor
07/01/2025*