

DISTRICT COUNCILLOR REPORT MARCH 25

Devolution Priority Programme consultations

The Devolution Priority Programme bridges the gap between the English Devolution White Paper and the forthcoming English Devolution Bill. The government is working towards mayoral elections pm 7th May 2026 for the six areas that have joined it.

On 17 February, the government launched consultations in the six areas (including Suffolk) on proposals to establish mayor combined authorities or mayoral combined county authorities.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/devolution-priority-programme-consultations-launch>

The government is seeking views from interested parties, including local residents, businesses, and public sector bodies in Suffolk. The consultations will consider questions such as the proposed geographies and how the new authorities will operate. The consultations close on 13 April. There are seven questions in the consultation paper asking statements such as

“To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority over the proposed geography will deliver benefits to the area?”

The tone of the questions is generally upbeat as, while people can disagree, the government want to focus on the benefits. The above consultation does NOT ask for the public’s views on the format of new unitary councils within Suffolk

Local Government Reorganisation

This is part and parcel of devolution and the eventual abolition of district and borough councils but will take some time to bed in. Mayors will be in place in the six priority areas before any major changes are enacted. However, county, district and borough councils are asked to put forward interim plans describing their preferred options and justifications for unitary councils in Suffolk. For districts the interim plan must be submitted by 21st March with the final proposal going in by 26th September.

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils held workshops on 3rd March 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. Ipswich Borough are obviously keen on the idea of a Greater Ipswich but for this idea to be popular with other subsumed populations, inc. Felixstowe a name change might be politic.

One of the disadvantages of one unitary authority for Suffolk is the breadth of responsibilities for individual councillors in that authority. Unless many more councillors were to be appointed, they would be spread very thin with regard to acting for residents and meeting their needs. Caroline Topping, the Green Leader of East Suffolk Council said "We do not believe that a single, vast council covering the whole county would best serve those who matter most." She felt that a two unitary East and West model would be preferable. Obviously we district councillors are not in favour of these new arrangements but we have no voice in the matter. Apparently these last time similar arrangements were mooted district councils were able to vote against

them – hence they are given no opportunity to do so again. We feel that the whole process is very undemocratic and that the public should have been consulted from the offset. However, in the current circumstances BMSDC will work with other councils to try to obtain agreement on the best ways to go forwards.

Recommendations from MSDC Council Meeting 27/2/25

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.

The Government has said that it will simplify the wider local funding landscape, reducing the number of grants and consolidating them into the Local Government Finance Settlement. In the meantime many grants such as the Rural Development Fund, the Minimum Funding Guarantee and the New Homes Bonus will be coming to an end – the former in 25/26 and the others in 26/27.

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.

Reminder: Land use in England consultation

On 31 January, the government launched a consultation on a new strategic approach to managing land use in England to give decision makers the data they need to protect agricultural land and increase Britain's food security:

It seeks views on the type and scale of land use changes that might be needed to restore nature, support food production, improve climate resilience and deliver new housing and infrastructure, as well as the actions government could take to support this.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/land-use-in-england>

The consultation closes on 25 April.

Funding to increase number of affordable and social homes

On 12 February, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government announced that up to 2800 extra homes will be built through an additional £300 million of government funding for the Affordable Homes Programme. Half of these homes will be for social rent:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-to-benefit-from-the-security-of-a-safe-home>

An additional £50 million of government funding was also announced to the Local Authority Housing Fund, to provide over 250 homes for those in need of better-quality temporary accommodation.

Further details of future investment beyond the current Affordable Homes Programme will be set out at the upcoming Spending Review to support greater investment in new affordable housing from social housing providers.

Reminder: Action taken to protect households with poor-quality insulation

On 23 January, the government announced that it had taken action after routine checks uncovered examples of substandard solid wall insulation fitted since 2022 under the Energy Company Obligation 4 and the Great British Insulation Scheme.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/action-taken-to-protect-households-with-poor-quality-insulation>

Thirty-nine businesses have been suspended from installing new insulation in people's homes. The government has demanded that installers fund any repair work themselves, under protections in the schemes. No household should be asked to pay any money by an installer.

The Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) has been writing to all the households affected, explaining that qualified professionals have started a system of checking every installation under these schemes.

Households should check what to do if they're concerned about the insulation they've had fitted through a government scheme:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-to-do-if-you-have-poor-quality-wall-insulation>

COVID-19 Day of Reflection 2025 – resources and online map

The COVID-19 Day of Reflection will take place on 9 March this year and is one of the ten recommendations set out by the UK Commission on COVID-19 Commemoration.

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.

Members of the public can find more information about the day and resources to help them to mark it, see

<https://dayofreflection.campaign.gov.uk/resources/>

Councils can share their event on the online map showing events, spaces for reflection and public or private gatherings.

<https://www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/w/covid-19-day-of-reflection>

Public health updates

Breast screening campaign to help detect cancers earlier

On 17th February, the NHS launched its breast screening awareness campaign aimed at increasing attendance at mammogram appointments and detecting thousands more breast cancers earlier.

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/2025/02/nhs-launches-first-ever-breast-screening-campaign-to-help-detect-thousands-of-cancers-earlier/>

The campaign comes as figures show more than four in ten women (46.3%) invited for their first screening don't act on their invitation.

Women invited for breast screening fall into three main groups: first-time invitees aged 50-53 who are automatically contacted, regular attendees aged 53-71 who are invited every three years, and those over 71 who can self-refer.

The Department of Health and Social Care has produced a kit to help councils share this information

<https://campaignresources.dhsc.gov.uk/campaigns/help-us-help-you-cancer/breast-screening-saves-lives/>

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV): vaccination for older adults – updated resources

In February the NHS announced that it was inviting people not yet vaccinated against RSV and aged 75-79 or turned 80 after 1 September 2024 to book an appointment with their GP.

On 20th February they published further information on the benefits of vaccination, giving resources to promote it:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/respiratory-syncytial-virus-rsv-vaccination-for-older-adults>

UKHSA warns of potential second norovirus wave – resources

The latest UK Health Security Agency data shows norovirus cases continue to rise across the country with laboratory reports at the highest levels since reporting data this way began in 2014.

Common symptoms of norovirus include:

- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea
- high temperature
- abdominal pain
- aching limbs

Food surplus fund now open for applications

On 7 February, the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) announced that food redistribution charities can now submit applications to a new £15 million government scheme, Tackling Food Surplus at the Farm Gate:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/15-million-food-surplus-fund-now-open-for-applications>

The scheme will help strengthen links between farms and charities to help solve the problem of food surplus on farms, with grants starting from £20,000 to help organisations.

Applicants can submit bids outlining how they intend to form relationships with farmers to access any surplus food, and how they would seek to increase their capacity to redistribute this food to communities.

The funding can go towards purchasing new packaging and labelling equipment and vehicles to move goods from farms to a redistribution organisation, as well as new equipment, like fridges or freezers, to safely store food and ensure it lasts longer.

The fund is open to food redistribution charities and any groups with an interest are encouraged to apply.

The fund closes at 11:55am on 13 March. Councils are encouraged to share this information as appropriate.

Press release:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/15-million-food-surplus-fund-now-open-for-applications>

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04/03/24*