

District Councillor Report for Bramford February 2024

Fison Site

I was very pleased to go on a site visit to Fisons on the 13th with 4 councillors, Andrew Mellen (Leader of the Council), Andrew Stringer (Portfolio Holder for Planning, Richard Winch (PH for Housing), John Matthisson (Chairman of Audit and Standards) as well as Bron Curtis (Principal Planning Officer), Tom Barker (Director - Planning & Building Control) and Emily Attack (Director - Assets and Investments). We spent an hour looking in to the site and discussed possible ways forward as well as security and fly tipping. It seems that the administration are looking at a solution to the issues with the site and they will take a proposal to the cabinet that a Viability assessment will be carried out on the site to look into the issues that are stopping it from being demolished/developed. This is a very expensive process, so demonstrates a real drive to move forward. Hopefully using the assessment, they can see what options they have and also seek funding from government towards costs. This is the biggest step forward with the site in my time as ward councillor, so very encouraging.

Community Rail Partnership

Mid Suffolk councillors have unanimously supported the introduction of a Community Rail Partnership (CRP) in the district. The CRP, involving collaboration between the railway industry, local councils, and the voluntary sector, aims to enhance local stations and increase passenger numbers through economic development, community engagement, and sustainable travel. The Ipswich to Cambridge line, which runs through the district, is set to benefit from the scheme, with a focus on Thurston, Elmswell, Stowmarket, and Needham Market. The CRP's potential establishment would allow for initiatives addressing accessibility, mental health, exclusion, isolation, and general station improvements.

Skills and Innovation Hub

Mid Suffolk District Council's proposal for an £18 million Skills and Innovation Centre in Stowmarket has achieved a significant milestone. The three-storey facility, located at Gateway 14 within the Freeport East site, aims to provide office space for high-growth start-ups, collaboration areas, training facilities, and a café. In collaboration with West Suffolk College and the universities of Suffolk and Essex, the center targets local skills gaps, emphasizing areas like the green economy and digital/AI technology. The council has approved the funding strategy, subject to Freeport East's agreement in March. The project is expected to foster entrepreneurship, collaboration, and innovation, particularly in green skills. The center, funded partially by £10.75 million from council reserves, plans to replenish the funds from business rates once operational. The building, meeting high sustainability standards, is anticipated to support an innovation cluster at Gateway 14 and contribute to regional economic growth. The full business case awaits final approval from the Freeport East Board in March 2024.

Electric Bikes

Mid Suffolk District Council, in collaboration with local bike rental company Eezybike, has introduced two new electric bikes available for hire at Needham Lake. The initiative aims to promote sustainable travel by providing residents and visitors with an opportunity to explore different eco-friendly transportation options. The council has funded a charging pod for the bikes and substantially subsidized the hiring costs, allowing people to experience electric bikes without a significant financial commitment. The bikes are conveniently located near the Duck and Teapot café, accessible via footpaths around Needham Lake. Bikes are £10 for 3hrs, £18 a day and £72 for 4 days (subsidised) If there they look for more sites, I think Bramford would be a great place to have more pods.

Grants of £230,000 Awarded

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have allocated £230,000 in grants and funding to support various community projects across the districts. Among the initiatives are the construction of a new sports pavilion in Hadleigh and improved facilities for Claydon Football Club. Babergh's projects include a Layham Road sports pavilion and play area improvements at Cordell Place. In Mid Suffolk, support goes to Claydon Football Club, Palgrave and District Community Centre, Battisford Village Hall, and Rickinghall Village Trust for projects ranging from refurbishments to access improvements and solar panel installations. The funding, derived from community grants and section 106 funds generated by local developments, underscores the councils' commitment to enhancing residents' well-being and community access to facilities.

Budget

I am still waiting for the finalised budget to come out this week but I can give an insight using the minutes from the cabinet meeting on the 7th.

A 2% increase in Band D Council Tax for 2024/25 is recommended. This to me is unnecessary as we already have large reserves and very few capital spends in the budget. We will receive a £18m dividend from Gateway 14 in Stowmarket and have income coming in from CIFCO creating another year of surplus, the reserves are estimated to reach £37,784,431 by March 2025. To put this in perspective the total cost of services this year was £12.4m.

The Housing Revenue Account remains in much poorer health with expected increases to council rents and maintenance charges. Will update when it's finalised.

Kind regards

Cllr James Caston