Annual District Councillor Report 2023/2024

Being in opposition since the May 2023, against an overwhelming Green Party majority, has been a dispiriting and frustrating experience. Two group members, newly-elected in May 2023, have known nothing different but it has come as a major jolt to the four longer-serving group members who have experienced the highs of either being in significant control of the council or more recently the nerve-biting four years when the council was balanced 17-17 and virtually every council vote was on a knife-edge. Now, with the Greens outnumbering us by a factor of four (24-6) and the Lib Dem opposition often siding with the Greens, we have felt quite impotent. The Green Party inherited a very robust financial legacy from our many years in control of the council, where we consistently generated large budget surpluses and we had frozen the council tax for the previous two years. Budget surpluses continue for 2023/24 and are forecast for the current year and the next three years. On top of those multi-million in-year surpluses, our Mid Suffolk Gateway 14 commercial development site has already banked a £20million cash surplus, with this cash coming to the council in 2024/25, and with the same quantum or more likely even more to come as the remainder of the site is completed. To put the £20million into perspective, that is about 2.5x our annual council tax precept. It should be clear from the above numbers that there could be no rational justification for a council tax increase at Mid Suffolk, either now or for the foreseeable future. Total Gateway14 dividends may well equate to £1,000 per Band D property compared to the annual Band D precept of £171.59. Annual budget surpluses equate to over £100 per Band D property. The Green Party however proposed a 1.99% increase this current year and have built in 2.99% increases in their future projections. As a Conservative opposition group, we proposed both a freeze for this year and more importantly, proposed the setting up of a politically-balanced working party to explore what modest amounts of additional expenditure from the surpluses might lead to 'best-in-class' services whilst also exploring how some part of large budget surpluses and Gateway 14 dividends could be returned in rebates to the Mid Suffolk electorate. These may come across as unique proposals in the local government world but are justifiable due the almost unique financial surplus situation that Mid Suffolk finds itself in. Even rebates of £200-£500, which many might deem modest amounts, would be life-changing to some of our most financially vulnerable residents. However, neither the Green Party or the Lib Dems were prepared to support these Conservative budget amendments and the council tax increase was voted through.

I happily have held the role of Chair of Overview and Scrutiny, which is the most senior role that a current opposition member holds, I hope to carry this on into the next year and am very happy to continue. I also am the shadow portfolio holder for planning, which means attending plenty of workshops and meetings, but is not my preferred area or my strongest. I continue to try my best to help residents and enjoy serving the community.

District Councillor Report for Bramford May 2024

Funding for swimming pools

Mid Suffolk have secured funding from Sport England for a new swimming pool cover and filtration system over in Stowmarket, it will save a vast amount of energy and relieve the financial burden of running a swimming pool. The total pledged is £180,000.

Food Waste

There is concern in the council at the added cost of food waste collection which would come in the form of a 23 litre bin and a 5 litre food caddy to fill it. Estimates stand that there would be a funding shortfall of £254,000. I personally think we should be looking at keeping food waste on site and working on reducing levels not carting high moisture content waste all over the district. Cabinet will discuss this issue on the 14th of May. The options are bite the bullet and purchase new equipment, bins and caddies. The second is to wait for more information on Government funding. The equipment must be in place by the deadline of 31st of March 2026.

Parking Enforcement

I have requested Ipswich Borough Council to do parking enforcement on the following areas, the bus stop, Gippingstone and Acton Road, The Street and Leggett Drive. I am waiting for a report and will pass it on to the PC.

Rural Transport Grants

The Cabinet will discuss whether to approve, in principle, a grant not exceeding £300,000 for new passenger transport provision in Mid Suffolk. They agreed in October to invest £600,000 in new community bus routes and passenger transport via grants.

Scrutiny

In the May meeting we looked at the CIFCO property portfolio, the readiness of housing stock for inspection and the development of a new tenant forum. CIFCO is still bringing in good money and performing well although the market has dipped causing book values to be reduced. It is still a good source of income for the council. There was a problem with the redacted papers, which should have been shared with councillors, so this was reflected in several recommendations asking for transparency in the smaller details. There are several environmental initiatives going on and they continue to work to no EPC rating above C by 2027. This will go to Full Council in June.

The other Item was the housing paper we looked at the legislation from government and the work being done and came to the conclusion that everything was on track

and we were on corse to be ready for inspection. We are doing a mock inspection to be more confident. The committee made a few tweaks to the documentation, makeup and looked at their position in scrutinising the tenant forum. There were several recommendations for both items.

Stowmarket By-Election

After the election we have a new Green councillor Loraine Baker, she has already subbed on my Scrutiny committee and seems very knowledgeable on finance.

Kind regards

Cllr James Caston