

Annual Report 2025 from your District Councillor

There is one similarity between this year's Annual Report and the one of last year. The AGM of the Mid Suffolk District Council is yet to take place, on the 15th of May.

This last year can be roughly divided into two parts, one being the carrying on as usual with matters and ideas arising from Parish Councils, from individual members of the public, assisting with Locality Awards and debates/decisions made at the MSDC meetings.

The second part concerns the highly rare event of assessing and responding to the proposals for the reorganization of Local and Regional Government.

One part of this deals with the introduction of Mayors in our Region. The aim is to formalise so called 'Mayoral Combined County Authorities', MCCAs. On this matter the degree of public influence has been and remains very limited. The government has decided that all of England is to adopt this system, a way of managing that has already been introduced in parts of the country. Notable examples are Birmingham and Greater Manchester. The proposal, in this case what is extremely likely to happen, is the creation of a combined Suffolk/Norfolk MCCA. The population would be around 1,5 million. The Mayor is intended to preside over an assembly of 5 voting members. There would also be nonvoting members. A likely outcome would be two members from Suffolk and two from Norfolk. For a decision to be valid the Mayor must be part of the majority. Thus a Mayor would be able to block any decision that he/she doesn't approve of. A Mayor will be elected according to the first past the post system. There is a clear possibility that there could be of Mayor of one political leaning and the other 4 members with voting rights would be of different political persuasions. A Mayor would be able to raise money from an additional Mayoral precept and/or a Mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy.

District Councils have been given the opportunity to take part in a 'Consultation', the responses to this had to be handed in to the government no later than the 13th of April. During the debate in Council, on the 10th of April, it was pointed out that the 7 questions requiring responses were like a questionnaire rather than a proper consultation, a view that I do share. The very fundamental question addressing whether we actually want a Mayoral system, a new layer of loco/regional government, was not asked.

Elections for the Mayor are expected to be held in May 2026.

The second part of the new set up of local government deals with the abolition of District Councils and of County Councils. This principle will come into force, decided by the government. The new Councils will be called 'Unitaries' and will handle the vast majority of the matters presently dealt with by the County and District Councils. The Government has said it prefers Unitaries to have a population of around 500 000. If that number were to be adhered to in a rural area like Suffolk we would have to have one single Unitary for the entirety of the County. The total population of Suffolk is around 760 000. 500 000 may be a functioning prospect for urban areas. However, Suffolk is vast and not densely populated. The overwhelming majority of District Councillors in Mid Suffolk disagree with the vision of only one Unitary. The same applies to all other District Councils in Suffolk, also including Ipswich Town Council. The County Council wants to create a one Suffolk wide Unitary. The District Councils are aiming for a 2 or 3 Unitary arrangement. One option is a West Suffolk and an East Suffolk Unitary. A lot of work is being put in by number of dedicated Councillors and Officers. Views and ideas from Parish Councils are welcome. The final proposals need to be handed in to the government no later than the 26th of September. The government is the ultimate arbiter.

Elections for the Unitaries are envisaged in May 2027. Those elected would form a 'shadow Unitary'. One year later it is expected that they would 'go live'. During the 'shadow' year the County and District Councils would continue to function and prepare for their own demise.

Other notable events include the adoption of the 'Biodiversity and Trees supplementary planning document'. A commendable amount of hard work had been put in by Officers and Councillors. I voted in favour of this, over all is it very good. The doubt that I do have is whether it is feasible to make a developer responsible for monitoring and reporting for 30 years.

The eagerly awaited for 'Intensive Livestock and Poultry Farming Supplementary Planning Document' was discussed and approved. This will be very helpful when it comes to assessing future applications.

The Government has released new figures for numbers of new houses to be built. This is in the National Planning Policy Framework. For mid Suffolk there is an increase of 37%, from 535 to 784 new homes. Previous accomplishments above targets are not allowed to be taken into account. Parishes will have to do 'Neighbourhood Development Plans' outlining suitable plots for these abodes to be built. If that isn't done locally it will be dictated to us.

A new scheme for recycling has been approved. Food waste to be collected every week. Plastics won't be recycled until possibly April 2027.

A Housing Revenue Account business plan was discussed as was a great need to improve the condition of stock. This will be very costly.

Workshops re the LGR (Local Government Reform, Unitaries) and Devolution, re Mayors have been held in Stowmarket. Very informative and well attended.

The Suffolk County Council decided to go along with the idea of 'fast tracking' the applications to form Unitaries, meaning that it would be necessary for simple logistical reasons to ask the government to cancel the Local Elections on the 1st of May. I did not succeed in trying to find out about any substantial advantages of this. It was only said that 'it is good to be first in the queue'. The scenario of going ahead like this did create a lot of dissent, resulting in four of the Conservative Councillors leaving the Conservative Group, forming a new group of Independents. This means that no one joined any other party and that no one stood down as District Councillor. I am now one of the Independents. My main reason is that I strongly disagreed with the idea of cancelling scheduled Elections. Democracy is not to be tampered with. There are lots more things that could be said but any document must be mildly readable.

Finally, an update on the longstanding issue with the missing bit of footpath at Blacksmiths Way. Up until the end of last year there was one Officer who seemed to engage with this but then he went off the radar totally, impossible to connect with. In April there was another Officer whom I talked to at a Teams Meeting. He has now handed the matter over to yet another Officer. I will meet her on the 22nd of May. A long while ago I talked to Robert Eburne, representing the developer. He agreed to pay for this although he didn't have to. Given the time lost I am unsure if this will happen. I will continue to keep you updated.

Yours Sincerely,

Anders Linder, your District Councillor.