

Mid Suffolk Disability Forum

Minutes of the Meeting held on Wednesday, 17th April, 2024,
from 10.30am to 12.30pm, via Zoom

Present:

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| Linda Hoggarth | - Chair / Resident / Disability Forum for Suffolk / Avenues East |
| Connie Barnes | - Step by Step Co-ordinator, Green Light Trust |
| Jonathan Chew | - Self-Advocacy & Engagement Lead, ACE (Anglia) Ltd |
| Mark Conquer | - Resident / ACE (Anglia) Ltd |
| Nigel Crisp | - Staff Manager – Ipswich Depot, First Bus |
| Anselm Gurney | - Partnership Manager, Everyone Active |
| Paul Hughes | - Corporate Manager – Building Control & Access Officer, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils |
| Samantha Lake | - Corporate Manager, Customer Operations, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils |
| Cllr John Matthissen | - Mid Suffolk District Council |
| Courtney Reeve | - Disability Activist |
| Miles Row | - Suffolk Artlink |
| Elizabeth Storer | - Community Development Officer, Healthwatch Suffolk |
| Helen Toffanello | - Secretary / Resident |

Guests:

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| David Connors | - Head of Elections and Land Charges, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils |
| Katherine Davies | - Sustainable Transport Officer, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils |
| Janet Lawrence | - Development Officer, Active Suffolk |
| Kate Parnum | - Regeneration Project Manager, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils |
| Patrick Richardson-Todd | - Electoral Services Team Leader, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils |

Apologies:

- | | |
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| Simon Barnett | - Integrated Transport & Enhanced Partnership Manager, Suffolk County Council |
| Emma Buckmaster | - Prospective Candidate, Green Party |

Terence Carter	- Vice Chair / Resident / Mid Suffolk District Council & Stowmarket Town Council
Bethany Couch	- General Manager, The Regal, Stowmarket Town Council
Wendy Johns	- Communications & Engagement Officer, Suffolk Sight
Steven Largent	- Resident / ACE (Anglia) Ltd
Cllr Adrienne Marriott	- Mid Suffolk District Council
Gareth Moir	- Integration & Partnership Manager, Ipswich & East Suffolk Alliance
Alan Neville	- Community & Customer Engagement Manager, Greater Anglia
Jen Overett	- Access for All, Needham Market / Inclusion & Diversity Committee, John Peel Centre
Claire Smith	- Resident / Suffolk Parent Carer Forum
Sue Spiller	- Resident, Ixworth
Christine Steward	- Resident / Sensing Change

1. Welcome and Introductions

Linda welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

Linda thanked Chewy and ACE (Anglia) Ltd for hosting this meeting on Zoom.

2. Apologies

The above apologies were noted.

3. Accessible Voting

3.1 David Connors, Head of Elections and Land Charges, and Patrick Richardson-Todd, Electoral Services Team Leader, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils were welcomed to the meeting.

3.2 David explained that he has only been in post since January and has been focussed on preparing for the imminent May elections.

3.3 There are 182 polling stations across Babergh and Mid Suffolk and 102 in Mid Suffolk alone. The polling stations are usually in community buildings. The buildings are reviewed every 4 years to assess their suitability for the staff and voters, and the standard of their

facilities and access.

3.4 Regarding provision for people with special needs, all locations have pencil grips, large print ballot papers on request, voting devices for sight-impaired people, and written and pictorial instructions on how to vote.

3.5 Specialist equipment such as ramps are provided where required.

3.6 In 2022 new legislation was brought in on who can support electors to vote. Restrictions have now been removed and anyone over 18 can now support a voter who needs assistance.

3.7 Other reasonable adjustments can be requested.

3.8 Postal voting is open to everyone and can be permanent or temporary and is renewable every 3 years.

3.9 Waivers are available for those who cannot give a signature as long as the required documentation is completed in advance.

3.10 Large print documentation is available on request and appointments by proxy are also an option. If the voter has chosen the proxy option, they can still attend the polling station on the day if they change their mind.

3.11 A member commented that assistance for visually impaired people was not of a consistent standard across all polling stations. David will bring that up in staff training.

3.12 One member asked whether a person who requests large print documentation to be sent to them can have it automatically sent to them in that format every year. David thought that was possible and can be organised but added that it would be sent separately to the postal vote.

Action: David Connors

3.13 It was confirmed that bus passes are an acceptable form of ID for voters.

3.14 An estimated 5 or 6 million people in the UK are not on the electoral register and members thought perhaps many of those could

have disabilities. David will return to a future meeting to discuss the issue.

3.15 In response to a question about the survey undertaken every four years and the actual routes to the polling stations, Patrick said that the routes are sometimes checked but, in rural areas, the limited choice of venues may mean that there may be access difficulties in reaching the venue. Consultation is undertaken with Parish and Ward Councillors when deciding on the location of the polling stations with the intention of choosing those which are nearest to settlements. The over-arching principle is to enable people to vote.

3.16 Members felt that there was insufficient information given about candidates and that this should be improved and also in an easy read format. It was noted that issues about candidate information should be deferred to political parties.

3.17 In response to a question about the future of the voting system and whether this would eventually become entirely on line, David said that he thought this would not happen for a very long time, if ever. There are some pilots taking place in Wales, to include early voting and the possibility of being able to vote at any polling station, which, if successful, may be introduced in England.

3.18 Linda thanked David and Patrick for attending the meeting and said that the Forum would be pleased to continue the discussions following the upcoming elections. The slides used will be distributed with the minutes.

4. Community Transport – What’s available and future plans

4.1 Katherine Davies, Sustainable Transport Officer, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils, was welcomed to the meeting.

4.2 Katherine’s role provided an overview and enabled her to keep up to date with sustainable transport options that were ‘cleaner and greener’.

4.3 She began by talking about bus services. The Suffolk on Board website has details of all timetables, routes and fares. The user needs to also access the specific bus operator’s website to find the accessibility information. <https://www.suffolkonboard.com/ways-to-travel/bus/bus-timetables/>

4.4 Through the Bus Service Improvement Plan, which involved receiving suggestions from Parish Councils, Suffolk County Council has awarded funding for additional services in Mid Suffolk, including:

- A new service between West Suffolk College in Bury St Edmunds and Diss.
- A new half hourly service between Stowupland, Cedars Park and Stowmarket.
- An extended service from Stowmarket to Ipswich to include evenings.
- An extended service from Mendlesham to Stowmarket to include Monday to Saturday, not just Thursdays as previously.
- A continuation of the Vertas taxi bus pilot scheme to connect Thurston, Elmswell and Beyton with Bury St Edmunds.

4.5 Community Transport in Mid Suffolk is operated as Connecting Communities by Communities Together East Anglia. Information can be found at:

<https://www.communitiestogethereastanglia.org/community-transport/>

4.6. The service has 2 wheelchair accessible minibuses available to book Mondays to Saturdays, 7am to 7pm, with a pricing scheme. The booking office is open from 8am to 4pm. Volunteer drivers are also used to transport passengers as a door to door service.

4.7 Funding has been provided for a new 'ChatABoard' service, available Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, and serves villages in the north of Mid Suffolk. It will also operate a circular route from Stowmarket to Stowupland.

4.8 Mid Suffolk District Council has set up a rural transport grants scheme of £600,000. Mid Suffolk has been split up into 6 areas and each area offered £100,000 of funding to improve transport in their area. Any operator could apply and the application period ended on the 15th April. The applications are currently being assessed and decisions will be made by a panel on the 25th April. Certain conditions are attached to the funding. It has to be accessible, cost effective with good timings day and evening, with connections to onward transport such as bus and train services. It must be environmentally sustainable such as electric or biofuel and well promoted to local residents. The Council have asked for feedback on the new routes so they can be adjusted if necessary.

4.9 In response to a question about availability of demand responsive transport, Katherine said that operators do their best but potential users of services do have to be flexible. She hoped that the new funding will enhance provision.

4.10 Members asked how far in advance journeys for community transport need to be booked. This varies but again new services may help.

4.11 With regard to bus services around Cedars Park, the 87 and 87a service provides a half hourly service. Buses used are low floor with space for one wheelchair user.

4.12 Members commented on the lack of evening services, making it difficult to get home from having a night out.

4.13 In response to a question, Katherine said that bus operators do provide disability awareness training for their drivers.

4.14 Katherine was thanked for her input to the meeting and for answering questions from members. Her slides giving more information will be distributed with the minutes.

5. Understanding the current sport provision of activities within Stowmarket and how to make them more accessible and inclusive

5.1 Kate Parnum, Regeneration Project Manager, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils, was welcomed to the meeting.

5.2 The Stowmarket Health Education and Leisure Facilities Project (SHELF) received planning permission on the 14th February, 2024. The development has now been split into categories.

5.3 Kate is now working on the first one, the sports and artificial pitches ensuring the inclusivity of provision. There will be a phase for the buildings and Kate will consult the Forum on the plans and developments in due course.

5.4 Kate introduced Janet Lawrence, Physical Activity Development Officer, Active Suffolk, who came into post in January. Janet explained that her role is joint with Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils and

specifically covers Stowmarket and Sudbury. Her role is to increase the number of people taking part in sport and physical activity and create the right conditions for this to happen as well as to support existing and new groups and organisations in this.

5.5 She will be visiting primary and secondary schools to promote sporting opportunities and will also visit surgeries, sport clubs, community groups and leisure centres.

5.6 Action Suffolk's Diversity Inclusion Action Plan has been updated and will soon be made available.

5.7 Evie Edwards, British Boccia champion, is a board member of Active Suffolk and has been helping with this. The new Sport Welfare Officer is Emma Swan.

5.8 Her work involves currently engaging with the community to gather insight and learning from groups, individuals, schools, partners and clubs.

5.9 Many clubs need to increase their confidence and knowledge to adapt to and support disabled people and funding needs to be allocated in order to promote inclusion. More volunteers are always needed.

5.10 Buddle is a free learning and support website for clubs and groups offering physical activity. For more information go to <https://buddle.co/>

5.11 Chewy offered to meet and share his knowledge with Janet.

Action: Chewy / Janet Lawrence

5.12 Janet and Anselm are in regular contact and are due to meet shortly.

5.13 Kate and Janet were thanked for attending the meeting. Janet's slides will be distributed with the minutes.

6. Minutes from the Meeting held on the 17th January, 2024

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record.

7. Matters Arising

7.1 Item 3.8 Highway Infrastructure Design: Luke Cantwell-Forbes, Principal Transport Development Planner, Highways, Suffolk County Council, asked at the previous meeting if Forum members would be interested in being part of a panel to help design highway infrastructure. Our interest has been flagged up with Luke.

7.2 Item 8.1 Greater Anglia:

7.2.1 Jen has reported that she has received no further information about improving the access to Needham Market Railway Station.

7.2.2 It was believed that work on improving the access at Stowmarket Railway Station will commence in the autumn of 2024.

7.2.3 An on-site meeting at Stowmarket Railway Station should be being organised by Cllr Welham to look at the access concerns following works to the car park.

7.3 Item 8.2 Changing Places: The new facilities at the Food Museum in Stowmarket are now complete and open. The new facility at Stradbroke Swimming Pool & Fitness Centre is almost completed with a few snags to address.

7.4 West Suffolk Archives & Funding for Arts Organisations:

7.4.1 Following our discussions at the last meeting, a letter of concern was sent to local MPs and Councillors regarding the closure of the West Suffolk Archives in Bury St Edmunds with the removal of all records to the Hold in Ipswich. Responses received noted that the difficult financial situation facing Suffolk County Council and the withdrawal of the administration at West Suffolk Council to proceed with the Western Way development removed the option to relocate the West Suffolk Archives in Bury St Edmunds. Therefore, the decision was taken to close the building in Raingate Street as to remain there would require £5m of investment. Working parties are being held to determine how the archives that must remain locally are able to do so.

7.4.2 With regard to the removal of core funding for arts organisations, a new £500,000 grant funding pot will be open to all organisations in

the Arts and Culture sector from April 2005. This will be recurring year on year. Existing core funding will continue until 31st March, 2025.

8. Issues, Concerns and News from Members

8.1 Parking on Pavements: Mark raised concerns regarding customers of Takeaways and Delivery Drivers parking on pavements causing difficulties for pedestrians, wheelchair, mobility scooter and buggy users. It is not illegal to park on pavements so cannot be enforced. However, the police can be involved if the vehicles are causing an obstruction. Sam will contact the Council's Parking Team on the subject and report back to the Planning Group.

Action: Sam Lake

8.2 John Peel Centre: Jen reported that the café at the John Peel Centre is now open and the Box Office is accessible from the Market Place in Stowmarket. A good day to try this is Thursdays. Suggestions for improvements are still welcomed via the website.

8.3 Culture, Heritage & Leisure Strategy 2023 - 2028: Miles said that this strategy has been under review and could be a topic for a future meeting.

8.4 Everyone Active:

8.4.1 Anselm reported that the Chair-based Exercise and Table Tennis activities have proved very successful. Whilst the original funding has ended, those taking part now pay £3 per session. This has not proved a problem and attendance has been maintained.

8.4.2 Current activities are as follows:

- Boccia with Active Lives – Thursdays, 1.30pm to 3pm – 18 to 20 people are attending.
- Chair-based activities – Mondays, 1.30pm to 2.30pm – an average of 15 people attend.
- Table Tennis – Fridays, 10.45am to 11.45am – an average of 8 people attend.
- Quiet swim session suitable for those with, for example, sensory issues or autism will begin soon at Stradbroke Leisure Centre on Fridays, 2pm to 3pm.

8.4.3 Members were asked to contact Anselm if they had further

suggestions for activities that could be arranged for disabled people at the Leisure Centre.

8.4.4 Anselm thanked Forum members for their support and assistance.

9. Access Issues

9.1 Planning Applications: Comments have been made on the following Planning Applications:

DC/350520/20 & DC/23/05721 – Land on north side of Station Road, Haughley – Application for 29 dwellings. Some bungalows are included.

DC/24/01153 – Gateway 14 – Application for reserved matters relating to appearance, landscaping, layout and scale for the erection of buildings, etc.

9.2 Other Access Issues: There were none to report.

10. Health and Social Care

10.1 Elizabeth provided a report on the current work of Healthwatch Suffolk which will be distributed with the minutes.

11. Future Meetings

11.1 Topics for Discussion: The Planning Group will work on the following suggestions:

- Culture, Heritage & Leisure Strategy
- Further consultation work on the SHELF project

11.2 Format of Meeting: Sam has searched for a suitable hybrid venue for meetings but is unable to find a venue that meets all the requirements of members and therefore there is a need to compromise on facilities and location. She suggested that Hillside Community Centre in Stowmarket may be an option. A projector would be required. She will consult with members regarding their preference for a hybrid meeting using this venue or to remain as a Zoom meeting. In the meantime, arrangements will continue for the next meeting to take place via Zoom.

Action: Sam Lake

12. Information Round / Any Other Business:

12.1 Stowmarket Town Awards: Nominations are now open online and at certain venues. Only residents of Stowmarket and those with a close link to Stowmarket can be nominated. For more information go to: <https://stowmarkettowncouncil.gov.uk/stowmarket-town-awards/>.

13. Date of Next Meeting:

The date of the next meeting will be Wednesday, 17th July, 2024, 10.30am to 12.30pm, via Zoom and also possibly as a face to face hybrid meeting.

The link and arrangements for the meeting will be sent in due course.