

## **Mid Suffolk Disability Forum**

**Minutes of the Meeting held on Wednesday, 30th April, 2025,  
from 10.30am to 12.30pm, via Zoom**

### **Present:**

Linda Hoggarth	- Chair / Resident / Disability Forum for Suffolk / Avenues East
Simon Barnett	- Integrated Transport & Enhanced Partnership Manager, Suffolk County Council
Cllr Terence Carter	- Vice Chair / Resident / Mid Suffolk District Council
Jonathan Chew	- Self-Advocacy & Engagement Lead, ACE (Anglia) Ltd
Mark Conquer	- Resident / ACE (Anglia) Ltd
Bethany Crouch	- Stowmarket Town Council
Nigel Crisp	- Staff Manager – Ipswich Depot, First Bus
Anselm Gurney	- Partnership Manager, Everyone Active
Paul Hughes	- Head of Service – Building Control & Access Officer, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Samantha Lake	- Head of Service, Customer Experience, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Teena Mason	- Business Development Co-ordinator, Seetec
Cllr John Matthissen	- Mid Suffolk District Council
Cllr Jen Overett	- Mid Suffolk District Council / Access for All, Needham Market
Sebastian Reeve	- Resident / Disability and Mental Care Advocate
Miles Row	- Suffolk Artlink
Christine Steward	- Resident
Elizabeth Storer	- Community Development Officer, Healthwatch Suffolk

### **Guest:**

David Connors	- Head of Elections and Land Charges, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
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### **Apologies:**

Zoey Banthorpe	- Arts & Culture Lead, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Wendy Johns	- Resident / Suffolk Sight

Steven Largent                      - Resident / ACE (Anglia) Ltd  
Helen Toffanello                 - Secretary / Resident

## **1. Welcome and Introductions**

Linda welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

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

## **2. Apologies**

The above apologies were noted.

## **3. Accessible Voting for People with Learning Disabilities and/or Visual Impairments**

3.1 David Connors, Head of Elections and Land Charges at Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils was welcomed to the meeting and invited to update members on improvements being made.

3.2 David has implemented some of the recommendations around access to information regarding requesting reasonable adaptations at polling stations, Suffolk travel schemes to gain access to polling stations and signposting and engaging residents in how to request adaptations to make voting more accessible.

3.3 Alongside ACE, he has looked at the information available on the day of poll and the paperwork and notices that are held in the polling stations. Whilst many of the notices are legislatively prescribed there are opportunities to provide pictorial instructions for voters, which seek to aid voters in understanding the process, however the colour scheme used is grey on white and therefore may not be of use for all voters.

3.4 Changes are being made to paperwork regarding preparation for elections, for example registering to vote and postal votes. Again, there is a pictorial guide and where requested different paperwork can be provided.

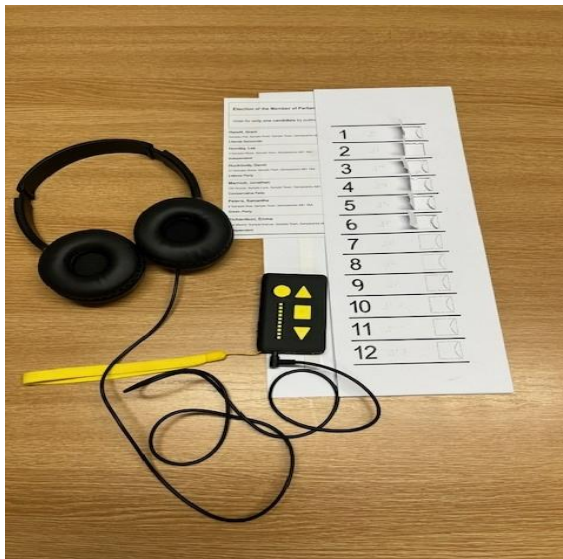
3.5 The work has stalled because the elections in Suffolk have been postponed and with legislative changes being made it would be useful

to revisit this. David is working with the print company to look at providing information in different formats.

3.6 For the Haughley, Stowupland and Wetherden by-election on the 12<sup>th</sup> June an audio, tactile voting device will be trialled and feedback will be provided to the Forum.

3.7 These devices provide large buttons and they are able to read the ballot paper, how many people to vote for and the candidate's name. These are important as they allow for accessibility and secrecy of ballot and provide independence. These devices will not be available in all 180 polling stations, but can be requested, although this is being trialled.

**Photo of the audio tactile voting device:**



3.8 David suggested meeting with Chewy and Mark from ACE (Anglia) Ltd to progress the paperwork conversations considering the changes in the election dates and explore how to best make changes and move forward.

**Action: David Connors / Chewy / Mark Conquer**

3.9 David will attend a future meeting of the Forum to provide feedback on how the audio/tactile device worked and then explain its use and application and any other updates.

**Action: David Connors**

#### **4. Streetscapes & AccessAble**

4.1. This item was deferred to a future meeting due to the unavailability of Zoey Banthorpe, Arts & Culture Lead, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils.

#### **5. Priorities for Mid Suffolk Administration**

5.1 Cllr Jen Overett, Mid Suffolk District Council, was invited to introduce this item and explain how the Forum can contribute.

5.2 She explained that the Administration would like to discuss priorities over the next two years, or for however long before the Mid Suffolk District Council is dissolved and replaced with a unitary system.

5.3 A significant number of the Green Councillors have expressed a wish to improve opportunities and access for residents with disabilities across Mid Suffolk.

5.4 This is a high priority requiring more commitment and action and it would be useful to gain the Forum's views on how the administration's work can be strengthened in this regard.

5.5 She would take points made to Officers and Members but areas could be as follows:

- How the Forum's influence can be extended.
- How pressure may be exerted in the planning system to make new properties more accessible.
- Access to local businesses.
- Improvements to Taxi Services.

5.6 There is recognition that these are big subjects and not easy to fix, but if the Council can make some changes they would be pleased to do so.

5.7 Members raised a number of issues, as follows:

##### **5.7.1 Taxi Services:**

- Taxi drivers do sometimes refuse to take guide dogs or wheelchairs. It was noted that this is a national problem.
- It is difficult for people with speech impairments to book taxis.

- There are not enough wheelchair accessible taxis.
- When booking a taxi, people are sometimes asked to pay in advance and then the taxi does not turn up.
- Disabled people can be charged more for a taxi journey than someone without a disability.

Jen said that she would raise the issue of refusal of guide dogs at the next licensing committee meeting. There was also the possibility of organising a joint workshop across Babergh and Mid Suffolk taxi operators to explore how to provide training on accessibility and the concerns raised.

**Action: Cllr Jen Overett**

#### **5.7.2 Access to Shops and Businesses:**

- It is difficult to make local Shops understand fully the difficulties disabled people face when trying to independently access their premises such as the Post Office, in Ipswich Street, Stowmarket and the new Starbucks Coffee Shop.
- Opportunities could be considered to look at training for Planning and other departments regarding independent access.
- Access issues with the Council's own buildings such as the Mid Suffolk Leisure Centre. A request has been made for an accessibility review of the Leisure Centre.
- Concerns were expressed that it is necessary to repeat and keep explaining access issues before any action is taken.

Sam would explore how access issues can be included on the Council's Planning Team Meeting agendas, to investigate how such training could be provided and what options exist to make changes.

**Action: Sam Lake**

Anselm would ensure that an access survey of the Mid Suffolk Leisure Centre is undertaken.

**Action: Anselm Gurney**

#### **5.7.3 Local Transport:**

- Many people rely on friends and family for local transport needs, due to a lack of availability of public transport. This is a barrier to employment where people cannot or do not drive or have access to transport.
- Look at the availability of local transport as this is a barrier to

employment, and many people rely on family to provide this support.

#### **5.7.4 Local Government Reorganisation:**

- The Disability Forums in Suffolk should have the opportunity to make their views heard during the consultations about reorganisation.
- As there are Forums across East, West and Mid Suffolk how can these local voices still be heard, should there be one unitary authority for Suffolk. These local Forums have no desire to merge into one.

It was agreed that:

The views of the Forum for local Government reorganisation should be flagged with the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive. In order to ensure that there is a collective approach by the Disability Forums to ensure that local Disability Forums remain in place, an approach will be made to their supporting officers from the local District Councils to allow for a united voice.

**Action: Sam Lake**

5.8 As this was an initial discussion with members, it was agreed that a smaller meeting be set up with Cllr Richard Winch to progress next steps.

**Action: Cllr Jen Overett**

5.9 The Planning Group noted that the challenges of using taxi services could be a future item for discussion.

## **6. Customer Access Points**

6.1 Sam was asked to introduce this item. She said that it was an opportunity to discuss how to access Council services now and if there are any barriers or opportunities to provide different access or services.

6.2 There are different ways to contact the Council - by visiting a customer access point, where people can drop in and speak to staff about any Council enquiry. People can also speak to the Council via the telephone, online form and through the webchat. Mid Suffolk District Council also has a website with general information.

6.3 Some recent changes have been made:

- Stowmarket Customer Access point at 54 Ipswich Street is now

open 5 days a week.

- A new service alongside Citizen's Advice has also been opened in Eye Library, every Friday from 9.15am to 12.30pm.

6.4 If Members do not want to explain any barriers in the meeting, then they can always contact Sam outside of the meeting, using the below contact details:

[Samantha.lake@baberghmidsuffolk.gov.uk](mailto:Samantha.lake@baberghmidsuffolk.gov.uk)

01449 745177

6.5 There are also opportunities to look at more rural locations and outlying villages for people that live on the boundaries of Mid Suffolk to see if there are opportunities there. This would include community spaces.

## **7. Minutes from the Meeting held on the 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2025**

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record.

## **8. Matters Arising**

### **8.1 Item 6.3 Misuse of Blue Badges:**

8.1.1 There were 13 instances of blue badge misuse reported in Babergh and Mid Suffolk by Suffolk County Council but the statistics were not split by District Council area.

8.1.2 Concerns were raised regarding blue badges for children with additional needs as some children are still being rejected for a blue badge application if they are a flight risk, even if they have a diagnosis. Sam would raise those concerns with Suffolk County Council following information from Terence.

**Action: Sam Lake / Terence Carter**

**8.2 Item 7.2 Greater Anglia:** Alan Neville had reported that work is progressing on the installation of the lift at Stowmarket Railway Station. There is no timetable for completion. Following the site visit, two dropped kerbs have been put in place directly in front of the Railway Station as promised. It was noted that this is much appreciated. Other works continue to be investigated.

## **9. Issues, Concerns and News from Members**

**9.1 Benches in Ipswich Road, Stowmarket:** Terence reported that two new benches have been installed in Ipswich Road but the ground work has not been completed. Mark would photograph the issue so that the Forum can make enquiries.

### **Action Mark Conquer**

## **9.2 Everyone Active:**

9.2.1 Anselm was pleased to report that the Mid Suffolk Indoor Bowls Club has successfully applied for funding from Sport England to set up new bowls sessions for people with disabilities. These will take place on Tuesdays, from 1pm to 2.30pm, start date to be confirmed.

9.2.2 A range of additional equipment is being purchased to increase access. The equipment will be available for the specific sessions and outside of the sessions. This includes:

- Wheelchairs, where the wheels are larger so weight is distributed to avoid damage to the underlay on the carpet
- Two rollators and two walkers to assist people with differing mobility issues.
- Four walking stick protectors.
- Ball launchers.
- A six foot folding ramp which can be placed in one corner of the rink.

9.2.3 Publicity materials will be produced shortly, once the start date is confirmed. These can then be circulated to Forum members for when the sessions start. On the trial session, 18 people attended, which was good, and everyone said they wanted to attend on a weekly basis.

**9.3 Cambridge Ipswich Community Rail Partnership:** Simon reported that an officer has been recruited for this Partnership. It is understood that the Board will be meeting shortly.

## **10. Access Issues:**

**10.1 Planning Applications:** Comments have been made on the following Planning Applications:

DC/25/01089 – Land east of Warren Lane and west of Cresmedow Way, Elmswell – Application for planning permission for a development



of 29 dwellings, 9 of which are affordable, and 3 bungalows. They will meet Part M4(2).

DC/25/01542 – Truckeast Ltd, Violet Hill Road, Stowmarket – Erection of a 3 Storey, 66 bed Care Home,

DC/25/01673 – Truckeast Ltd, Violet Hill Road, Stowmarket – Erection of 3 Storey Retirement Living Apartments (29 one bedroom 18 two bedroom) and 14 bungalows built to Part M4(2) plus 1 guest room and communal facilities.

DC/23/05536 – Land off Church Road, Thurston – Approval of reserved matters for a development of 15 dwellings, 5 of which are bungalows. 8 of the dwellings will meet Part M4(2).

DC/25/01874 – Land north of Wells Cottages. Palmer Street, Walsham-Le-Willows – Outline planning application for 15 dwellings.

## **10.2 Other Access Issues:**

**10.2.1 Walnut Tree Pub, Stowmarket:** It is thought that this pub is currently closed. When it re-opens, it would be good to check the access.

**10.2.2 Starbucks, Stowmarket:** Linda had attempted to raise the issue of the heavy door with the franchisee but had not received a response. Cllr Lay, however, was following this up with Planning to get some advice on how to take this forward. Sebastian offered to make a visit to Starbucks to see what he thought of the door and to ask for the contact details of the Manager.

**Action: Sebastian Reeve**

**10.2.3 Post Office, Stowmarket:** Linda had reported members' continued concerns regarding the entrance door to the Post Office. She expected the same response that, in their view, the entrance door is compliant.

**Post Meeting Note:** As expected, the Post Office have continued to maintain their view that the entrance door in terms of its dimensions is compliant. They suggest that a member of staff will always come to the assistance of a disabled person who is struggling to gain access.

**10.2.4 Table Service in Cafés:** In response to the question regarding table service at the Regal, Bethany explained that when customers are greeted they are asked if they can make their order at the counter, but

if they cannot, then table service is offered.

**10.3 Consultation on Planning Applications:** Linda was not convinced that the Council is sending the Forum all relevant Planning Applications for housing developments of over 10 dwellings and developments to which the public would have access, for example, shops, museums, or cafés. Sam would follow this up with Planning to ensure the Forum is able to make comments on relevant applications.

**Action: Sam Lake**

## **11. Health and Social Care**

**11.1 Healthwatch Suffolk:** Elizabeth's detailed update will be distributed with the minutes.

**11.2** Elizabeth mentioned a workshop that is being held between transport providers and the NHS regarding people accessing health services. Simon said that he was organising this and invitations had not yet been sent.

## **12. Future Meetings**

### **12.1 Topics for Discussion:**

- Streetscapes and AccessAble
- Taxi Services
- Update on Transport Workshop

**Action: Planning Group**

**12.2 Format of Meeting:** It was agreed that the next meeting in July will be held on line via Zoom. Chewy reported that a hybrid venue he had checked out did not prove to be suitable.

## **13. Information Round / Any Other Business**

There was none.

## **14. Date of Next Meeting**

The date of the next meeting will be Wednesday, 23rd July, 2025, 10.30am to 12.30pm, via Zoom.

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