

Mid Suffolk Disability Forum

**Minutes of the Meeting held on Wednesday, 23rd July, 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
Jonathan Chew	- Self-Advocacy & Engagement Lead, Ace Anglia
Mark Conquer	- Resident / Ace Anglia
Nigel Crisp	- Staff Manager – Ipswich Depot, First Bus
Anselm Gurney	- Partnership Manager, Everyone Active
Wendy Johns	- Resident / Suffolk Sight
Samantha Lake	- Head of Service, Customer Experience, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Cllr John Matthissen	- Mid Suffolk District Council
Archie Merritt	- Customer Engagement Lead, Regal Theatre
Miles Row	- Suffolk Artlink
Helen Toffanello	- Secretary / Resident
Sarah Wilkin	- Chief Executive Officer, John Peel Centre

Guests:

Zoey Banthorpe	- Arts & Culture Lead, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
David Connors	- Head of Elections and Land Charges, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Luke Uttley	- Town Centres Lead, Economy & Business, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils

Apologies:

Steven Largent	- Resident / Ace Anglia
Tracy Matthew	- Communities Together East Anglia
Gareth Moir	- Integration & Partnership Manager, Ipswich & East Suffolk Alliance
Cllr Jen Overett	- Mid Suffolk District Council / Access for All, Needham Market
Christine Steward	- Resident
Elizabeth Storer	- Community Development Officer, Healthwatch Suffolk

1. Welcome and Introductions

Linda welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

Chewy and Ace Anglia were thanked for hosting this meeting on Zoom.

2. Apologies

The above apologies were noted.

3. AccessAble and Wayfinding

3.1 Zoey Banthorpe, Arts & Culture Lead, and Luke Uttley, Town Centres Lead, Economy & Business, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils, were welcomed to the meeting and invited to update Forum Members.

3.2 Luke began by explaining that the purpose of the Stowmarket Wayfinding Project is twofold. It aims to improve the connectivity points for residents of and visitors to Stowmarket, especially at the Railway Station and Car Parks, the main arrival and departure points for the town and also to highlight the town's heritage with signage to explain the town's history.

3.3 Using Concept Design slides prepared by the Consultants, Luke gave an overview of the plans thus far.

3.4 A map has been placed at the Railway Station but needs to be relocated nearer the exit of the Car Park and better signposting to attractions such as the Food Museum.

3.5 The Consultants have put together a colour palette for the signage and information boards that includes the blues, greens and creams used by Stowmarket Town Council with easy to read, clear fonts.

3.6 The Gipping River Path needs highlighting and signs will be placed to it on the white pedestrian bridge and on the road between the Railway Station and the crossroads.

3.7 Heritage signs will be located at the sites of the Iron Foundry and

the Camping Land.

3.8 Existing poles will be used where possible for the erection of the directional signs.

3.9 The maps and information boards will include a section for the town's main events.

3.10 Luke noted a request that the engravings on the bridge to Cedars Park be highlighted.

3.11 It is understood that there is a joint project to improve the Parish Churchyard.

3.12 Wendy said that those with sensory impairments need to have the text as bold as possible using a simple font. Luke thought the QR codes on the signage might help with that issue but will check. Wendy suggested he bring the signage to a Suffolk Sight meeting at Red Gables to be assessed. Luke will share the Concept Design slides with her to show at her forthcoming meeting. Mark also offered to look at the signs to ensure that these were suitable for people with visual impairments.

Action: Luke Uttley

3.13 The Concept Design slides will be distributed with the minutes.

3.14 Zoey then took over to provide an update on the work with AccessAble. Mid Suffolk District Council had contracted AccessAble to carry out audits for tourist venues in Mid Suffolk and these have now been completed.

3.15 The next stage is to share this work with Visit Suffolk and Visit Norfolk to develop their new websites and to inform an Accessibility Module. This will give access information showing car parks, step free access, the concessionary prices, free companion tickets and much more. The Visit England website will act as a base from which to work.

3.16 Zoey thanked Linda, Wendy and Miles for helping with the leaflets on Grazing Walks which had attracted 950 views on the website so far.

3.17 Zoey suggested attending a future meeting with Holly Oakland, Visit Suffolk, to show the progress made and the functionality of the

Visit Suffolk website.

3.18 Miles offered to help with the website from a neurodivergent angle.

3.19 Chewy shared a link with Zoey to show the work Ace Anglia had done with the National Trust to encourage more disabled people to visit their venues.

3.20 Zoey and Luke were thanked for attending the meeting and invited to return to update the Forum at subsequent meetings. Forum members were keen to assist where they could.

4. Update on Accessible Voting

4.1 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.

4.2 David said that he had had a very useful meeting with Chewy and Mark at Ace Anglia, where they had completed a table-top walk of the voting experience including postal votes and voting at polling stations.

4.3 As a result, an easy read guide to voting was being put together and expected to be ready for March, 2026. This would enable disabled voters to familiarise themselves with the process. Easy read posters would also be prepared.

4.4 David would share this work with other Suffolk Councils to help disabled voters across the county and standardise the process.

4.5 Guides could also be prepared for first time voters so that information reaches as many people as possible. The Forum would be able to assist by circulating information to members.

4.6 The audio voting tactile device was trialled at the Haughley by-election where people were able to see how it works. Voters would need to request this prior to attending the polling station but it was also possible to have one brought on the day.

4.7 David would arrange to meet with members of Suffolk Sight and Ace Anglia to demonstrate how the device works and the process for

ensuring that one can be available at a polling station if required.

Action: David Connors

4.8 David has been invited to a meeting of the Learning Disability Partnership Board in September to talk about accessible voting.

4.9 David was thanked for attending the meeting and invited to return when further progress has been made.

5. Briefing on Taxi Services

5.1 Due to the unavoidable unavailability of Kate Purcell, Licensing Manager, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils, she had prepared some slides to provide a briefing which Sam would give on her behalf.

5.2 Sam outlined the legal duties of taxi drivers according to the Equality Act 2010. Drivers have to give assistance to wheelchair users and those with learning disabilities, mental health issues and hidden disabilities. They must also take assistance dogs. Drivers can only be exempt from carrying out these legal duties if they have a disability or issue themselves that makes it impossible, for example, if they physically cannot carry a wheelchair or are allergic to dogs.

5.3 The drivers' duties are to carry the passenger and store their mobility aids, to carry the passenger in comfort and to offer mobility assistance.

5.4 The driver can be fined up to £1000 for not carrying out these legal duties and be taken before the Licensing Sub-Committee to assess if they are fit and proper to hold a licence. As an example, in May, a Mid Suffolk driver was suspended for 28 days for refusing to take a guide dog.

5.5 The available Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles (WAVs) are listed on the Mid Suffolk District Council website. Five are currently listed but they are often used for school runs as the Council cannot dictate their use. Drivers find the cost of buying a WAV prohibitive at £30,000 upwards. Sam would investigate whether any funding was available to operators to help with the purchase of a WAV.

Action: Sam Lake

5.6 The Licensing team send out undercover people to use the

service to test and assess it. The Council respond quickly to complaints, meet with drivers to hear their concerns and meet with other Councils and operators to share best practice. Drivers also have safeguarding training.

5.7 Passengers can report an incident or make a complaint at the Access Point in Stowmarket High Street or Eye Library. They need the taxi number plate, time and date of the journey and details of what happened when filing the complaint.

5.8 A member had noted that taxi services need to be reliable and on time.

5.8 The Mid Suffolk Taxi Bus signs have been positioned around Stowmarket but it was felt that the service should be better promoted to ensure it was well used and could expand. There is currently no Saturday service but there will be in the future, another member had commented that the service also needs to operate on Thursdays and Fridays. This service is under the remit of Katherine Davies, the Sustainable Travel Officer. Sam will obtain information about this service for distribution to members.

Action: Sam Lake

5.9 It was felt that operators and drivers needed more disability awareness training.

5.10 Kate will be invited to a future meeting to answer further questions about taxi services and members' experiences.

Action: Sam Lake

6. Minutes from the Meeting held on the 30th April, 2025

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate meeting.

7. Matters Arising

7.1 Item 5 Priorities for Mid Suffolk Administration:

7.1.1 Further to the discussions at the last meeting, members of the Planning Group had met with Councillors including Cllr Richard Winch to discuss how the Forum's priorities could be progressed via the current administration of the Council. As a result a consultation paper

outlining the Forum's priorities had been sent to members prior to this meeting. No additions or changes had been made and acceptance of the consultation paper was proposed by Helen Toffanello, seconded by Nigel Crisp, and unanimously approved.

7.1.2 The approved paper would be submitted to Cllr Winch in order to progress the priorities.

Action: Planning Group

7.2 Item 5.7.2 Access Survey, Mid Suffolk Leisure Centre:

Anselm said that the Mid Suffolk Leisure Centre had not been surveyed for several years. He was very happy that a survey should be undertaken but was unsure as to who would do this. The Forum was not able to undertake formal access surveys as it is not insured to do so. An outside agency could be used if funding was available. The Planning Group will discuss this further.

Action: Planning Group

7.3 Item 5.7.4 Local Government Reorganisation: A survey, prepared by local district councils, had been distributed to members by email on the 24th May, in order that members could have their say on Local Government Reorganisation. The survey closes on the 25th July, 2025. Sam was working with other Disability Forums in the County to gauge opinion but it seems clear that the Forums wish to carry on their work as they do currently. John said that a full Council meeting will be held on the 24th July and it was likely that a two council system would be their option for Suffolk. However, the government makes the final decision as to how many councils will be set up to cover Suffolk.

7.4 Item 8.1.2 Blue Badges: Terence had not provided any information regarding the rejection of Blue Badge applications for children with additional needs so Sam has not been able to raise concerns with Suffolk County Council as yet.

Action: Terence Carter / Sam Lake

7.5 Item 8.2 Greater Anglia: Members noted that the work to install the lift at Stowmarket Railway Station was taking a long time and that, during these works, they had further to walk to the footbridge. An update will be sought from Alan Neville.

Action: Planning Group

7.6 Item 9.1 Benches in Ipswich Road, Stowmarket: This work is part of an ongoing project with Red Gables Volunteer Group. Two new raised beds are to be added.

8. Updates, Issues, Concerns and News from Members:

8.1 Ace Anglia: Ace Anglia had held a very interesting and useful Talk Tech Conference at the University of Suffolk. Information about the work of Ace Anglia can be viewed on You Tube and the Suffolk Ordinary Lives website <https://suffolkordinarylives.co.uk/>.

8.2 Everyone Active: Anselm reported that the new bowls sessions for disabled people had begun on the 1st July and were officially opened by Cllr Welham on the 22nd July. The sessions take place on Tuesdays, 1 pm to 2.30pm. £8,800 worth of new equipment had been secured. There are now four activities for disabled people each week – chair based exercise, boccia, table tennis and bowls.

8.3 Suffolk Artlink: Miles highlighted ‘Creating Space’, a free 8 week programme for adult family carers taking place at the Stowmarket Community Centre, Hillside, Stowmarket, from September. For more information go to: <https://www.suffolkartlink.org.uk/sessions/stowmarket-creating-space/>

9. Access Issues

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

DC/25/02900 – Land west of Ixworth Road, Norton – Outline planning application for 2 self-build dwellings. No comments could be made as there were no documents to look at.

APP/W3520/W/25/3364061 – Land To The North And West Of, School Road, Elmswell – Appeal by: Christchurch Land & Estates (Elmswell South) Ltd. Proposal: Outline Planning Application (Access to be considered, all other matters reserved) – Erection of Care Village comprising 66 bedroom care home (C2 Use), 37 No. Extra Care Bungalows (C2 Use), 3 No. Almshouses (C3), Management Office (E(g)(I) Use), Club House, Community Growing Area, Orchard, Community Bee hives and Open Space Provision. The Public Inquiry will start on the 4th September, 2025.

9.2 Other Access Issues:

9.2.1 Starbucks, Stowmarket: Chewy would ask Sebastian if he had been able to visit to check the issue of the heavy entrance door.

Action: Chewy

9.2.2 Post Office, Stowmarket: Members' continued concerns were raised again with the Post Office regarding the entrance door and asked if a bell could be fitted to allow customers to attract attention. This request has been passed on by the Post Office to the owners/operators of the business.

10. Health and Social Care

10.1 Healthwatch Suffolk: Elizabeth had prepared an update to be circulated with the minutes.

11. Future Meetings

11.1 Topics for Discussion:

- Further discussion on taxi services
- Disabled Facilities Grants for adaptations to homes – there is a bottleneck in the system as Occupational Therapists have to assess the home first causing delays.
- Keeping warm in winter and the grants available.

Action: Planning Group

11.2 Format of Meeting: It was agreed that the next meeting in October will be held on line via Zoom. John will check out a possible hybrid meeting venue in Claydon and report back on its suitability.

12. Information Round / Any Other Business

There was none.

13. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting will be Wednesday, 8th October, 2025, 10.30am to 12.30pm, via Zoom.

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