

## **Mid Suffolk Disability Forum**

**Minutes of the Meeting held on Wednesday, 8<sup>th</sup> October, 2025,  
from 10.30am to 12.30pm, via Zoom**

### **Present:**

Linda Hoggarth	- Chair / Resident / Disability Forum for Suffolk / Avenues East
Cllr Terence Carter	- Vice Chair / Mid Suffolk District Council / Stowmarket Town Council / Resident
Simon Barnett	- Integrated Transport & Enhanced Partnership Manager, Suffolk County Council
Jonathan Chew	- Self-Advocacy & Engagement Lead, Ace Anglia
Mark Conquer	- Resident / Ace Anglia
Elysa Dale	- Poverty Reduction & Digital Inclusion Lead, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Elizabeth Delaney	- Communications & Engagement Officer, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Teresa Farley	- Community Navigator, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Steven Largent	- Resident / Ace Anglia
Cllr John Matthissen	- Mid Suffolk District Council
Archie Merritt	- Customer Engagement Lead, Regal Theatre
Gareth Moir	- Integration & Partnership Manager, Ipswich & East Suffolk Alliance
Cllr Jen Overett	- Mid Suffolk District Council / Access for All, Needham Market
Christine Steward	- Resident

### **Guests:**

Pete Chivers	- Business Development Manager, Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice
Clare Peake	- Energy Adviser, Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice
Kate Pearsell	- Licensing Manager, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Philip Winter	- Team Manager, Independent Living Service, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils

### **Apologies:**

Cllr Libby Brooks	- Diversity Group, Mid Suffolk Liberal Democrats
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Anselm Gurney	- Partnership Manager, Everyone Active
Paul Hughes	- Head of Service – Building Control & Access Officer, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Wendy Johns	- Resident / Suffolk Sight
Samantha Lake	- Head of Service, Customer Experience, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Helen Toffanello	- Secretary / Resident
Elizabeth Storer	- Community Development Officer, Healthwatch Suffolk

## **1. Welcome and Introductions**

Linda and Terence 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. Adaptations to Homes**

3.1 Philip Winter, Team Leader, Independent Living Service, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils was welcomed to the meeting.

3.2 Philip gave a presentation regarding adaptation grants available to residents in Mid Suffolk.

3.3 He explained that Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils' Independent Living Service aims to encourage independence at home by providing a supportive network across the district.

3.4 The Independent Living Service focuses on creating a suitable home environment for vulnerable residents, their families and carers. This includes listening to people and offering guidance on financial support, adaptations and relocation assistance.

3.5 He explained the different types of grants available including the application process and eligibility criteria for each grant.

3.6 A brief overview of the grants is as follows:

- **Disabled Facilities Grant:** For large scale projects, up to a maximum of £30,000 can be claimed. This grant is means tested (unless applying for a child), must be for an owner occupier or private tenant. There may be some repayment conditions.
- **Minor Adaptations Grants:** For smaller projects, a maximum of £15,000 can be claimed. This grant is not means tested, must be for an owner occupier or private tenant. It is not repayable.
- **Repair Grants for Previous Grant Aided Adaptations:** This is intended for larger scale repairs, a maximum of £10,000 can be claimed. One claim in every three years can be claimed, must be for an owner occupier or private tenant.

3.7 Further information about the grants and the application process can be found in Philip's slides which will be distributed with the minutes.

3.8 Philip shared some positive comments and feedback from residents who had been awarded grants.

3.9 It was clarified that the Independent Living Service only supports with adaptations within homes and does not assist individuals to find an accessible home.

3.10 In response to a question regarding Council Tenants, Philip explained that the grants were for owner occupiers, private tenants or housing association tenants. Council tenants should be able to access similar support by contacting the Housing Team.

3.11 It was highlighted that the process can be much slower for Council Tenants.

3.12 Philip was thanked for his presentation and asked to ensure that the slides from this were available for the minutes.

#### 4. Keeping Warm in Winter

4.1 Elysa Dale, Poverty Reduction and Digital Inclusion Lead, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils, was welcomed to the meeting.

4.2 Elysa gave a presentation on keeping warm in winter. This

covered understanding cold homes and the impacts on both physical and mental wellbeing, noting who is more at risk and tips for staying warm at home.

4.3 She shared information about local organisations that can offer help and support. These include Citizens Advice, Warm Homes Suffolk and Mencap. Their contacts are available in her presentation slides.

4.4 Pete Chivers, Business Development Manager, and Clare Peake, Energy Adviser, Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice provided an overview of the advice they offer to support residents , especially in respect of energy.

4.5 It was noted that Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice is one of five Citizens Advice organisations across Suffolk. The Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice is based in Stowmarket and at a number of outreach locations;

4.6 Mid Suffolk has a speciality Energy Adviser who offers confidential, holistic advice covering a range of topics including warm homes, financial support and income maximisation.

4.7 People can sign up to the Priority Services Register with utility providers who can support in a number of ways including being first to hear when power is being cut or reinstated, assistance with meter reading and, in some circumstances, access to a free boiler check.

4.8 Elysa asked what would make support and information easier to understand. Suggestions made were easy read guides, tenancy guides and awareness sessions.

4.9 It was discussed that it would be very difficult to provide guidance on all types of boilers / storage heaters because they are all different. However, general guidance would be useful along with information about organisations that can offer support.

4.10 Chewy shared an easy read tenancy guide which has previously been developed. This had been very beneficial to many residents.

4.11 It was suggested that basic information (warm home links or energy advice) could be included in Town and Parish Council newsletters.

4.12 Further discussion on easy read guides could be discussed at the Advocacy Group.

4.13 Gareth said that the Be Well Bus will have a focus on keeping well in winter over the next few months. The Bus will be in a variety of locations offering information and services to residents. Gareth will share a flyer with a list of dates and locations.

**Action: Gareth Moir**

4.14 Elysa, Claire and Pete were thanked for attending the meeting and providing members with helpful information. Elysa's slides will be distributed with the minutes.

## **5. Taxi Services in Mid Suffolk**

5.1 Kate Pearsell, Licensing Manager, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils, was welcomed to the meeting. She began discussions by responding to questions that had been raised at the previous meeting.

5.2 She acknowledged that there are ongoing issues across the country with regard to the availability of Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles. Even in areas with a good number of these vehicles, services can still be limited.

5.3 She explained that there is no way to legislate what hours drivers work, so if they choose to only do school drop offs and pick ups, there is currently nothing that Licensing can do.

5.4 Licensing is raising awareness amongst drivers that additional charges are not acceptable and refusals to take guide dogs or assist disabled passengers will be investigated.

5.5 In 2024, the Council's Policy was reviewed and introduced a penalty points system for drivers. If drivers have too many points, they have to appear before the Licensing Committee. Complaints from passengers will also result in appearing at the Committee.

<https://www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/documents/d/asset-library-54706/bmsdc-hackney-carriage-and-private-hire-licensing-policy>

5.6 Members asked further questions as follows:

**Question:** Are there any grants available to help drivers purchase Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles?

**Response:** Taxi drivers can apply for up to a 50% grant towards a vehicle, up to a limit of £10,000. This can be used for second hand cars. More information is available via the Rural England Prosperity Fund - Heart of Suffolk. <https://heartofsuffolk.co.uk/invest/business-support/grants-and-funding/rural-england-prosperity-fund-2/>

**Question:** Do drivers receive training in disability awareness?

**Response:** Yes, all new taxi / private hire drivers must complete a two day course. This includes assisting passengers with disabilities including information on hidden disabilities. A refresher course is required every three years.

**Question:** Side access is always difficult for wheelchair users. Can drivers be trained in this?

**Response:** Yes, this is covered in the mandatory driver training. There is an emphasis on patience and understanding the challenges faced by wheelchair users.

**Question:** There are concerns about taxis running late. Is this being addressed?

**Response:** Delays can happen due to traffic but operators are expected to ensure a timely service. If delays are frequent or without reason, Licensing is open to receiving feedback and complaints so these issues can be investigated.

5.7 Many members shared their own experiences with regard to taxis and additional costs and their poor availability.

5.8 Clare said that Citizens Advice were seeing an increased number of people for whom transport and travel in this rural area is becoming more difficult.

5.9 Kate encouraged members to raise a complaint or share feedback if they have experienced an unsatisfactory outcome with regard to taxi journeys. There are systems in place to hold drivers to account if they are found not to be following the rules.

5.10 Simon reminded members about Connecting Communities who have fully accessible vehicles available across Mid Suffolk. Journeys can be booked 14 days in advance.

5.11 Kate was thanked for responding to members' questions.

## **6. Minutes from the Meeting held on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2025**

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record.

## **7. Matters Arising**

**7.1 Item 4 Accessible Voting:** David Connors, Head of Elections and Land Charges, provided an update to say that he has been invited by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's national Accessibility of Elections Working Group to talk about the work that has been undertaken in Suffolk. He will provide an update at the next meeting.

**7.2 Item 7.1 Priorities for Mid Suffolk Administration:** Elysa provided an update from Sam. The priorities identified will go to the Senior Leadership Team, after that these will go to the Cabinet.

**7.3 Item 7.2 Access Survey, Mid Suffolk Leisure Centre:** It is understood that the Communities Team is following this up.

**7.4 Item 7.5 Greater Anglia:** Alan Neville had advised that the work to install the lifts at Stowmarket Railway Station was on target to be ready later this year. He also said that no changes were expected to Network Rail's schedule.

**7.5 Item 11.2 Format of Meetings:** John continues to investigate the availability and potential to use a venue in Claydon for a hybrid meeting.

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

### **8.1 Computer Courses:**

8.1.1 Steve said that Communities Together offer digital/computer courses and drop-in sessions at Elmswell Library and at Stowmarket.

8.1.2 Elysa explained that there lots of organisations and services to support digital inclusion across Mid Suffolk. Information on organisations that are delivering in person support is available at <https://www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/digital-skills-in-person-sessions>. Alternatively members can contact Customer Services.

## **8.2 Hearing Loops:**

8.2.1 Christine reported that the loop at Stowmarket Railway Station worked effectively for her when it was last tested.

8.2.2 She also shared that the loop at the Regal Theatre, Stowmarket had not worked very well on her last visit. Archie will look into this and report back.

**8.3 Micromobility Scheme:** Simon said that the Government will be opening applications for Counties interested in trialling a micromobility scheme. He would like to gather views on what would make the scheme successful and accessible for all at a future meeting.

## **9. Access Issues**

**9.1 Planning Applications:** There were no planning applications received during the last quarter and Linda is concerned that relevant applications are not being sent to the Forum. Elysa will raise this with Sam.

**Action: Elysa Dale**

## **9.2 Other Access Issues:**

**9.2.1 Post Office, Stowmarket:** It has been reported that no outside bell can be located at the entrance door so that customers can attract attention.

## **10. Health and Social Care**

**10.1 Healthwatch Suffolk:** Elizabeth provided an update as follows:

**“Your Care, Your Way – Living with a visual impairment in Suffolk:** The survey asks people with a visual impairment, that cannot be corrected with glasses, for their feedback on all health and social care services including GP surgeries, hospitals, social care, mental health, pharmacy and opticians. By completing the survey, you'll help us better understand what it's like to live with a visual impairment and to access NHS and social care services in Suffolk - including what's working well and what could be improved. The survey will close in January 2026.



There are several ways you can take part in the survey:

- You can complete it over the phone with a member of our team.
- You can complete the survey online at <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/visurvey>
- A hard copy of the survey is available and can be sent out.
- If you would like the survey in another format (e.g. specific colours, large print, easy read), just give us a call – we'll do our best to help.
- Email: [research@healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk](mailto:research@healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk)
- Telephone: 0800 448 8234”

## **11. Future Meetings**

### **11.1 Topics for Discussion:**

- Update on the SHELF Project – Kate Parnum
- Update on Accessible Voting – David Connor
- Micromobility Scheme – Simon Barnett
- Communities Together East Anglia

### **Action: Planning Group**

**11.2 Format of Meeting:** It was agreed that the next meeting in January will be held on line via Zoom.

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

There was none.

## **13. Date of Next Meeting**

The date of the next meeting will be Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2026, 10.30am to 12.30pm, via Zoom.

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