

Minutes of the Mid Suffolk Disability Forum Meeting held on Wednesday, 29th July, 2026 from 10.30am to 12.30pm, via Zoom

Present:

Linda Hoggarth	-	Chair / Resident / Disability Forum for Suffolk / Avenues East
Philippa Alston	-	Head of Customer Experience, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Linda Banks	-	Social Media Officer / Resident
Simon Barnett	-	Integrated Transport & Enhanced Partnership Manager, Suffolk County Council
Alex Bartholomew	-	John Peel Centre
Mark Conquer	-	Resident / ACE (Anglia) Ltd
Elysa Dale	-	Poverty Reduction & Digital Inclusion Lead, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Elizabeth Delaney	-	Communications & Engagement Officer, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Anselm Gurney	-	Partnership Manager, Everyone Active
David Hill	-	Accessible Information Design Lead ACE (Anglia) Ltd
Paul Hughes	-	Head of Service – Building Control & Access Officer, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Trevor McLeese	-	Resident
Marie Metcalfe	-	Engagement Officer, Wellbeing Suffolk
Cllr Jen Overett	-	Mid Suffolk District Council, Access for All Needham Market
Lesley Rayner	-	Community Rail Partnership Officer for St Edmund's Line
Ellie Robertshaw	-	Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice
Bernie Ryan-Self	-	Community Engagement Officer, Rural Coffee Caravan Suffolk
Christine Steward	-	Resident

Elizabeth Storer	-	Community Development Officer, Knowing Works
Helen Toffanello	-	Secretary / Resident

Guests:

David Connors	-	Head of Elections & Land Services, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Helen Cufley	-	Countryside Public Realm Manager, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Megan Dent	-	Site Inspector, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils
Rebecca Richardson	-	Accessibility & Inclusion Manager, Greater Anglia

Apologies:

Jonathan Chew	-	Self-Advocacy & Engagement Lead, ACE Anglia
Grace Hill	-	Volunteer
Wendy Johns	-	Communications & Engagement Officer, Suffolk Sight
Cllr John Matthissen	-	Mid Suffolk District Council
Archie Merritt	-	Customer Engagement Lead, Regal Theatre

1. Welcome and Introductions

Linda welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

David and Mark from ACE Anglia were thanked for hosting this meeting on Zoom.

2. Apologies

The above apologies were noted.

3. Greater Anglia

3.1 Rebecca Richardson, Accessibility & Inclusion Manager, Greater Anglia was welcomed to the meeting and invited to talk to members about her work in improving accessibility.

3.2 Using slides, Rebecca explained that her team consisted of herself and Fran Escobar, the Accessibility Support Manager.

3.3 Their work covers four main areas as follows:

Strategy and Stakeholder Management

- Work with regional and industry partners on new projects such as ramps and source local investment.
- Manage Passenger Assistance and analyse the data for better outcomes. The number of people needing assistance has grown 20% this year to 142,000.
- Improve service accessibility so it is reliable and simple with accurate information – Convo now has a BSL service in some stations such as Norwich, Chelmsford and Ipswich but unfortunately many screens do not have the capability to offer the service. It is now also possible to add a request for assistance when booking a ticket.
- Create virtual tours of the stations. Audio guides are also now available for visually impaired people.
- Train the assistance staff regularly on disability equality.

Improve the accessibility of trains and stations

- Make use of funding to bid for accessible projects.
- Now that Greater Anglia comes under Great British Railways, they will have to analyse each station in great detail to make sure it conforms with the national standard, looking at everything from being step free to lighting.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Detailed data is now available to analyse customer satisfaction, passenger assistance and station facilities.
- They can see for example where passenger assistance journeys are incomplete perhaps because a staff member has not arrived or the passenger has not made the journey.

Working in Partnership

- Sharing best practice
- Attending events.
- Using the Accessibility Panel for various projects e.g. new train designs, evacuation procedures and training videos.

3.4 Rebecca then responded to questions and comments from members as follows:

- In response to a question about the Accessibility Panel, Rebecca explained that the Panel gives local people who have lived experience of disability the chance to create a more accessible rail network and have a say in how future policy is shaped. The Panel comprises 6 disabled people with different skillsets from a variety of backgrounds who all have lived experience. There are 2 wheelchair users, 2 visually impaired people and 2 with invisible impairments. Meetings with the panel are mostly confidential and not minuted, only actions are noted.
- How could the Forum best assist with improvements that help disabled people in Mid Suffolk. It was agreed that the Planning Group would identify a member willing to liaise with Rebecca on any work involving local stations.

Action: Planning Group

- Jen and Luke Uttley, Town Centre Lead, had recently met with Rebecca at Stowmarket Railway Station to discuss a safe route across the car park to the new lifts. As a result, a surveyor is visiting the Station shortly to identify a safe route. If there is a simple solution, no funding will be needed. If it is complex, a business case will need to be put to the Department of Transport which will take longer. Simon said that he has a meeting about transport in Stowmarket soon and will see if some funding is available for a safe route.

Action: Simon Barnett

- Members asked when the lifts at Stowmarket would be ready for use but Rebecca was unable to provide a date. However, work to get the lifts ready continues to be carried out.
- A member asked if it could be known where the disabled carriage would stop as the length of train changes so it is impossible to be

sure which carriage it is. Staff will know but it is not always possible to ask if they are on another platform. Trains are being rewrapped in the future and the issue has been identified. There is a possibility the disabled carriage could be marked in a different colour.

- 3.5 Rebecca was thanked for attending the meeting and for responding to members' questions. The presentation slides will be distributed with the minutes.

4. Chilton Play Area

4.1 Helen Cufley, Countryside Public Realm Manager and Megan Dent, Site Inspector, Public Realm, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils, were welcomed to the meeting and invited to outline the plans for the new play area.

4.2 Helen explained that the play area is part of the SHELF project and will provide sport themed play equipment for younger siblings to enjoy when they come to support their brothers and sisters playing sport.

4.3 The play area will be located where the rugby pavilion is currently and constructed in 2027.

- 4.4 It will have a range of inclusive play equipment including:
- A self-propelling swing with an upright position so it is easier to transfer a child from a buggy or wheelchair.
 - A seesaw with a back support at one end with 4 springs for a number of children to sit or lie on at the same time. This piece of equipment has been a great success at Hadleigh Sports Centre.
 - A Multi Play with a wide platform, hand grips and a wide slide.
 - A ground level roundabout with partial seating.
 - Play panels for auditory and sensory play including BSL.
 - Ground level activities such as hopscotch and a raised half-football that can be jumped on or over.
 - A bench and space for picnic blankets and chairs for the parents and families to gather.

4.5 Members are asked to consider further ideas for the play panels

and forward these to Linda by the end of August. These will then be forwarded to Helen.

Action: All

4.6 The play area will be fenced in with weekly and monthly play inspections to check the equipment and site.

4.7 The equipment will be robust, stainless steel and cleanable so any vandalism can easily be removed.

4.8 The slides will be distributed to members so that members with disabled children can comment.

4.9 Helen and Megan were thanked for attending the meeting and for explaining their well-thought out and inclusive play area design.

5. Update on Accessible Voting

5.1 David Connors, Head of Elections & Land Services, Mid Suffolk & Babergh District Councils, was welcomed to the meeting and invited to update members.

5.2 He reminded members that a range of access guides and videos have been put together with the help of ACE. Other areas of Suffolk and the UK have also adopted these. These resources are available online and at the polling stations.

5.3 Audio-tactile devices were made available for the last elections at voting stations. If someone requests the McGonagle Reader it will be ready for them at the appropriate polling station, or staff are available to deliver the device to a polling station if someone arrives who needs it. However, none were requested before or during the recent elections. The availability of the devices needs further promotion. David will ask ACE, the RNIB and Suffolk Sight for help with this. Elysa had many comments from electors during her time as an election officer that the devices would come in useful next time and that they would let families and friends know of their existence.

Action: David Connors

5.4 Coloured acetate sheets in 10 different colours were available at all polling stations to overlay the ballot paper which helps some people process the information more easily.

5.5 Specific training around reasonable adjustments has been received to make the process as accessible as possible for voters including giving clear directions, speaking clearly and letting voters take their time.

5.6 Equipment used at home to support their disability can now be brought with them to polling stations such as magnifying glasses, writing aids and pens or their own mobile phone if they need to access a text to speech app.

5.7 Power of Attorney is not covered under election law, so proxy voting is the only way forward for those individuals. If a member of the public wants to support someone such as a family member at the polling station, there is a declaration they have to read and sign – the polling station will have this, so they just need to make staff aware and they will advise them accordingly.

5.8 David has been encouraging candidates to provide information in accessible formats and has pressed upon political parties that their information should be accessible to enable voters to confidently transfer their informed decision to the ballot paper.

5.9 David was thanked for attending the meeting and invited to return with further updates in due course.

6. Minutes from the Meeting held on 22nd April, 2026

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record.

7. Matters Arising

7.1 Item 4.7 Waste Management: Families who require larger food waste caddies can request them via the Council website. Tactile stickers for people who are visually impaired to differentiate between

the types of bins are now available from the Council and Suffolk Sight but members agreed that they were not sufficiently adhesive or raised. Elysa will report back.

Action: Elysa Dale

7.2 Item 7.3 Summer Social: This was a big success and will be repeated next year. Members of the Planning Team were thanked for organising the event. Anselm apologised for not being able to provide a physical activity for the event due to his staff being prebooked but asked if he could have longer notice of the date of the next summer meeting so he could organise an activity for next year.

7.3 Item 7.4 Forum Publicity Materials: Elizabeth D reported on progress as follows:

- **Leaflet:** The last photograph on the leaflet is due to be finalised and will be available to share digitally from next week. Printed copies will be ready soon to give out.
- **Posters:** The poster is now completed and available for members to display. Members present at the Summer Social agreed that the poster is excellent.
- **Social Media:** Linda B will be regularly posting content about the Forum and disability issues on social media. Members are asked to let Linda B know of any content they would like to share such as why they joined the Forum, success stories resulting from the Forum's activities, or positive experiences they have had.

8. Updates, Issues, Concerns and News from Members

8.1 Everyone Active: Anselm shared that there is now an adult gym session for disabled people every Wednesday morning, 11-12. As a result of funding, the sessions will be free until 10th February, 2027. Members can e-mail Olly Clayden to arrange a time for the first 1:1 appointment. A different activity for disabled people is now available every weekday.

9. Access Issues

9.1 Planning Applications: Only two applications have been sent through for comment in the last quarter and Elysa was asked to check with the Planning Department that the Forum is receiving all those that are relevant.

Action: Elysa Dale

Comments have been made on the following planning applications:

DC/26/01870 – Moat Meadow, Finningham Road, Old Newton – Application for planning permission without compliance of conditions – Erection of 47 dwellings, 16 of these are affordable – Planning permission was approved in 2023.

DC/26/02218 – Helmingham Hall Helmingham Estate Helmingham Stowmarket Suffolk IP14 6EG - Full Planning Application – Alterations to existing Stable yard, demolitions to 20th Century buildings, proposed building of new estate office and gardeners yard, new bin and log store, improved landscaping and pedestrian visitor access routes, new cycle storage facilities

Members noted that Helmingham Hall was agreed to be challenging for disabled visitors. Simon will check this on his forthcoming visit.

Action: Simon Barnett

9.2 Member's Access Issues

9.2.1 John Peel Centre: Alex reported that the redevelopment plans were available to view on their website. The plans have not been previously shared with the Forum so Alex will report back on the disability improvements such as the stage and lift.

Action: Alex Bartholomew

10. Health and Social Care

10.1 Knowing Works: Elizabeth S reported briefly on current work being undertaken including gathering feedback of non-emergency

transport, best start family hubs, and experiences of deciding to go into care homes. The annual report is also available. Elizabeth will provide a more detailed report for the minutes.

11. Future Meetings

11.1 Topics for Discussion: The Planning Group will consider the feedback collected at the Summer Social and will then plan items for the agenda.

11.2 Format: The next meeting will take place on Zoom.

12. Information Round / Any Other Business

12.1 ACE Anglia: Members were reminded that there is a considerable amount of information available on the Ace Anglia website in an Easy Read format.
<https://www.aceanglia.com/resources/>.

Karen Moy is the incoming Chief Executive following the retirement of Andrea Clark.

13. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting will be Wednesday, 21st October, 2026.
10.30am to 12.30pm via Zoom.

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