

Little Blakenham

Service Charges

Mid Suffolk Council has reviewed the charges it makes for services it has no duty to provide but that residents need. Recycling bin collection and dog waste bin emptying are examples. Here it is allowed, and administration wants to recover its costs. The total of these fees and charges for 2023/24 will be £5.407m, an increase of £256k on last year. The proposed increases range up to 73.8% but the overall average is 5%. Bulky Items collection up 10% to £49.50 and new Garden Waste collection up by 15.9% to £69, (renewals increase by 8.3% to £59) will perhaps affect us most. It is concerning that these increases will impact on people struggling to make ends meet and give an additional twist to inflation.

Tenancy

Some years ago the Council was persuaded to introduce “flexible” fixed term tenancies. It has never actually used these, and they are largely ineffective in reducing housing waiting lists.

Managing and administering these tenancies has proven to be costly and time consuming for landlords, and unsettling for tenants, particularly vulnerable tenants, and those suffering with mental illness.

Mid Suffolk and Babergh have produced a new tenancy policy and consulted tenants on its features. It provides information on how their occupation of council homes will be managed. It is consistent with the current political agenda for social housing and prioritises long-term security. “This will allow tenants and their families to create a home in council properties and build thriving and diverse communities in our housing estates.”

The councils will create a new, separate policy encouraging tenants to downsize. It may include financial incentives, advice, and practical support to assist and encourage tenants to free-up larger homes for families.

New bin lorries

The councils carried out the biggest upgrade to their 35-strong waste fleet in almost 10 years, investing some £2 m. You will have seen the publicity about the competition to name them. Twenty-two environmentally friendly bin lorries replace most of the current fleet which has emptied around 40 million bins over their working lifetimes.

They will be fuelled by certified sustainable Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) produced from waste cooking oil, after Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils became the first rural UK council to switch to the fuel last year. The change cut our carbon emissions by around 90%, as well as reducing other pollutants.

A good news story but it is a bit surprising that we have changed the fleet just ahead of the Government’s changes to waste collection strategies. The need to collect glass and food waste separately may well demand a different vehicle configuration. Jumping early may delay the move to new rules or just block progress. I hope not!

£2.8 m carbon-cutting solar investment

At Stowmarket Leisure Centre 70 solar carports are in operation, meeting almost 24% of its annual electricity demand. Another 40 are at Sudbury Leisure Centre. Each site includes battery storage so excess energy produced during sunny periods can be saved for later. The systems feed eight electric vehicle charging points, including two rapid chargers.

This trial of the technology, among the UK’s first, will generate 292,000-kWh a year reducing annual carbon emissions (CO₂) by 62 tonnes, a welcome step in the right direction. The works cost £1.4 m total, £800k from Government and £650k from the Councils.

The scheme is part of a £2.8m investment in solar energy across the Council's four leisure centres. Last year 1,278 solar panels were installed on the centres' roofs, along with other energy saving measures, including heat pumps. These were paid for by £1.4m in grants from the Government's Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.

Overall, the solar carports and roof solar panels are now producing nearly 50% of Mid Suffolk Leisure Centre's annual electricity demand. This is something we have been advocating for several years as a way to generate green energy without taking additional agricultural land or requiring grid reinforcement. At a time when the cost-of-living crisis sees the leisure centres playing their part as warm spaces for residents in need, it is good to see their energy being obtained in an environmentally friendly way.

How do the economics work? Well 292,000 kWh at feed in prices would yield about £11,680 which would hardly pay the interest on £1.4m, which would be around £56,000 at 4%, let alone



repay the capital. However, assuming we are substituting power purchased at around 44p per kWh, this looks a bit different. The value of the electricity generated would then be £128,480 for about a 11 year pay back.

That does not of course value the CO2 reduction and the reduction in climate impact that would bring but it does assume you would use all the power generated and we haven't seen an estimate that covers that. Probably ok for a leisure centre.

Port One

The planning application for the extended site stretching down to Pound Lane, and with a new entrance that appears to address the Great Blakenham Parish Council concerns about queuing has been submitted. I have asked the developer to encourage Highways to press for action to improve the Claydon roundabout. The senior planning officer, Vincent Pearce, has been trying to arrange a meeting which it will be good to attend.

Port One have purchased land between the railway and the river in Great Blakenham either side of the footpath through to Barham, as part of the environmental and biodiversity compensation for the site extension. The exact plans for this are to be agreed with input from planners and local communities.

I was told that the land profile and arrangement of bunds and reinforced tree belts between the extended development and Little Blakenham will ensure the new group of warehouses do not dominate the village but will not be visible. I have not checked the profiles in the application but will do that before the application gets to development control.

Finally, I received some concerned comments from Stephen about the elm trees at the edge of Port One. The response was "With both the root protection zone and the adjacent landscaping works we have taken great care to ensure that the Stand of Elms were left protected. As an example, we set building 3 around 1.5 m higher than originally proposed to ensure the levels were complimentary to the adjacent elms, which are of significant importance, and we believe are the largest Stand remaining in the UK"

If you have queries, please phone me on 07756292320 or email me at: john.field@mid.suffolk.gov.uk