

DISTRICT COUNCILLOR'S REPORT JANUARY 2023

Storm Babet: Flood Recovery Framework schemes – advice to councils on claim reimbursements for awards made

The Flood Recovery Framework was activated on 25 October 2023 in response to severe flooding caused by Storm Babet and eligible councils have been reporting impacts on DELTA (a web application for collecting a wide variety of DLUHC's data) for claim payments.

On 25 January, the DELTA data system will "lock down" and weekly reporting for Storm Babet will cease. The flooded property data presented on the 25 January return will form the baseline against which the government will track the recovery and be the basis for maximum funding allocations to councils.

For Community Recovery Grants and Business Recovery Grants the paid to date values will be the basis on which re-imburements will be made. The deadline for the Storm Henk Flood Recovery Framework DELTA return is 12 April.

If you have any Flood Recovery Framework queries, please contact REDRecovery@levellingup.gov.uk

Flu and COVID-19 surveillance reports updated

On 18 January, the UK Health Security Agency published [the latest national influenza and COVID-19 report, monitoring COVID-19 activity, seasonal flu and other seasonal respiratory illnesses.](#)

In week two, influenza activity increased slightly across most indicators. COVID-19 and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) activity decreased across most indicators.

Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities

On 19 January, [the Department for Education announced that families in England who have children with special educational needs and disabilities \(SEND\)](#) will soon receive further support with more short breaks, supported internship opportunities and better support for those with Down syndrome.

The short breaks innovation programme – which provides a range of activities for children with SEND, to help improve their health, education and wellbeing outcomes – will be extended to a further seven councils.

Backed by £30 million of government funding, activities include cooking classes, theatre trips and craft workshops, providing children with SEND an opportunity to develop social skills and friendships, whilst offering parents a break from caring responsibilities.

Patient Choice campaign

Last week (15 January), [the Department of Health and Social Care \(DHSC\) launched the next stage of the Patient Choice campaign](#). The campaign aims to help the public understand their right to choose where they receive their care. Patients have a legal right to choose which hospital they are referred to for their first outpatient appointment, when they are being referred for treatment by a healthcare professional.

To support the next stage of the campaign, councils are encouraged to amplify DHSC posts about [Patient Choice](#), which can be found across DHSC [social media channels](#). In addition, organisations can create content to be used on their own channels by downloading a range of resources from the [Campaign Resource Centre](#).

The Great British Rail Sale returns

On 20 January, [the Department for Transport announced that passengers will have from 23 to 29 January to claim up to 50% off selected advance and off-peak rail tickets, through the Great British Rail Sale](#).

Over a million discounted tickets will be available to destinations across England and Wales, as well as on cross-border trips into Scotland, for journeys taking place between 30 January and 15 March.

The Rail Delivery Group will host a central webpage, helping customers find the best deals. Tickets can also be found on all ticket retailer websites for journeys taking place between 30 January and 15 March 2024. Only a limited number of tickets are available, and no further sale tickets will go on offer once sold out.

Councils are encouraged to share this information as appropriate.

Community Ownership Fund

The government is providing £150 million over 4 years to support community groups in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to take ownership of assets and amenities at risk of being lost, e.g. community centres, parks, pubs and post offices.

(See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-ownership-fund-prospectus>).

Voluntary and community groups can bid for funding to acquire important assets and run them for the benefit of the community. The Fund will run until March 2025. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will run regular bidding windows throughout the year for applicants to submit a full application to the Fund.

Suffolk Recycling

Glass will be part of kerbside collections from April 26th 2024. In the meantime MSDC are promoting their "Glass is better in the bank" campaign. Glass can be reprocessed in the UK ready to be made into new bottles or jars in a few weeks. It can be endlessly recycled.

Foxhall Recycling Centre development is now complete and fully operational ahead of schedule. Changes to the highway and site layouts should allow improved access. Steps up to containers have been removed and the Re-use Shop has been moved which should improve customers' experience.

MSDC Skills and Innovation Centre at Gateway 14

Fiona Duhamel gave Lib Dem and Conservative councillors a presentation on this project. It will be a three-storey development with public access to the ground floor where there will be a glass atrium and a public café. Also on this floor there will be a dedicated training space which might be used to teach modular, long-term degrees. There will be a Boardroom with space for up to 150 delegates.

Forty-four office units will be available to let and there will also be hot-desking facilities. It is planned to provide 150 parking bays and possibly two electric bus parking spaces.

The design of the building is such as to allow a 33% reduction in emissions compared with other buildings of a similar size.

MSDC Housing Revenue Account

Deborah Fenton presented some data to Conservative and Lib Dem councillors. The original HRA was set in February 2022. Now there is a new HRA Business Plan for 23/24. There have been problems with contractors and £375K is needed to catch up with repairs. Surveyors and building services consultants have occasioned increased costs.

Levies on Second Home Owners and Owners of Empty Properties

Councillors at Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are considering higher tax premiums for owners of second homes and long-term empty properties, following the introduction of new government rules.

There are and more than 680 empty properties in Mid Suffolk, which the councils are keen to bring back into use to help meet growing housing need.

The councils already impose a council tax premium on the owners of properties that are empty and unfurnished for two years or longer, but under new legislation, the councils would be able to target empty properties after just one year from April 2024 – and impose a levy on second home owners from April 2025.

Proposals being considered by cabinet members next month would see the owners of properties left empty for a year or more paying double, with a premium of up to 100% from April 2024; properties empty for five years or more seeing their council tax bills treble with a premium of up to 200%; and owners of properties left empty for 10 years facing quadrupled bills, with a premium of up to 300%.

Also under the proposals, the owners of 542 second homes in Mid Suffolk would see their council tax bill double from April 2025.

The definition of a second home for council tax purposes would be a property which there is 'no one resident' but that is 'substantially furnished'. There will be exceptions, in line with Government policy, expected to include properties being actively marketed for sale or rent for a limited period, houses going through probate, caravan pitches or houseboat moorings.

Initial analysis suggests the proposals for empty homes premiums could generate an extra £500k in Mid Suffolk next year, while the premiums for second home owners in 2025 could net an additional £90k for Mid Suffolk. The districts, however, only keep a fraction of the council tax they collect, with the bulk going towards the cost of services provided by Suffolk County Council and the Suffolk Police and Crime Commissioner.

The proposals are just one way that the councils are encouraging empty properties back into use. There is also information on the councils' websites about Houses 4 Homes – the councils' empty homes initiative and the range of help it can offer owners to bring properties back to use, including providing loans, landlord lettings and income assistance and construction support.

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