

District Councillor Report January 2025

- There was no MSDC meeting in December.
- In December the Government released new figures for targets re house building, in the National Planning Policy Framework. For Mid Suffolk this means a 37% increase, from 535 to 784 abodes. Previous achievements above targets are not allowed to be counted in. The conclusion is that the Joint Local Plan needs to be reviewed. Time frames for this to be discussed and presumably decided in Council in February. If nothing is done we'll simply be dictated to 'from above'.
- There will be a freeze of District Council tax for this year.
- CIL money, 700k, will be distributed around 500k for sports and well being facilities in Stowmarket, 188k for Thurston Community College and 6k for improvements to National Rail installations in Thurston. Part of this to be spent on a level crossing.
- The Leader of the District Council, Andrew Mellen, has issued a statement concerning the 'Devolution plan', namely the plan to abolish County and District Councils in favour of a 'Unitary'. The statement is brief, it says that he will 'resist any drawing up of powers away from local people'. He expresses hopes that this plan may benefit residents.
- To finish this report I'm adding some update about the Devolution and the debate of yesterday, the 9th. I attended the debate.

Fundamentally there will be 'Unitaries' replacing the existing County and District Councils. That is government policy.

The real question of yesterday, therefore was, should Suffolk opt to apply to be in the 'priority group', fast tracked or should we wait to be in the second tranche of this transition.

I may add that the 'White Paper' was published on the 16th of December and that this debate took place on the 9th of January. This has meant that Consultations on the matter of opting for 'fast track' or not could not happen.

The argument in favour of 'fast track' was that we can hope for, or count upon, having more influence on the manner with which the transition is carried out, on how the new structures will be chiselled out and the like. It was claimed that being in the second wave would mean that we would simply be given a dictate ready made. Whether there could be any financial incentives or not was not brought forward in this debate. To what extent and about what our 'influence' might extend was not given any detail. The main argument against 'fast track' was that this will mean cancelling the County Council Elections in May this year. It was said that this negates democracy, also that no elections mean that the transition period would be managed by people past their elected period of mandate.

The proposed introduction of a Mayor was featuring very little in the debate. Then again, that bit is decided by the government.

The vote in the Chamber ended up 43 votes in favour of 'fast track', 15 against and no abstentions.

The final decision was taken in Cabinet. Decision was made to apply to join the 'Priority' cohort of County Councils and sending off the letter to government today, the 10th.

It is expected that we will know by the end of this month whether we have been accepted or not.

After that there will be period of extensive consultation and decision making about how we, as a County, prefer this change to happen. A lot is up in the air at present, like the size of the Unitary/ies, boundaries of the lands to be contested in elections by hopeful Unitary Councillors to be and lots more.

A 'business case' needs to be put forth this summer.

Mayoral elections envisaged to take place in the late first half of 2026.

When talking about dates for the Unitary elections things become more opaque, it depends on if the hoped for time frames will match reality or not. It could be 2027 or 2028.

One thing is clear, a Unitary Councillor will have a greater number of Parishes to liaise with than a present District Councillor. Arguably, to be a Unitary Councillor could amount to having a full time job.

Personally I remain unconvinced that the abolition of the May elections this year is worth getting in the 'Priority' cohort. If the cancelling of democratic elections is to happen at all the gains must be mighty.

I plan to do what I can to keep you abreast of all news coming out on this topic. Also I would like to hear and listen to your continuous thoughts on these matters. Email me whenever and at future Parish Council Meetings we will be able to talk further about these very important matters. The consequences will reach far into the future.

Best Wishes,
Anders Linder