

## District Councillor Report to Somersham May 2020

### The council in the Covid-19 era

The district council has re-configured a number of its teams to address the emergency response needs of the Covid 19 crisis. The structure is that defined by the joint emergency response team and district senior staff have joined the County and other agencies in that organisation.

The district is feeding government grant money through to businesses and organisations as fast as is possible and is addressing more normal issues such as homelessness by putting void properties back into use and renting hotel rooms, for instance at the Cedars, to house those who have been sleeping on the streets.

During this period no one will be evicted for not paying council tax or rent to Mid Suffolk and the Communities team is giving help wherever it is needed. Families struggling with financial hardship are to be given further support to reduce their council tax bills, with letters due through the doors of more than 4,000 households in Babergh and Mid Suffolk over coming days.

My impression is that the officers have risen to the challenge and are doing a good job. Change is being accepted with essentially 100% working from home and those who have been re-deployed to teams where demand is high are working enthusiastically. Staff absence is low, less than 1%, with numbers in single figures including those self-isolating for age reasons. That is true of the County Council as well.

### Joint statement on COVID-19 from political group leaders

Although the political makeup of the District Councils is varied we have resolved to work together to look after our communities, protect the vulnerable and safeguard our local economy during the pandemic.

### Finance

The district council is facing significant loss of revenue for car parking, the leisure centres and from its investments in commercial property. However they could be dwarfed by reductions in rent received and council tax. The Government is covering the temporary removal of business rates and the various grants that are being made to businesses and leisure organisations and has stated it will support local government. However the situation is not a comfortable one. In these circumstances it would be only too easy to react to alarming predictions and do damage to services that later proves unnecessary. Fortunately we have adequate reserves and, at the moment, there is every sign of a level headed response. However planning is moving to the recovery phase.

### Grants

Over £28m has been passed to eligible small businesses, shop owners and leisure organisations in Babergh and Mid Suffolk since the launch of the Government's Small Business Grant and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants at the end of March. This gives grants of £10,000 or £25,000 per business. There is an issue with a lack of applications from some eligible organisations and I have passed the information I have to your clerk.

Community groups and organisations can apply for immediate grants of up to £2,500 as part of Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils' response to COVID-19 making money not used last year for the shop fronts initiative, a total of £64,000 available for this use.

### Council meetings

Council meetings for Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils ceased when the lockdown commenced but briefings switched online. The Government made it legal to hold council meetings online, as you know, and after that formal council meetings are recommencing, starting with cabinet and planning meetings.

These meetings appear to work well, certainly briefings and pre-meetings, but we must ensure that the perception we are losing vital democratic challenge does not grow.

## **Waste Collections**

The district's waste collections have continued to function despite staff absence at Viridor, which has been quite significant in what is a small team. To ensure that the recycling materials and the residual waste were collected without problem the garden waste collection was halted. That caused considerable public annoyance but we are poised to re-launch the collections during May. People will have their subscription periods adjusted to ensure they are not paying for a service they did not receive.

## **Development**

### **Mid Suffolk Leisure Centre**

The plans for a £2.2m development and refurbishment at Mid Suffolk Leisure Centre in Stowmarket have been given the go ahead. Hopefully, that will help the facility return to full use when the lockdown ends.

### **SnOasis**

The 106 agreement for the SnOasis winter sports complex has been signed now that issues involving a ransom strip have been resolved. The administration continues to see this £500 million snow centre as something that will boost the local economy, creating they claim over 5,000 jobs. It has taken many years and extraordinary tolerance from the district council to get to this point and I still doubt that the business case stacks up.

### **Gareway 14**

Mid Suffolk District Council's vision for Stowmarket has taken a major step forward with the announcement of a partner, Jaynic, to deliver Gateway 14.

### **Somersham-Hopkins Homes**

The 106 agreement has been signed but the highways element does not include the off road link that appeared to be required except as an element of the improvement of local footpaths. District officers are adamant that they have satisfied the referrals committees intentions. Andy Laughlin is less than convinced but his letters have hit a stonewall, despite my interventions.