

Mid Suffolk District Councillors' May 2020 Report to the parishes in the Claydon & Barham Ward

The Council and its COVID-19 response

Following the 'lockdown' announcement, Endeavour House was closed and all Mid Suffolk/Babergh staff based there commenced working from home. Given the 'hot desking' approach and support for flexible working which were established after the move from Needham Market and Hadleigh, there was minimal disruption and a quick adaptation to the new norm by all staff. Virtual meetings and briefings, via Skype are now in use but generally using audio, but not video, to reduce the strain on IT bandwidth. There were a number of staff redeployments and flexible working hours as new priorities emerged and a Tactical Management Team created to oversee the delivery of new priorities. Issues such as homelessness, support for vulnerable people and those home-alone were promptly tackled. Grants have been swiftly processed to support the Home But Not Alone scheme. Some of our senior council officers are working as part of a Suffolk-wide approach to solutions.

All sheltered housing tenants along with a family member of each have been contacted on a daily basis by council staff recognising how difficult a time it is for these vulnerable elderly residents. A major exercise has been undertaken to pay out the many millions of pounds of government grants available to eligible businesses and the Shared Revenues Partnership have handled an unprecedented demand for Universal Credit claims and council tax payment support. The large amount of paperwork involved with the various business rate discount schemes have been promptly processed. Council house repair and maintenance has concentrated on bring void properties back into use but urgent residents' repairs are still being undertaken.

Staff sickness at Serco forced the early suspension of garden waste bin collections as resources were concentrated on the statutory waste and recycling collections. Garden bin collection will recommence with effect from w/c Monday 11th May and credit will be given for missed collections. The loss of income to the council for only this one minor disruption is in excess of £100k. The council has incurred some additional expense for such things as providing temporary accommodation to those who were homeless on the streets but the biggest hit to council finances will come from reduced income. The council relies on income from planning fees, land charges, building control, taxi licences and investment income as well as council tax and business rates. All these may be impacted to a significant extent by Covid-19. Central government has asked for regular returns from all councils to establish the financial hit to council income and increased expenses but many of these can only be initial 'guesstimates' at this time. Mid Suffolk is fortunate to have significant levels of reserves prudently put aside over the years for the proverbial 'rainy day' and Covid-19 is proving to be the ultimate rainy day.

The Council's AGM for May has been postponed in line with new government guidelines but other formal council meetings are resuming using Skype technology. The first virtual Planning Committee meeting was held with public participation at the end of April and was deemed most successful. This is now being followed by holding virtual Cabinet meetings. A

Cabinet meeting on 4th May approved a new Business Grant process, putting in place £150k to aid small and fledgling local businesses as they emerge from Covid-19 hibernation.

Alongside all this additional work there remains 'business as usual'. One example of this is that a development partner has now been appointed to assist Mid Suffolk in bringing the major Gateway 14 development at Stowmarket to fruition. Marketing agents and other professional advisors have been appointed. Revised plans for the site will be brought forward through the planning process later in the year and this significant local employment and business site should see its first occupants by 2022.

Police Matters (Tim Passmore)

Since the lockdown started overall recorded crime has fallen by about 15 % but as we all know crime is still happening - in Barham, Claydon and Henley to name but a few. Please don't be complacent just because more people are at home. There have been arrests and charges made but try to keep things under lock and key. Breaking and entering (if offenders are caught) is a more serious offence and can delay / prevent crime happening.

Please continue to report crimes and suspicions via the web or 101 which is now a free service.

There has also been a reduction in the need for child protection investigations and domestic incidents but this might be because victims find it difficult to report things - help is still available 24/7. Speeding enforcement continues in spite of the reduction in traffic volumes. Since the lockdown as of this week there have been 311 penalty tickets issued in Suffolk and some will now be prosecuted.

I have again had a discussion with the Chief Constable about parish funding of PCSOs and / or police officers and asking him to address the concerns raised regarding shift patterns and availability and will report back as soon as possible. Recruitment progresses well with 34 out of our target of an extra 54 for this financial year already appointed for training.

Drug dealers are changing their delivery methods - some are jogging as a disguise, pretending to be essential workers and using supermarket queues as a cover. Please again report anything you see so they can be caught and prosecuted.

On a bright note BP generously gave free fuel to all emergency services from mid March until the end of April.

Lastly well done and thanks to all involved in this super human effort from front line staff, volunteers, charities and all - it shows what can be achieved when we work together for the greater good.

John Whitehead and Tim Passmore