

News and information from Jane Gould, Babergh District Councillor.

To the residents in Orwell Ward

COVID 19 Newsletter 6

4 July 2020

Easing of lockdown restrictions

From Saturday 4 July, hospitality businesses including pubs, restaurants, hotels and hairdressers will be able to open their doors to customers.

In addition, the guidance for social distancing has been amended, and where 2 metre distances cannot be maintained, the guidance now recommends keeping '1 metre plus' distance. While these changes are welcome, it is still crucial that we continue to promote social distancing wherever possible and encouraging regular hand washing to limit the threat and spread of Covid-19.

Our work with businesses, towns and villages to support the introduction of all new social distancing measures continues, with both small and larger scale interventions being introduced across our districts to help create safer places for our communities. We are receiving regular updates from our towns where social distancing measures have been implemented to understand how they are working now more businesses have opened. This feedback will continue as lockdown measures continue to ease.

Help and Support

Our dedicated social distancing web pages feature a flowchart outlining the types of small-scale interventions along with the process and template for requesting larger scale interventions. We have created some downloadable posters to help businesses encourage social distancing. These are available, along with a range of guidance for businesses, on our social distancing web page. Further support is available by emailing our social distancing team or calling 0300 1234000 (option 7).

Public toilets

All legionella testing in our public toilets has been completed and we are now awaiting the results. Once the results are confirmed, the toilets will be thoroughly cleaned and opened to the public. Within all our public facilities, we will be encouraging social distancing and hand washing to reduce the threat of COVID-19 spreading.

Schools

Social distancing measures for local schools are being managed by Suffolk County Council, working directly with head teachers. In the first instance, Suffolk County Council is requesting that schools consider all available options, such as pavement marking and signage, before involving the road safety team. Requests for road safety measures outside or near school buildings can only be made by schools.

Play areas

Our public realm team is working to reopen play areas in our open spaces from Saturday 4 July, in line with the further easing of lockdown.

Discretionary Grants

The first round of applications for the Discretionary Grant, aimed at businesses in shared spaces, market stalls and charitable properties or bed and breakfast owners, closed on Friday June 19. We received 143 applications that met the Discretionary Grant criteria and, of these, 44 have already been paid. We are continuing to review all submitted applications. Any businesses that have applied and received a claim reference will be contacted to confirm whether or not their application has been successful. The criteria for the second round of Discretionary Grant funding was launched on Friday 3 July with the aim of reaching more small businesses who have not had access to other Government grants.

Housing - Gas safety checks

We are still experiencing challenges with tenants refusing access for gas servicing due to fears over Covid-19, resulting in an increasing number of out of date Landlords Gas Safety Records. To try to encourage more tenants to allow access, this week we began 'cold-call' face to face visits to properties to offer reassurance about how we can work safely to enable safety checks to go ahead.

Restart of non-essential repairs

From 4 July non-essential external repairs reported by tenants have been accepted including repairing external windows, guttering, fencing and paths. Internal non-essential repairs will remain paused for the foreseeable future to continue to protect the health and safety of our residents and staff.

Our communities - Support for those shielding

Last week, the Government announced the easing of lockdown measures for those who have been shielding - allowing them to leave their home, as long as they maintain strict social distancing. This will be followed by a further change from Monday 6 July, when they will be able to meet in a group of up to six people outdoors, while adhering to social distancing measures, and form support bubbles if they live alone, or are a lone adult with a dependent under 18. From Saturday 1 August the clinically extremely vulnerable can stop shielding and are able to visit shops and places of worship, while following current social distancing rules. Everybody in the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' categorisation has received a letter from Government outlining these steps. Those who have been shielding - and are in receipt of Government provided food parcels and medicine deliveries - will continue to receive this support until the end of July. Currently seven supermarkets are offering priority online delivery slots, with this set to continue beyond the end of July for those already signed up for support. Anyone who is clinically vulnerable and is yet to

register for support, should do so online at GOV.UK or by calling 0800 028 8327, before Friday 17 July to allow time for this to be put in place.

Village halls and community buildings

The Government also announced that village halls and community buildings were able to open from Saturday 4 July, as part of the easing of lockdown restrictions. The guidance documents, available on Community Action Suffolk's website, provide information on the safe re-opening of village halls and community buildings including making sure the hall is kept as clean as possible and that social distancing is still adhered to. Community Action Suffolk's Governance and Community Buildings Advisor Jayne Vaughan is also offering a Zoom session, for management committees and community building trustees to raise any issues or concerns they have regarding the reopening of their facility. A separate Zoom session is being run for Town and Parish Councils who manage village halls.

Volunteers

Government guidance for volunteers on how to help safely has recently been updated to contain the most up-to-date information for volunteers. The Government has also published updated guidance about how to volunteer, including guidance on how to volunteer through local authorities.

Armed Forces Week

Plans for Babergh District Council to host this year's Armed Forces Week events on behalf of Suffolk, including a week of events in Hadleigh, culminating in a colour parade throughout the town, unfortunately had to be cancelled due to Covid-19, but we were still keen to pay tribute to our armed forces community. Through our social media channels we urged recognition of the armed forces, who not only continue to provide national security, but have also played a vital role in supporting public services and our communities in response to the pandemic.

Planning site visits

In line with Government advice on social distancing, we will continue not to conduct site visits for Planning and Development Control Committees. If there is a specific need for a site visit, it will be conducted 'virtually' by a planning officer and the video will be available for committee members to view. We will keep these arrangements under review, in line with advice from Government. If you have any queries about site visits please contact the relevant planning officer or the Monitoring Officer.

Joint statement on tackling climate change from Babergh and Mid Suffolk's political group leaders

"The political make up of our councils is varied and diverse, but we are united in our view that the climate emergency is the biggest issue that affects us all, alongside responding to and supporting our communities' recovery from COVID-19. "We recognised the part we play in tackling this global issue at local level when we adopted climate emergency motions in 2019. But we know that we cannot do this alone. While there is still much work to be done, we welcome the collaborative approach taken to produce these latest proposals; with a joint, cross-party task force exploring how both councils can deliver real environmental change in our districts and to achieve our goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2030. Together, we can help to ensure our communities can look forward to bright, healthy and sustainable futures."

This is a joint statement by:

Cllr John Ward, Leader of Babergh District Council and the Conservative Group in Babergh

Cllr Clive Arthey, Leader of the Independent Group in Babergh

Cllr Robert Lindsay, Leader of the Green Group in Babergh

Cllr Sue Carpendale, Leader of the Liberal Democrats Group in Babergh

Cllr Trevor Cresswell, Leader of the Labour Group in Babergh

Cllr Suzie Morley, Leader of Mid Suffolk District Council and the Conservative Group in Mid Suffolk

Cllr Rachel Eburne, Leader of the Green Group in Mid Suffolk

Cllr John Field, Leader of the Liberal Democrats Group in Mid Suffolk

Cllr Gerard Brewster, Leader of the Independent Group in Mid Suffolk

Babergh and Mid Suffolk's blueprint for a sustainable future

Councillors are set to consider a raft of environmental measures to help Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils achieve their ambition of becoming carbon neutral by 2030.

CIFCO Business Plan for 2020/21

CIFCO's annual Business Plan is on the agenda for Councillors over the next few weeks, as the property investment company continues to weather the coronavirus storm and to provide Babergh and Mid Suffolk with vital funding to aid the districts' recovery. Property investment company CIFCO, which is wholly owned by Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, is presenting its third annual business plan to Councillors, detailing its performance over the last year and its investment strategy for the forthcoming year. While CIFCO has inevitably felt the impact of Covid-19, its company directors are confident that their rigorous risk management and diverse portfolio has put them in good stead to weather the storm. Through CIFCO, the Councils have benefitted from £1.633m of net income after costs in 2019/20. This is the equivalent to 10% of the Councils' annual staff costs or a 13.5% increase in council tax.

Over the last 12 months, CIFCO has acquired two additional properties taking the total number in the portfolio up to 14, located largely in the east of England and balanced across commercial sectors to minimise exposure to any one sector, tenant or location. Throughout the year the CIFCO Board considered almost 80 opportunities, rejecting most, and only progressing those that best

meet the investment criteria and most benefit the balance and risk profile of the portfolio as a whole.

CIFCO Capital Ltd was established jointly by Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils in 2017 to generate income through property investment which is then ploughed back into council services within the districts to offset reductions in funding from central government. Since its launch, almost £3m has been reinvested into council services.

Councillors are now being asked to consider CIFCO's performance and business plan for 2020/21 which, subject to approval at Full Council meetings in July, will continue to provide a framework and guidance for trading over the next 12 months. Last year the Councils approved the CIFCO fund being increased from £50m to £100m. To date, approximately £60m has been invested by CIFCO. Within this year's business plan, the timescale within which to invest the remaining £40m has been adjusted from April 2021 to October 2021 due to Covid-19 market impact.

CIFCO chairman Sir Christopher Haworth commented on CIFCO's performance and the impact of coronavirus on the commercial property market: "The impact of Covid-19 has been felt up and down the country and while CIFCO is weathering the storm, we are aware of the demands in the current economic climate. We are closely monitoring CIFCO's performance and while we predict the next quarter to be more challenging, we still expect rents received to exceed any borrowing costs that need to be covered by the councils. Our business plan is setting the parameters for investment over the next 12 months meaning we can move swiftly, invest wisely and continue to bring in income for the councils to support service delivery and aid the districts' recovery post-COVID."

The CIFCO accounts for the year ending March 31 2020 show a loss of £3.5m which is made up of one-off acquisition costs for the two new assets (including stamp duty and fees) as well as a re-adjustment on the value of the portfolio as whole. This loss would only be realised if the investments were sold in the

current market. Despite any fluctuations in the value, these are long terms investments which continue to deliver regular rental income.

Cllr David Busby, cabinet member for assets and investments for Babergh District Council said:

“CIFCO’s performance is providing significant returns to the Council, even in these unprecedented times. As with any investment, there will be initial, one-off costs and over time property values will fluctuate. In the long term, we expect our investment to grow providing a valuable revenue source for the Councils to benefit our residents and businesses.”

Cllr Peter Gould, cabinet member for assets and investments for Mid Suffolk District Council said:

“Like all local authorities, we are under unprecedented financial pressure to deliver services to our residents. The aim of our investment through CIFCO is to deliver a source of income for the long term rather being forced to make reductions to our services.

“The income we receive from the properties in the CIFCO portfolio can already be seen within our districts, enabling us to invest in local regeneration and in meeting the needs of our residents.”

This local regeneration includes building more than 180 new homes across Babergh and Mid Suffolk over the next two years. Work on sites for over 100 homes is due to start this year at sites across Needham Market, Shotley and Brantham, while a further 80 homes are due to be started next year in Stowmarket, Eye and Hadleigh. There is also local investment by Mid Suffolk District Council in Gateway 14, a new mixed-use business park outside Stowmarket which is set to boost local economy by providing up to 2.3 million sq. ft. of business, logistics and commercial accommodation over the next 10-15 years.

The plan was considered by Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee on June 22 and it will go before Full Councils on July 21 and 23. You can view the council papers on our website and watch both council meetings live via the councils' YouTube account.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any issues that you think I can help with and all the very best to you all.

Jane Gould

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