

**News and information from Jane Gould, Babergh District Councillor,
to the Parish Councils and residents in Orwell Ward
February 2023**

Help us promote our digital skills sessions

Do you know residents in your community and local network who'd like some help using the internet or a device like an iPad, smartphone or laptop? They can book a session with our digital skills team. Bookable sessions are now scheduled for February and March at libraries in Needham Market, Stowmarket, Sudbury and Hadleigh, with full details available on our website. All they need to do is call us on 0300 1234000 to book.

Building Services update

The councils' Building Services Transformation and Improvement Programme began in the latter half of last year, and an update on this work is now available. This provides further details about the issues we need to resolve, the impact of our action plan so far, discussions with the Regulator of Social Housing, and next steps.

A media release has also been issued. This highlights:

- How as a responsible landlord we have been proactive and transparent in addressing these issues.
- The number of properties overdue gas and electric checks is a very small proportion of our total number.
- The action plan, both short and long-term, to create an excellent service.
- Our work with the regulator to ensure we can give our tenants complete reassurance.

Guidelines and restrictions on decision making and publicity during the pre-election period

With the local elections taking place on 4 May 2023, a few reminders about the guidelines and restrictions on publicity during the pre-election period that starts on

23 March 2023 (16 March 2023 for parish councils). These restrictions apply to all elections happening during this period.

From the start of the pre-election period, the council must comply with restrictions outlined in Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986. In addition, a Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity published in 2011 makes clear that particular care should be taken in periods of heightened sensitivity, such as in the run up to an election. The Act defines publicity as “any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public.” Generally, the Act says that we should “not publish any material which, in whole, or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party.” The Code of Practice recommends that authorities should generally not issue any publicity which seeks to influence voters and that publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published unless expressly authorised by statute.

Decision making

In relation to decision making within the council, the position remains that it is ‘business as usual’ unless there are very good reasons why this should not be the case. In the vast majority of cases, the pre-election period will have no impact on normal council business, including the approval of planning decisions.

What this means

The primary restriction is on proactive publicity by the council which particularly relates to candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election. The council can still issue media releases on factual matters provided that these do not identify individual councillors or groups of councillors. Councillors are still free to respond to enquiries received from the media in a personal capacity. Individual councillors can issue their own statements, write letters to the local newspaper(s) for publication, contact the media directly or say what they like in a personal capacity, but must not use council resources to do so.

It is still possible for the council to issue statements on behalf of a councillor holding a key political or civic position provided it relates to important events which are outside the council's control and can be shown to justify a member response. These occasions are likely to be rare and to be the exception, rather than the rule. If you have any specific concerns or queries, please contact the monitoring officer.

Changes to the way we vote

The UK Government introduced a requirement for voters to show photo ID when voting at a polling station, which will be implemented in the upcoming local and Parish elections in May. Electors now will need to show photographic ID when voting in person in a polling station, across the districts. We are committed to ensuring that all our residents are fully aware of what is happening and will be using our full range of communication channels to support the Electoral Commission's national campaign within our districts.

Here is a summary of the accepted form of photo ID that can be used in polling stations:

- passport (even if expired, so long as the photograph is recognisable)
- driving licence (including provisional license)
- Blue badge
- certain concessionary travel cards
- identity card with PASS mark (Proof of Age Standards Scheme)

Residents without any of the accepted forms of photo ID can apply for a free voter ID document, known as a Voter Authority Certificate, or complete a paper application form, which will enable them to vote in person if that is their choice.

There are of course other ways, residents who are eligible to vote can - by post or by proxy. Find more information on the ways to vote and voter ID.

It is important that we encourage our residents to check that they are on the electoral register, and if not to register to vote by 17 April.

Houses 4 Homes

The Councils launched its rebranded Empty Homes service 'Houses 4 Homes' on Wednesday 1 February.

Houses 4 Homes aims to give owners of properties, which have been empty for six months or more, support and assistance to bring them back in to use.

The Service offers:

- General housing advice from Environmental Health professionals and include construction support and project planning
- Financial interest free loan assistance for property owners who need financial assistance
- Landlord lettings and income assistance - integrating and developing opportunities with Central Suffolk Lettings

The enhanced service supports the council's aim to reduce the number of long-term empty properties within the districts by helping to bring them back into use and discouraging owners from leaving them empty.

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

Babergh District Councillor, Orwell ward,

Jane.gould@babergh.gov.uk

01473 328147 or 07548 153 777