

## **District Councillor's Report – Dec 2020**

### **New Covid-19 Support Grants Launched**

Businesses in Babergh who have had to close their doors to customers as part of the second national lockdown may be eligible for a second wave of grant funding through the Government's Covid-19 support packages.

The **Local Restrictions Support Grant** is open to businesses who were trading as usual on w/c 2 November, who are liable for business rates and are one of the businesses required to close during the second lockdown. The value of the grant will vary depending on the rateable value of the business premises and will be paid as one-off grants to cover a 28-day period from 5 November to 2 December 2020. Businesses with a rateable value under £15,000 will receive £1,334 while businesses rated between £15,001 to £50,999 will receive £2000. Finally, businesses with a rateable value over £51,000 will receive £3,000 for a 28-day period. Once the application is submitted, the grants will be paid directly to the business bank account as quickly as possible. There is no charge to apply for the Local Restrictions Support Grant and businesses should be wary of any organisations who suggest they are working on behalf of any local authorities for a fee.

The **Additional Restrictions Grant** is open to businesses who were trading up to and including 4 November, who were instructed to close because of the national lockdown or can demonstrate that they have been significantly financially impacted by the National Coronavirus restriction measures. The funding available through the grant will range from £1,334 to £3,000 and applications must be submitted by Friday 18<sup>th</sup> December. Businesses will need to submit evidence that they meet the criteria. This includes a brief statement of the impact of this national lockdown on the business including detail of significant financial impact, current business insurance, confirmation of State Aid compliance as well as comparable evidence of business turnover for the period 1 September – 30 November in both 2019 and 2020. This funding provided by Government is intended to support businesses impacted by lockdown restrictions as well as to provide business recovery in 2021.

### **Green Light For Councils' Biodiversity Vision**

Councillors at Babergh and Mid Suffolk approved their first Biodiversity Action Plan to protect and strengthen biodiversity – supporting the councils' carbon neutral aims.

The plan was developed by a cross-party Biodiversity Task Force, supported by experts. It is the product of biodiversity emergency motions passed by both councils in 2019. Its approval forms a key step towards achieving the councils' ambitions to protect and enhance the environment, and links to their Joint Carbon Reduction Management Plan. Headline commitments include:

- developing a wildlife network map - to help identify and create important wildlife corridors, and tree and hedge planting areas. This will aim to enhance connectivity and improve management of existing as well as future Local Nature Reserves and wildlife sites in the district
- planting wildflower meadow verges and changing strict grass cutting regimes where suitable; encouraging bees and insects
- working with town and parish councils and local communities to identify areas where trees and hedges can be planted
- increasing hedge planting through the DEFRA Hedgerows and Boundaries Grant scheme, and helping to fund planting which isn't eligible where possible
- developing a Supplementary Planning Document linked to the Joint Local Plan - to strengthen biodiversity protections and set out the districts' expectations for design, landscaping and open space elements of new developments
- exploring the possibility of a green burial site

Residents are also being encouraged to take action, however small, to increase biodiversity in their communities. This includes things such as installing bird and bat boxes, planting flowers to attract bees, creating hedgehog corridors, and being biodiversity-conscious when gardening. Additionally, the councils' Tree for Life scheme continues to offer local parents a tree to celebrate the arrival of a child, or remember babies sadly lost. The scheme will play an important role in the wider-districts' biodiversity, using native, locally grown and sourced trees.

### **Councillors Approve Foundation For Future Growth**

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils finalised their Joint Local Plan last month – paving the way for sustainable housing growth, employment opportunities, and thriving communities with bright and healthy futures.

Both councils moved to prepare a Joint Local Plan in 2016, and careful consideration has been given to how Babergh and Mid Suffolk could deliver housing, important infrastructure, and essential employment until 2037. As part of this, a public consultation was undertaken in 2017 – with residents, local businesses and other stakeholders invited to have their say on proposals. Over 14,000 representations were received, and this subsequently informed the preferred options consultation in July 2019. Following further public feedback being received, a cross-party working group, along with officers, have worked extensively to reflect these views and revise the plan accordingly, supported by an extensive evidence base. The final version of the plan details how and where development should take place – ensuring suitable homes are built to meet the housing targets set by Government, whilst also

protecting and enhancing the districts' natural environment and heritage. Sustainable development and transport options have been promoted in the plan to meet the councils' continued commitment to addressing climate change.

Development of infrastructure, enabling facilities to keep pace with population growth, is central to the delivery of the plan and is supported by a detailed Infrastructure Delivery Plan. Importance has also been given to developing the local economy, revitalising town centres and encouraging tourism. These key priorities are supported by the accompanying evidence base to ensure the plan's soundness and deliverability. Officers have also worked with partners, such as Highways England, the Environment Agency, Historic England and others, to co-ordinate a strategic approach.

Once the plan's evidence has started to be tested, it is set to carry increased weight in the planning decision making process and will guide development in Babergh and Mid Suffolk in the long term. However, before the plan can be formally adopted by both councils, it must be submitted for examination to the Secretary of State. Prior to submission of the plan for examination, there will be a six-week period inviting representations on the legal compliance and soundness of the plan. These representations will be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for consideration during the examination and may result in recommendations for modifications to be made to the plan.

With changes to national planning policies, including local plans, potentially arising following the Government's recent planning consultations, cross-party councillors acknowledge the need to finalise the plan promptly in an attempt to protect the districts from future unsuitable development.

### **Councils To Consult On CIL Charging Rates**

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are seeking views on revised Community Infrastructure Levy charges for developers – helping to provide communities with the facilities they need to keep pace with growth. Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is collected from developers when they build new homes in the districts – supporting the councils' vision for communities with bright and healthy futures and enabling local infrastructure to meet demand from development. Mid Suffolk District Council implemented the charging of CIL in the district in April 2016, with the agreement that these rates would remain fixed for a minimum of three years. As this period has now lapsed, and in order to safeguard future infrastructure against rising costs, the councils have taken the decision to review their CIL charging rates.

The council will now undertake a public consultation to seek feedback on the revised rates. Residents, businesses, and voluntary organisations are invited to have their say before the six-week consultation closes on December 24. These responses will then be considered by the council, before being submitted to a Planning Inspector for public examination, prior to the implementation of proposed CIL charging rates.

CIL funding continues to make a real difference in Mid Suffolk, with over £2.5 million being awarded to the district's communities since the start of the year – paving the way for a range of vital facilities and local projects.

### **CIFCO Acquires Further Properties To Generate Income For Local Councils**

Property investment company CIFCO Capital Ltd purchased three further properties this month totalling almost £10.5m, to bring in future income for councils to invest back into local communities. CIFCO, which is wholly owned by Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, has purchased two neighbouring warehouse buildings on Cosgrove Way Industrial Estate in Luton for £2.475m. In addition to an office building in Epsom town centre, in Upper High Street, for £7.97m. The industrial units are both let to building supplies company Wolseley UK Ltd. The office building is home to Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust on a long-term lease. This ensures low risk returns for the councils at a time when Covid-19 is significantly affecting other traditional income streams.

The purchases are the latest in CIFCO's acquisition programme, with approximately £70m out of the £100m agreed by councillors invested so far. Further acquisitions are expected over coming weeks and months with the remaining funds due to be invested in full by October 2021 – as agreed by councillors at both Mid Suffolk and Babergh District Councils earlier this year. The latest acquisitions bring the total number of properties in the CIFCO portfolio up to 18 – and further diversifies its range of tenants to minimise exposure to any one sector, tenant or location.

CIFCO was established jointly by Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils in 2017 to generate income through property investment to offset reductions in funding from central Government. Since its launch, almost £3m has been reinvested into council services. The returns received from CIFCO allow the councils to meet loan repayments, with extra income on top then ploughed back into council services – at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has significantly affected other 'traditional' income streams.

The virus has affected almost all businesses, and CIFCO is not immune, however the diverse nature of its portfolio has mitigated the risks and rent collection levels remain above industry averages. As a result, CIFCO continues to generate a positive return for both councils.

Regards

*Rick*

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