

An update on Covid-19 in Suffolk

Thank you to everyone who has helped to support the Covid-19 response this month, which has seen the Government revert to Plan B and our NHS colleagues ramping up the vaccination rollout in a race against time to combat the spread of the Omicron variant.

We continue to use our social media channels to keep everyone informed and to share messages from our NHS and public sector partners – including information on vaccinations and boosters, FAQs and eligibility and advice for residents on protecting themselves and others.

We are ready to support our most vulnerable residents and communities through the Christmas period and beyond as case numbers continue to rise, with information on our website and across our social media channels regarding how to access help.

We await further information from the Government regarding the further financial support for businesses announced this week, so we can distribute funds to those eligible across our districts as soon as possible.

We also continue to provide regular bulletins giving a snapshot of the current Covid-19 situation in Suffolk - along with case numbers and updates on the work being carried out as part of Suffolk's Local Outbreak Control Plan. You can find the bulletins through Working Together, the monthly Councillor Update or [via the Suffolk County Council website](#).

Blueprint for districts' future development to progress

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have welcomed a decision by Planning Inspectors to allow work on their Joint Local Plan to continue – meaning the councils can ensure the right developments happen in the right places at the right time.

Public examination of the Local Plan, the strategic outline for future development of the districts, was paused earlier this year to allow the councils further time to review their evidence.

An exploratory meeting was held with the councils and inspectors on Thursday (December 16) during which a proposed work programme was agreed that would see the councils have an adopted plan next year, helping to shape the future for Babergh and Mid Suffolk's communities.

Work on the Joint Local Plan began in 2016 when the councils began gathering a range of evidence to help inform its preparation, including studies on retail, economic land needs, housing land availability and housing market assessments. The plan was then further developed following consultation, with submissions of more than 14,000 comments from over 1,300 people and input from both statutory consultees and cross-party councillors.

The plan – which outlines housing requirements and considers the long-term impact of climate change, including flood risk, water supply and biodiversity, as well as other matters such as supporting the economy and our town centres – is now nearing the final stages of the process. This involves a review by Planning Inspectors, who are appointed by the Secretary of State, to carry out an independent examination before recommending whether or not it can be adopted.

The Inspectors' proposals, agreed on Thursday, will see the councils now proceed with their Joint Local Plan in two parts. Important social, economic and environmental objectives will be put in place first, while remaining work on spatial strategy matters and housing allocations are addressed in part two. This means the councils will have an up-to-date plan for decision making.

The Inspectors gave assurances in the meantime that they recognised around 90% of the housing requirement that Babergh and Mid Suffolk needs to provide is already earmarked through existing commitments and Neighbourhood Plan allocations – meaning the councils can demonstrate they are meeting housing needs while the second part of the Joint Local Plan is developed.

Work begins on carbon-cutting solar carport schemes

Works have begun on installing solar carports which will help power and slash the carbon emissions of two council-owned leisure centres - as part of council plans to tackle climate change.

Phased works to install 70 solar carports at Mid Suffolk Leisure Centre in Stowmarket have now begun, with further works to install an additional 40 carports at Kingfisher Leisure Centre in Sudbury due to fully start in January next year.

The schemes form part of a £2.8m investment in solar at the councils leisure centres; with £1.4m in funding for the solar carports pilot, and a further £1.4m in funding to install [solar panels and other energy saving measures on the leisure centre buildings](#).

The carport technology, to be installed by [East Anglia-based Polysolar](#), will provide energy to help run the centres. As well as battery storage and several electric vehicle charging points, which will be available in both regular and accessible bays, including two rapid chargers at each site.

The initiative forms part of the councils' Carbon Reduction Management Plan, and is being funded by [over £600k from the councils](#) on top of £800k of Government matched funding from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' Getting Building Fund. Awarded by the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership, the match funding is to help deliver jobs, skills, and infrastructure in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Among the first rural UK councils trialling the technology, the councils' hope is that by championing innovation, their example will encourage others to follow suit.

The carports are expected to be completed by Spring 2022.

Freeport East passes major milestone

Mid Suffolk District Council has welcomed news that Gateway 14, near Stowmarket, has officially been designated as a tax site as part of [Freeport East](#).

Freeport East has moved a significant step closer to fulfilling its vision. The outline business case has been formally approved by Government, the three tax sites in Felixstowe, Harwich as well as Gateway 14 have been agreed, [published on GOV.UK](#) and Statutory Instruments laid to enshrine them in legislation.

George Kieffer, Acting Chairman of Freeport East, said: "This is a major achievement. Freeport East represents a unique opportunity to deliver economic growth and will create many high skilled jobs in the local communities. It will work closely together with the private sector as well as education institutions to create these opportunities through innovation and investment. Following designation businesses investing in the Freeport's tax sites will be able to benefit from a number of tax reliefs.

“The UK Freeports policy is designed to encourage businesses from around the world to create new hubs of global trade that will transform economic prospects and job opportunities for local communities. The location of Freeport East, with the country’s main unitised trade hub at its core and 50% of planned offshore wind capacity on its doorstep, could not be better placed to deliver on these objectives and to help the UK achieves its ambitious energy transition objectives.”

Sir Christopher Haworth, Chairman of Gateway 14 Ltd said: “I am delighted that we have reached this significant milestone for Gateway 14. As part of Freeport East, we will be able to deliver increased opportunities and benefits to attract future occupiers to the site, to the benefit of businesses across the whole of Suffolk.”

Councillor Suzie Morley, leader of Mid Suffolk District Council commented: "As we look to the future and prepare to grow our economy post Brexit and post Covid, Freeport East will increase the opportunities to attract new businesses and create job opportunities for the mid Suffolk region."

The tax reliefs that will be available in the designated tax sites are; Stamp Duty Land Tax Relief, Enhanced Capital Allowances, Enhanced Structures and Buildings Allowance, National Insurance Contributions rate relief and business rates relief.

Freeport East will create a global trade hub, resulting in economic growth, bringing more jobs and prosperity to the region. The project will accelerate opportunities in green energy and will help level-up the national economy.

In addition to the three tax sites, Freeport East will have customs sites at Felixstowe, Harwich, Gateway 14, Port One Logistics Park, Horsely Cross, Uniserve and PD Ports.

The Freeport East partnership includes Hutchison Ports Port of Felixstowe, Hutchison Ports Harwich International, Harwich Haven Authority, Haven Gateway Partnership, New Anglia and South East Local Enterprise Partnerships, Suffolk and Essex County Councils, East Suffolk Council, Mid Suffolk District Council and Tendring District Council.

Scheme to support new small businesses marks successful six months

A pilot scheme to support small businesses in Babergh and Mid Suffolk has been hailed a success as it reaches its six-month milestone.

Since its launch in July 2021, the Innovate Local initiative has supported 11 small businesses by providing a free pitch at either Stowmarket or Hadleigh markets for up to four weeks.

In addition to a regular spot on the market, business owners were offered support to run a safe and successful stall, mentoring, business advice and training opportunities both before and after the pilot to help them maximise the opportunity.

Feedback from the traders who have taken part in the scheme has been overwhelming positive with several investing in their own equipment to use on the market or other events. Following the initial success of the pilot, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are investigating ways to expand the Innovate Local scheme during 2022.

The Innovate Local scheme is part of a programme of activity to support high streets in the Districts post Covid-19.

The Innovate Local scheme is open to businesses that have been operating for less than a year and do not currently have a place on a market.

Cllr Gerard Brewster, Mid Suffolk District Council cabinet member for economic growth said:

“We have welcomed eight businesses to our market stall in Stowmarket over the past six months and supported them with expert support and advice. The feedback from the traders has demonstrated that by creating a pathway for new businesses can really help them get off the ground, engage directly with customers and develop their own skills to run a successful business.”

Louise Cornish is currently trading from the Innovate Local stall in Stowmarket and commented:

“Having the chance to be part of the Innovate Local scheme has been an amazing opportunity for me. I have always worked in retail but to get the chance to try and sell my own items is brilliant. The scheme has given me the chance to meet other traders and work alongside them, and gain experience on the market.”

The Innovate Local initiative at Hadleigh and Stowmarket has been run by Suffolk Market Events who currently manage Hadleigh market on behalf of Babergh District Council and partnership with the market manager at Stowmarket Town Council.

As part of the Innovate Local Initiative, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils will also be opening an innovation hub in Eye and a pop-up hub in Sudbury later this year.

The Innovate Local hubs will offer small business owners and entrepreneurs access to a working space, mentoring programme as well as targeted business advice and training opportunities.

The hubs are being delivered in partnership with the Innovation Labs and businesses using either of the hubs in Eye or Sudbury will be able to use Innovation Labs collaborative working space based in Stowmarket.

The Innovate Local scheme is being funded from the Suffolk Inclusive Growth Investment Fund (SIGIF) and is part of a wider initiative to support businesses in Babergh and Mid Suffolk. Other activities include the development of the successful Virtual High Street and the roll out a digital skills programme.

Councils urge National Highways to ‘unblock Copdock’

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have submitted a joint response to [a consultation by National Highways on proposed improvements to the Copdock Interchange](#) – urging the creation of a new link road to keep business traffic flowing freely.

The A14 junction 55 is a vital interchange for the region, linking the Port of Felixstowe with the Midlands and beyond via the M6 and M1, and Colchester, Chelmsford, London, the M25 and Stansted Airport to the south.

As part of an informal pre-application consultation on potential improvements to the junction, National Highways sought feedback on two possible options: either improving traffic flow by widening the existing carriageway and introducing left turn lanes, or slashing the volume of traffic using the junction by building a new link road for traffic travelling between the A12 (South) and A14 (East).

In their joint response, the councils back the new link road as the best way of tackling existing congestion and ensuring the efficient movement of goods from Freeport East, including Stowmarket's Gateway 14 - helping to ensure national, regional, and local economic prosperity and delivering the greatest benefits to the districts' communities and businesses.

However, of equal consideration to the councils is the environmental impact, with National Highways urged to ensure any proposals adequately address noise, light and air quality impacts on local residents, and align with Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils' Biodiversity Action Plan – protecting and strengthening plant life and local wildlife in the districts.

Cllr David Burn, Mid Suffolk District Council's cabinet member for Planning, said:

“We have worked closely with National Highways in preparing our Joint Local Plan and we recognise the Copdock Interchange as critical infrastructure for our districts. There is a clear need to focus on improvements to the A12 and A14 and the junction is also a key issue identified in Suffolk County Council's Local Transport Plan.

“However, any development proposals will also need to adequately address the environmental impact on local residents, and we welcome further discussions to explore opportunities to secure benefits for our communities.”

National Highways is now collating and analysing responses before producing a consultation report and presenting its chosen option to the Department for Transport for consideration for funding.

Eight new affordable homes in Needham Market

Eight new homes in Needham Market can now open their doors to families as the Chambers Green development continues to expand

The new houses on the Chambers Green development were handed over last Friday (3 December) on the site of the council's former offices are part of Mid Suffolk District Council's multi-million investment in the town.

The former Mid Suffolk headquarters site will be transformed into a combination of two and three bed detached and semi-detached houses, as well as one and two bed apartments. This latest stage will take the tally of completed homes on the estate to 10 - with an additional 19 homes due to be completed by Spring 2022.

The development is being delivered by Mid Suffolk Growth – a joint venture between Mid Suffolk District Council and Norse Group set up to deliver housing and promote sustainable growth across the district.

Cllr Lavinia Hadingham, Mid Suffolk District Council's cabinet member for housing, said:

“It's important that everyone in the district should have access to affordable housing and somewhere that they can call home. This development meets a range of needs – in adding to our council housing stock and offering a provision for those wishing to own property. Either way, these properties will be people's homes, and help to sustain one of our essential market towns.”

The development is part of Mid Suffolk District Council's Invest in Needham Market programme which aims to deliver projects to support the town and create places with bright and healthy futures that everyone is proud to call home.

Richard Gawthorpe, Director MSDC Growth Ltd said:

“On behalf of the Directors of Mid Suffolk Growth, we are delighted to be handing over these beautiful new homes to our client Mid Suffolk District Council. These 8 new homes represent the first release of 32 homes on Phase 1 at Chambers Green in Needham Market.

We want to thank our design team Hamson Barron Smith and main contractor Cocksedge Building Contractors for designing and delivering these exquisite new homes at Chambers Green and look forward to completing Phase 1 in the Spring and moving on to the larger Phase 2 development at Chambers Green during next year.”

In addition to the new houses at Chambers Green, the Invest in Needham Market programme includes the development of new homes at the former Middle School sites, the delivery of a new library for the town and the creation of a new café and visitor centre at Needham Lake.