

## **Working together to support communities and businesses**

I am writing to thank you for all your efforts in these unprecedented times, and to say that we look forward to even closer collaboration as we work together to support our communities and businesses.

I am aware that SALC are providing advice and guidance to you as parish councils and this is an important source of information. But I thought it might also be helpful to supplement that with some of the things we have been doing as well as making sure our work with you continues to be as effective, and focused on delivering for our communities and businesses, as possible.

Our staff and councillors are working around the clock to deliver essential services and extra measures for business and communities to help tackle COVID-19 and support the most vulnerable. This is, of course, while dealing with the same personal and health situations as everyone else and following Government guidelines.

This is an ever-changing situation as demands and pressures increase on the council and I would ask you to bear with us and, as ever, work with us to find solutions to local challenges where possible. Already we are seeing some great initiatives from Parish and Town Councils.

The coronavirus situation is moving rapidly with frequent updates. To avoid confusion and information overload, we would point people to our website to see the latest information and support available for business and households, as they are put in place following Government announcements.

In the first instance we would like people if possible, to go online to access services or find out information. This takes the pressure off our customer services team who are working remotely from their homes and reduces the number of calls. The website address is [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk) and the COVID-19 information can be found there for communities and businesses on our dedicated page [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/coronavirus) However, we understand that some may not be able to do this and our call centre will be able to help those who cannot find the information elsewhere.

I would be grateful if you could share this with your councillors and parishioners and I attach some text that you may like to share online or in parish communications:

## Message from West Suffolk Council

West Suffolk Council is first and foremost, making sure that we can continue to deliver the essential services our communities and businesses need while following advice and instructions from health bodies and Government. We are doing so using plans already developed for such eventualities so that, for example, we can redeploy staff where needed. We also of course recognise the serious impact COVID-19 is having on individuals, communities and our businesses, and are working urgently on additional measures to help ease the burdens they are already or will be facing.

As soon as these are ready to be introduced we are of course publicising them on our website [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/coronavirus) We remain focused on supporting and indeed improving the health, safety and welfare of our residents and businesses now and for the future.

Below I have summed up some of the actions we have taken and help that is being provided:

## Community Help

### Home, But Not Alone

- Anyone that is vulnerable, at home but with no other support from family or friends available to them, can call the Home But Not Alone freephone **0800 876 6926** which is staffed from **9am to 5pm**, seven days a week.
- West Suffolk Council staff provide a response to the calls from residents in its area and the aim is, where possible, to identify a solution in a local area, whether that's signposting to a shop that takes phone payments and delivers food, to matching people who are vulnerable with local community support to help with things like delivering groceries, medication or essential household goods, in line with Government social distancing guidelines.
- West Suffolk Council asks community support groups in the area to email [families.communities@westsuffolk.gov.uk](mailto:families.communities@westsuffolk.gov.uk) so that they can help coordinate this.
- The Home, But Not Alone service was created by partners from Suffolk's councils, police, health bodies and charitable organisations which come together as the Collaborative Communities Board.

- In addition, the 'Home But Not Alone', service has launched a free app, called Tribe Volunteer, to help connect people who want to volunteer in their communities with neighbours who are most in need. The service will mean willing volunteers, charities, town and parish councils, community and religious groups can all log their details and offers of support on an app which can be downloaded from the Apple App Store and Google Play Store.

### **Locality budget funding**

- Community and voluntary groups that are working to help vulnerable people in their neighbourhood during the coronavirus crisis can now benefit from extra financial support from councillors and guidance to help with their vital work.
- West Suffolk Council already works with many voluntary community sector groups, many of which are working to help the most vulnerable at this time, while new groups are also being formed.
- Now it is making additional support available to them by increasing councillors' locality budgets and adapting the scheme so it can offer swifter support to many of the new groups that are currently being set up.
- The locality budget scheme has been relaxed so that our councillors can now fund new groups who may not have created separate bank accounts or constitutions. Previously these groups would have had to undertake those actions before any funding could be awarded. Each of the 64 councillors' locality budgets has also been increased from £2800 to £3300. This level of increase will be kept under review during the current crisis and the aftermath. The Council is able to direct people to other available funding. Groups can contact their local West Suffolk Councillor to discuss available funding or email [families.communities@westsuffolk.gov.uk](mailto:families.communities@westsuffolk.gov.uk)

### **Advice for community groups**

- The Council also sharing Community Action Suffolk's coronavirus guidance for groups which includes advice on handling cash and safeguarding and is available at [www.communityactionsuffolk.org.uk/covid-19-response](http://www.communityactionsuffolk.org.uk/covid-19-response)

## **Business Help**

### **Support for our businesses**

Businesses are being contacted by West Suffolk Council to take up £32m in grants while they will also get a further £34m in rate relief to help them survive COVID19.

- The Council will be contacting an estimated 2,300 eligible businesses encouraging and supporting them to take up grants of £10,000 available under the Government's Small Business Grants Fund.
- It will also contact the business owners of another 610 properties that are eligible as part of the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Fund. Grants of £10,000 and £25,000 are available under the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Business Grants Fund.

### **Extra measures**

The Council has agreed extra measures to help businesses which we are implementing. They include: -

- On a case by case basis, looking at payment terms for business rates to aid those who are having difficulties paying. For example, this could mean spreading payments over a longer time or given a tailored response to the needs of the business.
- Not aggressively pursuing the collection of Business Rates during the pandemic, including suspending Court actions.
- the offer of more relaxed payment terms and recovery processes for services we provide such as rent on West Suffolk Council-owned properties, repayment for solar panels, green energy.
- On a case by case basis suspend payment for services not being delivered or received – for example brown bins or trade waste where a company is not trading.
- Review arrangements with current loan recipients, for example, exploring the suspension of interest and offering capital repayment holidays.
- Relax current payment terms to allow swifter payments from the Council to support the supply chain and local businesses.

### **2020 Bury St Edmunds Christmas Fayre cancelled**

- By cancelling the Christmas Fayre this year, we are freeing up much needed funding and officer support for businesses that need it now during the COVID-19 outbreak and the recovery from it.

- It is a sad decision to have to make, but it is a common-sense one to prioritise resources on helping our communities and businesses now.
- It means businesses will not only be supported during this time but in a better position to recover when we can hopefully support all traders and others across the whole of West Suffolk to celebrate Christmas.
- The future of other events later in the year is under review but for something as complex as the fayre we would need to book things and plan now using resources and funding perhaps better spent on our greater priorities for our communities now.

### **Parking charges**

- Charges in all West Suffolk Council car parks and on street have been temporarily suspended to support key workers and community volunteers in the current COVID-19 crisis
- The move will help local key workers and the delivery of essential goods for the most vulnerable in town centres by community volunteers and organisations.
- It will also ease parking for many working from home or in residential parking zones as they will be able to use the car parks and reduce parking on streets in congested areas. This allows emergency and essential services such as police, fire, ambulances and bin lorries to get through.

### **Civil Parking Enforcement**

- Councils will take over the enforcement of parking from the police from 6 April in Suffolk. While we have the power, we understand these are extraordinary times and we are prioritising our resources into tackling COVID-19. We will therefore be taking a common-sense approach.

### **Changes to our services and the way we are working**

- To help tackle COVID-19 and make sure we can continue to deliver essential services , as well as providing additional measures for communities and

businesses, West Suffolk Council is having to scale back or indeed stop some of the things we do.

- From Monday 30 March, the Garden Waste Collection Service has been suspended to allow redeployment of crews for essential collection. Residents who use the service will have the time added to next year, so they are not out of pocket.
- Grass cutting, some street cleaning and tree work has also been scaled back.

### **West Suffolk Council Markets to close**

- A decision has been made to close the markets in West Suffolk to allow staff to be redeployed onto other vital work.
- Market users and traders had been following social spacing and Government guidance with stalls spaced out to enable people to get essential food shopping.
- The Council had tried to keep the markets running as long as possible under Government guidelines. But operationally it could no longer be done as the numbers of traders and customers dwindle and the demands on staff and safety due to the impact of COVID-19 rises.

### **Parks**

- **Parks are being kept open so people can exercise once a day. All playgrounds in our parks have however been closed**

### **Scams**

- Please be extra vigilant at this time. A number of #COVID19 related phishing emails and texts have been reported to Action Fraud. These emails or texts appear to come from a credible source such as DWP, HMRC and banks. They attempt to trick you into opening malicious attachments or links to fake webpages which could lead to fraudsters stealing your personal information, logins, passwords, or banking details.
- Never pass on your personal information if you have any queries over the nature of the contact.

[www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/coronavirus)

- We would always recommend going straight to the website address rather than clicking links on emails or texts.
- Report the email or text to Action Fraud online, phone 0300 123 2050 (this number will be charged at your normal network rate). They open Monday to Friday 9am-6pm.

### Local Plan

In light of the current COVID-19 situation the Regulation 18 - issues and options consultation, planned for May 2020, has been postponed.

We will of course update you and our website regarding a revised timetable as more information becomes available.

### Contact details

Please, to help our contact centre who are working remotely and helping many people, some very distraught, we encourage wherever possible everyone to go online. Our website [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk) has all the information and special pages on COVID-19 which we are updating.

We do realise that this may not always be possible and so people can contact us on our normal number of **01284 763233**.

For help with business enquiries please visit [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/c19business](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/c19business) or [Covid19.BusinessGrants@westsuffolk.gov.uk](mailto:Covid19.BusinessGrants@westsuffolk.gov.uk) or call **01284 757114**.

With best wishes to you all, and do take care of yourselves, your loved ones and us all



**Clr John Griffiths**  
**Leader, West Suffolk Council**