**May 2020** Due to the Covid-19 emergency, from 23 March 2020, all Council meetings were cancelled, and Council staff began working from home where possible. Many staff have been seconded to different service areas and some of the routine work has been paused for the time being.

The Home but Not Alone helpline - 0800 876 6926 - was receiving several hundred calls a day. Staffed 09:00 to 17:00, seven days a week.

MSDC have so far received £1.069M in grants from Central Government to assist towards extra costs and reduced income.

Since the lockdown there were no formal District Council meetings until a planning committee meeting was held on Tuesday 28th April with members and officers using Skype facilities from their homes. The May Cabinet meeting was held using Skype and more and more meetings were being set up. Where possible task groups and informal meetings are continuing to try to move forward as much council business as possible.

Under delegated powers, as augmented by government legislation, some key decisions have been made by the Chief Executive. Most significant are the approval of Section 106 conditions regarding the “Snoasis” development and amendments to MSDC’s statement of community involvement which means no site notices for planning applications.

The majority of planning decisions are now delegated to the Chief Planning Officer. Ward members are able to provide information and advice which is taken into account as decisions are taken.

**June 2020** Staff were continuing to work from home, making use of Skype (now Microsoft Teams) to hold virtual meetings with colleagues and residents; non-urgent site inspections are not taking place. Many officers have been seconded to different duties to help MSDC respond to the issues arising from the pandemic.

A new £300,000 funding programme, for small businesses across Babergh and Mid Suffolk, The Business Innovation and Growth Fund, has been agreed - with funds to be allocated over the next three years. The aim is to help sustain and create jobs, provide opportunities to grow and innovate as well as react to the changing business landscape.

MSDC has funds to support organisations providing help to vulnerable residents. Community groups, along with town and parish councils, are playing a key role in easing the challenges faced by residents at this time. A Covid-19 Emerging Needs Grant was set up last month, ensuring much-needed funding could be provided to new and existing groups.

**July 2020** **The first full Council meeting since February 2020 was held virtually on 23rd of July and broadcast live via YouTube**.

First “post Covid” Review: Cabinet Targets. – Get economy moving again, get housing market moving again, improving housing standards, public health and wellbeing, climate change, innovation and

transformation.

Proposals from the Cross-Party Task Force of Mid Suffolk and Babergh Councillors were considered by Cabinet on 6 July. They contained a number of environmental measures which could form the councils’ first Carbon Reduction Management Plan, setting out how they aim to fulfil their ambitions of becoming carbon neutral within the next ten years. These included: B&MSDC will develop a plan to significantly increase tree and hedgerow planting in the district and B&MSDC will work with local communities and support them to develop local ‘place-specific’ solutions and build resilience to climate impacts.

Staff were returning from redeployments but systems such as the “Home but Not Alone” helpline kept in place. ​

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**Aug. 2020**  The Green Group and the Liberal Democrat Group of Councillors joined forces to become ‘The Green and Liberal Democrat Group’ in order to more effectively hold the current administration to account.  The new group has 17 members, one more than the Conservatives who will need to rely upon the Independent member and Chairman’s casting vote. Rachel Eburne is the Leader of the new group; she approached the Conservative Leader with a request that the two groups work collaboratively for the benefit of residents of the District.

Babergh and Mid Suffolk are to share a £800,000 grant from the “Getting Building Fund” for the introduction of micro-generation and electricity storage solar carports in Sudbury and Stowmarket.  The funding will provide 50% of the budget for Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Council to install multifunctional solar carports which will generate and store electricity and provide a point for electric vehicle charging.

**Sept. 2020** The Annual Council Meeting was held virtually on 24th September. Barry Humphreys was elected as Chairman and Paul Ekpenyong as Vice Chair. The Committees and Chairs were all agreed, with the Chairman using his casting vote to elect all the chairs and vice chairs from the Conservative and Independent Group, except for Overview and Scrutiny which is traditionally chaired by an opposition member and will continue to be chaired by Keith Welham, with Keith Scarff as vice chair.

The Councils have carried out a review of the delivery of the public realm service which includes maintenance of open spaces, litter picking, public toilets and tree maintenance.  Currently the service is provided by MSDC staff in Mid Suffolk, whereas in Babergh that work is contracted out.  The aim is to have a common service delivery across both districts. Changes will beimplemented in summer 2021

**Oct. 2020** Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils have been awarded a grant of £100,000 to help cover the cost of temporary accommodation for homeless people over the winter.  In Mid Suffolk there are few (possibly only 2) people sleeping rough but pre-Covid many others  had been sofa-surfing or staying with elderly relatives.  In order to protect vulnerable people, some of these people became homeless and were accommodated in hotels.

Government consultations on planning: *Changes to the current planning system* is about changes to planning policy and regulation including how the housing numbers for each local government area are calculated.

*Planning for the future* is a White Paper that proposes major reforms to the planning system.

**Nov. 2020** Mid Suffolk is administering the £500 compensation payment for those who have had to isolate due to Track and Trace. To date they have allocated £33,000. Separately, Government has provided £40,000 to the district council to use on compliance issues relating to Covid 19 such as environmental health or the need for Covid Marshalls in Stowmarket.

The Biodiversity Action Plan, produced by the cross-party task force, was adopted at the Cabinet meeting held on 9 November.  The aim is to improve biodiversity in the way that MSDC operate, through specific initiatives and partnership working.  One such initiative is to plant 500 trees and a kilometre of hedging during 2021/22.  The task force will monitor the Action Plan and look for initiatives for increasing biodiversity.

**Dec. 2020** Mid Suffolk is administering payments of grants to businesses forced to close or suffering a significant loss of income during the current lockdown period.  The current assessment of additional costs is £800k and income reduction currently stands at £1.3 million.  Support from Central Government has so far totaled £2.2million.  When the shortfall in collection of council tax and business rates is also taken into account, the overall shortfall due to Covid 19 is £81k.

 The budget setting process is under way; this will be a more difficult exercise than usual due to the uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.  MSDC has suffered a loss of income and extra costs.  Also, more and more residents are unable to make payments of council tax and council rents.

MSDC has made further investments in properties in Luton and Epsom for £10.5 million and plans to spend a further £15 million making a total of £50 million, all paid for on long-term loans. These investments are managed by CIFCO.  The property portfolio continues to decrease in value; two of the properties have been without tenants and some 30% of rental income is unpaid or delayed.  Nevertheless, the Leader of MSDC is quoted as saying, ‘Through these careful investments, CIFCO will continue to bring in much-needed income to support our district’s recovery post-Covid'.

**January 2021** Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils will cut their fleet’s carbon emissions by up to 90% – supporting the councils’ carbon neutral aims. The move follows approval by both councils’ cabinets this week, to switch their vehicle fleet to Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO).

Strategic Asset Management Plan announced following the appointment of a Corporate Manager for Strategic Property, this is being prepared to cover MSDC’s physical assets from patches of open space to office buildings -total value £20,987,880. This does not include Gateway 14 nor CIFCO. This will include acquisitions, disposals and monitoring of the estate.

B&MSDC working with Norse Group. The underlying purpose of the Design Guide is to define the quality standards of new development, at all scales, and to create well-designed and well-built places that benefit people and communities

**February 2021** MSDC Council: Budget Approved, Council Tax increased 1.66%, equates to £2.80 per year for a band D property, increases in social rents £1.30 per week.

In response to amendments proposed by the Green and Lib Dems Opposition Group the council accepted the motion: “That the General Fund Budget proposals for 2021/22 and four-year outlook set out in the report be approved, *and that recommendations to Cabinet be prepared, using a balanced, cross-party approach, for the allocation of the additional £4.1 million of funding for investment in our local economy, housing, the wellbeing of our residents and in our communities. This cross-party approach would also give consideration to the budget amendments proposed in 2020/21 and 2021/22.”*and be funded from reserves*.*

**March 2021** Joint Local Plan submitted for examination by the Secretary of State. Following both councils opting to prepare a [Joint Local Plan](https://www.babergh.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/new-joint-local-plan/joint-local-plan-r19-pre-submission/) in 2016, careful consideration has been given to how the districts will balance the delivery of housing growth, important infrastructure, and essential employment, while safeguarding our natural and historic environment until 2037.

Full Council supports the motion: “That the Council carries out a review of green space to ensure that it is optimising the biodiversity and wellbeing aspects of natural and amenity green space in Mid Suffolk.”

Gateway 14 Ltd has submitted a planning application to Mid Suffolk District Council for the development of Gateway 14, a mixed-use business park planned for land adjacent to junction 50 of the A14 in Stowmarket, Suffolk. Gateway 14 is one of a variety of sites in our region to be granted Freeport status.

**April 2021** Since March 2020, 6,237 business grants worth £30,041,539 have been paid to businesses in Mid Suffolk. On 31st March the COVID support grant scheme ended. **However, there are still grants to help with business rates and a new Restart Grant to help retail businesses open safely.**

**May 2021** County Council and Police Commissioner Elections 6th May**.**

End to Virtual Meetings from 7th May

Dear Group Leaders and Council Chairmen,

Thank you for the feedback you provided on my previous proposals for meetings after 6 May 2021. Based on that feedback and following the high court ruling this week, I have revised my recommended approach as per the attached document.

“I completely understand that some Councillors may be very anxious about returning to in person meetings, please rest assured that we will be taking all possible steps to ensure that the meetings are covid secure and that the health and safety of councillors, staff members and any members of the public attending is protected. We will provide further information ahead of the meetings taking place, but you will typically see the usual covid secure arrangements – social distancing, hand sanitising stations, requirement to wear face coverings, one-way systems etc.

We will not be requiring Councillors to demonstrate that they have been vaccinated or to have a negative covid test before attending the meetings, however I would encourage all councillors to consider using the lateral flow tests that are now available to everybody. More information about obtaining the tests can be found at <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/coronavirus-covid-19/getting-a-test/covid-19-asymptomatic-testing/>”

In accordance with the Local government Act 1972

The High Court ruling has made it clear that councillors must be present in a single, specified geographical location for the meeting to be legal – I believe this confines us to a single meeting room.”

Ongoing issues: In the light of recent (and continuing) breaches of planning conditions by developers. Philip Isbell has advised that he is completely revisiting the Enforcement Policy and expects this to be done at Overview and Scrutiny Committee as soon as it can be.  He also expects to reconvene the Member Working Group (that was used for the Joint Local Plan discussions) to discuss this in detail.