

January 2021 report for the Thredling Division from Cllr Matthew Hicks

Moving into a national lockdown. Testing capacity has increased in response to demand.

More than one third of Suffolk's total confirmed coronavirus cases were recorded in the last two weeks, government data has shown. A total of 15,643 people have tested positive for the virus in the county as of January 2 – with 5,321 people testing positive from December 20 to January 2, making up 34% of all cases recorded in Suffolk by that point. While the figures show cases are significantly on the rise, testing has vastly increased in recent months when compared to the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. Mobile testing has increased countywide, while a walk-in test centre has also opened at Portman Road, Ipswich, alongside the permanent test centre at Copdock. Suffolk is seeing a similar, sharp increase in positive cases in line with the regional picture, which is making more people ill and putting our hospitals under even more pressure. The new variant of the virus spreads more easily, we must all limit contact with others wherever possible. Even though you may not have any symptoms, you may be giving Covid-19 to someone else without realising it. We all need to maintain social distancing, continue washing our hands regularly, wearing a mask when appropriate and strictly following the government's guidance.

Support payments available for those told to self-isolate on low incomes

As of the 24th December, more residents on low incomes or benefits can now get financial help if they are told to self-isolate due to COVID-19. Previously Test and Trace Support payments could only be given to people meeting certain criteria, including on benefits. Now Councils across Suffolk have extended this, using their discretion, to help those on low incomes but not on benefits. Councils across Suffolk are helping administer the Government grant scheme to help people remain at home and do their bit to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Details about the Test and Trace Support Payments can be found on District and Borough Council websites and how to apply for it (see below). This is part of a range of measures that councils across Suffolk have introduced to support communities and businesses during the coronavirus pandemic. Visit your District or Borough Council websites for details on how to apply for the £500 Test and Trace Support Payment:

Babergh District Council: babergh.gov.uk/benefits/coronavirus-money-and-benefits-advice/

Mid Suffolk District Councils midsuffolk.gov.uk/benefits/coronavirus-money-and-benefits-advice/

East Suffolk Council <https://www.eastsuffolk.gov.uk/east-suffolk-test-and-trace-payment-scheme>

Ipswich Borough Council <https://www.ipswich.gov.uk/content/self-isolation-support-payments>

West Suffolk Council Test and Trace Support Payment westsuffolk.gov.uk

Additional help, including financial aid, is also available from Suffolk Support and Advice Service. This additional help is available for those facing financial difficulty or needing support – especially for those who have never asked for help before. On 1 October 2020, the Suffolk Support and Advice Service phoneline was launched to help people across the county access information or support relating to debt, benefits, housing or employment.

People can contact the Suffolk Support and Advice Service on 0800 068 3131 between 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday or go to: <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/coronavirus-covid-19/suffolk-advice-and-support-service/>

Suffolk 2020 fund projects to deliver over £2.5 million in new community-focused initiatives

On the 18th December, seven new projects were announced as part of the Suffolk 2020 fund to support residents and improve the county for years to come. The announced initiatives and projects are as followed:

1/ New booking system and automatic number plate recognition at Household Waste Recycling Centres – Improving the efficiency and customer experience across all 11 recycling centres by enhancing the online booking system using automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) and automated entry barriers.

2/ Adult Digital Learning - Developing new virtual learning tools and techniques and setting up a laptop loan scheme to strengthen and extend access to the Adult Learning Service for those living in digital and/or rural isolation. This approach will enable people to enhance their knowledge and skills to secure employment. Building on the swift switch to virtual learning during lockdown, we will further develop virtual learning for adults across Suffolk and use new technologies to enrich and improve the quality of interaction and training, modernising the service's offer.

3/ Youth Work - Developing and supporting growth of grass roots organisations to deliver accessible, high quality provision for youths across Suffolk. Includes creation of a virtual 'Centre of Excellence' to share best practice and provide a 'one stop shop' of support for youth groups across Suffolk.

4/ Discovering Suffolk – raising awareness of Suffolk's countryside and the county's rights of way network, promoting local (Covid-safe) outdoor activities across all of Suffolk with the development of a smartphone outdoor app and QR codes to engage new audiences.

5/ Automated Numberplate Recognition Speed Indicators – Devices will be installed at the roadside to tackle localised problems with speeding drivers. The devices will be periodically moved between sites of concern and the data will be forwarded to the Police to assist with targeted enforcement.

6/ Virtual Reality therapy - Engagement and coproduction with people living with dementia and their carers to explore and develop interactive and therapeutic experiences to support wellbeing. These would be delivered through mobile virtual reality headsets and include bespoke content and interactions based around archive media of Suffolk.

7/ Mobile Community ‘Care Hubs’ - Digitally equip and staff selected community vehicles accessing rural communities within Suffolk. This will support digital inclusion and provide a way to share information and provide help around the opportunities available with care technologies and other digital skills.

The work involved in setting up and enabling these projects will begin in early 2021, setting in motion a range of new community projects that will benefit people for years to come. The council’s agreement to move forwards with these exciting projects listed above follows the successful launch of the first three Suffolk 2020 projects that were announced over recent months:

EV Vehicle Charging Points – Making grants available to install around 100 vehicle charging points throughout the county. Particularly targeting rural areas and sites owned and managed by not-for-profit organisations such as Parish Councils, village halls, sports clubs, libraries and charities.

Tree Planting - Increasing tree cover, through rural and urban planting schemes, planting approximately 100,000 trees over the next 18 months, establishing ‘healing woodlands’ to remember those lost to Covid-19, and increasing biodiversity along roadside verges.

Quiet Lanes - Encouraging the use of non-motorised vehicles and more considerate driving at lower speeds along a range of the community’s self-selected rural lanes, with a view to adding 200 new lanes across Suffolk.

Whilst 2020 will live long in the memory for many reasons, the launch of these projects as part of the Suffolk 2020 Fund offers some real optimism and effort to bring communities together, supporting projects that will provide social, environmental and economic benefits in years to come. The Suffolk 2020 Fund was only made possible because of the decision of this council to use part of the Government’s one-year financial settlement to invest up to £3million throughout 2020 to kickstart some of the beneficial community projects that ordinarily may not have received as much focus or opportunity, given the other huge, costly frontline services that the county council is responsible for. I am very pleased that in amongst the great deal of work that is happening to fight the spread of Covid-19 across Suffolk this year, that we have been able to ensure we continue our work to invest in these timely and incredibly worthy projects to improve the local environment and communities for Suffolk’s residents.

Proposed changes to Sizewell C application are step in right direction but there is still work to be done

On the 18th December, Suffolk County Council welcomed EDF Energy’s movement towards reducing the number of additional heavy good vehicles on Suffolk’s roads. As part of its response to EDF Energy’s latest community consultation on its application for Sizewell C, Suffolk County Council has welcomed the energy provider’s movement towards reducing the number of additional heavy good vehicle movements on Suffolk’s roads and increasing the use of rail and marine freight deliveries during site construction. The Council has urged EDF Energy for many years to maximise freight deliveries by sea and rail and significantly, being of the view that the transport proposals were not sustainable, so it welcomes the proposals for an additional Beach Landing Facility on Sizewell Beach to bring construction materials in by sea, as well as an additional night-time rail delivery of materials to site. In its response, the Council also reflects that many of the proposals offered still lack vital elements in detail and assessment at this stage – such as impacts of the proposals on the coastline or night-time disturbance of residents living close to railway lines. The Council would welcome the opportunity for further dialogue with SZC C to better understand details of the current proposals, and the evidence base which has led to them. It is encouraging to see that EDF Energy has begun listening to the concerns raised by us and Suffolk’s communities. Recognising the need for further detail, the Council does welcome the principle of the changes proposed by EDF Energy, as they begin to address some of the concerns we have repeatedly raised. However, we feel there still remains work to be done if the scheme is to be acceptable to us and our communities - not least in the area of further eliminating, minimising, mitigating, or compensating for the impact of the scheme on Suffolk’s unique natural environment.

Matthew Hicks - County Councillor for the Thredling Division