

TO: **All members of Council**

**Our reference** CS  
**Your reference** N/A  
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Dear Councillor

**Council - Tuesday 14 July 2020**

Attached are the written responses to the questions/statements raised at the above meeting, as referred to in the minutes.

Yours sincerely

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**West Suffolk**  
Council

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## **Council: 14 July 2020 - Written Responses to Questions/Statements**

### **Item 5: Leader's Statement: Question from Councillor Max Clarke to Councillor Sara Mildmay-White, Portfolio Holder for Housing, following referral by Councillor John Griffiths:**

In the context of referring to West Suffolk Council (WSC) needing to intervene in the last tax year to prevent 393 households from becoming homeless and as the present COVID-19 related moratorium on evictions is due to end on 23 August 2020, which, unless WSC intervenes, would potentially result in 47 households being made homeless, Councillor Clarke asked what support was being given regarding this matter.

(Note: Councillor Clarke also made reference to support that was being given to children, schools and communities in his St Olaves ward to help improve young people's attainment in Maths and English; however, this was answered by the Leader at the meeting and no written response was required.)

### **Response from Councillor Mildmay-White:**

The Council has experienced an increase in homelessness cases throughout the Covid crisis. The demand has so far been predominately for single people and couples. However, like all councils we are anticipating that there will be an increased number of cases due to a number of factors such as financial difficulties, increased unemployment, family breakdown and the ending of moratorium on evictions.

The Housing Team will do what it can to support families during this difficult period. Where possible we aim to support people to remain in their existing homes including advice about rent arrears, negotiating repayments or extension of times with landlords and signposting to specialist support services, such as debt advice. We also provide advocacy support in Court situations. Where we are unable to support people to remain in their homes, we aim to find more suitable long-term accommodation and, if necessary, temporary accommodation.

The Council welcomes support from private sector landlords and can provide financial packages to incentivise new landlords to work with us. We continue to work closely with registered landlords in order to minimise evictions for social housing. Extra capacity will be provided to the Housing Team via the use of redeployed staff.

## **Item 5: Leader's Statement: Question from Councillor Cliff Waterman to Councillor Sarah Broughton, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Performance, following referral by Councillor John Griffiths:**

With reference to paragraphs 43 and 44 of the Leader's Statement, which provided details of grants allocated to small businesses during the COVID-19 crisis, Councillor Waterman asked:

"With all the [grant] money being paid out to local businesses, to which the Council has done fabulously well, what steps has the Council taken to prevent fraud, or if there is fraud how is it detected; and whether there is any monitoring of how the money is being used, and whether there are any measurable outcomes?"

### **Response from Councillor Broughton:**

Emphasis has been placed on issuing the funds quickly to support the business community and it should be acknowledged that this does increase the fraud risk. However, this risk is being mitigated with a combination of pre and post payment checks using both internal and external tools and resources.

Pre-payment checks for the Small Business Grant Fund and the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants include verification of business type eligibility, as well as checking of bank details and the company address. The Discretionary Scheme payments are also subject to in-depth checking for eligibility and impact which greatly reduces the risk of fraud in this area.

National Anti Fraud Network (NAFN) intelligence alerts are used for pre and post payment checks for nationally organised frauds, as is local knowledge.

Post payment checks include internal data matching to identify any multiple payments, some of which are legitimate. External tools are also being used, for example to data match to Companies House data (i.e. company status; incorporation date; insolvency) and to undertake bank account verification services. Positive matches do not necessarily indicate fraud, but could be an administrative error which may only affect the type (not value) of the grant paid.

It is anticipated that the Cabinet Office's National Fraud Initiative will also introduce further post payment checks.

If fraud is identified, the ARP Fraud Team will be assisting in investigation, which could result in either recovery proceedings commencing through the Council's Legal Services team or escalation to the relevant authorities and/or NAFN.

No conditions regarding how grant monies should be spent are attached to the payment of the business grants and no monitoring of the use of these monies is currently being undertaken.

The Government has not requested we find out how the money has been used nor does it require monitoring of this funding. However, we have issued two surveys of our businesses to engage with them and understand the issues and challenges that those who have received the grants are facing. This information is helping us to understand how Suffolk Local Authorities, Central Government and the wider public sector can support and sustain businesses. The first survey was sent out in May 2020 and we received a good response rate of 25% of those surveyed. Now that some businesses are able to reopen, with social distancing compliance, we have recently issued a second survey to understand if and how the support required has changed and if the grant received has supported each business.

**Item 5: Leader's Statement: Question from Councillor David Smith to Councillor Sara Mildmay-White, Portfolio Holder for Housing, following referral by Councillor John Griffiths:**

In the context of referring to West Suffolk Council working with registered housing associations and private landlords to meet anticipated demand for housing the homeless in the future, Councillor Smith asked:

"Is this now not a good time to consider building our own social housing stock so we are in a good place to cope with any future emergency that requires housing for a large number of people?"

**Response from Councillor Sara Mildmay-White:**

Whilst the Council does own temporary and emergency accommodation, it is not a stock holding authority so is unable to offer social housing tenancies. In order to do so, the Council would have to establish a Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which would require significant capital funding, long-term investment and an analysis of capital cost, revenue and the impact of government policies such as the right to buy. We are aware that a number of non-stock holding authorities are considering this option and we are keen to learn from their analysis. Many councils, such as West Suffolk, have set up housing companies as an alternative route to developing due to the complexities and the long-term investment needed to build social housing.

The Council is doing what it can to increase the availability of the right type of housing. In 2019/20 West Suffolk Council exceeded its housing delivery targets which included 326 affordable homes delivered against a target of 200 and brought 125 empty homes back into use.

## **Item 8: Pay Policy Statement 2020/2021: Question from Councillor Karen Soons to Councillor Carol Bull, Portfolio Holder for Governance:**

In the context of the provision of figures within the Pay Policy Statement 2020/2021 relating to whether a gender pay gap was evident within the Council, Councillor Soons asked Councillor Bull whether any figures were available in respect of a potential diversity/ethnicity pay gap.

### **Response from Councillor Carol Bull:**

There is currently no legal requirement to report on a diversity/ethnicity pay gap and therefore this information is not collected and presented in the Annual Pay Policy Report.

We are confident that our people are paid equally for doing equivalent jobs across our organisation and we continue to make sure our policies and practices are fair.

While it is not mandatory to calculate the diversity pay gap, we could choose to voluntarily calculate this, as some organisations do. However, given that, across the organisation, we have 6 BAME employees who are employed across Bands 3 – 6, which represents 0.82% of our workforce\*\*, there is limited value in doing so. This is because, with the employee numbers from BAME being so small, it would not add any further value in aiding our understanding of this aspect of our workforce and their pay. *(\*\*This data has been collated through staff equality data. The requirement to share this data is voluntary and therefore staff can opt out and therefore the data only reflects those who have shared it\*\*).*

Our workforce strategy outlines our approach to promoting equality of opportunity, particularly with regards to recruitment and retention and pay, reward and recognition. We are committed to creating an inclusive workplace culture. We are also working on some new opportunities to help recruit and support the development of BAME staff across the organisation. However, this is different from equal pay. We hope to highlight these in our new strategy, which is currently being revised.