

Report to the Council

Committee: Council

Date: 25 February 2021

Subject: Commercial and Regulatory Portfolio – Covid19 Responsibility

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Aniket Patel

Recommending:

That the report of the Commercial and Regulatory Portfolio Holder be noted in related to Covid19

The sharp rise in new Covid19 infections just before Christmas necessitated urgent changes to the response effort, both at a national, regional and district level.

The Government implemented a third national lockdown in response, and at the time of writing this is continuing.

At times over the Christmas period Epping Forest District had one of the highest rates of infection in the whole Country, peaking at just over 1,500 per 100,000. Since the 3rd lockdown was introduced infection numbers have fallen rapidly and the latest data (12 February 2021) indicates that this has now reduced to around 150.

With the peak infections came massive additional demand on the healthcare and associated sectors. The situation developed rapidly, and Essex Resilience Forum declared a major incident shortly after Christmas because of critical concern over hospital capacity. Over the past few weeks the position has begun to improve, and the major incident status was lifted at the beginning of February. The healthcare system remains under acute pressure, but the trend is improving reflecting the reduction in new infections and impact of the rapidly expanding vaccination programme.

Whilst Epping Forest DC had a limited role, the doctrine of mutual aid and support meant we were required to assist other agencies in the management of this incident.

EFDC staff made a massive effort to support the response in whatever way was requested and worked tirelessly for the residents of the District. This placed considerable extra strain on Council resources and staff have been moved between departments to cope with peak demands.

This Epping Forest DC response to the major incident included;

Supporting Test and Trace with calls and visits to those that the national and Essex service have been unable to contact. We had been expecting less than 10 call requests per day but at points received 200 per day.

Local Distribution of Lateral Flow Tests – Essex County Council managed to obtain a large number of Lateral Flow Tests, (LFT), in response to the heightened infection rates in the

County and asked all districts to help with the local distribution of these. Officers identified a location in Lyndsey Street, Epping and received a supply of 5,000 tests just prior to Christmas. Officers managed the collection and return of test kits to this location until the scheme was disbanded at the end of January.

Vaccination and Testing locations – Epping Forest District Council have been working closely with partners from Essex CC and Health to support in the identification of multiple sites for use as testing and vaccination centres. We have used key contacts in parishes, the community and our delivery partners to find suitable sites, often at short notice, in response to the changing nature of the pandemic. Sites identified include Epping, Theydon Bois, Buckhurst Hill and Loughton, amongst others, and the number of sites continues to increase as suitability is assessed.

Enforcement – Our Environmental Health Team continue to actively reinforce the Government's core messages, provide guidance and enforce legislation both within the resident community and the business community. We have stepped up the use of Parkguard to provide additional presence in the district's larger town centres, providing reassurance and advice. We are also using agency staff to support with the Test and Trace process. We are also working with the Corporation of London to manage the safe use of the Forest.

Communications – We have continued to amplify the Government and Essex communication messages to our residents using all mechanisms available. We have placed an order for street banners for main town centres to publicise and reinforce the Government's core messages.

The third lockdown created additional pressure on the Council, in respect of managing the practical implications of delivering services under the new rules and the additional demands for service. Our highest priority continues to be keeping the public and our officers safe when they are required to come in to contact.

The numerous Tier changes have all come with different levels of Government financial support for businesses and the Council's Revenues and Benefits Team currently have a very high workload signposting businesses, receiving applications, assessing applications and making payments. They are also responsible for making Government support payments to those on low incomes who are required to self-isolate. Finally, they are helping to award business assistance grants from a funding allocation provided by Essex County. The team are being supported by redeployed staff from other parts of the Council in order to ensure payments are made quickly.

In respect of service delivery, most services continue to operate, more or less normally, with some adjustment to ensure safety. The main exceptions are all leisure centres and the museum, which are completely closed for now. Extra care and attention is being exercised where we are required to enter people's homes (such as for housing repairs) and business premises.

During this latest peak the Council also saw much higher levels of sickness and self-isolation amongst staff. This has now returned to levels more consistent with the average experienced across the Covid Pandemic.

The changes to Tiers, the lockdown and the Council response continues to have a financial cost and a negative impact on income. This has been reflected in the Council's financial planning.