

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Council

**Date:** 30 July 2020

**Subject:** Commercial and Regulatory Portfolio – Covid19 Responsibility

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor Aniket Patel

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## **Recommending:**

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

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I can report that Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) is responding to the national and local position in a proactive and positive way through the efforts and contribution of our staff. The Council is also playing an active part in the coordinated Greater Essex response, via the Strategic Co-ordination Group (SCG), comprising all public sector bodies operating within the County.

Whilst the initial focus of the Council was strongly focused on the Response, with the easing of lockdown this is now moving to Restoration and a forward look towards Recovery.

Most Council services are now operating normally, but with some restrictions as necessary in order to maintain distancing and the safety of staff and residents. The main exceptions have been the Leisure Centres, where they remain closed in accordance with Government guidance but hope to open shortly. Safety of residents and staff remains the priority. The actions undertaken by the Council are reported in more detail within the reports of the individual Portfolio holders.

The majority of Council services continue to be delivered by staff working from home and no staff have been furloughed.

The Covid19 event has had an enormous impact on the Council and on its day to day business. Responding to the impacts and supporting the residents and businesses through the crisis has been the priority focus for the Council and this has therefore dominated much of its activity. What's more, Covid19 is likely to leave a lasting economic and community legacy that will remain a Council priority for potentially many years to come.

I have formed a cross party Portfolio Advisory Group which has been established to consider and coordinate all matters related to Covid19, including the Council's response and recovery actions around the key themes of Finance, Economy, Community and the impact on Council services. To date we have met 4 times and discussed Test, Track and Trace, the safe reopening of the High Streets, Community Wellbeing and Health and the impacts on Council services.

A report was presented to Cabinet in July setting out the impact of Covid19 on the Council, the actions taken to smoothly transition through the Recovery phase and an initial set of proposal around the Economic Recovery of the district.

## **Response Phase of Covid19**

Council may be interested in the following information about the Council's response since March.

- The Council has been able to keep most services running, in some cases digitally, and there has been no reason to furlough our employees. The Council is carrying out visits where social distancing can be maintained.
- Since the 16 March Customer and Revenue teams have been handling 2,000 calls per week. This represents a 30% increase on what is normally the busiest time of the year.
- The Revenues and Business Service Teams have provided £29.7m in Business Rate grants to over 2,450 local businesses since 6 April, of which, 90% was paid within the first two weeks. Further discretionary support from the Government is now also available.
- A total of 35 employees were redeployed to Operation Shield. The work included calls to the vulnerable list of Category A residents, welfare checks, supporting with additional calls to the Covid19 helpline, also supporting the food and distribution service. This service is now wound down as the Government has eased requirements to self-isolate, and those with residual needs are being supported by the voluntary sector.
- The Benefits Team have seen a significant rise in new claims; increasing from 150 in January to 347 in April. Of these, 80% of new claims have been made through our online forms.
- Employees in Older Peoples Services have made contact with over 1,500 vulnerable or shielding individuals.

### **Transition to Restoration**

There has been considerable effort invested in the re-opening of High Streets for non-essential retail (on 15<sup>th</sup> June) and then the hospitality sector on 4<sup>th</sup> July. Our main focus has been to ensure that people can move safely and to ensure that social distancing can be maintained, in line with Government guidance.

Across the District this has included;

- Providing social distance markers to Town and Parish Councils.
- A new webpage to facilitate digital engagement and consultation using the Commonplace platform which allows the public to map where social distancing issues exist and help identify where other measures could be delivered. Posters are displayed which have the QR code linking straight to the site.
- Essex Highways have changed signal times at pedestrian crossings so that they are instantaneous to provide pedestrian priority.
- Works in Epping High Street funded by Essex County Council have taken place resulting in a speed limit reduction, widening of the pavement in places and the suspension of a limited number of parking bays
- Work is now progressing on identifying conflict points and what improvement actions are required to other High Streets within the district.
- We have worked closely with the Police and other public bodies to ensure that the re-opening of pubs and restaurants ran smoothly.

Test, Track and Trace is also a focus of activity in terms of providing support to the national initiative and Essex CC. It is Essex CC who will assume the local lead and have the key powers in the event of an outbreak. Our role will be in providing support and guidance to those within local 'hotspots', should they occur.

### **Recovery Actions**

A full understanding of the last impacts of Covid19 will take time to emerge. However, it is immediately apparent that the local economy will be badly hit by Covid19, with the impacts probably lasting months and potentially years. The impacts include permanent changes to shopping habits,

a shift in the viability of office space, retail and leisure and an expected significant increase in unemployment.

Cabinet considered an initial set of Economic Recovery proposals at its meeting in July and it is expected that more will follow, but it is considered essential that the council makes an immediate response to try and mitigate the greatest impacts of Covid19 on the Epping Forest District economy.

Beyond these immediate actions, there will need to be a wider understanding of the impacts on the Community in terms of Health, Wellbeing and Cohesion. To better understand the impacts a doorstep survey is currently being conducted across two district wards. The result will help to formulate future actions.