

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 30 July 2020

Subject: Commercial and Regulatory services Portfolio Holder

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Aniket Patel

Recommending:

That the report of the Commercial and Regulatory services Portfolio Holder be noted.

1) COVID-19 – Response of Regulatory Service

I am pleased to report that the Regulatory Service, together with the Safer Communities Team have been at the forefront of activities to ensure businesses and the general public have complied with the Corona Virus restrictions. In March, this involved ensuring compliance with the Business Closure Regulations, explaining the implications and consequences of the rules to businesses, responding to complaints and making proactive checks to ensure that businesses understood their collective responsibility towards protecting public health. Environmental Health Officers (EHO) needed to interpret quite ‘rushed through’ Regulations to keep abreast of the quickly evolving legislative amendments that then allowed relaxations for certain businesses and activities, but not for all, and this continues today.

The approach taken, in line with Government Guidance generally, has been one of engagement and encouragement with enforcement as the last resort. Whilst there have been contraventions with some businesses breaking the rules, there has been general compliance and EHOs have only had to serve 2 fixed penalty notices on a premises that continued to flout the law.

As relaxations have begun and pubs, restaurants, bars and cafes are slowly allowed to open again, EHOs face the new challenge of ensuring that social distancing and hygiene measures are observed. Additional EHOs have been contracted as part of the Covid-19 recovery objective, to support our in-house EHOs, to engage with, encourage and prepare our businesses for safe opening. All hospitality businesses were contacted prior to 4th July relaxations, a survey of the high streets was carried out to determine their appetite for opening and to then learn the main obstacles and concerns they face. An essential pre-requisite to a business opening is a covid-19 Risk Assessment to demonstrate that all mitigating steps are being taken to ensure the business is covid-19 safe; and our EHOs offered advice and revisits to discuss and support businesses that requested further help. The feedback has been very positive and there is a genuine appreciation of the support that the Council has given. EHOs report that most hospitality businesses are keen to open and that they are taking their responsibilities very seriously and overall, are introducing effective measures to keep their staff and customers safe.

This work has contributed to the Safer Spaces Project, introduced to support businesses and restore the high street. I am also pleased to report that the Licensing Team are preparing for the issuing of pavement licenses, being introduced in the Business and Planning Bill which is

hoped will be enacted before the end of July. This is being introduced as a temporary arrangement, to last until 30 September 2021 and will allow businesses to expand their footprint on to the public highway, to compensate for the restrictions imposed by social distancing. This new licensing regime will be cheaper for businesses, relative to existing licensing regulation, and the administrative process will be streamlined and quick so that businesses can take advantage of the summer months. By the time of Full Council I would have sought Cabinet approval to put in place an approval process so that we are ready to process application when the legislation comes into force.

Part of the recovery phase towards controlling the covid-19 outbreak, is the NHS Test and Trace Service. It ensures that anyone who develops symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) can quickly be tested to find out if they have the virus, and also includes targeted asymptomatic testing of NHS and social care staff and care home residents. It helps trace close recent contacts of anyone who tests positive for coronavirus and, if necessary, notifies them that they must self-isolate at home to help stop the spread of the virus. The service is designed to trace the spread of the virus and isolate new infections, which will help control the rate of reproduction (R) and will also play a vital role in giving early warning if the virus is increasing again, locally or nationally. Whilst the original programme has been operated centrally by Public Health England (PHE), it was recognised early on that the national approach would be most effective if underpinned by a strong and complementary localised element. Local authorities have detailed knowledge of their communities and are best placed to deal with complex cases and outbreaks that occur locally.

Our EHOs are trained in infectious disease control and as such are well placed to carry out a covid-19 outbreak management role, should an outbreak occur, or be associated with a workplace activity on the district. I am pleased to inform that an Essex- wide group of Local Authorities has been established and an Essex Covid-19 Local Outbreak Control Plan has been produced with ECC and PHE to ensure that EHOs, working with other NHS and Essex partners are ready to deal with an outbreak should one occur.

The extent of the work is unknown as this will depend on the number of local outbreaks and the complexity of each case. An out- of- hour service covering weekend is required and also an agreement from all Essex LAs to support each other, should a particular outbreak be so large or complex to require the resource of neighbouring colleagues. A grant of £50,000 from ECC has been promised to each local authority to support this work.

It is proposed that this specific work will be carried out by our in house EHOs from both the Business and Corporate Team and also the Residential Team, alongside their normal duties, and will of course take precedence should an outbreak arise. Running alongside, will be targeted support and interventions on businesses considered to be at a higher risk of causing spread of infection so that preventative measures can be introduced before an incident occurs.

Enough about covid-19!

I am pleased to report that all 3 teams that make up the Regulatory Service have, returned to business as usual, whilst at the same time continuing to work from home where possible. All services apart from certain food safety inspections (as instructed by the Food Standards Authority) are taking place and premises inspections for health and safety, licensing and residential properties occur as before, whilst observing social distancing.

I am pleased to report that our newly restructured Private Sector Grants Team is now fully staffed with new recruits from 13 July and I look forward to giving an update in my next report, on progress made in respect of providing Disabled Facility Grants and administering the new Housing Assistance Policy for our most vulnerable residents.

2) COVID-19 – Impact on Tourism sector:

The tourism and visitor economy is worth approximately £230million in Epping Forest. Working with colleagues from across the public and private sector in the district officers have established the 'Visit Epping Forest' board and www.visiteppingforest.org to support and grow this sector of the local economy. The visitor economy has been significantly impacted by Covid19. This has been recognised by the government which has announced over the last few weeks a range of incentives and support for this sector which includes cultural and heritage assets. Some key information on local impact is set out below:

- Major attractions are planning to open in August and then assess the situation to judge what they can offer for the rest of the season. Some attractions will not open or fully open until 2021. Any late bank holiday and Christmas may be critical opportunities to recover lost income.
- Outdoor areas have seen big increases in popularity during lockdown including all Countrycare sites and walks, Epping Forest, Gunpowder Park, Lee Valley, Essex Way, Roding Meadows etc

'Visit Epping Forest' website:

- Website analytics show overall growth in visitor numbers and page views over 2019.
- Numbers dropped during lockdown and surged back again around the June 15th, and again on July 4th around the easing of restrictions. In the week after the announcement of the market's reopening, the North Weald Market page had over 7,000 views.
- Key government and local messages and significant additional online content was added to the website during lockdown.
- Major switch in popular viewed content to local green spaces, walking routes and outdoor activities.
- Recent popular searches for information have centred on market openings, high street and travel information, camping/accommodation.
- Return to previous page view patterns emerging with growth in food, drink and venue provider page views.

3) North Weald Airfield – Covid-19

I am pleased to report that the Airfield is now operating on a mainly business as usual basis following the restrictions on general aviation being lifted by the Department for Transport. The Saturday market re-opened on June 13th and has been well attended in the first 3 weeks with the vast majority of the public following the social distancing procedures implemented by the operator. I am pleased to report that the Airfield Manager reported back to work at the beginning of April after a two month sickness absence. The Airfield is now fully staffed after recently appointing 2 Operations Officers and 2 Lead Operations Officers. The pandemic and resulting lockdown has seen income drop by approximately £20k per month. It is envisaged casual bookings will start to increase now that government is easing restrictions.

Former Gymnastics Centre has had to be re-marketed following the previous potential tenant removing themselves from the transaction. A number of new offers have been received which are currently being reviewed. Hanger 1 is vacant but is now on the market with a suitable

commercial agent. A large number of asset management and lease initiatives are ongoing at the airfield including potential expansion of the HMRC space and a number of other public sector partner leads and potential utilisation of further space for private sector occupiers (subject to the outcome of the Master Plan).

National Police Aviation Service (NPAS)

A small number of local residents continue to complain about the noise the NPAS operation causes therefore an independent noise monitoring survey will be carried out. This this will be undertaken within the next 2 to 3 weeks. The purpose of the survey is to evaluate alternative flight profiles. It has also been agreed with EFDC's Public Relations team and NPAS to run a "good news" story piece to identify the excellent work they are undertaking from North Weald Airfield as it would appear that this is not well known within the local community.

Essex & Herts Air Ambulance Trust (EHAAT)

I am pleased to report that the construction of the new Hangar is well underway and is scheduled to be completed by the end of the year.

4) Building Control

Although the end of the year final accounts for BC have not yet been reconciled, I am advised that February and March finished strong with an average of £37K per month with a total turnover of £679K. This has exceeded the £550k budget by £129k. This is an excellent result and a strong figure to carry forward into the next year of the ring-fenced account. Clearly, the 2020/21 budget of £561k has suffered as a result of the lockdown which has brought the building industry to a crawl and this has been reflected in the income reports of April and May at £24k and £9k. This is a current cumulative shortfall of £56k. On a positive note, however the Partnership work with KJ Associates has recommenced with the receipt of 28 new projects. These quantities are expected to rise rapidly over the months and the technical team are now in a good position to cope. There are five other large projects from the remaining Partners which are on-going and it is likely that nothing new will be received for some time yet. I am pleased to report that following interviews 2 new Senior Building Control Surveyors were appointed.

5) Epping Forest Shopping Park

The Epping Forest Shopping Park is now re-open following the Covid-19 trading restrictions with appropriate social distancing. There have been some roof leaks and following an independent roof survey we are seeking technical legal advice on our next options. These are costs are being met from the retention monies held from the contractor.