

Report to Stronger Place Select Committee



SCRUTINY

Date of meeting: 29 September 2020

Portfolio: Commercial and Regulatory Portfolio – Cllr Patel



Epping Forest District Council

Subject: Covid-19 Update

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Recommendations/Decisions Required:

Consider this update report and make comments to the Portfolio Holder for Commercial and Regulatory

Report:

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. 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.
- 1.2. 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. Safety of residents and staff remains the priority.
- 1.3. 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.
- 1.4. However, the continued threat of a second spike means that the Council still has an active role in monitoring current levels of infection within the Epping Forest District Council and in ensuring that individuals and premises are observing the guidance around social distancing.
- 1.5. In recent weeks the new infection rates in Epping Forest District have been elevated and some of the highest in the wider Essex area. Whilst these are now slightly lower, the focus of reinforcing adherence and clear messaging remains high priority.
- 1.6. The majority of Council services continue to be delivered by staff working from home and no staff have been furloughed.
- 1.7. Through March to the end of June, 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. Furthermore, Covid-19 is likely to leave a lasting economic and community legacy that will remain a Council priority for potentially many years to come.
- 1.8. The Leader gave the role of Covid-19 Lead to the Portfolio Holder for Commercial and Regulatory. In response the Portfolio Holder, Cllr Patel, formed a cross party Portfolio

Advisory Group to consider and coordinate all matters related to Covid-19, including the Council's response and recovery actions around the key themes of Finance, Economy, Community.

1.9. Initially, during the peak of the lockdown phase, this PAG met weekly but has subsequently met less frequently as the nature of the Council's involvement and response has changed.

1.10. Cabinet considered a report in July setting out the impact of Covid-19 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.

2. Response Phase of Covid-19

2.1. During the response phase the Council was largely focused on the provision of support to those isolated by the lockdown and the challenges of providing core services safely in a Covid-19 environment. Some examples of impact are set out below:

- The Council has been able to keep most services running, in some cases digitally, and there has been no reason to furlough employees. The Council carried out visits where social distancing could be maintained.
- At its peak, the Customer and Revenue teams handled 2,000 calls per week. That represents a 30% increase on what would normally be the busiest time of the year.
- The Revenues and Business Service Teams provided £29.7m in Business Rate grants to over 2,450 local businesses and a further £800,000 of discretionary support.
- 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 Covid-19 helpline, also supporting the food and distribution service.
- The Benefits Team saw a significant rise in new claims; increasing from 150 in January to 347 in April.
- Employees in Older Peoples Services made contact with over 1,500 vulnerable or shielding individuals.

3. Transition to Restoration

3.1. Considerable effort was invested in the re-opening of High Streets for non-essential retail (on 15th June) and then the hospitality sector on 4th July. With the main focus being on ensuring that people can move safely and to ensure that social distancing can be maintained, in line with Government guidance.

3.2. Work is continuing in this space, especially around ensuring that distancing is being maintained in licensed properties, hairdressers, nail bars and beauty salons, as these venues are seen as a higher risk for spreading the virus.

3.3. Across the District actions have included;

- Providing social distance markers to Town and Parish Councils in the district.
- 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 continues on identifying conflict points and what improvement actions are required to other High Streets within the district.
- A bid has been submitted for European Funds earmarked for Returning High Streets Safely.
- We have worked closely with the Police and other public bodies to ensure that the re-opening of pubs and restaurants ran smoothly, including making arrangements for the licensing of establishments using Pavements.
- We have carried out doorstep well-being surveys in two wards across the district to understand the impacts of Covid-19 on communities. The result will help to formulate future actions.

3.4. Test, Track and Trace has also been 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. The Council's has been in providing support and guidance to those within local 'hotspots', should they occur.

4. Recovery Actions

4.1. A full understanding of the lasting impacts of Covid-19 will take time to emerge. However, it is immediately apparent that the local economy will be badly hit by Covid-19, 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.

4.2. Cabinet considered an initial set of Economic Recovery proposals at its meeting in July and it is expected that more will follow as our understanding of the impacts matures.

Reason for decision:

The Council response has been complex and broad, and members' views and comments are welcomed to inform future actions.

Options considered and rejected:

None.

Consultation undertaken:

None.

Resource implications:

The Council has experienced a significant financial impact from lockdown, predominantly as a result of lost income from commercial rents, car parks, leisure centres, business rates and council tax, but also has incurred cost pressures from helping the District through this crisis. As a result, the Pandemic represents one of the biggest financial issue facing the Council.

The current forecast (in line with the numbers being supplied to Government) is that the total cost to Epping Forest District could be in the order of £6.7 million across the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account. There are many large assumptions in arriving at this number, not least of all, the speed at which the economy recovers. Given this uncertainty, the actual cost may vary widely from this central estimate.

To date the Government has provided £1.577 million in support to the Council and announced further support on lost income from Fees and Charges and is considering support on lost Council Tax and Business Rate income. However, it is clear that the Government will not cover the full cost of the event and councils will be expected to share the cost.

The council had working balances of £7½ million at the start of 2020/21, and therefore is considered 'safe' in terms of its ability to balance its budget in the current year.

Legal and Governance Implications:

None.

Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications:

None.