

Part I

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All Wards

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET 3 NOVEMBER 2020
REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

COVID-19 UPDATE

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides a further summary to Cabinet on the work undertaken by the council to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. Once again it presents a snapshot in time against an ever-evolving international situation.

2 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 For members to note the continued work being undertaken and ongoing associated implications.
- 2.2 For members to agree that future updates be provided through the member information hub.

3 Explanation

- 3.1 The council continues to respond to the Covid-19 global pandemic. Although work has started to support the recovery phase, particular council service areas are now once again starting to focus back on the “response” phase to the pandemic.
- 3.2 On 12 October, the Prime Minister set out a three-tiered system of local “alert levels”: medium, high, and very high. The “medium” alert level, which will cover most of the country, will consist of the current national measures which came into force on 25 September 2020. This includes the Rule of Six, and the closure of hospitality at 10pm.
- 3.3 The “high” alert level will reflect many current local interventions, but there will now be consistency across the country. This primarily aims to reduce household to household transmission by preventing all mixing between households or support bubbles indoors. The Rule of Six will apply in outdoor spaces, including private gardens. Most areas which are already subject to local restrictions will automatically move into the “high” alert level.
- 3.4 The “very high” alert level will apply where transmission rates are causing the greatest concern, based on an assessment of all the available data and the local situation. This includes incidence and test positivity, including amongst older and more at-risk age groups, as well as the growth rate, hospital admissions and other factors.
- 3.5 In these areas, the government will set a baseline of prohibiting social mixing indoors and in private gardens, with the Rule of Six allowed in open public spaces like parks and beaches. Pubs and bars must close and can only remain open where they operate as if they were a restaurant, which means

serving “substantial meals”, like a main lunchtime or evening meal. They may only serve alcohol as part of such a meal. People will be advised not to travel in and out of these areas.

- 3.6 To create local consensus behind this more severe action, the government will work with local leaders on how individual areas should go beyond this baseline, which may include measures such as the closure of gyms, casinos, and leisure centres.
- 3.7 Non-essential retail, schools and universities will remain open in all levels.
- 3.8 Senior Officers and Members continue to support countywide and regional response structures, including the Strategic Coordinating Group, Community Reassurance Cell and Health Protection Board.
- 3.9 Additionally, we are supporting a number of tactical and operational groups such as Health Protection Board, Herts Environmental Health Officers Covid Group, District Outbreak Management Group, Hertfordshire Business Group, Incident Management Teams, Outbreak Tactical Control Group and the Event and Gatherings Covid group. This represents a significant amount of excellent partnership working across all levels of the organisation.
- 3.10 The sections below provide key updates on the current situation regarding our priorities, please note that they only contain changes since it was last reported at September Full Council.

3.11 Our Community

- 3.11.1 The Environmental Health Team continue to see an increasingly high demand for workplace interventions to assess Covid-19 compliance and will be undertaking enhanced proactive interventions to high risk settings across the district.
- 3.11.2 A Covid-19 contact tracing system, implemented at a local level to back up NHS Test and Trace, has been rolled out across Hertfordshire. Several members of the team have undertaken the national call handler training so that we have a cadre of approved officers who can access the national data and undertake contact tracing.
- 3.11.3 We continue to work with schools, colleges and Universities within Hertfordshire to help ensure they are Covid secure and to provide support through local outbreaks. PHE are no longer able to support the high number of cases in educational settings and the role of the council is essential.
- 3.11.4 The Safety Advisory Team are working with event organisers to ensure their events meet certain criteria so they can go ahead wherever possible. Particular emphasis is being given to half term, Halloween, Bonfire night and Remembrance Sunday.
- 3.11.5 The Community Safety Partnership (CSP) continue to ensure that targeted messaging goes to residents via online channels to give advice on how to keep themselves and their loved ones safe.
- 3.11.6 We are working with the CSP and HCC on an interactive workbook on the Five Ways to Wellbeing, which will be available to young people alongside the new learning module that will be available soon from County Council.

- 3.11.7 Events such as our annual Domestic Abuse Conference have moved to an online platform.
- 3.11.8 During the week commencing 12 October 2020, as part of “WelHat safety week”, a virtual campaign provided vital information to residents on keeping safe.
- 3.11.9 The Campus West Member Panel met at the end of September, where a service update was provided. Visitor numbers for cinema remain low in the absence of major new film releases. The Panel also agreed not to reopen Roller City for indoor skating, Soft Play City and the remote community centres following the introduction of new government restrictions in recent weeks: this will be kept under review.
- 3.11.10 In addition to virtual tours of the Mill Green Mill and the Welwyn Roman Baths, we have introduced a new Digital Trail in the gardens of Mill Green which visitors can follow by scanning QR codes on their smart devices. These explain more about some of our exhibits and their historical significance in the borough. We have introduced two new varieties of flour for sale at Mill Green in response to customer demand. We are also leading on collating new stories from local people as part of Black History Month.

3.12 Our Environment

- 3.12.1 From 2 November, Urbaser provided households with a weekly separate food collection. Residents should have also received a leaflet providing further information on the new service and we have a dedicated page on our website, where you can find further information and FAQs: <https://www.welhat.gov.uk/foodwaste>

3.13 Our Housing

- 3.13.1 The housing repairs backlog is continuing to be addressed and new requests are at pre-Covid levels. We are achieving high compliance for gas servicing and we will closely monitor the impact of the colder weather to make sure we maintain these levels. We are catching up with the planned maintenance programme which was affected during the height of the pandemic
- 3.13.2 We are maintaining strong performance for rent collection and we are engaging closely with tenants whose incomes have been affected by the pandemic, however we anticipate seeing tenants going onto Universal Credit when furlough ends.
- 3.13.3 There are a small number of people now in hotel accommodation, with the majority of people helped under the “Everyone In” initiative being helped into longer term accommodation. The team have been successful in a bid for funding under the MHCLG Next Steps programme. The council has been awarded more than £300K which will support alternative provision for Resolve (providing emergency accommodation to rough sleepers), expand our Housing First project and help with hotel costs.

3.14 Our Economy

- 3.14.1 The government recently announced that councils are responsible for administering test and trace support payment to individuals. Those who meet the eligibility criteria below will receive a self-isolation payment of £500:

- Those told to stay at home and self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace on or after 28 September 2020
- Are employed or self-employed
- Are unable to work from home and will lose income as a result
- Are currently receiving one of the benefits set out in the guidance

The scheme opened from 28 September 2020 and will last until 31 January 2021. The Council will be reimbursed for all payments made and the government expects local authorities to have arrangements in place to administer applications no later than 12 October 2020.

The Council will also be able to make a discretionary £500 payment in exceptional circumstances to an individual who meets the main qualifying criteria for the Test and Trace Support Payment (i.e. they are a low-income worker who is unable to work because they are self-isolating) but who are not in receipt of qualifying benefits and could suffer financial hardship as a result of not being able to work.

The team have worked with its online forms provider to design the online application form and have worked closely with Sopra Steria to ensure processes and resources are in place to enable timely payment of valid applications. These processes went live before the government's deadline of 12 October 2020.

- 3.14.2 The Food Standards Agency have confirmed the arrangements for food safety interventions until March 2021. The proposals will see food businesses split into high/medium/low risk tasks. All visits will be carefully selected and targeted based upon intelligence, known risk and professional experience.
- 3.14.3 Planning officers are visiting sites from public vantage points and only visiting private properties and gardens where it is safe to do so. There has been an increase in domestic applications for small extensions, garden buildings etc and works to protected trees. Enforcement Officers also remain busy investigating breaches that have occurred during lockdown.
- 3.14.4 The team continues to progress the Local Plan and is currently awaiting an interim report from the Inspector to help guide final decisions about additional/removed sites.

3.15 Our Council

- 3.15.1 Regular staff briefings and 'wellbeing' surveys are carried out, to provide reassurance to our staff and make sure that the right type of support is available.
- 3.15.2 The Elections team have commenced canvassing ahead of the May elections, and preparations to deliver the elections in a Covid secure way have started.

Implications

4. Legal Implication(s)

- 4.1. Service teams continue to balance the need to deliver services and operate in a Covid secure way. However, the coronavirus legislation and guidance is continually changing which makes it particularly challenging for officers who need to organise the councils activities in a Covid secure way.

4.2. We continue to work with a range of partners such as the Police and Public Health to offer advice to duty holders and carry out enforcement.

5 Financial Implication(s)

5.1 A detailed report on the financial impact of Covid-19 on the council's finances was reported to August Cabinet and Members also received a budget seminar at the end of August.

5.2 The latest monitoring position is presented alongside this report and sets out that the latest forecast pressures on the general fund for 2020/21 are £3.316m in relation to the pandemic. The council has received un-ringfenced funding to date of £1.477m and had applied for £0.553m from the income guarantee scheme which brings the net forecast variance down to £1.286m.

5.3 The latest forecast on the Housing Revenue Account is a pressure of just under £190k in relation to the pandemic.

5.4 On 22nd Oct, the government announced the allocation of the extra £1bn of additional support to local authorities.

- £900m will be distributed to local authorities using population and deprivation indices. Welwyn Hatfield's share of the funding is £0.313m, and this is in addition to the £1.477m mentioned in paragraph 5.2, the financial pressures faced by the council will continue to be monitored as part of the budget monitoring process going forward.
- The rest of £100m will be focused on supporting council leisure centres most in need. The DCMS has yet to provide further details on this and it is unclear at this stage whether authorities that have outsourced the leisure service would be eligible.

6 Risk Management Implications

6.1 The Risk and Resilience team continue to provide support and technical advice to managers in all service areas in respect of the legal requirements and guidance in place around Covid-19 and what actions and controls measures are required to be in place to ensure service delivery can take place in safe manner. The team are also undertaking a weekly Covid-19 audit of Campus East.

7 Security and Terrorism Implication(s)

7.1 None directly arising from this report

8 Procurement Implication(s)

8.1 Additional resources were provided by the procurement team to support contractors as the start of the pandemic.

9 Climate Change Implication(s)

9.1 As staff continue to work from home, where they can, in accordance with the government guidance there is a reduction in traffic and transport emissions.

10 Human Resources Implication(s)

10.1 Response to the Covid-19 pandemic is causing particular pressures in certain teams and will necessitate discussions about work priorities as we move into the winter period.

11 Health and Wellbeing Implication(s)

11.1 The Covid-19 pandemic remains a public health emergency and the council has legal duties to ensure staff are protected and services can be provided in a safe way

12 Communication and Engagement Implication(s)

12.1 The council is working through the SCG communications cell, of which the council's Policy and Communications Manager is the chair, to ensure the timely and consistent dissemination of key messages. Twice weekly updates are sent to all staff and members, and fortnightly healthy hub bulletins are circulated to members.

13 Link to Corporate Priorities

13.1 The subject of this report is linked to all the council's priorities

14 Equality and Diversity

14.1 The council's Equalities group is working with the Risk and Resilience manager to ensure that the council protects the groups in our community most likely to be adversely impacted by the pandemic. The work is being driven by national research on the effects of the pandemic on different ethnic groups.

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