

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL  
COUNCIL 20 JULY 2020  
REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

## **WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

### **1 Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report provides Council with a further update on the activities undertaken in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This remains a continuously evolving international situation and once again this report presents information available at the time of writing. Councillors will be aware of the update report provided to Cabinet on 16 June and this report builds on that and the information presented in the Chief Executive's report to Council on 6 May 2020.

### **2 Recommendation(s)**

- 2.1 That Councillors note the content of the report, the continued impacts of the pandemic on the council's operations and the work undertaken to date.
- 2.2 That Council thanks staff, communities, residents and businesses for their support in working together in this unprecedented time.

### **3 Explanation**

- 3.1 The Covid-19 pandemic is an international health emergency and has seen an unprecedented global response. In the UK, a Level 4 Health Emergency remains in force and within Hertfordshire major incident response plans have been triggered. It remains that Councillors and officers are still reprioritising workloads and activities in order to respond to this emergency; and although some services are involved in recovery and are starting to return to some level of normality, the council remains vigilant to ensure we are prepared for any "second peak" necessitating a return to response led activities.
- 3.2 As the borough's elected representatives, Councillors have also been essential in ensuring the council is able to continue to deliver its critical services and to support multi-agency partners and the community. The council has embraced hosting meetings by remote means and therefore continues to operate. Key decisions continue to be made by Councillors and there remain in place the emergency decision-making provisions within the Constitution, should the need arise.
- 3.3 The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on all council services, and the borough's communities and businesses. The sections below provide an update on the current situation regarding our priorities and objectives.

## **3.4 Our Community**

### **3.4.1 Safe Communities**

Officers continue to represent the council on various Hertfordshire-wide Covid-19 related groups which feed back into the wider Local Resilience Forum structures.

The Hertfordshire Recovery Coordinating Group, of which the Chief Executive is the chair, continues to meet. The Leader is a member of the Hertfordshire-wide Community Reassurance Cell which is currently carrying out work on a Hertfordshire-wide community impact assessment. The results of this will shortly be ready for analysis. The outcome of the community impact assessment will assist in determining Hertfordshire-wide recovery priorities.

Operation Shield and the formalised support it provided is ending and being replaced by a community support network. The Government has written to all shielding households, setting out the details. A letter has also been sent out from all councils in Hertfordshire to those individuals on the shielding list who have not previously responded to offers of assistance. The letter provides assurance that help is still available if needed, with signposting to the assistance available.

The NHS volunteer responders will be directed to households still requiring assistance. Supermarkets have pledged to continue prioritising food deliveries to shielding households and the CVS will be working with foodbanks to continue food distribution to those in the greatest need.

For those vulnerable households in the borough not covered under the shielding scheme, more than 670 food parcels were distributed by the council. Now that the food distribution has ended, further support will be provided by the voluntary sector.

The Risk and Resilience Team have produced corporate wide and service specific risk assessments to ensure the Council can operate its services in a safe manner. The team have also produced a set of guidance notes for both staff and managers to help support the risk assessments and answer concerns that officers may have in respect of issues such as social distancing in offices, separation of desks, use walkways, use of PPE etc. New guidance has also been prepared for managers to use when employees return to the workplace after a period of remote working. The team continue to receive queries from service areas about the implementation of controls. Some of the business as usual health and safety audits are now slowly being reinstated together with reviewing and updating policies.

Through the Community Safety Partnership, we have been liaising with the Police to determine and agree the responsibilities for the enforcement of social distancing controls in town centres and high streets, as well as the reopening of our pubs and restaurants. Over the weekend of 4 July, officers from the Environmental Health team undertook monitoring visits of the pubs which had reopened.

The Environmental Health team continue to investigate nuisance complaints including, where necessary, out of hours visits and working closely with the anti-social behaviour team to ensure all complaints are dealt with as effectively as possible. We are taking account of the government guidance and health and safety requirements to see how we may be able to deliver a routine out of hours noise service.

Over recent weeks, the Safety Advisory Team (SAT) has received a number of notifications in respect of events that are scheduled for 2021 and planning meetings are starting to take place.

As lockdown progressed, the teams have also seen an increase in the level of nuisance complaints from our residents, such as noise and bonfires, and officers have been available to investigate these and take appropriate action.

The Hackney Carriage team continue to assess licence renewals and applications, and to respond to complaints. They are liaising with other agencies to ensure the safety of the vehicles, drivers and the general public, including keyworkers who rely upon taxis for transport.

#### **3.4.2 Public Health**

The Public Health and Protection team have been busy providing Covid-19 secure advice, support and guidance to businesses prior to reopening. The team have visited premises across all of our high streets and town centres, not only to provide support to businesses, but also to ensure social distancing and other requirements are in place so that customers and staff are safe when visiting or working in our high streets.

Online training sessions have also been developed, proving to be extremely successful and well received by attendees. The work around the “reopening our high streets” has been a great example of #OneTeam working with many teams pulling resources together to ensure we can provide the best support and advice to our businesses. This has also involved working with outside agencies and, together with colleagues from Better Business for All, the team developed a Hertfordshire-wide guidance package for businesses.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has written to councils about their expectations of councils’ food work in the context of Covid-19 and the need to protect the resources allocated to food and feed law official controls. The council need to continue to undertake official controls prescribed in legislation, highlighting in particular controls that are key to EU exit, such as imported foods. However, the government has also approved an extension of the temporary deviation from normal statutory intervention frequencies set out on the Food Law Code of Practice, which governs councils’ activity in this area and the temporary measure will now run to September. An updated table of priority has been developed and this will include resuming physical inspections in our high-risk premises alongside appropriate use of initial remote assessment, as well as inspection of new businesses. During a food inspection, the team will also undertake checks in respect of Covid-19 secure implementation.

At the time of writing this report, the Public Health and Protection team are working closely with colleagues across Hertfordshire to develop the local outbreak plan and ensure we can deliver any required track and trace investigations and enforcement

#### **3.4.3 Sport & Leisure**

Panshanger Golf Course was re-opened from the end of May and has been trading well since. On 9 July, the government announced that indoor gyms, swimming pools and sports facilities can re-open from 25 July. Officers are working closely with GLL to ensure that Hatfield Swim Centre and Leisure Centre could re-open as soon as possible in a safe manner.

All four parks and playing fields managed by GLL have remained open, with cleaning and grounds maintenance work taking place. The GLL staff have been spending many hours clearing about 45,000 litres of waste a week at Stanborough Park. New signage, posters have been installed on site and free bin bags have been given to visitors to encourage them to bag the rubbish properly and take them home if the bins are full. Open Water Swimming at Stanborough will restart again from 11 July. The council's play areas have also reopened.

The virtual 'This Girl Can' Campaign has been running with an online timetable of activities for women, girls and their families to do at home.

Planning is underway for summer Xplorer sessions in the park, taking account of government guidelines.

Planning is underway for Big Summer. The calendar is live from 1 July. At the time of writing, Fast Traxx had been organised in Hatfield Town Centre, KGV and Roe Hill playing fields, plus graffiti art in both town centres.

#### **3.4.4 Art & Culture**

We have been helping to support younger members of our communities to enhance their virtual learning experience through a variety of school engagement work. This has included providing links to external organisations to enhance the virtual learning curriculum and encourage young people to remain interested during these challenging times. Organisations engaged include the Youth Council Hertfordshire, Holistic Teen Coach, Divergence Drama, Herts Sports Partnership and Stevenage Football Club.

Crucial Crew has also gone virtual, with a range of online resources available to our younger residents.

We are also working with schools in preparation for the anticipated reopening of schools in September, to see how we can promote mental health and wellbeing. This will include a mentoring programme, and this is being taken forward in partnership with Groundwork, initially for the Ridgeway Academy and Bishops Hatfield School.

Campus West cinema reopened its doors on 4 July, adhering to the government's new safety guidance. Humphrey's Café has reopened, serving drinks and pre-packaged food, with customer routes clearly marked out. Roller City and Soft Play remain closed at this time. The 2020 pantomime production of Jack and the Beanstalk has now been postponed and rescheduled for 2021. Tickets purchased by customers will either be moved to next year or a full refund will be provided to them.

Both Mill Green Museum and the Roman Bath House remain closed to the public at this time, as maintaining social distancing is a key challenge, given the design of our sites. The team has increased its social media presence to continue to engage with customers and to promote the Mill Green flour sales. We also participated in a social media campaign #LocalMuseumsUnite from April until June, involving museums around Hertfordshire by sharing stories and objects on a different theme each week.

The museum service has also been successful in obtaining a small grant of £750 from the Hertfordshire Association for Museums. This will go towards purchasing filming equipment to produce virtual tours of both sites. The virtual tour will be added to our website to engage with visitors.

## **3.5 Our Environment**

### **3.5.1 Clean Streets, Waste & Recycling**

The council's new waste contractor, Urbaser, continues to perform well, given the challenging circumstances. The provisional recycling tonnage for the wheeled blue bins and recycling centres for quarter one has been increased by 22%, compared to the same quarter last year.

### **3.5.2 Green Spaces**

Our tree officers and tree contractors have restarted all tree work. The gates to Northaw Great Wood have been reopened. Other woods and open spaces remain open, as well as allotments; with plot holders expected to observe social distancing rules.

The council's grounds maintenance contractor, Continental Landscape (CLL), has completed the work on the flower beds for the summer bedding. All of their services (including hedge cutting) have resumed.

### **3.5.3 Parking**

Following the next stage of the easing of lockdown measures, parking enforcement in residential areas was reintroduced on 6 July to manage the impact of increasing traffic on our roads. All existing permits will be extended for three months to compensate residents for the time that enforcement was suspended. This will automatically be added to accounts and reminders will be sent when permits are due for renewal.

## **3.6 Our Housing**

### **3.6.1 Quality Landlord**

We are continuing to provide support and advice to tenants with rent arrears. The number of new Universal Credit claims has now returned to near pre-Covid levels and overall rent income collection performance has remained strong.

We have seen an increase in neighbour disputes and anti-social behaviour. Council teams are working together and with the police to address incidents.

Currently evictions are banned by the government until August 2020. However, behind the scenes, the teams are preparing the way for legal actions to resume where there is serious anti-social behaviour and where tenants with rent arrears are failing to engage with our staff.

### **3.6.2 Housing Need**

Hotel accommodation continues to be provided to homeless households and the government has recently announced additional funding for local authorities to maintain housing provision for this group. We are awaiting more information from government on how the funding will be allocated. The team is working closely with these households and with the night shelter residents currently being accommodated in the Jim McDonald Centre, to help find long-term solutions for their housing and other issues, so that they can get their lives back on track.

Our lettings service has resumed allocating homes across the board, except for households which are currently unable to move due to coronavirus infection/self-isolation.

### **3.6.3 Affordable Homes**

We continue to make progress with our housing development activity, although there have been some delays on construction sites due to Covid-19. We continue to purchase homes through the open market purchase schemes.

### **3.6.4 Housing Quality**

The responsive repairs service has increased its capacity and will be addressing the backlog of non-emergency repairs that built up during the time that repairs were limited to urgent jobs.

We are also addressing the backlog of gas servicing visits which built up where tenants were refusing access due to the pandemic. As part of our #OneTeam approach, officers from a number of services came together to help deal with booking appointments and making arrangements for the gas servicing visits to take place. The team has been engaging proactively with residents through a dedicated phone service, aimed at providing reassurance and encouraging tenants to allow access. This has been successful, and the number of overdue appointments is falling significantly. Programmed installation of new gas heating systems remains on hold, unless to replace a faulty system.

## **3.7 Our Economy**

### **3.7.1 Sustainable Growth**

The Inspector cancelled the Local Plan hearing sessions scheduled for May 2020, but policy officers are still gathering evidence and submitting statements. The inspector has asked for new dates to be scheduled for July and August 2020. These are intended to debate village sites in the submitted plan and any other village sites that might be selected for submission, based on officer advice and responses to the current consultation document. Full Council will wish to note that the deadline for public consultation was extended to 1 May, in light of the lockdown situation.

The Head of Planning is working with Herts LEP to prepare an Industrial and Recovery Strategy for the county and will then use that document to help prepare an Economic Recovery Strategy and a Town Centre Recover Strategy for the borough.

A new "Pavement Licence" regime which is to be administered by local authorities is included in the Business and Planning Bill which should receive Royal Assent shortly. This makes temporary changes to planning procedures and alcohol licensing and is designed to make it easier for premises serving food and drink (such as bars restaurants and clubs) to seat and serve customers outside.

There are changes to the alcohol licensing regime, which will allow operators with existing alcohol on-sales licences to also serve alcohol for consumption off the premises and to make deliveries.

We have continued to determine planning applications and undertake enforcement of serious cases. We have maintained our role as statutory consultees, including for those applications that require complex noise, air quality or contaminated land assessments.

### **3.7.2 Investment & Regeneration**

Planning officers have re-started site visits from public vantage points and making a judgement whether it is possible to safely access back gardens via

side paths and gates. They are continuing to determine applications, using photographs where possible, however being cautious where they are unable to make a full and proper judgement. In such cases, officers will seek an extension of time with the applicant/agent. Anything that has been called-in for Development Management Committee will be dealt with via virtual meetings, in accordance with the new regulations.

### **3.7.3 Neighbourhood and Town Centres**

In addition to the ongoing partnership work with the police to address anti-social behaviour as set out above, we are working closely with local businesses to provide support and encourage visitors to our town centres in a safe environment.

### **3.7.4 Business Friendly**

The Licensing team are aware of the current difficulties faced by many businesses and, as such, are taking a pragmatic and flexible approach, while ensuring the licensing objectives are safeguarded. In the event that premises are found to be breaching licensing conditions, arrangements will be put in place to hold hearings of the licensing committee using remote access technology.

The Business and Planning Bill is currently moving through the necessary stages in parliament and, if agreed, it will allow a licence holder to place removable furniture on certain highways adjacent to the premises for which the application was made. This is a streamlined process to allow businesses to secure these licences in time for the summer and, where they are deemed to have been granted, allow these licences to remain in place for a year, but not beyond 30 September 2021.

We have worked closely with the Welwyn Garden City BID to ensure they have ongoing support from the council during this time.

In Hatfield Town Centre we have held Virtual Business Drop-in sessions and assisted in the planning for the successful re-opening of Hatfield Town Centre Market.

Across the borough, we have provided businesses with access to printed materials to promote health and safety, including floor marking, signs and posters.

The Economic Development team continue to work with businesses to help them wherever possible and are running a variety of virtual training events.

Since funding was received from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on 1 April 2020 for Business Grants to small businesses, retail, hospitality and the leisure sector, the business rates team has been working hard to identify the eligible businesses from our system.

As of 6 July, we have issued £14.9m in grants to 1,101 businesses: equivalent to 96% of our funding allocation.

The council has also launched the Discretionary Business Grant scheme, targeting small and micro businesses that were not eligible for the small business grant scheme. The application is open until 10 July.

### **3.8 Our Council**

3.8.1 Virtual committee meetings are now being held as required and the council has very successfully arranged other virtual events for Councillors and officers, including all-staff briefings and councillors' training and development events. Councillors and officers are becoming more familiar with the process. The new Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) rules have been agreed by the Constitution Review Group and preparatory actions are taking place to facilitate the first meeting of the OSC in July. With the constitutional changes now agreed by last Council, we are seeing the start of a more streamlined governance process, through the use of Executive Member decision notices.

### **3.8.2 Equality & Fairness**

Vulnerable residents have been identified, with targeted support, provided through the wider community response. This will continue through the county-wide community reassurance scheme.

In recognition of the reported vulnerability of people from BAME communities to Covid-19, the council is ensuring that staff from this group feel especially safe and this has been taken into account in the council's approach to preparing the workplace for officers who need to work in the office.

Going forward, the council's Equalities Steering Group will consider the potential impacts on staff and other members of its community.

### **3.8.3 Customer First**

As part of the development of the Welwyn Hatfield Healthy Hub, regular bulletins have been produced and these are being circulated out to various organisations, residents and all Councillors.

At the time of writing this report, officers are working on plans to open the reception in a safe manner. Protective screens, floor markings and signage are being installed. There will also be an upgrade to the booking system to enable customers to make an appointment prior to coming into the reception.

### **3.8.4 Employer of Choice**

Ongoing work continues corporately as we review services returning to their full capacity. There will be a mixture of working arrangements to co-ordinate as this unfolds. We continue with remote recruitment and a number of vacancies have been successfully filled in this way.

Two sessions, in respect of the mental health aspects of remote working, were delivered for our staff and an additional one is planned for mid-July.

## **4 Legal Implication(s)**

4.1 The council is a Category 1 responder for the purposes of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, meaning the council has a duty to work with partners to plan for and recover from emergencies, and also to keep critical services going.

4.2 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (the Act) was made on 25 March 2020 to make statutory provision in respect of Coronavirus and connected purposes. The Act confers a range of new powers to enable public authorities and other organisations to respond to issues associated with the pandemic.

- 4.3 The council continues to find ways to ensure it can continue to meet its legal obligations and duties, balanced against the requirement to work in different ways during the pandemic emergency period. The law in connection with the pandemic is continuously changing, so we are making sure that steps are taken to keep up to date.

## **5 Financial Implication(s)**

- 5.1 The council has previously estimated that the financial pressure that the council is facing due to Covid-19 is around £7m. The funding received to date from the Government is around £1.28m.
- 5.2 On 2 July, the government announced further support to the local government sector, which is made up of 3 elements:
- New £500 million of funding to cover local authority spending pressures.
  - A co-payment mechanism for irrecoverable Sales, Fees and Charges income. Under this scheme, councils bear the first 5% of losses compared to their budgeted income, but the Government will support those worst affected by covering 75p in every pound of losses beyond this.
  - Phased repayment of Collection Fund deficits over the next 3 years.
- 5.3 On 4 July, the government announced a £1.57bn funding package to the arts venue sector; it is unclear at this stage whether local authority run cinema and museums will benefit from the funding.
- 5.4 At present, it is unknown how much additional funding the council will receive as there are very little details available. As the quarter 1 budget monitoring report will be presented to August Cabinet meeting, officers will be providing a report to update of the financial impact of Covid-19 to the Council.

## **6 Risk Management Implications**

- 6.1 A strategic risk is now in place covering the impacts of Covid-19. This is assessed as highly likely to have major impacts; including finance and local economy, community wellbeing and effects on services, staff and corporate projects, and hence the achievement of some corporate objectives. Managers are also addressing Covid-19 impacts within their operational risk registers. Moving forward, there are opportunities to integrate some of the changes to working methods into the wider modernisation and transformation agenda which the council has in place.

## **7 Security and Terrorism Implication(s)**

- 7.1 There are no direct implications; however, guidance has been published to local authorities highlighting the risk of fraud in connection with recovery from the pandemic.

## **8 Procurement Implication(s)**

- 8.1 The council has been acting in accordance with government guidance to work with and support its contractors during this current pandemic.

## **9 Climate Change Implication(s)**

- 9.1 The social distancing requirements of the response to the pandemic have resulted in the majority of our staff still working remotely and the amount of face to face contact with our customers has reduced in line with these requirements. This has therefore resulted in fewer vehicles being used for work-related tasks and a subsequent drop in work-related vehicle emissions.
- 9.2 Whilst it could be argued that the reduction in staff attending the offices has led to a reduction in energy use at the offices, we must also bear in mind the potential increase in usage in homes.
- 9.3 Work is underway to record carbon savings arising from the pandemic response in order to feed in to and influence our Climate Change Strategy.

## **10 Human Resources Implication(s)**

- 10.1 The majority of employees have been able to continue working as normal throughout the emergency. There have been some impacts due to some employees being required to home school their children, but this has been mitigated by working with this group to agree more flexible arrangements. Where some services have scaled back, we have tried to redeploy staff to other critical services. There have been very low reported employee absences associated with Covid-19.

## **11 Health and Wellbeing Implication(s)**

- 11.1 Home working may have positive benefits, but we are also aware of the negative issues that can result from remote working, such as being away from colleagues, adopting a different routine and the feeling of isolation.
- 11.2 The challenge for many of the teams has been one of communication and ensuring that all staff members are able to communicate regularly in meaningful ways. However, the introduction of Microsoft Teams across the council has greatly improved our ability to communicate remotely.
- 11.3 For many of the service areas, critical frontline services are still being delivered to our communities. For others, new responsibilities have been introduced as part of the National Coronavirus Plan. It is essential that we continue to fulfil our duty of care in respect of our employees, contractors and members of the public and, as such, new risk assessments, new control measures and new systems of work have been implemented.

## **12 Communication and Engagement Implication(s)**

- 12.1 The Corporate Communications team continue to co-ordinate all Covid-19 communication activity across the council. Links to the multi-agency communications cell as part of the LRF structure ensure we are able to provide consistent, co-ordinated and timely communications to staff, Councillors, local residents and businesses.

### **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 As set out in the report, critical services and provision for vulnerable people are in operation and information on how to access help is widely available, in a range of media, at borough, county and national level.

14.2 On the basis that the changes to other 'business as usual' operations are currently temporary and in response to a national public health emergency, Equality Impact Assessments have not been completed for each of these changes made. Where future government regulations require changes to be more long term, this approach will be re-considered.

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July 2020