

COUNCIL – 13 May 2020

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Question 1

Cllr Sally Newton to ask the Leader:

How is East Herts Council working with our partners and stakeholders to respond to the challenge of the Covid 19 pandemic?

Response:

I'd like to thank Cllr Newton for her very important question at this time. At the outset of the Covid 19 this council engaged directly with partners and stakeholders so to maintain services and avoid wasteful duplication of effort.

Central government sees county-wide Local Resilience Forums, LRFs, these are established bodies set up to co-ordinate actions in an emergency. The Hertfordshire LRF, a partnership of over 60 organisations, set up a Strategic Co-ordinating Group which includes local government, public health, clinical commissioning group, ambulance and police representatives. East Herts works closely with this group, including co-ordinating various work streams some such as county-wide bulk-purchasing of PPE. As well as the immediate response to the crisis, the group recognises the potential long term impacts on our communities and of leading the Community Reassurance Group.

Hertfordshire County Council is co-ordinating volunteering via Team Herts and we have encouraged all the voluntary groups in East Herts to register on the Team Herts' list.

Nationally, Operation Shield involves GPs and hospital doctors identifying the most vulnerable who have been invited to contact the

county council to discuss their support needs. To date, East Herts Council has supported Operation Shield by phoning over 600 individuals who hadn't contacted the county. Our input has been vital in ensuring the most vulnerable are being reached.

The national Operation Sustain programme is about assisting those who also may need support. Again, we are working with partners to support this by, for example, working with health and county colleagues to support all our Social Prescribing Service clients.

We should be proud of how the residents of East Herts have 'stepped up to the plate' over 1,253 volunteers have been logged on Team Herts- the highest of any district or borough in Hertfordshire.

The challenges have been and remain significant but I am proud of the work by elected members and officers alike to work together with partners and stakeholders with the sole aim of protecting local residents as best we can.

For further information, please click on the following links:

<https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/coronavirus/coronavirus-faqs-and-service-updates>

<https://www.thvolunteering.org.uk/>

Question 2

Cllr Terence Beckett to ask Cllr Geoff Williamson, Executive Member for Financial Sustainability:

The current pandemic and resulting anxiety over the loss of income for many of our residents has driven a huge spike in enquiries to East Herts CAB, and as a council we are sending a lot of enquiries their way through our social media and individual communications. In addition, because of national guidelines on social distancing, CAB has closed face to face communications and have had to set their

teams up to work remotely in order to maintain the high standard of service our residents need and deserve.

The remote set up costs for CAB remote working has been in the region of 12K. Something no one could have budgeted for.

Therefore as it is alleviating a huge workload and expense from the council, have we any plans in place to give an additional grant to assist CAB in delivering their increased service remotely due to the COVID19 crisis, to at least meet all or part of their contingency cost for remote working?

Response:

Thank you Councillor Beckett for raising this question and firstly I would like to thank the CAB staff publicly for their continuing hard work during this difficult time.

Over the past few weeks we have been in discussion with their Chief Executive, Laura Hyde, and as Councillor Beckett points out they have seen an increase in demand. Queries and requests for advice around universal credit and employment have increased and they estimate around a third of this increase is directly attributable to Covid-19. Interestingly they are also seeing more queries from people in their 20s which traditionally have not been a group that has engaged with citizen's advice services.

The nature of the discussions we are now having with the CAB is how we can work together more closely when restrictions begin to be lifted. The CAB have by necessity closed their face to face offering, but have still managed to deliver an effective service over the phone and by email. Of course we too have done the same and have also managed to keep many of our services up and running. Going forward we want to ensure that we are able to bring all services back to normal operations, but also that we are able to take advantage of the changes in behaviour that have been forced upon us. With social distancing requirements set to remain for some time we will be

aiming to make more use of digital means of communicating with clients and residents as an alternative to face to face meetings.

Specifically in relation to the question, we are looking at how our customer service team and the CAB teams can collaborate further, particularly in relation to sharing space where social distancing can be maintained, and using technology which will allow staff from both organisations to be able to remain working at home but still have virtual meetings with clients over video conferencing platforms for example. In these ways we can help to reduce CAB's overhead costs and thus be key to how we support their services being sustainable into the future.

More work will be undertaken in the coming weeks and I am happy to keep councillors informed of progress.

Question 3

Cllr Ian Kemp to ask Cllr Geoff Williamson, Executive Member for Financial Sustainability:

Can the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability confirm that the Council is doing everything in its power to support local businesses affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

Response:

Thank you to Cllr Kemp for raising this matter and I can confirm that this is the case. We have a number of roles in this regard both as a regulator and as a community leader.

As of today we have administered £18m worth of business rates' relief and given out an extra £24m in grants to over 1,900 businesses. In conjunction with the other packages of financial support outlined by the Chancellor this will no doubt be a vital injection of cash for many hard-pressed businesses; indeed we have

received considerable positive feedback from those that have received the grant, stating how it has managed to keep them afloat in terms of paying their suppliers and employees.

Furthermore and in common with many other landlords, we have taken a sympathetic view with any of our commercial tenants who are experiencing financial difficulties. Arrangements to defer rent have been agreed with nine of our tenants, although one of these subsequently decided to maintain normal payments.

As we look ahead to restrictions being lifted we are also working closely with partners on re-opening town centres. Yesterday my colleague the Executive Member for Planning and Growth chaired a meeting with town councils, business representatives, the police and highways on how to implement social distancing measures in our high streets so that we can get people supporting local shops, restaurants and cafes in a safe way when these venues are allowed to re-open. We are also working closely with our colleagues on the LEP to promote initiatives such as a crowdfunding platform which allows businesses to secure cash investment from local people as well as access match funding if they can diversify their offer during these difficult times.

We will continue to build our support businesses as best we can going forward.

For further information, please click on the following link:

<https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-businesses/covid-19-grant>

Question 4

Cllr James Frecknall to ask Cllr Peter Boylan, Executive Member for Neighbourhoods:

The unprecedented time in which we are living is creating untold challenges for many residents across the district. While recognising and commending the work by officers and members alike in supporting those residents who are most vulnerable and in need, I would like to ask what the council is doing to tackle the increase in the rates of Domestic Abuse for both male and female residents. For instance, has the idea of 'safe spaces' has been discussed with local supermarkets and hubs? I recognise that much of this remit will fall to County Council, but it is to us, at the District level, to whom many residents will turn to for help first.

Response:

I would like to thank Cllr Frecknall for giving advance notice of this question. It is worth remembering that victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse can be men, women and children and is devastating to individual victims and families at any time. However, the recent measures taken to control the spread of COVID19 virus, requiring everyone to stay at home has provided an environment for relationships within the home to become highly pressured. Both intimate and sibling relationships have been tested beyond normal circumstances with sometimes a feeling of nowhere to escape.

It is widely recognised nationally that the incidence of domestic abuse has increased in the last few months. Since lockdown began, I take part in a weekly Zoom meeting hosted by the Police and Crime Commissioner, along with the Assistant Chief Constable and all community safety portfolios holders from the ten districts and boroughs and county. Domestic abuse has been a constant theme of concern at those meetings from the beginning. There has been a rise in police reporting for domestic abuse across the county and the

latest figures for East Herts shows an 11% increase on last year, but has now started to reduce.

Nevertheless, the responsibilities for prevention, detection and victim support for domestic abuse is a multi-agency one, led by the two safeguarding boards in Hertfordshire. Different agencies have different responsibilities and contributions to this approach. This council has both housing and safeguarding responsibilities with respect to those experiencing domestic abuse and continues to work hard to maintain services during the coronavirus emergency.

In February this year, the council entered into an agreement with the Survivors Against Domestic Abuse service, known as SADA. This service is managed by Stevenage Council and provides East Herts residents with access to support with rehousing options including safe accommodation. SADA has been operating throughout the lockdown and the council has continued to make referrals.

Both SADA and the Hertfordshire Domestic Abuse Helpline have reported increased referrals and contacts from across the county throughout lockdown. However, I can assure members that there remains capacity in the safe accommodation the council can access. Furthermore, just this week, the Housing Team is advertising housing association vacancies for the first time since March; certain groups will have top priority for rehousing, including those escaping domestic abuse.

The council is part of the countywide Domestic Abuse Partnership, which has been meeting weekly since it was set up on 20th April as part of the wider response to the coronavirus emergency. The use of supermarkets being 'safe hubs', which is an excellent approach, is being rolled out across the county by this Partnership.

This partnership has engaged the local charity "Safer Places" to train staff in local supermarkets and pharmacies on how to support

people who seek advice whilst out shopping alone, including providing posters, discreet leaflets and signposting.

Safer Places' website provides straightforward and practical advice, including accessing service while shopping alone and, when dialling 999, pressing 55 so that the operator can hear what's going on without themselves being heard or needing the victim to speak.

The council's website provides detailed information and advice on the range of services provided by the council and others.

<https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/housing/homeless-or-threatened-homelessness/housing-advice-domestic-violence-and-abuse>

I hope this provides Cllr Frecknall and other members with assurance about how serious this council takes its responsibilities around this important subject.

Question 5

Cllr Mione Goldspink to ask Cllr Geoff Williamson, Executive Member for Financial Sustainability:

Could the Executive Member give details, please, about the steps which this Council is taking to assist our Residents if they are having difficulty in paying their Council Tax?

Response:

May I thank Cllr Goldspink for raising this important issue.

For any residents who are experiencing difficulties the first step is to talk to us without delay, rather than simply stop paying. By doing so this enables us to record the issues and provide tailored advice based on their particular circumstances.

There are a variety of ways we can help - we can reschedule payments over the year, or delay payments by making their first instalment in June. If necessary we suggest that customers pay any small amounts they can afford regularly rather than nothing, to reduce pressure later on.

We will also advise them about Council Tax Support and direct them to other agencies if appropriate.

Furthermore all recovery actions such as issuing a summons for non-payment have been stopped.

The Council Tax Hardship Scheme which grants up to an extra £150.00 for working age claimants is also helping to reduce the pressure on the most vulnerable.

We have to remember that East Herts is the collection agency for Council Tax for all preceptors, and HCC and the Police are not allowing us to delay our paying over their precepts, so we need to continue to collect what we can to enable other important services to continue running.

For further information, please click on the following link:

<https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/coronavirus/council-tax-benefits-and-coronavirus>

Question 6

Cllr Mary Brady to ask the Leader of the Council:

Could you please indicate which proposed projects may be affected by the blow to the economy of the Covid-19 Virus?

Response:

We are working closely with the construction companies which have the best access to professional advice. Construction companies are taking direction from the Construction Leadership Council and guidance from central government on assessing whether their supply chains are still active as well as the feasibility of social distancing on sites. Following the announcement by the Prime minister on Sunday evening, it seems construction is a sector where government are keen to keep things moving.

At this stage we don't expect too many delays in our major projects.

At Grange Paddocks Leisure Centre we are 8 weeks into construction and still anticipate the new centre being operational by October 2021. It helps of course that the current activities are mostly groundwork related which means social distancing is a lot easier. For Northgate we are proposing to press ahead with works and hope to agree a date for closing the car park soon with a view to works commencing thereafter.

With regards to Hertford Theatre we are concerned that current restrictions could impact our ability to undertake any meaningful public consultation which is necessary before a planning application is submitted and we anticipate a delayed start date for works from January 2021 to July/ August 2021.

However, the current situation provides us with an opportunity to undertake a different approach to consultation and engagement. Traditionally consultation activities carried out by the Council focus

on face to face events and large mail outs. These tend to be costly to deliver and the least environmentally sustainable options available. Alternative approaches to consultation are now being explored across the country and provide different platforms to engage with wide sections of the community.

There are a range of tools which are available to us such as email surveys, on-line live Q&A sessions through facebook and youtube and bespoke software for virtual exhibitions. All of which are being used elsewhere and provide for a more efficient, sustainable and inclusive approach to consultation. We will be looking at deploying some of these new approaches in our pre-application engagement for the Theatre. The old and the new.

A similar situation arises on consultation from the new designs for Hartham Leisure Centre.

I want East Herts to be an exemplar in the delivery of alternative consultation techniques and I would like external developers to follow suit in pursuing a range of alternative consultation options to reach a fully inclusive audience ahead of submitting planning applications.

That hopefully gives a flavour of where we are however I note the question is about the economic dimension to these projects. We will have to wait and see what the macro effects of this pandemic are on the global economy, cost of materials, labour and so forth but we are committed to moving these projects ahead on time and in budget.