

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL, COUNCILLOR JOHN LODGE

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL, JULY 2020

As might be expected the work of the council continues to be on responding to the Covid19 pandemic, as well as keeping as many of the essential services to residents and businesses operating uninterrupted.

Whilst it may seem to many that the country is starting to get back on its feet, following the worst of the pandemic, there is still a great deal of work for our officers in responding to the outbreak and helping businesses and communities start their recovery.

Our focus on supporting businesses in the District includes the payment of over £18m in business rate reliefs and grants, since the end of March. We are also working hard to ensure we pay invoices received as soon as possible to aid the cash flow of businesses; that turnaround time is currently just over 7 days. And the planning service is maintaining a high performance on determination times, providing residents and businesses the certainty they need in planning ahead.

There has been a very positive response to the work of the council in preparing businesses for the relaxation of measures, enabling them to open in conformance with Covid-safe practices. This has been such a great effort from such a small number of staff, some of who have also had to deal with a significant illegal import of food and other prohibited products through Stansted Airport.

However, the impact on our business community is clear, with the collection of business rates in Q1 of 2020/21 reducing to 19.6% collected (compared to 29.5% for the same period last year).

Our focus on supporting residents and communities includes the new track and trace system, which is now embedding across Essex, with the production of the Essex COVID-19 Local Outbreak Control Plan. Our staff have been trained and are now on stand-by seven days a week to respond to an outbreak. The requirement for officers to stand ready is likely to continue for many months, although of course we very much hope it won't be needed.

As anticipated, unfortunately, a significant increase in homelessness approaches is already evident, which the Housing Team is responding to. The performance of the Benefits Team to process changes relating to council tax and housing benefits claims has been excellent, even better than in previous quarters, despite the increased workload. And although the need for assistance from the Council's community hub has reduced there continues to be a steady demand for support, including delivery of prescriptions and food shops and parcels.

The work of our Street Services teams has been excellent throughout the period of lockdown and as relaxation occurs; the percentage of waste and recyclables successfully made on first visit continues to be sustained at high levels.

And, as always, the Council's website remains an excellent source of up to date information; the use of the website remains high proving to be an invaluable source of material for businesses and residents alike.

The council's response would not have been possible, however, without the support and cooperation of our residents and visitors to the District. We thank you for being considerate to others, following the rules and helping us all to reduce the incidence of Covid19 in the District.

Whilst retaining our response to the pandemic, the Council must now also turn its thought to the longer term recovery for the district. Many businesses have closed and many are unsure if they will be able to continue trading successfully. The unemployment figures for May indicated a rise in unemployment in the District, up from 1.34% in April to 4.2% in May – that was 2,265 people (East of England 5.7%, Great Britain 6.5%). The council will be reviewing and redrafting its Economic Development Plan to ensure we do whatever we can to support businesses grow again and that our residents, particularly younger people, can get on the employment ladder.

We also anticipate that the demand on our homelessness service will grow as restrictions on landlords taking action against tenants who are behind on their rent are lifted, as families who have struggled to manage relationships during lockdown feel able or are forced to access assistance and more generally as the consequences of the economic shock are felt by our community.

However, it is important that we also seize the opportunities that the pandemic has generated, including the incredible efforts of all of our volunteers, many of who stepped forward for the first time. We will work with our partners to ensure that we continue to tap in to this invaluable resource and continue the increased sense of generosity and community generated by the pandemic.