

Report to the Council

Committee: Council

Date: 25 February 2021

Subject: Environmental and Technical Services

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Nigel Avey

Recommending:

The report of the Environmental and Technical Services Portfolio Holder be noted.

COVID-19 – Response of Contracts and Technical Services: All services continue to perform well during the Covid-19 period. Office based staff are continuing to work remotely by using Microsoft TEAMS or ZOOM. Those who need to come to office for operational reasons are taking precautions to avoid the risk of infection. Operational staff have assisted with the Council's Safer Spaces Project to keep the high streets safe.

On the Waste Management side, Biffa are seeing higher levels of sickness due to COVID, as well as more positive cases within their staff, and family members testing positive and having to self-isolate. Collection rounds are still being completed but additional loaders are being deployed from other services once they have finished their round. Mop up crews consisting of Supervisors and Operations Manager are also going out and lorries are being tipped in the evening to ensure that they are empty for the morning.

Within Fleet, there has been a reduction in the number of MOT's being carried in January as the team have been affected by Covid-19. The team have adapted their shift patterns and been very flexible with their working hours to minimise any disruption to planned servicing and public MOT's.

Waste Management: The new recycling banks are now in place. These new banks occupy a smaller footprint and can collect glass, cans and plastic bottles as well as paper and card. This has enabled six additional car spaces being created in the car park in Lower Queens Road, Buckhurst Hill. They are also based on 1100 Litres wheeled bins so that all our recycling freighters can collect the banks on a more regular basis. This new bank system will reduce the amount of space occupied compared to the current system, reduce/eliminate the need for specialist collecting equipment thus reducing the carbon footprint of the service and have a faster reaction time to issues including overfilled banks as we can use our existing freighters. It will also improve the appearance of the recycling sites with distinct EFDC corporate identity.

Waste and recycling tonnages have seen a considerable increase as a result of Christmas and the current lockdown situation with more people working from home. Due to the sheer amount of recycling bags and cardboard that we are currently collecting, this is more than 2 trips from the house to the vehicle. The Biffa crews used to be able to do with one trip for recycling and then one for glass. At present it is not possible to do this in two motion's, due to the large volumes of recycling. This is having a knock effect on times to complete the rounds. Therefore, additional rounds have been deployed to deal with Christmas and lockdown weights. Week commencing 28th December, recycling tonnage had increased by 18% from the same week last year.

Car Parking: Car parking usage is still considerably lower compared to the same time last year, therefore income from the car parks remains significantly lower than previous years.

Last year we introduced Red Route (double red lines) in Epping Forest to tackle the issue of inconsiderate parking which was breaching Covid-19 regulations. NEPP are regularly patrolling daily with additional patrols at weekends and Bank Holidays. Since the introduction well over 1000 PCNs have been issued. NEPP are also using the CCTV enforcement car, in one visit by the car logged 154 illegally parked cars.

Leisure Management: The district's leisure centres remain closed under the Government's national lockdown. No date or timeframe has been given yet as to when the centres may be able to re-open. A funding application has been submitted to Sport England to assist with the financial impact that the COVID has had on the facilities. We hope to have a decision on our submission in the coming weeks.

Ongar Leisure Centre: The bulk of the refurbishment work at the Leisure Centre has now been completed within the £1.3m budget and with only slight delays due to Brexit/Import/Export problems with some suppliers. Members will be pleased to hear that sufficient savings were made to enable a small poolside viewing seating area to be installed for parents and additional decorative works in and around the reception areas. As a reminder, the refurbishment work included a complete replacement of the pool plant including water treatment and air handling systems. Replacement of the aged boilers with much more energy efficient and smaller units along with digital energy management systems. Repair and refurbishment of the leisure centre roof and skylights. Upgrade of electrical systems throughout the centre and the introduction of more energy efficient LED lighting where possible. Additional routine work such as asbestos encapsulation and/or removal was incorporated as needed.

Members will be pleased to hear that the large TV screens that were in the old reception area and outside the Council Chamber, have been re-used to provide parents with better viewing of their children's swimming lessons. Some surplus desks resulting from the accommodation have also been used to upgrade the offices at the leisure centre and reduce the refurbishment costs. The work was undertaken through provisions in the existing leisure contract and managed by Places Leisure and EFDC Officers. Members may be interested to know that the main contractor was a Chelmsford firm, Southern Counties Roofing, who performed very well under trying social distancing conditions. The centre has now had its operational life extended by five to seven years as per the project brief. Lockdown has prevented the centre from re-opening as originally planned but Places Leisure and EFDC will be doing some promotional work as soon as possible to encourage Ongar residents to visit the centre.

Buckhurst Hill Benches: Leisure and Car Parking Team officers recently supported Buckhurst Hill Parish Council and Waitrose with the provision and installation of some memorial benches outside the supermarket in Queens Road. The work was funded in part by Essex County Council through the local Councillor. The two benches are made of teak and inscribed with messages supporting NHS and frontline workers and commemorating the anniversary of VE day in 2020. In addition to these benches, a privately funded memorial bench was also installed at the top of Queens Road to commemorate the passing of members of a local family. Members will be pleased to know that the benches removed from Queens Road will be re-used around the District with one going to Ongar in the near future. Again, working with Buckhurst Hill Parish Council, the Leisure and Car Parking Team will be installing some new benches in the Roding Valley Recreation Ground as soon as the wet weather abates.

DaRT87 Demand Responsive Transport Trial: The trial service commenced on Saturday 2 January 2021. However lockdown has seriously suppressed demand, so only a minority of the 55 registering interest so far have used it. The main journey types for those registering are: NHS staff (13), those seeking a tube link for London commutes (15), EFDC staff (8), school/college (4). Geographically, the hotspots for interest are SW Harlow, Epping Green and Loughton.

The Traffic Commissioner backlog means the service still cannot charge fares, but we turned this into a 'try for free' offer via social media during mid-January. A total of 138 single trips were taken in three weeks in January. Later in January there were occasions when 4 to 6 passengers were on board (max 7 allowed under covid rules), our partners Epping Forest Community Transport attribute this to some passengers becoming regulars, a hopeful sign.

Procurement and Contract Development: The Procurement and Contract Development Team have continued to offer advice, guidance and support to officers with their projects and contracts, notably the Digital Planning Project, Car Park Minor Works / Street Furniture, Corporate Printing and the Housing Management IT System amongst others. The team have also provided Contract Management support to ICT with their strategic suppliers, such as Microsoft and Northgate.

Following Cabinet decision in December 2020 The Procurement Strategy and Rules for EFDC have been updated with effect from January 2021 the Team Manager has been running virtual training sessions. These raise awareness of the changes and give officers the opportunity to ask questions. Three sessions have taken place so far in January with two more scheduled in February, and the feedback has been positive from those who have attended so far. The Economic Development Team will facilitate engagement with local businesses and officers will provide advice on how local businesses can bid for supplies and services procured by the Council.

Fleet Operations: The workshop continues to operate 6 days a week and providing a full service/mot and safety inspection service, December was a busy month which included the free winter safety car check for staff/Members and stakeholders.

There has been a reduction in the number of MOT's being carried in January as the team have been affected by Covid-19. The team have adapted their shift patterns and been very flexible with their working hours to minimise any disruption to planned servicing and public MOT's.

Recruitment is underway for a 2nd apprentice and procurement is underway for a replacement fleet for Grounds Maintenance, CCTV and Country Care, we will be trialling electric options as part of this process to reduce our carbon footprint in line with Councils priorities.

Grounds Maintenance: The gardening teams are now well into their winter works programme, completing the annual pruning of the numerous roses, shrubs and hedgerows located throughout the district. It may be noticed that many of the ornamental beds have been covered in a layer of wood-chippings; this is a 'natural mulch' applied to the soil to help suppress weed growth, retain moisture and enrich the soil. This environmentally friendly method of weed control and plant management also provides an excellent way of recycling the wood-chippings generated from our tree maintenance work.

Additional sites throughout the district have been identified for planting works where shrubs have become old or tired and require replacement. These sites include the re-planting of the heathers at Leonard Davis House, additional shrub work at Thaxted Way and some minor turfing works at Buckingham Road. The winter bedding plants throughout the district have been installed with the Polyanthus and Pansy's showing bright display's during the shorter day and signs of bulbs emerging to flower in the coming weeks.

The servicing of equipment and machinery is underway in preparation for the start of the mowing season in the spring months. The servicing includes maintenance of the ride on lawn mowers, oil changes to tractors, repair of weed spraying lances and blade changes to hand mowers and hedge cutters.

Country Care: It is with great sadness to report that the team have lost one of its volunteers, Peter Spence and we would like to acknowledge our appreciation of all the hard work and time that he gave to Country Care. Peter volunteered with the team for 30 years and through his volunteering gave approximately £55,000 in monetary terms of his time. He will be greatly missed by the team and volunteers.

In between Lockdowns 2 and 3 three volunteer tasks have been held in the district's woodlands;

- In Chigwell Row Wood thinning was carried out on the dominant holly around some of the veteran oaks and the Heath had much of its invasive aspen removed.
- At Linder's Field the team and volunteers removed holly and sycamore removal and some bramble bashing round the hawthorn trees on the meadow.
- A total of 198 volunteer hours was given to the Service over the three tasks.

The team continues to conduct habitat management work but without the volunteer army the sites are presenting challenges.

A wetland bird survey report has been completed which analyses the abundance and species of wetland birds on three of the Local Nature Reserves: Church Lane, Thornwood Common and Nazeing Triangle. There is a good diversity on all three sites of wetland recordable species and the data collected is helping to plan future habitat management.

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, events planned for the Festival of Culture will not go ahead as hoped. The team adapting the events for delivery on either Teams or Facebook.

Basic Tree Maintenance is ongoing and the tree planting for 2020-21 has commenced. The team have successfully recruited to the vacant Arboriculture Officer post and they will be joining the Council very soon. During this period, we are prioritising inspections on a risk basis.

Environmental Protection and Land Drainage: The team have been busy in recent weeks due to heavy winter rains. The 14th Jan saw heavy rain across the district and the team was busy monitoring our two larger flood storage reservoirs to ensure they performed their duty of collecting and storing water to delay it entering downstream catchments.

The team also ensured our other flood defence assets such as storm grills remained clear and free flowing by removing accumulated debris. Officers attended a number of properties across the district to provide advice and where necessary provided sandbags where they could be effective.

Following heavy rainfall events the team follow-up on all resident concerns raised and either refer them to other agencies such as Thames Water who are responsible for surface water sewers, Essex Highways who are responsible for road gullies or follow-up with landowners where ditches in their ownership are blocked or contributing to flood risk.

Although Epping District escaped the worst of the rains that affected the rest of the country on the 20th January the team and Councils term land drainage contractor were on standby to attend any emergency issues. The team have also met with Essex Highways to highlight key highway flooding sites that are high profile within the district and to have input into strategic projects such as Qualis development sites and North Weald Airfield Master planning.

We are recruiting to the post of Land Drainage Officer, following the notification of retirement in March of the current officer.

The impact of the coronavirus has meant that certain visits to premises to assess less urgent drainage issues or undertake sampling of private water supplies have been reduced, and only undertaken where risk assessed as safe to do so. But with the recent recruitment of a Principal Environmental Protection Officer our annual data return has been completed and inspections are increasing for pollution and water supply issues.

Highway Rangers: The rangers continue to work on reported issues from both Essex County Council and those reported by Members and residents. The types of jobs they have completed have included rebuilding damaged fencing at Staple's Road, a number of bollards across the district that have been hit by vehicles, repairs to highway signs and clearing tree and hedge growth around signs and walkways.

The rangers have also undertaken works in Epping High Street and Waltham Abbey to repair tree pits ready for new trees to be planted, refurbished one bench, with new wood on order for

other benches and a number of paving works. A new gate is on order for the Market Square in Waltham Abbey and has been chained temporarily to remove car access.

We have also utilised contractors to undertake larger projects such as paving works in Epping High Street where tree roots had lifted slabs, these were pruned with the help of the Arboriculture Officer and their contractors to ensure the iconic trees remain healthy and allow repairs to the footway to reduce trips and falls. Quite a number of reports that are made to the team are rejected as they are works that the rangers cannot work on such as defective street lights, pot holes or private hedges which remain the responsibility of Essex Highways.

<https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/environment/highway-rangers-service/>