

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Date of meeting: xx Month 2020

Portfolio: Commercial and Regulatory Portfolio – Cllr Patel



Subject: Covid-19 Update

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Democratic Services Officer:

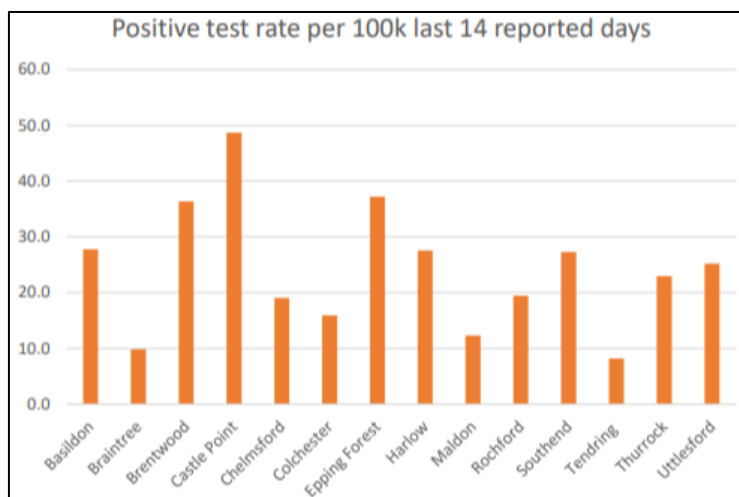
Recommendations/Decisions Required:

Consider the Council's response to the Covid19 Pandemic and make comments to the Portfolio Holder for Commercial and Regulatory on future actions and approach.

Report:

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) is responding to the national and local position in a proactive and positive way through the efforts and contribution of our staff and members. The Council is also playing an active part in the coordinated Greater Essex response, via the Strategic Co-ordination Group (SCG), comprising all public sector bodies operating within the County.
- 1.2. Whilst the initial focus of the Council was strongly focused on the Response, with the easing of lockdown this had moved to Restoration and a forward look towards Recovery.
- 1.3. Most Council services are now operating normally, but with some restrictions as necessary in order to maintain distancing and the safety of staff and residents. Safety of residents and staff remains the priority.
- 1.4. However, the continued threat of a second spike means that the Council still has an active role in monitoring current levels of infection within the Epping Forest District Council and in ensuring that individuals and premises are observing the guidance around social distancing.
- 1.5. In recent weeks the new infection rates in Epping Forest District have been elevated and some of the highest in the wider Essex area. This represents an area of significant concern and so, the focus of reinforcing adherence and clear messaging remains a high priority.
- 1.6. The following two charts present the published data on infection rates, captured via recorded positive tests in the two weeks prior to the production of this report. The position changes rapidly, but the trend is upwards mirroring the national trend position.



Positive tests by district

Row Labels	05-Sep	06-Sep	07-Sep	08-Sep	09-Sep	10-Sep	11-Sep	12-Sep	13-Sep	14-Sep	15-Sep	16-Sep	17-Sep	18-Sep	Grand Total
Basildon	4	1	9	3	3	2	9	3	2	4	6	1	2	3	52
Braintree	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	2	1	5	0	2	0	15
Brentwood	3	3	3	1	0	3	1	3	0	0	1	3	2	5	28
Castle Point	2	0	5	3	3	10	2	4	0	1	6	0	3	5	44
Chelmsford	5	2	3	4	2	2	3	1	2	3	1	3	1	2	34
Colchester	0	1	1	3	4	2	4	1	0	1	2	6	2	4	31
Epping Forest	1	1	2	3	5	3	2	0	2	4	9	3	9	5	49
Harlow	2	0	2	2	2	2	0	0	1	7	4	0	0	2	24
Maldon	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	1	8
Rochford	1	1	1	1	4	1	2	2	0	0	2	0	1	1	17
Southend-on-Sea	2	2	1	5	6	7	4	2	3	3	4	2	3	6	50
Tendring	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	12
Thurrock	4	2	5	3	1	4	4	1	3	1	3	1	6	2	40
Uttlesford	3	2	0	2	0	1	1	2	0	3	2	3	3	1	23
Grand Total	29	15	33	34	32	38	32	20	16	33	47	26	35	37	427

- 1.7. The majority of Council services continue to be delivered by staff working from home and no staff have been furloughed.
- 1.8. Through March to the end of June, responding to the impacts and supporting the residents and businesses through the crisis has been the priority focus for the Council and therefore dominated much of its activity. Furthermore, Covid19 is likely to leave a lasting economic and community legacy that will remain a priority for potentially many years to come.
- 1.9. The Leader nominated the role of Covid19 Lead to the Portfolio Holder for Commercial and Regulatory. In response, the Portfolio Holder, Cllr Patel, formed a cross party Portfolio Advisory Group to consider and coordinate all matters related to Covid19, including the Council's response and recovery actions around the key themes of Finance, Economy, Community.
- 1.10. Initially, during the peak of the lock-down phase, this PAG met weekly but has subsequently met less frequently as the nature of the Council's involvement and response has changed. The frequency of these meetings is now once again expected to increase along with the rise in cases nationally.
- 1.11. Cabinet considered a report in July setting out the impact of Covid19 on the Council, the actions taken to smoothly transition through the Recovery phase and an initial set of proposal around the Economic Recovery of the district.

2. Response Phase of Covid19

- 2.1. During the response phase the Council was largely focused on the provision of support to those isolated by lock-down and the challenges of providing core services safely in a

Covid19 environment. Some examples of impact are set out below;

- The Council has been able to keep most services running, in some cases digitally, and there has been no reason to furlough employees. The Council carried out visits where social distancing could be maintained.
- At its peak, the Customer and Revenue teams handled 2,000 calls per week. That represented a 30% increase on what would normally be the busiest time of the year.
- The Revenues and Business Service Teams provided £29.7m in Business Rate grants to over 2,450 local businesses and a further £800,000 of discretionary support.
- A total of 35 employees were redeployed to Operation Shield. The work included calls to the vulnerable list of Category A residents, welfare checks, supporting with additional calls to the Covid19 helpline, also supporting the food and distribution service.
- The Benefits Team saw a significant rise in new claims; increasing from 150 in January to 347 in April.
- Employees in Older Peoples Services made contact with over 1,500 vulnerable or shielding individuals.
- All rough sleepers were housed within 3 days in response to the Government's 'Everyone In' initiative.

3. Transition to Restoration

3.1. Considerable effort was invested in the re-opening of High Streets for non-essential retail (on 15th June) and then the hospitality sector on 4th July. With the main focus being on ensuring that people could move safely and ensuring that social distancing could be maintained, in line with Government guidance.

3.2. Work is continuing in this space, especially around ensuring that distancing is being maintained in licensed properties, hairdressers, nail bars and beauty salons, as these venues are seen as higher risk for spreading the virus.

3.3. Across the District actions have included;

- Providing social distance markers to Town and Parish Councils in the district.
- A new webpage to facilitate digital engagement and consultation using the Commonplace platform which allows the public to map where social distancing issues exist and help identify where other measures could be delivered. Posters are displayed which have the QR code linking straight to the site.
- Essex Highways have changed signal times at pedestrian crossings so that they are instantaneous to provide pedestrian priority.
- Works in Epping High Street funded by Essex County Council have taken place resulting in a speed limit reduction, widening of the pavement in places and the suspension of a limited number of parking bays
- Work continues on identifying conflict points and what improvement actions are required to other High Streets within the district.

- A bid has been submitted for European Funds earmarked for Returning High Streets Safely.
 - We have worked closely with the Police and other public bodies to ensure that the re-opening of pubs and restaurants ran smoothly, including making arrangements for the licensing of establishments using Pavements.
 - We have carried out doorstep well-being surveys in two wards across the district to understand the well-being impacts of Covid-19 on communities. The result will help to formulate future actions.
- 3.4. Test, Track and Trace has also been a focus of activity in terms of providing support to the national initiative and Essex CC. It is Essex CC who will assume the local lead and have the key powers in the event of an outbreak. The Council's has been in providing support and guidance to those within local 'hotspots', should they occur.
- 3.5. Changes in guidance continue to provide new challenges and requires the Council to work with partner organisations to provide presence, enforcement and reassurance to the community.

4. Recovery Actions

- 4.1. A full understanding of the lasting impacts of Covid19 will take time to emerge. However, it is immediately apparent that the local economy will be badly hit by Covid19, with the impacts probably lasting many months and potentially years. The impacts include permanent changes to shopping habits, a shift in the viability of office space, retail and leisure and an expected significant increase in unemployment.
- 4.2. Many of the implications are yet to be fully felt or understood as much of the economy is still holding its breath whilst waiting to see what degree of normality resumes when Covid19 ceases to be a continued risk.
- 4.3. However, at some point, either when Covid19 has continued for too long or Government support ends (e.g. Business Rates reliefs or furlough), the full impact of this event should emerge, and it will be possible to truly gauge the lasting impact.
- 4.4. In anticipation and recognising the need for affirmative action in response, the Cabinet considered an initial set of Economic Recovery proposals at its meeting in July. It is expected that more actions will follow as the understanding of the impacts matures.

5. Analysis of the Council Response

- 5.1. It is difficult to gauge how the Council performed in response to the Pandemic as there are no objective measurements or targets to assess this against. Measurement therefore tends to be via a subjective assessment of the Council's performance together with anecdotal feedback.
- 5.2. In this respect the assessment is that the Council performed well in the face of what was an unexpected and massive shift in the organisation's focus.
- 5.3. The key requirements placed on the authority were as follows;
- Protect the workforce, elected members and customers
 - Provide support for the vulnerable and shielding
 - Provide support to those elements of the economy financially impacted through lockdown

5.4. **Protect the workforce, elected members and customers**, the Council took the initiative and required all staff to work from home ahead of the national advice. Members meetings were temporarily suspended, and emergency decision-making powers were introduced to ensure that the Council could continue to function. This was quickly replaced with virtual meetings, meaning that little use was made of emergency powers. Face to face customer meetings were withdrawn and replaced with alternatives, including more support to the Council's phone lines.

5.5. **Provide support for the vulnerable and shielding**, the Council rallied and focused all staff running non-essential or suspended services on to supporting those shielding. Working closely with the County and voluntary sector we were able to quickly ensure all those in the community who required support were looked after, this included regular calls to our own vulnerable tenants. As previously mentioned, a helpline was created and advertised and operated 7 days a week. In accordance with the Government's 'everyone in' directive the Council's housing team housed all rough sleepers in the district within 3 days.

5.6. **Provide support to those elements of the economy financially impacted through lockdown**, the Council distributed £30 million of Government support to local businesses within a matter of weeks and was the first council in Essex to achieve this. This provided immediate cashflow support to those impacted businesses.

5.7. The requirement on all councils has been enormous and dynamic. Regulation, requirement and expectations have changed rapidly, and the Epping Forest District Council structured itself accordingly to cope with these demands. As a consequence, the view is that the Council responded well to the initial phase of this pandemic and has retained the structures in place to ensure that it is able to respond to the continued impact.

5.8. The Council has learnt and adapted its structures as the needs have changed and it is felt that nationally and locally the support infrastructure is now much more resilient and better able to cope with further spikes.

6. Reason for decision:

6.1. The Council response has been complex and broad, and members' views and comments are welcomed to inform future actions.

7. Options considered and rejected:

7.1. None

8. Consultation undertaken:

8.1. None

9. Resource implications:

9.1. The Council has experienced a significant financial impact from lockdown, predominantly as a result of lost income from commercial rents, car parks, leisure centres, business rates and council tax, but also has incurred cost pressures from helping the District through this crisis. As a result, the Pandemic represents one of the biggest financial issue facing the Council.

9.2. The current forecast (in line with the numbers being supplied to Government) is that the total cost to Epping Forest District could be in the order of £6 to £7 million across the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account. There are many large assumptions in arriving at this number, not least of all, the speed at which the economy recovers. Given this uncertainty, the actual cost may vary widely from this central estimate.

9.3. To date the Government has provided £1.577 million in support to the Council and announced further support on lost income from Fees and Charges and is considering support on lost Council Tax and Business Rate income. However, it is clear that the Government will not cover the full cost of the event and councils will be expected to share the cost.

9.4. The council had working balances of £7½ million at the start of 2020/21, and therefore is considered 'safe' in terms of its ability to balance its budget in the current year.

10. Legal and Governance Implications:

10.1. None

11. Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications:

12. None

Background Papers: