

ECM 21.05.20 SPELTHORNE'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

INTRODUCTION (Daniel)

From the very start of this national emergency, we have sought to act quickly in implementing measures to safeguard life. From placing the Borough on an emergency footing on 13 March 2020, closing our offices and community centres, and introducing remote working, we have striven to do whatever it takes to help protect the welfare of colleagues and communities from the profound impact of coronavirus.

This pandemic has generated a shock on a scale never seen before. The severity of impact has been unprecedented and has generated a set of challenges in relation to health and wellbeing, communities, civic society, public services and the economy. This report as presented by officers tonight is a testimony to the truly inspirational commitment of staff across the Council working in support of our communities and businesses to overcome such challenges.

SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES

Support 4 Spelthorne Hub and Community Development

Good evening, I'm Karen Sinclair, Joint Group Head of the Council's Community Wellbeing team. I'm going to cover the angle of work relating to support for the local community.

In late February/early March, as national concern about the virus began to rise, we started to plan for options to enhance our local offer. Our immediate thought was for our older service users – some 1800 people using our community centres, receiving meals on wheels, or community alarm pendant wearers.

We began liaison with our Meals on Wheels food provider to ensure they would be able to accommodate our core order going forwards, but also cater for any increased demand. In addition, we researched P.P.E. and safe working methods for visiting 5bed-ridden clients, to protect both staff and customers.

In recognition of the increasing health concerns nationally and locally, the Council made the decision to close the Community Centres, ahead of the Government decision.

A core group of our staff was established, operating at social distance from one another at the Council Offices, with other staff working either from home or minimal numbers at the centres or Leisure Centre. This arrangement continues.

Our initial priority was to support the older vulnerable service users - the 1800 referred to. We commenced telephone calls to both reassure and ask if they required any support. To a large number of this group, these calls have continued on a regular basis.

When lockdown was announced, certain categories of people had been asked by the Government to shield, in other words isolate at home. These included people such as cancer sufferers and those in the most medically vulnerable position. The shielded group are also described by the Government as Category A.

The Council therefore realised the importance of preparing to provide a comprehensive offering for our local community. It's important to stress that effective joint partnership was integral to this. The offer we created was branded Support 4 Spelthorne (S4S), and had a number of strands including;

- Meals on Wheels
- Voluntary sector offer
- Foodbanks
- Money Advice with our partner A2D
- A direct offer of emergency food from Spelthorne Council itself
- Telephone support and advice 8 - 8, 7 days a week

Harnessing the voluntary sector

We knew that we couldn't deliver Support 4 Spelthorne alone. We built on the lessons learned from previous experiences such as the floods, and so entered into a partnership arrangement with Voluntary Support North Surrey to coordinate the roles of volunteers with existing community and church groups, to support residents with prescription collection and food shopping.

Creating food provision

There were already four foodbanks operating in Spelthorne. We recognised that these primarily catered for a different group to some of the shielded, for example, the families and households on low income. We focussed on practical support to enable them to increase capacity. This included the

purchase of fridges and freezers and a generous Council payment of £2,500 to each one. We also brokered corporate donations, including where restaurants were closing and did not want to throw perfectly good food away.

For the most vulnerable shielded Category A residents, in the early stages there was talk of the Government providing food packages directly, but no clarity about how this might work. Therefore, the Council made a commitment to support our own local offering, which we decided to call comfort packs. These were basic food supplies designed to feed a vulnerable person for a week. It should be remembered that at that stage, there was national panic buying, and shops were starting to run out of many items. Lockdown was commencing and therefore the task of creating the facility to put together the packs, at that time on an unknown scale, was monumental.

Staff across the Council rose to the challenge including negotiation with local food retailers to bulk purchase, collect and deliver to the Leisure Centre, which was used as the base. Initially around 150 packs were assembled. This amount was later increased. Systems also had to be devised to deliver the packs, including vehicles, route planning, training appropriate staff, safe systems of working - including of course PPE. This offer was officially operational from 30 March- a very quick turnaround from inception.

Welfare checks – Category A

Whilst Surrey County Council were technically responsible for contacting this group, it was agreed that each District and Borough would contact its own residents to assess needs. However, it is true to say that at times we were all operating in a fog, due to lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities both from Government, Health, County.

Given our concerns locally about managing the personal data of thousands of vulnerable residents on a spreadsheet, we quickly decided that we needed a more robust solution. IT colleagues worked solidly for days to produce a database and end-user form, a project which would normally take months. The beauty of our solution was that a call handler could complete the form, and it would automatically send requests to the appropriate point, such as a comfort pack or assistance with shopping from the voluntary sector. This turned out to be a very good decision, as County and other Districts and Boroughs consistently had issues with the Excel spreadsheet Surrey had devised. Indeed even at this stage Surrey are still trying to look at a workable alternative, now paying a private company to produce something very similar to our solution.

With assistance from teams elsewhere, we created a comprehensive rota of staff that could undertake calls to the shielded group and work through the form with empathy.

Where contact could not be made, we made the decision to visit the clients in person-again involving a great deal of organisation from S4S, both in terms of staff, training and reporting. This proved very successful, as often people were not answering phone calls, but would answer the door or respond to a calling card. In a very small number of cases, we had to escalate to the local Police for visits. In contrast, other Districts and Boroughs relied heavily on phone calls so involved the Police on larger numbers of escalation visits.

It is critical to note that, especially in the early days, some of these calls and visits were literally lifesaving. People were terrified, had no food and no idea who to turn to. Call and visit staff were trained by our managers, however little could have prepared people for the levels of distress they encountered, including several people that were either bereaved or themselves suicidal.

Welfare Checks Category Bs

Whilst the Government priority has always been, understandably, the shielded group, we recognised that there were many more residents who were nonetheless still vulnerable within our community. We referred to this cohort as Category Bs.

There was no obvious list of these residents, so the Council undertook a huge task to try to identify them. Again, staff from other teams were deployed to consider various data sources, such as the electoral roll, Housing Register data, and those who required assistance with moving their refuse bins. Where e-mail addresses were available, people were contacted this way. In other cases, we sourced telephone numbers as a form of contact. Within a short time period, we started to contact the Category B people and replicated the Category A method of contact.

Outcomes

Apart from the all-important qualitative data in the form of thanks and e-mails, here are a few statistics collating information since the start of the crisis:

- 3000 Category A shielded households have been contacted, with the highest success rate in Surrey. We have successfully contacted 98.7% of our shielded households in comparison with the Surrey average of 84.2%
- Part of this achievement is because we have undertaken more visits to shielded households than any other Surrey authority - at 687 visits this amounts to 20% of all visits across the County
- 400 emergency comfort packs have been delivered by S4S. As we had this facility, we did not need to access the County supply of emergency food packs distributed from Guildford Spectrum, which was heavily relied on by most other districts and boroughs
- 10,000 Meals on Wheels delivered. We are now delivering 40% more meals weekly than we were at the start of the pandemic
- 123,000 meal equivalents issued from the local food banks
- 400 referrals for volunteer food shopping and 350 for prescription collection

To summarise

It is fair to say that Community Wellbeing staff have been instrumental in the development and running of the Support 4 Spelthorne community offer, working long hours including through the bank holiday weekends. This role continues.

I hope I have emphasised as I said, the life-saving importance of much of this intervention, the desperation and fear of clients. Our community offer has, on the whole, been gratefully received. In my view, the fog that I mentioned earlier still exists to a degree. There remains some confusion over on line shopping slots and provision of food packs directly from the Government. Only last week Surrey County Council were as surprised as we were to receive another large number of shielded clients to contact – some seven weeks after the community offer was set up. However, as always, we have risen to the challenge.

HOUSING OPTIONS/HOUSING BENEFITS/LEISURE (Deborah)

Good Evening

I am Deborah Ashman the other Joint Head of Community Wellbeing
It was clear from the outset that due to the statutory responsibility of Housing and Housing Benefit and the needs and vulnerability of the respective client groups that the effect of the pandemic and lockdown would be substantial.

Both Housing and Housing Benefit normally deal with clients face to face with Housing Benefit dealing with over 700 clients a month in reception .New practises had to be introduced due to the closure of reception to ensure business continuity

Both teams were and are continuing to be put under great pressure due to the inconsistent, confusing and conflicting instructions given by Central Government and I thought it best to give you a taster of the types of issues that had to be dealt with urgently.

Hospital discharges

The government announced that 15,000 hospital discharges would have to happen nationally; this equated to 75 discharges for Spelthorne residents. However, patients may have been deemed medically fit but they are unable to go home due to lack of support or the unsuitability of their home. Residential homes were also discounted due to the lack of testing before hospital discharge

In partnership with A2D and funding from the Integrated Care Partnership 7 one bed properties were identified , furnished and made ready for occupation in existing sheltered units for the purpose of providing “step down “ properties enabling at speed, supported provision.

Daily calls with hospital discharge teams were undertaken to identify appropriate nominations.

Rough sleepers

On 26th March at 4.30 pm, all Councils received a letter from Government instructing them to place all local rough sleepers in self-contained properties within 24 hours, being mindful to ensure alcohol and drug users were set apart. This accounted for 12 people.

However, in the same week the Government instructed hotels to close. We used the Travel Lodge for emergency self-contained accommodation for some clients with specific needs as well as using it when all other providers were full.

We needed to completely rethink.....

On the same day we received a phone call from the Travel Lodge stating that due to the government announcement we had 3 hours to re arrange suitable accommodation for 3 very vulnerable clients (two being wheelchair users) currently in their hotela very difficult task.

We were therefore dealing with increased demand but no supply.

Domestic violence

Councils were instructed by Government to address the needs of victims of domestic violence differently. Previous experience in other countries identified the sharp increase in domestic violence both during and after lockdown. We were instructed to place in bed and breakfast not just victims of domestic violence but perpetrators to enable some victims to remain in their home.

This again needed us to balance the need of safety and suitability of emergency accommodation as well as location.

Possible prisoner release

The government then announced some prisoners maybe released into the community due to the spread of the virus in prisons. Due to the location of Bronzefield, we prepared but the government never followed through.

Finding suitable alternative accommodation

Due to the closure of the Travel Lodges and other local hotels intensive work by the team had to be undertaken to try and identify alternative placements for these different cohorts of people all with differing needs. However, hoteliers were only interested in assisting key workers. After extensive negotiation over a week and lots of blind ally's we were finally able to secure some local provision.

It should also be noted, we have had to place 30% more households in bed and breakfast since the beginning of this Pandemic but we have been contacting this vulnerable group regularly to ensure they feel supported.

(The current situation)

When considered together this illustrates the confusion and conflicting urgent demands based mainly on theory and projection that the team has had to face usually having to react within hours.

As Karen states the “fog “continues as Government continues to change and amend guidance.

One such example is that the Government has stated that we no longer need to continue to help rough sleepers however this is a moral dilemma for the team and they have worked tirelessly to find permanent accommodation for 4 out of the 9 placed in temporary accommodation. We will continue to work with the remaining 5.

Domestic Violence has increased from 9% of our housing approaches to 27%.

The Housing Benefit Team

The Housing Benefit team deal with residents who need to claim financial assistance for the payment of their rent or council tax. So the impact of people losing their jobs or being given less or no hours to work has significantly affected the work of the team.

The end of the financial year is always very busy for the team however when as soon as the lockdown was announced the influx of calls began and have continued.

The majority of the callers we dealt with and continue to deal with have never claimed benefits before, and they need help and reassurance to deal with the many issues that having no money or just trying to get through the system entails. Many are very distressed and desperate. (The Department for Work and Pensions has received 1.5 million new claims for Universal Credit since March).

Within the team, there has been a marked increase of over 40% in the working age caseload.

Completed application forms are now coming in and in some weeks, there has been a 250% Increase in completed forms received.

Leisure team

The leisure team have mainly been redeployed, but have managed with the help of the resource centre to post 486 activity packs to children and adults. They remain very active on social media encouraging the residents to remain healthy.

The leisure centres obviously still remain closed.

The immediate and long-term effects of the lock down and the pandemic will be ongoing. The teams will need to respond and act appropriately, which has meant that the team managers are already currently looking at how to change or adapt the services to ensure this is done.

FAMILY SUPPORT (Terry)

The Family Support Team, which operates across Spelthorne, Elmbridge and Epsom and Ewell, normally operates by face-to-face contact with the families they are supporting. During the COVID-19 period, the majority of visits to clients have been replaced by phone or video contact, including Team Around Family meetings. Extra vigilance and procedures have been put in place to detect and handle suspected domestic abuse, in view of the increase in reported cases in the UK.

Utilising the skills of the team, 60% of their officers have been involved in making welfare calls to vulnerable residents; and the Family Support Manager has also been assisting with firming up arrangements for the implementation of the Hardship Fund for employees agreed as part of the current year's Revenue Budget.

The team have continued to work closely with Housing Options on intensive housing support, where some home visits have been required. Similarly, a number of home visits have been necessary in relation to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme operating in Elmbridge and Epsom and Ewell, which the team have continued to support during this period.

CUSTOMER SERVICES AND REVENUES (Terry)

With the assistance of ICT, the Customer Services and Revenues Team switched telephony systems and moved to working remotely. The skype system does not have quite same functionality, which adds to the pressure on the team who are dealing with more calls than normal (41% more in March, 78% more in April). Obviously, a lot of callers are ringing because they are anxious about their financial circumstances, which means some calls can be stressful. Managers have been taking care to ensure they keep in touch and support team members.

Many of the customers ringing up are asking for deferral of council tax payments. Every request is dealt on a case-by-case basis. We acted quickly to put information about our approach on our website and on social media. As at 4th May, 664 request for council tax deferrals received. Council tax collection was down 0.9% at beginning of May and is being monitored carefully.

Business rates collection is down 5%. The business rates team are working hard to support vulnerable businesses; firstly putting through £14m of 12-month business rates exemptions for businesses in the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors; and secondly by processing business support grants. Once the detailed guidance was received, the team have been working on a daily basis, including weekends, to process these grants as thoroughly and as quickly as possible, to ensure that businesses get the grants they need. To date we have issued 953 grants to businesses with a value of £12.5m.

In order to ensure that businesses got the money they were entitled to, we publicised details of the Government scheme on our website and on social media. We have also deployed Economic Development and other colleagues to assist in trying to chase responses from the couple of hundred businesses who did not respond. The process of checking to ensure no fraudulent claims are processed is quite lengthy and a few such claims have been identified.

At beginning of May, the Government announced an additional discretionary grant scheme for Councils to provide support for businesses not eligible for the original grant. We are currently liaising with other Surrey councils to develop an appropriate set of criteria which, will be broadly similar across Surrey and we are expecting to have the scheme up and running by early June.

NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES (Jackie)

Good evening, I'm Jackie Taylor Group Head of Neighbourhood Services at Spelthorne Borough Council and I am going to provide you with an overview of our team response to Covid19.

Our main pressure and focus of attention since the country went into lock down has been to carry out the majority of our services, as residents would expect to see them. Most of our staff are operational and so for the majority working from home has not been possible although we have retained an admin function within the depot to manage the day-to-day business as usual.

Our key areas of concern have been with the amount of waste being produced by residents as a result of them being at home. Since the beginning of March, we have been collecting a weekly average of:

- 610 tonnes of rubbish
- 416 tonnes of dry mixed recycling
- 55 tonnes of food waste
- 98 tonnes of green waste seeing a peak of 139 tonnes in 1 week with a spike in requests from new customers, resulting in large numbers of bins being delivered within a very short period of time.

The community recycling centre was closed to all customers in March and as a direct result, we have seen our reported incidents of fly tipping increasing, recording weekly totals of between 20 & 84 tips, 64% of which were household waste.

The main areas for fly tipping are at the councils bring bank sites, which are located around the borough. Despite the CRCs opening last week we continue to see the same dumping problem in these areas. The JET and community safety teams search for the identification of the fly tippers and will be looking to either issue fixed penalty notices to and/or prosecute those responsible.

Our street cleansing teams have adapted to suit the mass closure of retailers and the stay at home lockdown procedures. This service will continue to adapt in response to lockdown changes, which will undoubtedly result in an increase in discarded litter and general waste.

The Spelride team have until now been assisting with the delivery of meals on wheels, this is now being covered by the regular meals on wheels drivers and we are now looking at how we might be able to enable our most vulnerable

residents to move safely outside of their homes by utilising our Spelride drivers and transport.

The boroughs 750 acres of parks and open spaces have remained open and continue to be maintained to a high standard with only the toilets, playgrounds, sports courts and fitness equipment closed off. Last weekend following a change in government guidance, we reopened toilets and sports courts.

It continues to be a daily challenge ensuring that other areas within our parks remain closed until such time as guidance advises us they should reopen. When reopening any of these areas we display guidance reminding people to respect the social distancing guidelines.

Spelthorne in Bloom is going ahead as planned this year and residents will start to see floral displays going up on lamp columns around the borough during the coming weeks.

Our parking officers continue to enforce dangerous or obstructive parking and have unfortunately been subject to abuse for carrying out their duties. Despite this unacceptable behaviour, we have issued penalty charge notices for inappropriate parking. Visitors to our car parks are very low and we have seen a reduction in customers of 82% and income 95%.

Earlier this month we dealt with 2 unauthorised encampments and we continue to work with those managing both areas of land to help them target harden themselves from potential future incursions.

We prepared ourselves in the very early stages of the virus for a large increase in burials and relative burial space capacity. From the beginning of March 20, there have been 225 all causes deaths recorded in Spelthorne. Contrary to our initial concerns, the increased demand for burial bookings and space have not materialised.

We have been engaging with the Local Resilience Forum excess death cell and have worked through the restrictions on numbers of mourners at burials. This in itself is very challenging given the sensitive nature of the work the cemetery staff undertake. Despite the restrictions, we ensure that we continue to provide dignified treatment of all affected, including those who die.

For all of our service areas we have undertaken dynamic risk assessments relating to working practices and potential health & other impacts. These risk assessments have helped us to minimise the potential health impact of the

disease on any of our employees. Thereby enabling us to maintain trust and confidence amongst the majority of our staff.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND BUILDING CONTROL (Lee)

Good evening, I am Lee O'Neil, Deputy Chief Executive, and I'm going to be covering the work of the Environmental Health and Building Control Teams.

Environmental Health

Environmental Health have been one of the Council's key services responding to the threat of COVID-19; whilst they have also had to keep a range of other critical services functioning to protect public health.

As part of its measures to control the spread of COVID-19, the Government introduced new regulations requiring certain businesses to close and maintain social distancing measures. Environmental Health were one of the enforcement bodies given powers to monitor and tackle this.

This wasn't an easy task, as the team had very little time to digest the requirements of the legislation and prepare the necessary procedures to enforce these requirements. In doing so, they also had to consider how they could do this whilst they themselves applied appropriate social distancing and hygiene measures.

I am pleased to say that the team rose to this challenge, ensuring that the necessary systems were in place, and officers trained, in a matter of days, rather than weeks.

As a result, as of 13 May a total of 902 visits had been undertaken to business premises in the borough to check compliance with the new restrictions. Officers have made a number of these visits jointly with Surrey Police and some have taken place in the evening or at weekends, including the recent bank holiday. Fortunately, they have found that compliance is generally good.

The fact that people have been confined at home has led to an increase in some of Environmental Health's normal core activities, including having to deal with more noise and bonfire complaints.

Similarly, the combination of more people storing their rubbish at home, more incidents of fly-tipping and quieter streets, has led to a significant increase in

the number of complaints about accumulations and rats, all of which have had to be followed up.

In total, combining complaints about noise, bonfires, accumulations and pests – the Environmental Health Team has seen a 229% increase in service requests compared to the same period last year. Some of the issues officers have had to deal with have been particularly difficult, dealing with individuals who have been very emotional and on some occasions suicidal, brought on by the current pressures they are under.

In relation to food safety - the team has been required to reprioritise its work according to instructions issued by the Food Standards Agency - these are outlined in the report on page 40 - 41. One of the consequences of the lockdown restrictions is that many food businesses are now relying on online delivery apps for much of their business. Most of these companies specify a minimum food hygiene rating they are willing to accept in order to trade through their platform, which has pushed a number of businesses with low food hygiene scores to make improvements. They have then been requesting revisits from the food team – adding to their workload.

In addition to providing support for the Council's welfare hub, much of the team's other essential work, including private sector housing enforcement, licensing and pollution control has continued, using modified procedures; although some their planned inspection work has had to be scaled back in order to respond to the new and urgent challenges they have faced.

The team are likely to face continued pressures on their workloads going forward, which may increase further should, as expected, environmental health officers be asked to assist with other functions responding to COVID-19. This could include contact tracing and assessing the COVID-19 related risk assessments for businesses, as they continue to return to work.

Building control

Members will be aware that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the Government have made it clear that they wanted building work to continue to keep the economy ticking over.

Our Building Control Team have therefore provided an essential service during the pandemic, working remotely to ensure that customers can receive the service they need to progress their building projects.

The nature of the team's activities does however require site visits to be undertaken, to check progress with works. Unlike many other local authority Building Control services, our officers have managed to continue to provide site visits by applying strict social distancing and hygiene procedures; and where this has not been possible alternative approaches have been undertaken – such as the use of photos and video evidence to demonstrate the adequacy of building works. This approach has since been endorsed in nationally issued guidance from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Other activities, including out of hours cover, have been maintained during the lockdown period, whilst officers also provided support for the welfare hub.

Although there has been a steady flow of new Building Regulations applications coming into the Council, the numbers have been lower than normal over the last couple of months. However, the team's core work activities have recently started to pick up and have significantly increased over the last few days as more building sites kick back into action. It therefore looks like the vast majority of building projects in the borough will be operational in the very near future.

PLANNING SERVICE/ASSETS/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (Heather)

Planning

Good evening Councillors – Heather Morgan Group Head of Regeneration and Growth here. Around 70% of staff in my group have been redeployed to critical duties. They have:

- Pulled together data sources to produce a prioritised call list for vulnerable residents
- Delivered food parcels
- Made welfare calls
- Furnished and fitted out step down units for hospital discharges
- Assisted the Support 4 Spelthorne Hub
- Helped with Customer Services support calls
- And Produced ID badges for volunteers

The Council has had to review how it deals with major planning applications.

We have extended public consultation to 28 days.

Officers are writing to all applicants who have submitted major applications asking them to agree to a deferral until the Council has the ability to deliver some form of a physical planning committee. Applicants cannot be forced to comply with this request.

As a Council, we are minded to accept that for Spelthorne Borough applications we accept delays to formal determination. However, the groundwork will continue by the planning team in the meantime.

Planning applications continue to be submitted as normal. There has only been a slight dip in numbers.

The rapid implementation of the final section of the Enterprise system now enables an application to be dealt with electronically from start to finish, allowing the team to work virtually.

The Strategic Planning team were redeployed for the whole of April but work has been continuing on:

- logging responses to the Local Plan consultation
- and overseeing consultants who are updating other work

Assets

'Lockdown' coincided with the March quarter rent collection. With a £1bn property portfolio, income receipt was critical.

The Council has radically altered the way it deals with rent collection, including

- weekly rent review meetings with management team and senior cabinet members
- case by case assessments
- applying a principle of whether a tenant can't pay or won't pay
- robust one to one engagement
- developing a RAG rating system
- reviewing covenant strengths
- undertaking weekly cashflow modelling
- and where tenants cannot pay, service charges have been prioritised

In terms of the Investment portfolio more than 90% of the March quarter rent due has been received, and of the 10% outstanding all but 3.6% has been addressed through rent deferral plans.

For the Elmsleigh Centre, the Council forecast to realistically recover 29% of rent, and 71% of service charges, a combined total of 39%.

We recognise the valuable place local organisations have in our community, and we are considering requests from lessees regarding rent on a case-by-case basis.

In addition, we are undertaking internal alterations at Stanwell Pavilion (at our cost) to enable more effective use of the building by Stanwell Food Bank.

Economic Development

The country needs to be in the best economic position possible once the pandemic subsides. Development and construction are central drivers in achieving this.

Two applications have been or are about to be submitted - Thameside House in Staines-upon-Thames and Victory Place in Ashford.

Together they will deliver around 250 units of much needed housing, with the latter providing 115 key worker homes.

Government has made it clear that during the pandemic “construction sites have not been asked to close, so work can continue if it is done safely”.

All our active construction sites are fully adhering to the Industry Guidance and are operating safely.

Economic development have focused on:

- Supporting businesses struggling to access government funds
- Working with the business rates team to chase up those businesses who qualify for grants
- Keeping our website updated daily
- And advising on how to diversify business and provide ongoing support, plus webinars

Thank you

ICT AND HUMAN RESOURCES ETC (Sandy)

Good evening Councillors I am Sandy Muirhead Group Head Commissioning and Transformation covering our emergency response, ICT, HR, data protection, projects and the start of recovery.

Locally a decision was made on 13 March to move the Council to a virtual footing as far as possible. So we had to quickly identify who could and could not work from home. We also took into account staff who had health issues and undertook immediate steps to ensure shielded or vulnerable staff could work from home wherever possible.

Staff able to work from home straightaway did so from 17 March whilst those who could do so but needed equipment were urgently issued with equipment to do this. The ICT team acted very quickly and spent time ensuring all our spare kit including rebuilding of laptops was enabled for staff that needed it and purchases made, where necessary, for items such as headsets. So, by 23rd March the majority could work from home. The team provided support by setting up new on-line forms and processes to better enable virtual operations. Without their skills, energy and long hours of working we would not have delivered so much to our communities.

In addressing staffing there was considerable work by Human Resources and management to ensure staff issues were addressed and staff wellbeing maintained.

A spreadsheet listing of all staff was developed outlining whether their job was critical or non-critical in the current circumstances or whether they were sick or self-isolating. This allowed us to look at redeploying staff in critical areas.

As an update to the written report since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, 263 staff have been working in critical service teams. A further 115 staff have been involved in full-time, part-time and one-off redeployment activities. Those who have been redeployed have managed the Council's COVID-19 response, made welfare calls and visits, delivered food parcels and handled the increase in calls to Customer Services from residents. We have developed HR policies to deal with the COVID 19 emergency and consulted Unison.

We have all been mindful of the difficult situations the Council's employees have had to face not only at a personal level but also in dealing with some very difficult calls with residents. We have ensured that support for mental health issues can be easily accessed by staff. We are also setting up an

assistance fund, which can be accessed confidentially by employees who find themselves in financial difficulties,

With all the activity in relation to vulnerable people in particular, the data protection officer, DPO, has been involved in finding pragmatic routes to dealing with data in a COVID 19 world.

The work of the root and branch team has continued often with a COVID 19 flavour in for example, helping to design new forms or developing process maps to enable better virtual working. They have also looked at how to capture the learning points from the current working situation to enable teams to better adapt to it.

PPE

On personal protective equipment (PPE), we have followed guidance from Public Health England but that guidance has changed over time! We have though made sure our staff have PPE in accordance with the latest guidance. Despite shortages, we have managed to maintain supplies to our frontline staff and now we are finally seeing a more reliable supply coming through.

To protect our staff and reduce the risk to health, working from home as has been a priority and remains so. We will though undertake, in line with Government guidance, health and safety measures to allow staff to come into the office when appropriate.

Recovery

The main focus of our efforts as a Council to date have been in ensuring we continue delivering our essential services. However, the response mode of the emergency is still very much in play especially in relation to the vulnerable residents and those suffering financial hardship.

We are developing our recovery plan in terms of both our service delivery and how we can continue in helping the Borough's residents' and businesses going forward. We are still in uncertain times and there is currently no way of knowing when or if our society will return to normal, and what a new normal may look like. We will though continue to be flexible and responsive to meet needs of the Council and residents into the future whatever the new normal involves post COVID-19.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE (Victoria)

Good evening Councillors, this is Victoria Statham speaking on the work of Corporate Governance

The immediate impact on Corporate Governance related to the changes in legislation, which were required to enable the Council to continue to operate and make decisions whilst the country is in lockdown.

The Coronavirus Act received Royal Assent on 25 March. However, it was necessary for further regulations to be put in place in order that Council meetings could be held remotely. These came into force on 4 April. Working with the Committee managers, we then had to consider the operation of the new rules together with the ICT implications in order to hold two Extraordinary Cabinet meetings on 8 April and a Planning Committee meeting on 29 April, which was a meeting to which the public had access.

The public Planning Meeting went smoothly with protocols on how to conduct remote meetings being put in place and with diligent rehearsals in order that it would run smoothly on the night. This is a new way of working for members as well as officers.

The holding of this Extraordinary Council Meeting itself has involved a considerable amount of time and effort by many council officers.

A number of staff within the corporate governance teams have been on redeployment duties, but work has continued in earnest,

Legal Services

The Council's need to respond effectively to this emergency has had a substantial effect on the work of the Legal team having to provide advice and assistance on all impacts.

New areas of work have been varied and time consuming for the team. New work has included reactive advice on business closures, support in respect of prohibition notices and prosecutions under the new Health Protection Regulations; advice on resultant contractual positions; and advice on rent reviews and rent collection at this time.

During this period, the team have managed to obtain an emergency injunction for unauthorised development and an order to remove an unauthorised encampment.

Procurement

With only one member of dedicated staff in the procurement team, (the recruitment of a Procurement Officer had to be halted due to lockdown), work has continued on all procurements currently out to the market and also those in the pipeline, to ensure that the Council has the works, goods and services required to ensure that services can operate and continue to deliver. Action is being taken on the two Procurement Policy Notices issued by the Government.

Electoral Services

Electoral Services were in full-flow preparation for the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections scheduled for 7 May 2020; this poll is now postponed, and will take place in May 2021. There was a considerable amount of work in cancelling this election including notifying support staff and cancelling all premises bookings. Various changes to the database had to be made due to the election cancellation, as this would affect registration processes. During this time, there has been the business as usual: registrations, removals and continuing to update the credit agencies, government departments and members as required.

Due to the financial situation, the team have seen an increase in the request for Confirmation of Residency letters. These are being emailed now with the fee being waived.

Internal Audit

Internal Audit are monitoring the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, offering advice and insight to add value.

It was not possible for the March Audit Committee meeting to take place, although all scheduled audit reports had been prepared and issued to Members of this Committee, in accordance with the statutory deadlines.

The commencement of planned audits for 2020/21 has been temporarily suspended pending further developments.

The team have continued to progress and finalise audit work already underway as far as possible. They have also reprioritised focus in evaluating new and emerging risks in the current environment.

ACCOUNTANCY (Terry)

The Team has continued to work remotely on producing draft accounts for financial year 2019-20. In recognition of the impact of COVID19, the Government has revised the target dates for the accounts process with draft Statements of Accounts now to be published by end of August and external audit to be finished by end of November.

The team have been involved in accounting for additional costs/loss of income arising as a result of COVID19 and have been liaising with services to track impacts and to report to Government.

Additional focus is being placed on cash-flow management and monitoring.

Accountancy have been particularly involved in assisting the running of daily payment runs to pay out the Business Support Grants and with facilitating purchasing food for the Support4Spelthorne hub.

COMMUNICATIONS (Jennifer)

I am Jennifer Medcraff, Head of Communications at Spelthorne Borough Council.

The challenge was to communicate effectively and quickly with residents, employees, Councillors, businesses and community groups in the Borough. Things were changing hour-by-hour and with each change came a new and often complex communication demand.

We knew how important it was to reach those more vulnerable and those not digitally connected as well as managing 'fake news' and misinformation.

Opportunities to use and share partner information; including Public Health England was a strong advantage, particularly at the beginning of the crisis. By identifying our external stakeholders, we were also able to publish local and relevant messages from community support groups and local businesses.

As a priority, we communicated our hub 'Support 4 Spelthorne' and created a recognisable brand, which was used in all the online campaigns as well as hard

copy materials. The hashtag #support4spelthorne, has been shared by residents and organisations across the Borough.

We used a targeted approach to ensure the Council reached those residents that potentially need support including letter drop to residents that use our assisted waste service.

Another campaign called 'Be a positive part of your community' encourages everyone to check on their neighbours and posters were displayed on noticeboards, delivered to food banks alongside an ongoing social media campaign.

Using different communications methods, including press releases, posters, letters, web pages and social media posts, information shared included:

- Playground and facilities closures
- Community safety
- Refuse and recycling collections and advice
- Leisure activities
- Environmental health advice
- Cyber scam and fraud messages
- Physical and mental health support
- Free parking
- Business support available
- And support for domestic abuse victims

These local messages were shared alongside central government messages on COVID-19.

The team filmed four video messages from the Leader of the Council, which updated residents on the Council support available. ENews 'Coronavirus' publications were produced and daily news alerts sent out through the subscription service.

For local businesses in Spelthorne, the team communicated swiftly and proficiently, the Government support packages available and this included a dedicated business web page to drive grant enquiries to an online form.

On the Council website, the team were quick to create a Coronavirus web page, updated daily with clear subject matters including news updates, financial advice and community support.

Social media became an indispensable source of information during this crisis – primarily for its speed, two-way channel offer and engagement, which allowed us to quickly back up any actions taken by the Council with a clear piece of communication. In total, our audience has grown by 65% year on year and post volumes have increased by 326%.

An essential part of our communications strategy was also Councillor Engagement. By equipping yourselves with relevant, factual and timely information this would allow you to continue to play leadership roles within your own communities to support and reassure residents.

The team issued written updates twice a week and virtual mid-week briefings were delivered, covering all aspects of Council updates relating to COVID-19.

As well as regular email communications with yourselves, a number of hard copy posters and leaflets were distributed. Active engagement on our social media channels has been encouraged with details on campaigns and what channels the Council uses.

For internal communications and in this new era of working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown, maintaining communication between co-workers was more important than ever.

Weekly verbal and written briefings were held by the Management Team with an invitation to all staff members to virtually listen and ask questions directly to the team as well as regular updates on our intranet and staff emails.

Alongside the immense amount of work I have just detailed, the team have also continued to issue communications for a number of services and in the background we have ran a number of key projects including our successful 'V For Victory' campaign to commemorate VE Day 75.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS (Terry)

You have heard from the previous speakers about the scale of the impact on the Council resulting from the COVID-19 emergency, including the need to redeploy a significant proportion of our workforce, incurring unexpected expenditure and significant drops in income.

Pages 108-121 cover the financial impacts on the Council.

Our data, along with other districts and boroughs' returns, helped successfully make the case to MHCLG and the Treasury that their initial funding allocation of an average of 45p per district and borough completely failed to acknowledge the impact of drops in fees and charges income for districts and boroughs. As the report highlights our first Emergency Funding allocation was £34,000, or roughly 34p per resident; and our second funding allocation of £986,000 equated to roughly £10 per resident. So, the lobbying by Council Leaders and officers between the first and second tranches did have some positive impact. In total, we have therefore received to date £1.02m of emergency funding from central government, which is useful but does not cover the full impact on this authority. In comparison SCC have received £47m.

Given the uncertainties as to how the COVID-19 situation will develop and how long the phased easing of Government restrictions to control the virus will take, we have estimated a range of scenarios from a relatively short lockdown to a longer lockdown. As a result, we have a range of estimates for the financial impacts. The report focuses first (page 110) on additional expenditure requirements, such as resourcing and purchasing food for Supply4Spelthorne, and block booking temporary accommodation for rough sleepers and homeless. This identifies a potential additional cost impact ranging from £361,000 to £2.011m on the Council's Revenue Budget for 2020-21.

The report then looks (page 111) at the loss of income to the Council, including impacts on services such as car parking, land charges, licensing, Staines Market, planning and building control. We have also identified potential for some delay/reduction in retail rental income from the Elmsleigh Centre although we anticipate the impact can be absorbed by a combination of the opening Elmsleigh sinking fund balance and reducing future set-asides in the Elmsleigh sinking fund. We have not included impact of commercial rental, as currently we are not anticipating writing off more than 0.01% of the March rental due. Our worst case modelling indicates our commercial rental sinking funds of £20m are sufficient to absorb any adverse impacts relating to later quarter. I will touch on Elmsleigh and commercial rental issues a bit further later on.

The income loss also takes into account anticipated reduction in returns on our invested surplus cash funds. On the basis of advice received from our Treasury Management advisers, we have estimated a reduction of £600,000 in the current financial year as the most likely mid-range case. Overall, the total loss of income from all sources is estimated as a range of £1.9m to £5.095m.

So, if we combine the additional expenditure and loss of income ranges we obtain a net range potentially impact on the Revenue Budget (as shown on page 112) of £2.265m, to £7.106m. We can then deduct the £1.020m emergency funding we have received from government and also the £9,000 we are receiving from Surrey County Council towards rough sleeper costs. We can also deduct anticipated recovery of Category A costs from Surrey County Council as Category A residents are the responsibility of upper tier authorities. Additionally, we can strip out the adverse Elmsleigh Centre impacts as they can be covered by sinking funds adjustments. We can also take into account that in the 2020-21 Budget, within the £1.3m Planned Projects budget there is headroom of £0.5m, which can be used to fund some of the impacts. Taking into account all these adjustments results in a potential bottom line impact on the Council's 2020-21 Revenue Budget ranging from £0.304m to £4.4m. Our estimate of the most likely mid-range figure is £2.172m.

So clearly unless the Government provide a significant amount of further emergency grant funding, we are looking at a potential budget shortfall in 2020-21. The report sets out a number of mitigation options such as maximizing reimbursement from other partners, using the Planned Projects budget £500,000 and looking for further efficiencies. However, if the gap materialises at the higher end of the range the only practical option for 2020-21 will be to use some of the Council's reserves, hence the recommendation that the Council uses up to £4.5m of its useable revenue reserves if necessary. This equates to about 36% of our available reserves (excluding sinking funds) which is a significant proportion, and if applied we would look to rebuild this pot over time. One does need to remember that one of the purposes of reserves is to act as pot of cash for a rainy day, and currently we are facing the most extreme financial storm we have ever faced.

So far, we have talked about financial impacts on the Revenue Budget for 2020-21. There will however be other financial impacts. It is almost certain that there will be less council tax and business rates collected than normal (even after adjusting for 30% of the business rates tax base, now having 12 months exemption). This will feed into what is known as the Collection Fund, which is operated by the Council as the billing authority. At the end of the financial year, any deficit in the collection fund will be split between the Council and precepting bodies. In the case of the council tax deficit, this will be split between Surrey County Council (76%), the Police and Crime Commissioner (13.6%) and Spelthorne Borough Council (10.4%); and in case of business rates between the Treasury (50%), Surrey County Council (10%) and Spelthorne (40%). The apportioned deficits will potentially make balancing the 2021-22 Budget more difficult. Additionally, if there is a sustained increase in the number of people receiving Localised Council Tax Support that will reduce

the tax base for 2021-22, again making balancing the 2021-22 Budget more difficult.

What will partially offset the above additional pressures on the 2021-22 Budget will be the decision by the Government to defer by a year the implementation of the Fair Funding Review, and also the move to 75% Business Rates Retention, both of which we were anticipating would make the 2021-22 budget more difficult before the COVID-19 crisis. If the move to negative grant is also delayed a year, then the £1.6m built into the Outline Budget for these impacts will not be required in the 2021-22 Budget.

The report has not commented on the Capital Programme impacts, as most of our housing delivery projects have continued to progress with appropriate social distancing. Financing of our capital programme has become cheaper since COVID-19 as gilt rates have dropped. Knowle Green Estates undertook a COVID-19 health and safety evaluation of the residential properties it is managing, revising cleaning arrangements. A few tenants have self-isolated.

Heather Morgan has already spoken about the focus of the assets team to engage with our commercial tenants and ensure that the rent due is paid. Compared to a lot of other commercial portfolios we have done relatively well, with 90% of the March quarter rent received; 6.3% covered by rent deferral agreements (i.e. not writing off the rent but allowing tenants additional time to pay); and a further 3.6% is currently in the process of being agreed as deferral agreements. We expect less than 0.01% of the March quarter rent to be written-off. Obviously, the June quarter date may prove more challenging and a lot will depend on the speed of unwinding of lockdown and how that impacts on our tenants. In anticipation of further difficulties, we have modelled worst case scenarios over the next 5 years to ensure that our sinking funds are sufficient (these are the amounts we have been setting aside each year from rents to build up a pot of funds to cover future risks of drops in rental income or need for capital refurbishment).. In 2019-20, we put aside more than £8m into our sinking funds. In comparison, the net contribution from the rent to the Revenue Budget was £9.5m. So, we were setting aside nearly as much into sinking funds as we used to support the revenue budget. Relevant Cabinet members and Officers are monitoring on a weekly basis the commercial and retail rents position.

As is the case everywhere across the country, collection of the retail rents are more challenging. It is important, however, to remember that the motivation for the Council buying back the long lease of the Elmsleigh Centre was not in anticipation that this was going to provide a commercial income stream to support the provision of council services. On the contrary, all net income was

to be re-invested into the site and the town centre. The purpose of this acquisition was for the Council to fulfil its leadership role in place shaping the borough. This was a regenerative move as part of the wider Staines-upon-Thames Master Planning, with a view to manage over the medium to long term a diversification away from retail, to a varied town centre with increased residential, community and cultural facilities. This was to ensure the long-term vibrancy of the town. COVID-19 has indeed confirmed the need to reduce the amount of retail in our towns over time. To date we have received approximately 30% of rent due in March for Elmsleigh Centre. Our Assets Team are involved in regular discussions with the tenants, with a focus on putting in place deferral plans so they can pay the rent back over time once they have re-opened. Currently we are expecting non-essential retail to start reopening in June. If there is any shortfall in the Elmsleigh rental in 2020-21, we anticipate that can be reduced by reducing the planned £1.4m set aside into the Elmsleigh sinking fund originally planned for this financial year.

It is important to note that the additional income we have been generating from commercial assets for the last four years has been invested in supporting services and improving our service resilience. Indeed, without this income our ability to have responded in the way the Council has would have been severely constrained. For example, in Housing Options and Independent Living a number of the posts, which have been central to coordinating our response to support vulnerable residents would not have been affordable in the Budget without our commercial income. Similarly, our ability to support the food banks in the way we have would have been constrained.

In summary

The Council has experienced very significant financial impacts as a result of COVID-19. This has principally taken two forms, either resulting in the need to incur additional expenditure to support residents and businesses of the borough (pages 109-110); or secondly in the form of loss of income arising from a reduction in demand for services. (page 111).

All councils are suffering such impacts. District and borough councils are proportionately more impacted as they rely on fees and charges to fund a higher proportion of their budgets as they receive less in grant funding than other councils.

The estimated additional expenditure to be incurred ranges from at best £0.361m to at worst £2.011m, with a mid-range most likely estimate of £1.039m.

The estimated loss of income ranges from at best £1.904m to at worst £5.095m with a mid-range most likely estimate of £3.318m.

After taking into account emergency grant of £1.020m, and taking into account estimated recharging to Surrey County Council and use of some £0.5m flexibility within the Project Delivery Fund - the net estimated potential adverse range is from at best £0.304m to at worst £4.42m. The most likely mid-range scenario is approximately £2.2m.

The recommendation to approve use of reserves of up to £4.5m is to cover worst case, and would only happen if we do not receive sufficient further additional funding from Government.

The report also highlights the challenging impacts on council tax and business rates collection which are being monitored on an ongoing basis and which will potential impact on the Council's 2021-22 Budget, as well as that of Surrey County Council and the Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner.

Having said the above regarding the tax collection impacts on 2021-22 Budget, we anticipate some of that impact will be offset by some of the other measures announced by the Government such as deferring the Fair Funding Review by a further year.

The report summarises the relatively strong position we are currently in with respect to commercial rents, whilst being mindful of the potential challenges ahead. The £20m of sinking funds' balances helps give the Council a reasonable safety cushion.

The report also summarises the position with respect to retail rents relating to the Elmsleigh Centre and highlights that we anticipate being able to absorb any adverse impacts without impact on the Revenue Budget or council tax.

FINAL WORDS (Daniel)

This Council currently remains on an emergency footing, with our priority focused on urgent actions within an immediate operational time frame. Staff, across all ranks, have now been engaged for over 60 consecutive days, with front-line and redeployed staff working extra-long days, into the evenings and on bank holidays and weekends, serving the most vulnerable in our society.

Whilst our corporate capacity remains stretched and there remains great uncertainty regarding the short-term outlook, some early considerations of potential recovery phases have commenced. Until a vaccine is widely available, there is unlikely to be a single moment when the risk is fully eliminated and the crisis is truly over. Everything points towards a considerable adjustment period ahead, for the nation and its public services.

Whilst we all feel the profound impact of coronavirus, not just on ourselves, but on our loved ones and our communities, we also have a great deal to be thankful for. For the dedication and professionalism of hundreds of essential workers from this Borough, I want to place on record my personal thanks and heartfelt appreciation to all my fellow colleagues who have worked flat-out throughout this emergency to safeguard our most vulnerable and to maintain the public services our communities rely on.