

Covid update from Waverley BC, 1/4/20

An email from the Chief Executive of Waverley Borough Council

To: Waverley Borough Councillors, MPs, Parish & Town Clerks, County Councillors

We are now in week 3 of this emergency. Many staff members have been working long hours, on the weekends and around the clock to support the vulnerable, support the Health Service and maintain our priority services. I and other senior managers continue to brief the Executive and the Leader of the Principal Opposition together on a weekly basis and as issues arise. Following our latest teleconference on Tuesday afternoon, here is a summary update of the work that Waverley Borough Council is doing to support residents during this time of emergency. None of this is confidential.

On all these matters, keep an eye on www.waverley.gov.uk/coronavirus for specific updates.

Support to local vulnerable people

Our Community Meals Service has increased and we work closely with our community partners to deliver these. Waverley staff members are also assisting Voluntary Action for South West Surrey by taking phone calls from the new Surrey Helpline for vulnerable residents who call for particular assistance. As the county-wide process for the distribution of food to vulnerable residents proceeds, our staff will be assisting. Our Communities team has also been supporting the local volunteer groups and parish and town councils with their local schemes, which are a fantastic display of the community spirit that is a hallmark of Waverley residents. We will also be promoting donations to the food banks. Over the next few weeks, Waverley's housing tenants are receiving a welfare call from our Housing team, including offers of support and information. Our Housing team is also making contact with our extremely clinically-vulnerable residents, as identified by the NHS, to understand their requirements and how we can support them.

Our Revenues team has been strengthened to deal with the increasing volume of calls who have suffered from a loss of earnings. Their circumstances are being assessed on a case-by-case basis and options include varying council tax instalments and the Council's council tax support scheme, which reduces the bills for the borough's lowest income households.

We suspended car park charges from last week to support key workers and volunteers, and this will benefit all residents, although the national rules on essential travel must still be observed. Season ticket holders' permits are being extended.

Support to local businesses

The government announced recently various measures to support businesses. The protocols we needed to implement these measures were published at the end of last week and we immediately made and tested the necessary software changes to implement the business grants and the business rates relief schemes. Revised business rates bills were sent to 800 businesses, most of whom will now pay zero. Grant payments are being processed. This work is very intensive as eligible businesses to have to be assessed. The total value of the grants in Waverley will be £28 million, with the cost being covered by the government. See www.waverley.gov.uk/businessratesgrants.

We have launched www.waverley.gov.uk/StayHome, a searchable database of business that can offer contactless delivery services. We are also signposting to support available organisations such as Surrey Chambers of Commerce, FSB, Arts Councils, EM3, VisitBritain and Enterprise First.

Waste collection and fly tipping

We continue to collect refuse, recycling and garden waste. With 15% sickness within our Biffa workforce, we have suspended mechanical street-cleaning and we continue to keep the service under review. Our critical pinch-point is suitably qualified drivers. It has been suggested to us that bus drivers might be redeployed; however, they have a different category of driving licence and would not normally have the experiences of manoeuvring refuse trucks and using the compaction/hydraulics systems safely. We will continue to explore all possible options with our contractor to maintain services. Surrey, West Sussex and Hampshire County Councils have all closed their recycling sites because residents should not be making non-essential journeys. Regrettably, our own bring sites have suffered from overnight fly tipping of large items and contamination of the recycling containers, despite the 'stay at home' rules. Our Environmental Enforcement Officers are patrolling these sites and we will prosecute if necessary. The irresponsibility of a few sadly entails a great deal of public resources being diverted to non-emergency activities. In a similar vein, there were some complaints and social media comments over the weekend about bonfires. Further communications are being agreed with Cllr Williams as relevant portfolio holder and with Cllr Ward to encourage members of the public to behave with consideration. Contrary to some people's expectations, our legal powers only apply when bonfires are a frequent nuisance – this will not be emphasised in our communications for obvious reasons.

Planning

The government has made clear that Planning services must continue and that the relevant targets will remain, although there may be some understanding by the Planning Inspectorate if matters are delayed due to Covid. The Planning and Legal teams are working on a protocol for how the service will continue at Waverley, including how Planning Committee meetings will be facilitated. Site visits and the Planning Reception are suspended, in line with the Government's rules on social distancing. The work on the Local Plan Part 2 has been deferred.

Meetings

Legislation has been changed to allow formal meetings without being physically present. The regulations to make the law active have not yet been published, but should be by the end of the week. The Democratic, Legal and IT teams are working through the various logistical and constitutional issues. They will draft protocols on how we can apply this at Waverley. We need the government's detailed regulations before we can finalise our protocols. If any changes to the Council's Constitution are proposed, they would be considered by the Standards Committee before being considered by Full Council (remotely). We have already utilised technology to hold informal briefings and meetings with officers and councillors remotely and we will look to expand this approach in the future as another way of keeping councillors up to date with what is happening. Any system we use will be accompanied with testing and training.

Other services and staffing

Our services have all been prioritising their work and we have diverted staff to support the Covid emergency. Our leisure centres, parks and playgrounds are closed in line with the Government's rules. We are tracking all new costs and income reductions. The great majority of staff members are working from home, and further improvements to our IT systems are planned to make this easier, as there have been some challenges in this area: some to do with the strain on our systems, some to do with domestic and local infrastructure outside of our control. Our sickness rate is about double the normal, and we do have to take account of the pressures resulting from self-isolation and the suspension of schools. We have frozen recruitment processes. Teams are working innovatively and well in these conditions and are focused on supporting the Covid response and maintaining our priority services. I am proud to work with such dedicated and professional colleagues.

Surrey Partnership

As well as running Waverley services and providing direct support to vulnerable people in the borough, staff members are supporting the various Surrey-wide structures and work streams, which directly support the Health Service and the expected steep rise in hospital admission over the next few weeks. The attached letter from the chair of the Surrey Local Resilience Forum outlines this work and its 10 streams. The detail of some of this work is understandably very sensitive. I have been chairing the 'Infrastructure' stream, and our most urgent piece of work this week is around sourcing accommodation for the homelessness, discharged patients and key workers, to reduce the spread of the virus and to release hospital beds. This is a very intensive piece of work involving all the borough councils' housing teams and other public services, as well as negotiation with hotel chains. Both as a borough chief exec and as the chair of this work stream, I dial into the relevant teleconference calls every day of the week. Colleagues similarly support some of the other work streams.

Parish and Town Councils

As well as liaising with parish and town councils on some of the issues listed above, I held a teleconference with clerks last week. One of the main issues raised was the provision of the burials service in the coming weeks and months, which I then raised with the Surrey-wide coordinating group. Andy Jeffery, Godalming Clerk, has subsequently had contact with the coordinators of the relevant work stream and has reported back to other clerks. I have urged the clerks to raise any issues they have with us and we can escalate if necessary.

National issues

The Government will be sending a letter from the Prime Minister to all households emphasising the national rules on staying at home and avoiding all non-essential travel. We are aware that, locally, these rules are causing frustration (e.g., from people expecting SCC's tips and countryside car parks to be open) and upset (e.g. cemetery closures), which show that there is still further communication and awareness-raising needed on the importance of avoiding such travel, reducing the risks of transmission, shielding the vulnerable and protecting the NHS. The messages on good hygiene will also be stressed. We all have our part to play in saving lives.

Councillor briefing

The group Leaders have asked us to arrange a briefing that councillors will be able to dial/log in to and ask questions on the current situation and how we go forward. We are working on the logistics and will be in touch soon.

Despite the logistical, community and sometimes personal challenges that Covid-19 has brought, I am proud that public services in Waverley and Surrey are pulling together in a remarkable way. In just over two weeks, a massive amount has been achieved and we have reconfigured how many of our services operate. There will certainly be lessons to draw as we start to plan for recovery. But the first lesson is about the astounding commitment and hard work of our staff and our councillors. These are the values that will see us overcome the crisis and rebuild our services and communities after it has passed.

With best wishes

Tom

Tom Horwood – Chief Executive, Waverley Borough Council