

We all know that since we last met in February the world has been severely impacted by the global covid-19 pandemic.

I'm sure I speak for all Members and Officers in expressing our sincere condolences to all the families who have lost loved ones as a result. Our thoughts are with them at this very difficult time. I would like formally to express our thanks to all the key workers for their tireless efforts over the last few months to help and support us all and keep us well – the NHS staff, care staff, those who work in supermarkets, county council staff and countless others, including our refuse collection staff who ensured that our bin collection service continued throughout.

I'd also like formally to thank all those in our community who volunteered to assist residents who needed support with food deliveries, prescriptions or simply being at the end of a phone. The community response across Mole Valley was the envy of many.

Mole Valley can be proud of the role it has played in supporting the response to the pandemic right across Surrey. As Members are aware the NHS Seacole Centre opened its doors on 4 May as a community hospital, and the currently vacant Bookham Youth Centre will shortly become the hub for food deliveries to those who continue to need assistance across Surrey. In addition, the Council continues to provide facilities on a regular basis for mobile testing units.

Yesterday we published a detailed report outlining the actions we took in order to support our residents, businesses and communities during lockdown. This also provides information about the work that is ongoing in order to support recovery and ensure that our own operations are back up and running as quickly as possible. While I won't go through that in detail now I wanted to share some information with you –

One of the most significant roles the Council undertook in the very early days of lockdown was providing support for the vulnerable and those who were shielding. Working with the county council and a significant number of community groups we made sure that everyone had the food and medicines they required. To help community groups to respond we provided £108,000. Meanwhile teams of our own staff made sure that everyone had a friendly voice at the end of a telephone – indeed well over 10,000 calls have been made over the last 3 months.

Another key role was in ensuring that those who were homeless were encouraged to come in. We assisted 19 rough sleepers and continue to work to ensure that they are supported into appropriate housing.

Lockdown resulted in many individuals across Mole Valley facing financial uncertainty. We did all we could to assist, including providing advice to over 1000 residents about their council tax payments.

When lockdown hit many of the businesses operating in our area had to close. Within the council phone lines were set up to provide support, advice and signposting while other teams processed

approx. 1300 grants totalling some £16M. This work continues. The 30<sup>th</sup> June was the closing date for our discretionary business support schemes – we received 120 applications and are currently processing these and will be making payments very soon.

March 23<sup>rd</sup> also had a significant impact on our own operations – staff had to work from home. Given the significant investment the Council made last year in its IT infrastructure and laptops this was relatively straightforward and with some innovation they were quickly able to ensure that planning applications, building control, reports of anti-social behaviour, bonfires, noise complaints, the market in Dorking, our telecare service, bin collections and street cleaning could all continue.

Over the 3 months 125,000 people sought information from our website, we sent out almost 1000 pieces of information on social media, there were 5500 calls to our customer services unit, we sent out regular newsletters to over 2000 residents and answered 2835 queries on line.

The closure of Dorking Halls, our leisure centres, the Fairfield Centre and our community transport service ensured that we had staff available to help support the new functions we took on and their support was invaluable.

We've all become a little more dependent on technology over recent months – we've held youth awards and the very popular Dorking Sounds competition on line (there were over 3000 entries) and promoted various arts and fitness initiatives. We've also held all meetings, including all informal and formal council meetings virtually.

As we started to emerge slowly from lockdown we wanted to do all we could to support our residents, communities and businesses to move towards normal – albeit that this might be a new sort of normal. We were particularly keen to do all we could to build on the really strong links that had developed with the community and voluntary sector, in addition to ensuring that our local recovery is a green one– building on the very obvious environmental benefits that we have all seen over the last 3 months.

Just some of the things our recovery groups have been overseeing are -

- Working hard on our new climate change strategy which will come to Cabinet in September
- Supporting a county wide tree planning initiative
- Investigating the possibility of establishing a community lottery which would see proceeds invested in local communities
- Supporting our town centres to continue to re-open safely including using funding that we have been given to provide signage and help promote local businesses. We have also worked with Surrey county council and Coast to Capital LEP to submit bids for funding to support physical works put forward by ward councillors to support their local town and village centres.
- Working with a wide range of partners to provide advice and assistance to businesses through our weekly e-newsletter, webinars, drop in information hubs and training events.
- Preparing to administer pavement licences

As you might expect there has been a strong focus on enabling our own business to get back up and running safely so our recovery groups have overseen the preparations for re-opening our tennis courts, skateparks, public toilets, Dorking Halls Cinema on the 4<sup>th</sup> July and Car Parks on 6<sup>th</sup> July. We are also working closely with our leisure providers to help ensure that they can re-open when permitted and are thinking about how best to use our community transport service for the benefit of our residents over coming months.

Risk assessments have been completed to enable staff to work safely, albeit in much reduced numbers, from our buildings and to carry out physical visits when these can't be done in any other way. Members have also been supported with guidance to help them as they continue to represent their wards.

In emergency responses there is normally the crisis, and a well-planned recovery and then things more or less return to normal for most people. Of course we all know that this is not the case with Coronavirus – we must continue to do all we can to minimise the risk of the virus spreading and now have an important role in preparing for the possibility of a local outbreak.

Last week saw the publication of the Surrey local outbreak plan – our officers have contributed to the production of that plan and, if unfortunately it has to be implemented, will have a role to play in the control of any outbreak.

Of course none of this would have been possible without the hard work of our own staff and their willingness to do anything that was required of them to support the Mole Valley community. In closing I want to say a very big thank you to them and as a small token of our appreciation confirm that I have made arrangements for each to be given an extra days leave this year – details of which will be sent out soon.

Stephen Cooksey  
7<sup>th</sup> July 2020