

ANNUAL COUNCIL MEETING, 10 JUNE 2020 – ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Several months ago, our country joined many other in introducing a national lockdown to help stem the spread of the corona virus, which has been sweeping the globe. We all know this, as each one of us has lived through lockdown. Each of us has our own version of what lockdown means to us and the affect that it has had upon the lives of our loved ones.

Once it begun, everything that local government does became ever more vital for our communities. We set about supporting our residents on a scale not seen before. Uncertain of how this pandemic would progress, Officers of this Council worked together for the benefit of our Borough.

Mr Mayor, I am deeply proud of how our authority stepped in, and stepped up to fill the void created during the national lockdown. Despite no prior experience of humanitarian relief, officers from right across Havering – from every department, set about reducing the impact that this virus could have upon our community.

In preparing for this evening, I was amazed at the length and breadth of the scale of support that has been provided by our council to our communities. It is easy to forget that our council is made up of individual men and women who, like us, have never been through such a crisis before. They did not know what the impact of lockdown would be or how the virus would spread but regardless, they set to work to help reduce the human suffering of our residents.

At the start of the pandemic, we decided that the best way to help our residents was through daily communication. We launched our internal and external email bulletins to provide the latest information in a fast moving environment. This has been a critical element of our approach to respond to the pandemic, and it has allowed us to challenge any fake news that may have been spread by ill-informed individuals about the virus. It has also helped to encourage residents to follow the national guidance, not to break the lockdown, helping to keep them and their families as safe as possible.

The key messaging of stay and home, protect the NHS, and to save lives, borrowed by our Council from the government, became the focus of our communication.

To support people to stay at home, we changed our parking enforcement regime. In contrast to many other authorities, we ceased charging for on-street and off street parking, and stopped enforcing parking regulations provided that it did not block the carriageway or posed a danger to other users. This meant that we were able to remove that anxiety and worry from our residents.

It is worth noting that the enforcement approach is still with us, and we are now engaging with our residents to determine the right time to bring back charging and wider enforcement, which some Councils have already jumped back into

At the start of the pandemic, knowing which staff members were suffering symptoms and were self-isolating became a determining factor on how we could respond. I know that our waste collection contractor suffered issues with maintaining the service, and in support of retaining our weekly collection of refuse and recycling, we paused our green waste service, and we re-deployed Officers of our council to help out. This meant that we continued a weekly service throughout lockdown, and with the use of officers from across the Council, only missed two green collections.

It was only possible for the weekly service to be retained by the good will of our contractor's staff, and the staff of our council to pitch in. With greatly increased amounts of waste being generated whilst in lockdown, I know that staff even utilised some Sundays to get through the work.

There has been much media coverage about care homes and their ability to weather this crisis. And with one of the largest over 65 % populations in London, it became a great focus for our Council.

I would like to thank the Council staff in the adults social care department, because they put everything on hold to support the 63 care and residential homes across Havering. In what was a difficult time, we were able to provide additional financial support to ensure homes were able to meet the extra costs that they faced. The Council was able to provide emergency supplies of PPE, and put in place safe guards to ensure that should one care home suffer a reduction of staff due to the effects of corona.

Mr Mayor. To help with discharges from the hospital, we repurposed Council properties to support vulnerable residents to leave hospital to safe accommodation with care packages in place. Thereby freeing capacity within the NHS, and saving lives.

At the start of the pandemic thousands of households across Havering were told to self-isolate and remain at home. At that time, the shelves at most supermarkets were bare, and suddenly a whole group of people who had previously been completely independent, became vulnerable. Overnight, we were faced with issue of ensuring that these residents could get enough food to eat.

And so, Mr Mayor, our Council set about creating a food distribution hub, staffed by Council Officers, to help provide weekly food drops to our residents in need. Coordinated with help from the Havering Volunteers Centre, we were able to go above and beyond just the NHS shielding list, providing emergency food supplies to anyone that was in need. This help also extended to the three food banks across the Borough. As food donations dried up, our council was able to step in and support them to support our residents.

A great strength of our Borough is the community identity and feeling. It is the voluntary organisations that provide support and guidance to our residents that makes us special. To help coordinate our voluntary sector, we held a round table discussion with the voluntary stakeholders, provided funding and support the Havering Volunteers Centre, and signposted our residents accordingly.

Knowing the difficult financial position that many of our households would experience, our council put in place a package of financial support that went beyond any other London Borough that I am aware.

We placed £2 million of our Council's money into a hardship fund to provide grants of £100, capped at £1,000, to help people struggling through this crisis. We did this because we appreciated that financial worries at this time, could add to the anxiety and worry of some of most vulnerable residents.

It is not just households that were facing an uncertain financial future, but the many businesses and organisations that operate within our Borough. It became apparent that we needed to ensure that our business support offer was ready to help businesses through this crisis.

Armed with the first tranche of funding from the Government, our Business Rates Team worked 18 hours days, over the Easter bank holiday weekend, to administer and get out the grants to the eligible businesses as quickly as possible. This money has helped thousands of local businesses weather the storm of this pandemic.

Our three Facebook live events also ensured that our Council continued to engage with local businesses and were on hand to answer points and comments from residents.

The second wave of the business support, being the discretionary business support grants are now being processed with the first payments already having been made. This will help hundreds of micro businesses missed out from the tranche of funding, and will ensure that stallholders in Romford market are able to trade again.

In a changing world, we have taken a fresh look at the Romford market, and I am delighted to announce that – after working with the Market Stall holders association – we will be extending the operating days to include a Sunday – helping to create a vibrancy in Romford and a focus for people to return.

To help businesses right across the Borough, I am pleased to report that we will be working to launch a new shop local platform, to allow local traders to help sell their products on a wider scale. We will also be looking at extending the discount for people that pay for parking by App or phone, to encourage many more people to shop locally.

During lockdown, our parks and open spaces became a place of rest spite for residents. They provided the open space needed for residents to exercise safely and to help support our resident's mental wellbeing. At start of the pandemic, an option that other councils considered was closing their parks and open spaces, because of the fear that they would allow easier spread of the virus.

Instead, here in Havering, we opted to close our outdoor gyms and children's play equipment, and with added enforcement from our parks team. This allowed so many people in Havering to rediscover the amazing outdoor space that we have, and for

people to benefit from the years of investment and effort that have gone into our parks.

Last year, it was questioned whether our Council should aim for Green Flags in our parks due to cost – well, Mr Mayor, I am delighted that we have never listened to Members who have sought to do our parks down and have continued to invest despite them. I believe that the majority of our residents agree with this I wish to reconfirm this administration's commitment to our external environment.

As the lockdown eases, we enter a new phase. Our focus must be on recovery of our organisation and our communities. We need to take stock of what we have been through – our collective experience – and consider how we want our organisation to continue to provide excellent services going forward.

What does the “new normal” mean for Havering? Last year, we adopted a new strategy for people and places. We had aimed to make Havering more nimble and to adopt the latest advances in IT. The result of the corona virus has lead our organisation to adapt and change in a way that we never thought possible.

We now need to reconsider and re-imagine what sits behind our Council. We need to be more focus on outcomes and to challenge every preconceived idea and motion to deliver a better offering for our residents.

Next week, the first report on the financial impact of the corona virus will be submitted to the Overview & Scrutiny Board for pre-decision scrutiny on route to Cabinet. This will be the first report of a series to outline where we are and how we will respond to this crisis, each report relating to our COVID-19 response I shall be seeking to submit to the O/S board to help ensure that whatever we agree is the best that it can be.

Over the coming months, we must renew our commitment to our Borough's future. We will need to work in a different way – not just Council Officers but also politically. Politically, I very much hope that our “new normal” will mean a reset in our relationships.

With the end of the weekly all members' briefings, I wish to report that I will still continue to meet with Group Leaders every fortnight. Allowing any issues that members may have to be brought forward for us to resolve.

Whilst it is for my administration to provide the respond and to carry the responsibility of elected office, I very much hope that a new consensus can be established moving forward.

Finally, as many of you may be aware, of the tragic events in America that led to death of George Floyd.

We must always fight for what is right and to challenge ourselves to ensure that we do not allow compliancy or injustice to enter our council. Therefore, to guard against this, I am committing to an independent review of Havering Council and race relations in our borough more widely, and in particular, whether this Council has the

policies and processes in place to erase bias and discrimination. The result of this report will be taken to our Cabinet.

Mr Mayor. So much has happened over the last three months. The way that our authority has responded – the dedication that our Council Officers have shown to their roles, highlights the very best of local government.

We are here to be run in a business like way, but never forgetting the reason for why we are here. In this time of need, our residents deserved the very best that Havering Council could provide. It is at this moment that I realise how very lucky I am to be a resident of this Borough.

Mr Mayor, despite the challenges that we still face, we will be able to move forward in Havering, together.

Thank you.