

Full Council 8 July – Leader’s statement

Over the past few weeks we have seen lockdown restrictions begin to be eased in our borough and right across the country. It has been encouraging to see our parks, streets and town centres gradually return closer to normality.

Last weekend saw the reopening of pubs, restaurants and a whole host of other businesses. This also included hairdressers – which I’m sure like many people – I was very happy to be able to book in a long-overdue cut and finally shed the ‘lockdown look’!

We know that our local businesses and economy have been badly impacted by coronavirus and the Council is doing everything possible to help them recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As well as distributing the financial support provided by the Government, the Council is also helping local businesses by offering advice and poster toolkits to allow them to re-open in a safe, socially distanced way.

It has been great to see so many residents returning to the high streets to support their local communities by shopping locally and helping Havering businesses back on their feet. The Council will continue to do the same.

Over the last couple of weeks – we have announced some bold measures to help our high streets.

From after Monday 3 August, all Council car parks and “stop and shop” on-street parking bays will be free of charge every Sunday.

The new “stop and shop” initiative provides one hour free parking in more than 1,000 on-street parking bays from Monday to Saturday.

At the same time, there will also be the launch of a new parking app – RingGo – that will give a 20 per cent discount on all parking charges using Covid-safe contactless payment via app, mobile phone or text.

I am also extremely proud of our new Havering Heroes free parking permit. We must not allow the life-saving work of our key workers to go unrecognised and our permit is a thank you for the sacrifices they have made during COVID-19. I hope other councils follow our lead.

Havering Council was one of the few local authorities to suspend parking charges as lockdown began. We are also one of the last to resume parking enforcement and charges.

We have and continue to work hand-in-hand with businesses to help our town centres become Covid-secure and ready to recover. As confidence returns to the high street, so will residents and just as we all came together to fight the pandemic, we must remain united to support local businesses.

One disappointing aspect of the easing of lockdown has been the amount of litter that has been left across our beautiful parks and open spaces.

While our parks and street cleaning staff are working tirelessly to keep Havering clean, the COVID-19 outbreak means some services have fewer people working in them than usual.

This means that bins cannot always be emptied as regularly as we would like so it's even more important that people use the bins provided. I ask residents that if they find a bin is already full please look for another one which is less full or walk your waste home.

I am pleased that as we edge closer to recovery we can also now resume our ambitious regeneration plans to provide more affordable homes for local people. This is even more important to ensure a bright future for our borough as we come out of the pandemic.

Last month – at a virtual planning committee meeting – our plans for a new retirement village on the Solar, Serena, Sunrise estate in Hornchurch were given the green light.

Our impressive proposals mean that our new retirement village will allow our older Havering residents to live fulfilling, independent lives in a state-of-the-art community, and to also access the support they might need in later life.

This development is part of the '12 Estates' regeneration programme, which will see around 3,500 homes delivered with our joint venture partner, Wates Residential, over the next 12 to 15 years. The £1 billion programme will seek to double the amount of council rented accommodation and more than double the number of affordable housing.

Elsewhere in the south of the borough, our joint venture with Notting Hill Genesis, to provide more affordable homes continues apace.

Last week saw the close of the latest public consultation – where residents had their say on plans for the first three sites – out of nine - to be developed along the A1306 corridor in Rainham.

It will provide up to 160 homes for local residents and will also include the relocation of the much-loved Silver Hall Social Club.

On Monday – I was delighted to visit our new development on Crow Lane in Romford, called 'Victory Place'. The site includes 82 brand new properties which the Council and Mercury Land Holdings have purchased to help tackle the housing shortage for family-sized homes.

Following on from the 42 homes at the Briar Road development in Harold Hill, which were made available last year, these brand new homes at Victory Place range from 1-bedroom apartments to a large number of 4-bedroom family homes.

I am both excited and proud to mark these milestones. It means we are a step closer to providing more affordable homes to local people. We are shaping our

communities of the future and promising to create a borough where people are proud to call home.

Most of what I have mentioned so far is promising and it provides us with a glimmer of hope that our borough will continue on the path to recovery from the pandemic.

However, this will only happen if we continue to be cautious, sensible and considerate of each other. Coronavirus has not gone away. As we have seen in Leicester – these new freedoms we can all enjoy can easily be reversed. While the number of cases in Havering is nowhere near the level which would call for a local lockdown, what's happening in Leicester should be a stark reminder to us all – we are not out of the woods yet.

We all need to continue with social distancing, and maintain effective respiratory and hand hygiene. Anyone with COVID-19 symptoms must self-isolate and request testing so that their close contacts can be traced before they unknowingly spread the infection further. Last week the Council published our local outbreak plan which provides a clear blue print for how we would respond in the event of an outbreak within our borough.

Our recovery will only continue if everyone keeps to the rules. Unfortunately if you don't behave sensibly, and maintain social distancing, you not only risk a new spike in coronavirus cases in our borough you also put yourself and all those you live with at risk. None of us want to go back to lockdown – so I ask all residents - whatever you do as rules are relaxed, please stay alert and stay safe.

We continue to review and take stock on how the coronavirus crisis has hit the Council's coffers. Last month, the first report on the financial impact of the coronavirus was submitted to the Overview & Scrutiny Board. This is 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 us as members and politicians. Politically, I very much hope that our “new normal” will mean we can come together to help and improve the lives of our residents.

On Sunday – I was honoured to join the millions of people across our country to mark 72 years of our NHS – with a national toast and applause.

Their birthday this year is particularly poignant – with the challenge of coronavirus. Their work over the past few months has saved countless lives and has been integral in keeping our country safe.

On behalf of all members and council staff – we thank you. The NHS is what makes our country so special and it was an honour to be able to celebrate this brilliant institution over the weekend.

Finally, I would like to say thank you again to our council staff, volunteers and agency colleagues who continue to work tirelessly to help us through this crisis.

I continue to be amazed at the length and breadth of the scale of support that has been provided by our council to our communities. Regardless, of their own fears, anxiety and personal experiences with the virus – our staff continue to help keep our frontline services running, support our most vulnerable residents and assist in our ability to come out of this stronger. With their commitment and my council's ambition – I am confident we will forge a new future for Havering together.