

As of 31 March 2020

Leader's newsletter

Welcome to my Leader's Newsletter.

The last few weeks have been dominated by the Covid 19 virus. It is likely that this will dominate for months ahead so it is appropriate that this letter concentrates on that issue.

Please direct volunteers and those in need to the Council's website. We cannot have too many volunteers who become a resource for this crisis and for the future. Those with needs can also call the Council hotline on 01432 260027.

Individual cabinet members are continuing to contribute to their portfolios. A description of some of the work they are doing is set out below.

I seem to spend a lot of my time on zoom and similar calls, gathering information about what is happening in other counties, and ensuring we are not missing a trick etc. In the last week I have had two conference calls with the Secretary of State for MHCLG (with all Council Leaders across the country), one with the leaders of Staffordshire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Shropshire ("the Shire Counties"), one with CCN which is an organisation which represents about 40 of the smaller counties, and a personal call from the Chair of the LGA. Issues are common:

- Supply of Personal Protection Equipment.
- Mechanics around Operation Shield (shielding the 1.5m most vulnerable)
- Social Care
- Business Support
- Financial issues – administering the financial assistance being offered by the government.
- An emerging issue of mental health.

I usually have a call with the Chief Executive each day. I pass on to him what I have learnt from the calls I am involved in and he briefs me on what is happening from his perspective.

As Leader of the Council I see my priorities as:

- Talking to our main partners.
- Explaining to Councillors that we are the eyes and ears of our communities passing on useful intelligence to officers. In this context, I am contacting representatives of all the market town asking them to let me know how they are getting on with a view to sharing best practise.
- Identifying local problems that may be emerging. I have certainly been hearing from a few of you about such issues and we have tried to respond quickly.
- Seeking reassurance from officers that they are being effective. Cabinet receives daily written updates from the Chief Executive and we are in daily contact with our lead officers .

My role is not to get involved in such operational group as the Local Resilience Forum as this is too much into the detail.

There are some issues which are emerging. Among these are changes to the decision making process which we are adopting. This is a crisis and from time to time quick decisions must be made that cannot wait for the usual processes to be followed. There are also other decisions which are of a longer term nature which need to be progressed. I am working with Democratic Services to ensure that we follow the Constitution which contains provisions which address such issues.

Other issues we have been asked to help with include:

- Enforcing social distancing especially among teenagers.
- Homelessness as sofa surfing has become a risk for the host.
- Construction workers protection.
- Animal (and pet) welfare

Covid 19 is setting all council leaders unprecedented challenges –even the most experienced. The focus is about keeping as many people safe as possible and ensuring that our vital front line services are supported. You are doing this. I welcome your insights on where we could be doing more, but also what you feel the council is doing well – it is vital that we all learn from this experience.

This is just the beginning of what might be a fundamental shift in society. I firmly believe that Herefordshire and its citizens is/are well equipped to cope with those changes. We are adaptable and not so wedded to values which are going to be shaken. However, it is not going to be easy for any of us.

In the past week I have also attended the LEP Board meeting, a Hoople Board meeting, and was an observer at the NMiTE Board Meeting. All of these bodies face challenges with the crisis.

You will have noticed that the prefabricated sections of the Station Road approach building have been put in place. Work will now stop as a consequence of working practices due to the virus. This will result in delays to the completion date.

Portfolio reports

Finance and Corporate Services (Cllr Liz Harvey)

Staff internal to the council have been redeployed, and more brought in via Hoople, to rapidly expand the 'virtual' call centre teams which deal with revenue and benefits support. These teams have been working very hard to handle the many calls coming in from businesses and from local residents already facing hardship as the government's distancing and isolation policy impacts on work and home life.

Business Support Grants: The priority over the last 2 weeks has been for the 'virtual call centre' to gather as much information as possible to allow the government's business grants to be transferred to businesses' bank accounts and support packages to be provided, as necessary.

Government funding should be received this week and it is our intention to pass as much as possible instantly through to local businesses.

Email approaches for business bank account details originating from the council's herefordshire.gov.uk addresses are genuine, but do request further assurance before handing the information over if they are at all concerned.

Information on this initiative to provide rapid financial payments to businesses can be found online here: https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/info/200145/business/364/pay_your_business_rates

The nationwide business rates 'holidays' announced by government were not announced in time to prevent our county business rate demands being issued, causing some confusion in the business community. All businesses have since also had letters confirming these holidays.

Council Tax Hardship: Help is available for households facing financial difficulties through the council's existing Hardship and Council Tax Reduction Schemes. April council tax payments will be requested for households paying by direct debit in the first half of April. We are continuing to examine additional ways in which we can offer flexibilities to households as regards council tax payments and scheduling at this difficult time.

Communications: The Comms team are working closely with the leadership team to push information out across web and social media platforms as quickly as possible. The aim is to do everything possible to keep our communities informed and to have the council's messaging platforms seen as the 'go to' place for the most up-to-date local information and advice.

Please could councillors use Twitter, FaceBook, Instagram, Web Blogs etc. to signpost people to the **council's online messaging** where telephone contact information is also available:

- Website: www.herefordshire.gov.uk
- FaceBook: <https://www.facebook.com/hfscouncil>

Throughout the day **up-to-the-minute bulletins and updates** are posted to the council's Coronavirus Blog page here:

https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/news/article/964/coronavirus_latest

Please sign-up to the **daily news feed** email service which will provide you with the most current advice published each day to the council's Coronavirus Blog page. Registration for these new updates can be done from Coronavirus Blog page and also from here:

<https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKHEREF/subscriber/new>

Government **guidance and frequently asked questions on CV-19** can also be found on the government website here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do>

Local residents can volunteer for 'Talk Community' ground-level support groups through the council's volunteer registration facility which went live last week. Link here:

<https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/covid19help>

Local residents can register their support needs from the 'Talk Community' ground-level support groups through the council's community support registration facility which went live last week. Link here: https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/info/200207/family_support/883/coronavirus/4

The government launched its '**Operation Shield**' initiative last week in conjunction with the NHS to identify the people most vulnerable to Coronavirus because of complex and serious medical conditions. However, it is quite possible that there are local residents who fall through this net and fail to be identified top-down as needing to completely confine themselves to home for at least 3 months.

Guidance on Operation Shield and the **circumstances which may justify the need to shield** can be accessed here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

Please can councillors help to communicate with and encourage local residents who have not received letters from their NHS contacts, and who believe themselves to be especially health compromised, to **self-identify as needing to 'shield'** on the government website at this address:

<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable>

Council Finances: A significant number of support packages, grants and loans schemes have been offered already by government to businesses and to the public to address economic and social impacts from the current emergency. The council will also receive government funding to assist us with our own extraordinary expenditure at this time.

In addition, this emergency will not only damage the council in terms of additional costs, but it will also reduce the income we can expect to receive, e.g. car parks, planning, licensing.

We are assessing the likely overall cost to the council as the situation continues to develop, but presently it looks like government support to us will currently only cover around 25% of the total cost to the council.

Capital Projects: During the emergency we will look to reprioritise works already planned, e.g. schools maintenance and repairs. Given the uncertainties created by the emergency and possible new and different priorities in the anticipated recovery phase, it is likely that a reprioritisation and/or delay in existing and proposed new capital spending will also be necessary.

Governance: Changes to decision making process have already had to be implemented to speed action and to address the constitutional issues related to Cabinet and Committees being unable to make collective decisions.

We remain hopeful that changes to legislation will be enacted by ministers to allow publicly accessible virtual decision-making meetings to take place. In the meantime, the Leader and/or the Chief Executive and Directors under urgent/emergency powers in accordance with the council's existing constitution. Cabinet members continue to be very closely involved in all discussions prior to these constitutional powers being exercised.

Children and Families (Cllr Felicity Norman)

This directorate has continued regular meetings and briefings in the last two weeks, such as C&F Scrutiny meeting, Corporate Parenting Panel, and C&F Performance Challenge, as well as my own weekly telephone discussions with the Director, and fortnightly Cabinet briefings, all moving this week to video conferencing. I am also kept up-to-date by email with day to day changes. A number of other meetings and conferences have had to be postponed.

The situation for **schools** has changed as government advice has changed, but we are now moving towards establishing hub schools in the market towns for ease of access, for vulnerable children and those of key workers who do not have other childcare options. School transport is expected to work with these changes. The PRU and hospital school are now working online. Special schools were closed last week, on government advice, but will now join forces to provide one centre. Brookfield and Hampton Dean are staying open and particular care is being taken with children with emotional needs, autism etc. who are especially sensitive to stressful change.

Safeguarding Measures are in place to address the needs of children with CP and CIN plans, including those with new assessments, and our Looked After Children (LAC) children. Visiting guidelines have been approved by legal, and they will all receive the appropriate levels of visits. These can be stepped up if thought necessary. With some exceptions, visits to our LAC children will be 'virtual visits', and some telephone support will also be available. MASH has trialled online/distance working and is settling in.

The activity of the directorate has become fully focused on responding to the pandemic COVID-19. Business continuity is kept under constant review. We are working with schools, settings and colleges to enable vulnerable children and children of key workers to continue to be able to attend early year's settings, schools and colleges, including transport where appropriate. We have made arrangements for core children's social care activity to continue and are reviewing our approach on a daily basis, alongside staffing updates.

In terms of other matters over the past month

- Families First has been extended for a further year with just over half a million in funding (service transformation grant). The current service arrangements in Herefordshire have achieved a 60% success rate with family interventions.
- Some family support workers have been linked to two schools (Leominster and Ashfield Park). Schools pay for 1 day per week for FSW to attend. Family support work has been shown to be beneficial to support and enhance school staff skills, meeting parents at the school gate and developing relationships, advising on family matters, and running parenting programmes to work with parents.
- Within safeguarding and family support we are realigning the family support service so that nine family support workers move into the assessment service and six family support workers move into the child protection/court teams. This should enable more direct work to take place earlier in terms of cases open to children's social care. We are also currently recruiting to the edge of care service and made some appointments.

All parts of Herefordshire Council have responded magnificently to the current challenges and I join other cabinet members in sending our very grateful thanks, including to those in Children and Families faced with the challenging task of keeping our children safe in these difficult and unpredictable time.

Assets (Cllr Gemma Davies)

I firstly wanted to tell you how astounded I have been by the herculean efforts by all staff at Herefordshire Council and our incredible volunteers in the COVID response. I am amazed and humbled every single day.

Waste – Unfortunately, due to the lockdown restrictions from Government we have had to close the Recycling Centres. At present the Government advice is clear, you should only be leaving your home for four reasons: to go to essential work; to shop for basic necessities; for any medical need and for one form of exercise per day. Also, due to businesses closing many people were attending the centres after taking the opportunity to clear the garden or house. Unfortunately this mean our sites being swamped with people and as such social distancing measures were unable to be adhered to. Furthermore we needed time to identify staffing levels and ensure that those staff available were deployed to the most important roles. There is no intention to reduce waste collections and the waste team are working tirelessly on giving out advice to residents on how to get rid of your waste differently including composters. I will have weekly briefings with the team and will, of course, keep you fully updated on any changes.

Cultural services – Despite the efforts of all staff and volunteers within cultural services, the decision was made to close all buildings to the public many days before the Government lockdown. The reason for this was three fold: Firstly, that the safety of our staff could not be guaranteed due to lack of social distancing and the conflicting reports on the lifespan of the virus on surfaces such as exhibitions and books; secondly that staff needed time to put their efforts into how to deliver cultural services in a completely different way to provide health, wellbeing and education without social contact; and thirdly, that most of our services are heavily, if not fully, reliant on volunteers to deliver the service. Reports were coming in daily that those volunteers were unable to come to our sites for a variety of reasons.

It is imperative that I stress that those services are not closed; you can still access ebooks and audio books through Borrow Books app so people can still 'take books out'.

https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/info/200149/libraries/71/ebooks_eaudiobooks_and_online_resources and we have staff that can talk people through the registration and borrowing process. For those who have got books, we have suspended all fines. We are also looking into how to deliver books in a safe way. The teams are also being incredibly imaginative with regards to continuation of online sessions across all of our cultural services and will work with our cultural partnership colleagues to deliver services over this difficult time. For information, the Arts Council have set up emergency measures and a £160 million pound fund for those who need it during this crisis. More information can be found here <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/covid19>

Property – A full audit of our property asset is constantly being reviewed and buildings identified for a number of uses during the crisis. Work is currently being undertaken on some of those buildings that have been identified for purposes such as extra care space, storage sites or other medical areas. I have received reports of residents taking pictures of contractors and abusing them for still working during lockdown. Please could I ask you to remind people that contractors and indeed BBLP workers are classed as essential workers as per the Government lockdown guidelines and as such are doing essential work for the council.

Health & Adult Well-Being. Adults and Communities (Cllr Pauline Crockett)

These are unprecedented and extremely challenging times, that said, the A&C teams have risen to these challenges and are gaining momentum. By now you will have received a letter pointing out what HC are planning and doing in this extraordinary time. 88,000 letters were posted. Our Director Stephen Vickers is pivotal in the planning and implementing of the service and has a wonderful team to work with.

The newly appointed Head of Partnerships and Integration, Amy Pitt, is co-ordinating the Talk Community Project and with Ward Members and Community support is gathering local intelligence. Again, Communities have stepped up and arranged their own local support groups and I ask that you contact Amy or Nicky Stroud at HC with any details relating to this.

Other changes within the directorate:-

Staff have been redeployed to the call centre, this is from 8-8 Mon-Fri and 10-4 Sat & Sun

We have now allocated council staff to be deployed in every ward to act as link workers to support communities and the parishes.

We have received offers from over 600 volunteers throughout the County.

Vulnerable residents are now able to be supported through the SHIELD project, a Government initiative with local intelligence support offering shopping or pharmacy collection.

And finally, please be patient with contact with officers, they are all under additional pressure!

THANK YOU!

Housing, regulatory services and community safety – Cllr Ange Tyler

In this time of an unprecedented crisis, I am humbled how your Officers within my portfolio are working tirelessly with all emergency partners to protect our communities across Herefordshire. I personally would like to say "Thank You".

We are looking at holding virtual Committee meetings to deal with any requests for premises reviews.

Registration, Coroners Service, Bereavement Services, Markets & Street Trading, CCTV.

Government advice is still awaited on changes to death registration while the service is setting up a team to carry out death registration. The Town Hall office is now closed and it is by appointment only. Coroners' service have taken decisions that all jury inquests will be postponed until 1st September. Administrative support open to public from 08.30 to 12pm. Crematorium and waiting room now locked to the public and waiting Government advice on any changes to cremation forms. Volunteers are being requested to assist. Markets & Street trading waiting on advice from Public Health whether to close. CCTV – West Mercia Police request for this to support enforcement and this will be continued as a key service.

Regulation, Trading Standards, Environmental Health, Licensing - The team has received a number of complaints about repricing and handling scammers for Covid-19. The team are fully updated and will continue to monitor. Officers out and about making sure stores are closed and they will continue to respond to complaints and be intelligence led. Traveller sites are being visited every other week. Pest control continues to operate for rats and mice. The teams are liaising with the police on how to monitor shops and will work with Safer Neighbourhood teams and the police for public open spaces. They have offered up to 12 staff for potential redeployment and await decision.

Strategic Housing - The impact of Covid-19 includes inevitable delays in the implementation of some policies/projects due to the re-focusing of staff towards emergency responses, primarily implementation of Allocations policy and Homepoint ICT, Housing Delivery project, completion of developments at Widemarsh Street and Hope Scott house for the homelessness. The team are seeking guidance around delays. The Housing Strategy Officer is researching affordability, updating the temporary accommodation strategies and working through the action plan of the Homeless Prevention Strategy. The Housing Development Officer is evaluating the returned tenders for the Housing Market Area Needs Assessment. Housing Co-Ordinator is updating the housing section on the website and assessing low cost market applications. Other works are being carried out such as the rewrite of the Empty Homes Strategy and analysing returned empty property questionnaires as well as providing advice and assistance to bring property back into use.

Community Safety Partnership - Discussing statutory responsibilities of CSP for the next year. Task & Finish group to be set up to work with analysts which should inform priorities for next year. However, this may be delayed due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Environment, Economy and Skills (Cllr Ellie Chowns)

I took on this portfolio 4 weeks ago. A lot has changed in that time, and things are still moving fast. I want to pay tribute to the incredible hard work and amazing commitment of the Council's staff, who have been going way beyond the call of duty, pulling together to respond to these unprecedented challenges.

Economy: Coronavirus has had a massively detrimental effect on many businesses, and the Economic Development and Finance teams have been working their socks off to provide support and to set up systems to pay the government grants announced by the Chancellor, which will be disbursed by local authorities. We expect to begin payments this week.

On 24 March we had some good news when the LEP approved two of our three applications for Growth Fund funding – for the Hereford Enterprise Zone, and the Ross Enterprise Park – totalling £9.9m. Changes to the capital budget may be required as a consequence, and preparatory work is being done for this. However timescales are likely to change given the circumstances, and we may need to revisit the capital budget and the Economic Development programme in response to Coronavirus, once we have a clearer idea of how our local economy is affected.

Skills: We were due to have an OFSTED inspection of our Adult and Community Learning programme on 17/18 March - but it was cancelled at the very last minute the night before. The ACL programme has suspended face to face contact, and providers are working to support learners remotely where possible.

Environment: some staff have been redeployed to support the Coronavirus response, and some work has been postponed. The draft Carbon Management Plan was released on 9 March and work is continuing to finalise it. We launched a '2020 Climate Challenge' initiative at the same time, but have delayed the first meetings of the volunteer teams given the current disruption. The format of all Council decision reports is to be amended so that climate and ecological implications are explicitly considered for every decision; I hope this will be very helpful in embedding sustainability in all Council decisions. Once we move on from the initial coronavirus crisis response stage, we will need to ensure that sustainability is embedded in all decisions regarding 'rebooting' afterwards. Some coronavirus-induced changes (for example, more remote working) will have important long-term economic, social and environmental implications.

Infrastructure and Transport (Cllr John Harrington)

This last few months have been a busy and testing time for all at the Council and the flooding particularly has impacted upon our resources.

Flooding and Roads: Most roads are now back open across the county (Fownhope being the most obvious exception) with BBLP and their Tarmac subcontractors getting around the county to do as much work as possible within the Bellwin timeframe, which unfortunately ended on Sat midnight (28th). We continue to talk to civil servants at Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to seek an extension and reassurance that work we have done and have to continue to do is going to be reimbursed, arguing that issues around flood waters receding and to some extent the Coronavirus (which has caused disruption to our supply chain) mean it was not realistic for us to have completed all work we wish to claim for within 4 weeks, even with the delayed starting date the government did agree to

Drainage: The last few months have reiterated the need for more investment in drainage throughout the county. Reinvesting back into drainage without the appropriate funding from Central Government means there may be less money spent on other road projects but it is vital to do so if we are to properly address our drainage issues. I have asked officers and BBLP we hope to apportion a significant amount of that for drainage improvements to network, liaising with the parish councils and using their local knowledge to get the work done precisely where it is needed most. The lengthsman money put aside for drainage work in the 2019/20 budget is doing its governance circulation.

Phosphates and Nitrates in Lugg and Wye Catchments: Cllr Swinglehurst and officers continue to push the Environmental Agency and Natural England to agree a new Nutrient Management Plan based on the commitments we have made as a Council to funding integrated wetlands. Meetings are

taking place with the Environmental Agency, Natural England and Powys Council to get clarity on timelines as a matter of urgency.

Fownhope: The road between Fownhope and Mordiford remains closed with a landslide in one spot and a bigger more complex stretch of unstable road a few hundred yards away. The landslide site is easier to address but the solution for the 100 yard unstable stretch is complex and will be costly. Issues with utilities (BT particularly), the need for accurate geo-surveying and working out how to keep access available for residents who live between the two sites have caused complications.

Working Practices Covid-19: During this period of lock down, Council staff, BBLP and other contractors will continue to work as essential key workers and will operate a strictly one person per vehicle policy and a 2 metre working distance protocol, with access to hot water and soap or sanitiser. There may therefore be a lot of extra vehicles at a site and sometimes personal cars too – please explain to any residents if they ask why this is.

Buses: In line with government advice we will continue to pay at least 90% of the value of our contracted services via local bus companies. This will help maintain buses for the children of keyworkers to travel to school, allow those who are isolated to travel in for food and essential shopping and provide some financial respite to operators. We are in almost daily contact with operators to ensure they are supported and understand the need for social distancing to be observed wherever possible on buses. We have waived the restrictions on concessionary passes so that these can be used at any time, particularly for elderly residents who would like to get into supermarkets early – taking advantage of any early supermarket reserved early opening slots for pensioners for example - and return home as soon as possible. We do not want to particularly encourage the elderly and vulnerable to travel by bus and will monitor this but for some it may be their only opportunity to travel.

Parking: We took the decision as a Council that we would suspend all on and off street parking during a period of at least 3 months, reserving the Country Bus Station carpark for hospital and emergency service keyworkers. This allows us to redeploy staff and offer people opportunity to pull up outside pharmacies and GPs and even shops for short visits. A couple of parking enforcement officers (we have 14) will remain on duty to ensure only healthcare and emergency services keyworkers are using the Bus Station carpark and to make sure loading and restricted bays are kept clear for appropriate use. The remaining wardens have already been redeployed, most to help the police enforce lock down restrictions.

Planning: Planning officers continue to work on caseloads from home. Any controversial or cases with high public interest may still be requested to go to committee by ward members.