

## **District and County Report to Rotherfield Parish Council**

Given Phil Dixon is unable to travel back from France owing to the lockdown this report covers District and County matters

Regular updates are being circulated to Towns and Parish clerks and hopefully distributed to councillors.

I and all Council Leaders have had a number of teleconference calls with the Secretary of State and other Ministers so we are all updated.  
Regular discussions with senior officers at ESCC

I also speak to Trevor Scott, Chief Executive at Wealden, each day to discuss any emerging problems.

In addition, I brief and briefed by local MPs on a regular basis.

### **Shield /Hub**

Central Government identified approx. 1.4million residents across the country as being vulnerable and needed to stay indoors for at least 12 weeks. They will have received letters, generated centrally, and will receive supplies of food and medicines direct from suppliers and overseen by the Sussex Resilience Forum (SRF). The SRF combines Local Authorities, Blue Light services, NHS and has access to military assistance if required and particularly military logistic personnel.

Under the SRF each District or Borough in East Sussex is a local hub. The Local Hub will seek to pick up those in need not covered by the Shield.

**The number for the hub is the main WDC number 01323443322.**

The number of calls being received had steadily increased increasing but has plateaued at approx. 40 a day. The hub will, if it is the best course of action refer to local volunteer groups. Currently there are many more volunteers than tasks for them to carry out. Delivery of prescriptions is the most common request.

The Hub will be open over the week-ends from 10am to 4pm. In addition. WDC have sent out letters to all residents over 70's in the District.

### **Local Volunteer Groups**

I have been in regular contact with Sharon Bohane and it is clear that Rotherfield is well organised. RSM also gave Rotherfield a head start.

Volunteer groups have varied in how they are organised but all are reporting, as expected, the willingness of volunteers to come forward to assist.

### **PPE**

As we all know from the media supply of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) is an issue. World-wide demand is high and getting enough of the right items is challenging. Supplies are being made to the SRF but more is required.

**Business rates grants** – WDC have received 2850 applications for the grants thus far. By EOP today almost 2400 have been evaluated and £22m paid out to Wealden businesses. The remaining 400 need some additional checks.

WDC can only pay out grants according to the regulations. There are a number of businesses that have claimed but their rateable value is too high.

The limit for Small Business grant is an RV of 15k. Those at or below 15k can apply for a £10k grant.

Businesses in the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure sectors with a RV of up to 15k are granted £10k and those with a RV of 15.01 up to 50k receive £25k.

Whilst WDC wish to get the money to business we need to ensure the applications are eligible. We have had a surprisingly high number of ineligible claims including some from business that have been dormant for some time.

Applications are being processed at approx. 400 a day and payment runs going out every couple of days.

Given many businesses, entitled to a grant, do not normally pay business rates it has been a significant task developing the data base. Application forms are on the website and letters have been sent out though aware some companies are closed. WDC is promoting the scheme through the media, Chambers of Commerce Federation of Small Businesses etc. to draw applications from businesses that may be eligible but have not yet claimed.

If you are aware of businesses that have not claimed please refer them to the WDC website where a form can be completed.

To have set up the system and paid out £22m in such a short time is I think a significant achievement.

**Business Rate Suspension** In line with Govt guidance WDC suspended payment of business rates for 2200 businesses. This was completed seamlessly with any need for form filling or even contacting the businesses.

**Waste** – As you are aware the Garden Waste service had been suspended. Given the absence rate of staff this was a regrettable but necessary step.

The fact that this suspension coincided with the start of registration for the paid service for 20/21 could not be avoided. Applications for 20/21 service are being made which I think shows the public do understand the current situation and challenges.

Residual (Black bag) and Recycling collections were operating to schedule.

### **Household Waste recycling Centres**

These are currently closed as visits not classed as an essential journey. Also, unfortunately when they were open some members of the public did not follow social distancing and were abusive to staff. There are some indications that Govt may classify trips to HWRC as a justifiable journey.

**The good news is that Garden Waste Collections has restated from last Monday.**

**Homelessness** – at the moment, WDC have been able to secure enough accommodation to meet the needs of those who need our help. The issue that is now being looked at by this team and the Sussex Resilience Forum is about finding accommodation for people who are currently in hotels who need to isolate as a result of them developing symptoms of Covid-19 (they can't remain in the hotel as they have shared facilities such as kitchen facilities, which would be contrary to Government guidance). Work is also being undertaken to monitor and develop options to respond to the potential for increased housing need / support due to domestic violence (which is an increased risk due to families being together at home for extended period).

## **Schools**

The majority of secondary schools remained open for key workers and for vulnerable children. Smaller primary schools are not open and arrangements made for pupils needed in to go to school were made at Local Schools.

Food Vouchers are also available for parents whose children are eligible for Free School Meals

Arrangements were made to cover the Easter Holiday period when school places will be needed but less than in normal term time.

There has been much speculation on when schools will re-open but no official statement has been made.

## **Road Repairs**

Crews are still out repairing roads. Some crews have been verbally abused and challenged on why they are still working.

**Benefits** Not surprisingly we have seen an increase in the request for benefits including Council Tax Support. 3000 residents on Council Tax Support each received £150- again this happened automatically with no form filling.

Many residents also need to claim Universal Credit – this is handled by Dept of Work and Pensions.

## **Bus Concessionary Fares**

Whilst most residents are and should shop locally the concessionary fare restrictions have been lifted so the passes can be used at any time.

**Libraries are closed.** The on-line library is still available. Current book loans have been extended to 30<sup>th</sup> June so residents will not be subject to fines.

## **Adult Social Care**

There are the inevitable pressures on this area with the additional problem of staff being off sick or self-isolating. Essential supplies will be covered by the SRF but carers still need to visit those in need for other services.

## **Mental Health**

Loneliness is always a potential problem and with more, especially more elderly being in complete lockdown looking out for neighbours becomes even more important.

### **Credit/Debit card machines**

To address the problem of payment for services to those requiring assistance WDC will fund each Parish/Town purchasing a debit/credit card machine up to £200.

### **Meetings**

Decisions of the Council can now be made remotely and we are all getting used to the various formats.

WDC held their first planning meeting last Thursday (23<sup>rd</sup>) and full council will take place in May again remotely.

### **Recovery**

As signs of a relaxing of some of the restrictions both councils are looking at how they can help the economy back on track. Work is being done through the TES (Team East Sussex) which is the local group of the federated SELEP (South East Local Enterprise Partnership)

### **Conclusion**

We don't know when this emergency situation will end so all we can do is to do the best we can for our residents especially those of any age who are vulnerable.

**Bob April 2020**