

## Birch Ward Councillor update June 2020

### Message from Cllr David Hitchener:

'Council focus remains to keep as many people as safe as possible and ensuring that our vital front line services are supported. The gradual release of the lock down is to be welcomed, but the Cabinet and Council remain concerned that this does not result in a worsening position. I urge people to continue to comply with the latest guidelines on social distancing'.

Our environmental health officers have been very active in supporting public health colleagues with a national 'Track and Tracing' scheme being launched by Public Health England. A small team of our officers are already trained in contact tracing for other notifiable diseases and have now received bespoke refresher training to enable them to undertake local outbreak control work for Covid 19, as and when informed by Public Health England colleagues. That said, it remains important that the substantive regulatory duties of environmental health are still maintained, so managers are having to carefully balance the two pressures and also explore ways in which redeployment from other areas can cover these statutory and important duties.

### Some schools (Cllr Felicity Norman) are delaying for one or two weeks due to staffing issues.

Planning for increased numbers has been ongoing for some time with stringent measures to ensure the safety of staff and pupils being put in place. Online education will continue for those who have not returned. Early years settings have also been expected to plan for a wider reopening from 1 June and many are expected to do so for small numbers of children. This is a challenging situation for many early years providers who are small independent businesses.

Schools, social workers and family support workers are in regular contact with vulnerable children, keeping in touch and encouraging them to attend school, although numbers continue to be low. This may improve once the wider school population begins to return.

**Some children are disadvantaged by lack of IT equipment**, poor connections, crowded and noisy home conditions, lack of home support or stress related to low incomes and unemployment. We are working with schools to find ways of addressing these inequalities, including the provision of individual laptops and have taken part in the national scheme to provide IT equipment for some disadvantaged learners and also for children with care experience. We expect to be receiving c.400.

The next Cabinet meeting is due to approve our **new Council Carbon Management Plan** which sets out our interim target for a **75% reduction on 2008/9 levels by 2025/26, part of our commitment to become carbon neutral by 2030/31. This is the first of two 5-year plans setting out our pathway to achieve this. This builds on excellent progress to date – we have reduced our emissions by 43% over the past 10 years** (2008/9 to 2018/19). The Carbon Management Plan includes projects such as the following (more details will follow shortly in the Action Plan):

In partnership with Highways England and SWARCO we are currently installing three rapid **electric vehicle charging points** at Broad Street car park, Leominster, Edde Cross car park, Ross on Wye and St Martin car par, Hereford. These new charge points will enable residents to charge much faster as they typically deliver 80% of a full charge in approximately 30mins.

This week we received our 5 new **electric pool cars**. These will be available for staff to use shortly as we are currently reviewing a safe working procedure during Covid.

Our **Marches Renewable Energy grants** project is progressing well with a number of local businesses and organisations have benefited from 50% grants for renewable energy projects. These include grants for solar PV projects at Wye Valley Engineering in Ross and Frank H Dale in Leominster. More info [here](#).

**TravelFund grant** scheme relaunched as part our Destination Hereford active travel programme. We've reviewed the scheme to help supporting remote access to work during Covid 19 and also cargo bikes for businesses deliveries. More info [here](#).

### **Economic Development – Cllr Ellie Chowns**

The LEP this week approved our business case for spending £444k of Marches Investment Fund money on a **strategic tourism initiative to support the recovery of the visitor economy. This will be important in attracting new people to #VisitHERE in Herefordshire when lockdown restrictions are lifted** – really important to support our local businesses in the visitor economy which have been severely affected.

Earlier this month, central government announced that each local authority would receive an additional 5% of grant funding for a **discretionary business grant fund**. The guidance asks that we look to prioritise small businesses in shared offices or other flexible workspaces, regular market traders who do not have their own business rates assessment, Bed & Breakfasts which pay Council Tax instead of business rates, and charity properties in receipt of charitable business rates relief which would otherwise have been eligible for Small Business Rates Relief or Rural Rate Relief. We are working towards launching the scheme in early June.

Herefordshire has been awarded £172,188 to help **facilitate the re-opening of high streets** in June. The funds can help plan towns and cities plan for re-opening, engaging and advising businesses, communicating to the general public about how high streets can re-open safely, and any small scale changes required to the public realm.

Work continues to consider other ways to help support local recovery, including through our capital programme.

### **Fastershire**

The **'Keep Connected' small grants scheme** has so far supported 78 community groups to continue to connect virtually through the crisis with over £12k in small grants

70 Businesses have recently attended online **FasterBusiness Workshops** with more events planned over the coming months

**Gigaclear** cabinets are now live (in one case as of tomorrow) in Stretton Sugwas, Yarpole and Bromyard Downs.

Work is starting on the **Airband** networks to the east/ south east of Hereford in the next fortnight.

\*\* Later in June the council will be formally launch the **Fastershire Community Broadband Grant** – this is stage 5 of the Broadband Strategy that aims to address the remaining localities in the county that are not included in current deployment programmes. The new Stage 5 will offer grants on a property basis to individuals and businesses to procure their own Gbps capable broadband solutions from a selected range of suppliers. To read more about the plans in the Fastershire Broadband Strategy [click here](#).

**CV-19 Funding Gap:** Presently there is a significant gap between the costs and lost income to the council as a consequence of CV-19 and the funding support provided and promised by central government. The gap is currently estimated to be of the order of £15m. We hope and expect that further government funds will come across to narrow this crevasse but nevertheless we shall need the cleverness and imagination of all our staff, councillors, partners and residents to help us find our way to a 'new normal' as this national emergency continues to run its course.

**CV-19 Business Grant Distribution:** Business grants have been paid out to more than 4,500 businesses across Herefordshire since the beginning of April. Government has recently announced a discretionary grant scheme for the small and micro-businesses that do not meet the small business and retail, leisure and hospitality schemes. Final details are awaited from Government, but the initial allocation to Herefordshire is just over £3m. Information on how to claim these new payments will be updated on the CV19 business support page of the council's website when it is received.

Telephone support continues to be provided to Herefordshire residents to help them identify and use local networks of support, having taken over 3,000 calls, supported by significant staff deployment. The telephone service is now provided through Customer Services from Blueschool House. The Link Worker role continues to offer support across the county and arrangements are evolving as demand decreases and some council staff return to substantive roles.

**Challenge & Pothole Funds Grant** - An additional allocation of £7.6million for the current financial year was announced by DfT in May (on the back of the chancellor's announcement earlier in the year as already mentioned) to help us address significant network condition backlog (we are approx. £100 million behind in returning the network to best condition). Of course the detail and delivery date hasn't yet been received but I have made it clear I want a significant portion of this capital to be put into improvements in our drainage networks – running water destroys road surfaces quicker than anything. We hope to engage with all the parishes in due course to make best use of local knowledge to ascertain priorities. And you may or may not be aware, back in 2013 when BBLP took on the contract from Amey the very first thing they had to do was cope with a reduction in annual plan revenue money for highways from around £9 million per annum to £6 million. Drainage maintenance suffered most significantly as we were essentially left with not enough resource to do much but fight a reactive battle of patching potholes. Improving the drainage network through capital works is a priority for the next few years.

**Covid Active Travel Emergency Funds** – Support was also announced for councils to encourage more cycling and walking and help reduce the impact of congestion as people try to get back to work and schools over the coming months. Despite the headline promises and a total £250 million fund, very little is coming our way because the weighting is being factored towards authorities that had heavier public transport use. The money will be released in two tranches – we'll get about £40000 in a fortnight's time to reallocate road space for pedestrians and cyclists and a possible £180000 over the summer to consider or cement more permanent measures. The rather meagre funding aside can I please reiterate that we need as much feedback from ward members as possible – and many of you have fed that back – so please chat with your parish councils and residents and reply to me and or Mairead Lane with a line or to (or an entire 10 page plan!). This is a real opportunity for us to support the many residents who have enjoyed more space to cycle and walk, and want to continue moving in this way – and, whilst we must be realistic about road traffic beginning to return to previous levels, we can do a lot now to change the way we make many trips that don't need to be in a car.

**Car parking** – over the next few weeks we will start to reintroduce parking charges but we need to first consider what on-street parking we may lose through space repurposed for walking and cycling. I have also asked the team to continue to reserve Venn St and the Bus Station carparks for NHS and other keyworker for the foreseeable future, and until further notice.

**Public Toilets** – The decision has been made to reopen in two stages. In the first stage we will reopen the toilets where social distancing can be adhered to without any extra work required i.e. single set toilets. The second stage will look at those where some work would be required to allow for social distancing