

CABINET – 28 APRIL 2020**ITEM 4 - CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) IMPACT AND RESPONSE
OF THE COUNTY COUNCIL**

From Terri Eynon CC, Labour Group Leader

The Labour Group wishes to take this opportunity to express its thanks to the officers of this Council for their timely and proactive response to the Coronavirus pandemic. We also wish to express our condolences to the families of all those who have died due to Covid-19 and to reach out to everyone across Leicestershire and beyond who are currently working to defeat this frightening disease.

We are immensely proud of the way that the County Council has responded to this crisis. In January, when the national response to the news regarding the SARS-Covid-2 virus still consisted of false reassurance, Labour's Health Spokes Cllr Amanda Hack raised her concerns about the situation in China at the regular scrutiny briefing in January with the Director of Public Health and was provided with some early reassurance about the threat at that point. The County's approach of watchful preparedness meant that, even before the lockdown was announced by the national Government, Leicestershire County Council were preparing to cancel public events and making it possible for staff to work from home.

The need to shield over 9000 residents who are particularly susceptible to Covid-19, 3000 of whom have had difficulty accessing food and pharmacy supplies has meant staff have had to contact huge numbers of people. Officers of the Council have maintained their professionalism at a time when every single service across the Council has had to transform not only how they work but what they do. The sterling work of backroom IT staff has made it possible for many of our statutory services to continue in virtual form, safeguarding children and continuing to assess the social care needs of vulnerable adults.

The Labour Group are also proud of the way that the democratic services of the Council have ensured that scrutiny has continued, despite the lack of face to face meetings. A national emergency is a time for national unity, but that does not mean Opposition politicians should give up asking questions. We are pleased at the way that this Council has responded to issues raised by Labour members at the weekly Group Leaders and All Members meetings.

The Labour Group also wishes to express their thanks to the people of Sichuan province, China, who are twinned with Leicestershire, for their support with the provision of Personal Protective Equipment.

The Labour Group have been especially pleased to see:

- An initial £1M Fund for Charities and Social Enterprises, later extended to £1.5M, to ensure the third sector, as their income falls due to social distancing regulations, can continue to support the most vulnerable in Leicestershire.
- Questions raised nationally regarding the lack of Personal Protective Equipment for Care Workers.
- The promotion of a scheme to enable business to donate and create PPE for the NHS and Care sector.
- Public Health data being collected locally regarding the number of Covid-19 cases and deaths in care homes at a time when national data on community epidemiology remains sadly lacking.
- Casework continuing via Barnardos to support Young Carers who may be particularly stressed at this time.
- Questions raised nationally regarding the costs of the 0845-number used by Edenred who were nationally commissioned to provide the School Meals Vouchers which led some unfortunate parents to spend five times as much money chasing the voucher than they gained in food.
- Support for the Leicestershire Shared Reading volunteers who have been enabled to move some of their groups onto telephone conference services using book sets supplied by the Library Service.
- The proactive response from Trading Standards for calls from Community Radio providers concerned that people without internet access might be vulnerable to scams and fraudsters. Trading Standards flow of Public Service Announcements has been exemplary.

The Labour Group support:

- The proposed resumption of community testing and contact tracing and are strongly supportive of the proposal for this work to be done by Local Government in-house, with appropriate remuneration, rather than outsourced to the private sector.

The Labour Group remain concerned regarding the Financial position of the Council:

- There is a national tendency to overlook the pivotal position of local government which has led to local councils suffering disproportionately from austerity in the past. This lack of focus on social care from central government, contrasting with the higher profile given to the NHS, has led to a notable delay in the provision of PPE to care home staff.

- The 'risk-sharing' model being proposed nationally may mean that the full financial effect on this Council is not to be mitigated by the Government, putting future statutory services at risk. We are deeply disappointed at the prospect of more services being reduced or stopped. **We urge the Leader two strongly lobby Leicestershire Members of Parliament regarding this.**
- Staff employed by Leicestershire Traded Services on zero-hour contracts may not be protected by the Government's furlough scheme

The Labour Group have concerns re Key Worker testing:

- Testing the household members of NHS or other key workers may not in fact provide certainty as to whether staff should either be self-isolating or can come to work. Whilst the specificity of nucleic acid tests for Covid-19 is very high, and a positive result can generally be trusted, sensitivity can be affected by a number of variables related to the site and timing of the swab. A sensitivity of 95%, whilst relatively good in laboratory terms, means the 5 in every hundred people who have Covid-19 will be falsely reassured and may be sent back to work putting vulnerable people at risk. Concerns regarding test reliability and the use a surrogate measure for immune response will also apply to the antibody test which may not provide reassurance that a key worker is safe from future infection by Covid-19. **Can we be reassured that these caveats regarding testing are understood by employers and that a clinical assessment of symptoms and, if necessary, a re-test will be part of the process?**

The Labour Group have concerns regarding, Young Carers, schooling and education:

- Home education may suit some families but as this continues there is a risk, especially for low income families with limited access to IT, that this will exacerbate unequal access to opportunities and widen inequality.
- The replacement for Free School Meals may be a poor substitute for the hot meal that children from low income families were getting at school.
- Social isolation may lead to a longer term detrimental effect on the mental health of Young Carers.

The Labour Group have concerns regarding wider health and wellbeing:

- Access to emergency dental services appears to be patchy putting some people at risk of severe health consequences.
- The NHS is coping with Covid-19 by postponing other essential operations and this may lead to preventable deaths.
- The number of suicides in Leicestershire appears to be increasing and some people may not be coping well with social isolation.

The Labour Group have concerns re the communication of plans for waste disposal:

- The two-tier collection and disposal system is confusing for residents and there needs to be better communication with the public regarding the staged resumption of recycling and household waste services.

The Labour Group have some questions for future consideration:

Food insecurity and income inequality

- The lockdown and associated uncertainty around employment is having a devastating impact across Leicestershire. There will be people who have not needed to access emergency food assistance or benefits before in areas with little infrastructure. **How are we managing to get food to people who are suffering from food insecurity, particularly as the normal referral mechanisms are suspended and referrers such as Health Visitors, Social Workers, Job Centre and Housing Officers are no longer seeing people face to face?**
- The County Council, Districts/Boroughs and the Voluntary Sector all have roles in identifying those in need. **Can we be sure that people are not falling through the gaps?**

Other Vulnerable adults

- Many Vulnerable people live independently without a formal package of care, including Housing Associations and Charities **How are Leicestershire Public Health supporting landlords who look after vulnerable residents in Extra Care, sheltered or supported accommodation?**
- Support to people with learning difficulties does not always include direct personal care however Staff who provide non-CQC support to vulnerable residents may not be able to do so within social distancing rules. **Are Support staff and agencies able to access PPE via LLR Prepared?**

Managing social distancing

- In some areas we are beginning to see more of the public out and shopping as if all is back to normal. Compliance appears to be patchy. **How is Leicestershire managing lockdown? Is traffic increasing? Are supermarkets managing social distancing? Are there pockets of dissent? Can we have a briefing from the Police?**

Loughborough University

- Loughborough University has a number of international students. **Are there any students unable to get home? What will be the impact on the Leicestershire economy if our Universities cannot bring in international students by the autumn?**

Recovery

- Recovery is likely to include the adoption of a new normal and surviving a deep economic depression. **How will the developing exit strategy be communicated to Members?**
- **Can we have a briefing from the LRF or LLEP?**
- When are schools likely to be going back? What preparations are we making?
- **Will there be a cross-party Member Advisory Group to discuss the Recovery Plan?**

We look forward to continuing to work with all Members of Leicestershire County Council to support the continuing effort to manage the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Dr Terri Eynon MRCPsych FRCGP

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