

County Council newsletter: April 2020

From Nick Carter & Jeannette Matelot

This report provides an overview of the impact and implications of the coronavirus (CV) lockdown on just some of the County Council's services.

PUBLIC HEALTH

There have been 1336 CV cases registered in Oxfordshire, as of 24th April. The number of ONS-registered deaths is 135 as of 10th April (this figure is published in arrears). The Public Health team currently reports some evidence of a plateau in the number of CV cases and deaths.

Testing: this has been expanded for all essential staff, and the public health team is working with care home staff to implement a new care home action plan. This includes testing all care home residents and ensuring appropriate discharge with isolation provision.

The re-prioritised workload of the County's relatively small Public Health team includes CV issues, alcohol & drugs dependency, the city & district homelessness response, and suicide surveillance.

The team is also involved with Public Health England in contact-tracing and provision of advice to schools and care homes. The expertise gained feeds back into the local Oxfordshire system.

Testing facility: a test site for key workers opened in mid-April at the Thornhill park & ride site. This will be in place for up to 6 months and will be extended if needed.

ADULT SOCIAL CARE

PPE: the County monitors stocks of PPE and has regular conversations with providers to ensure there is sufficient equipment. More than 60,000 pieces of equipment were sourced and distributed on 9th April.

Care providers: OCC is paying care-providers an additional 10% of their average monthly payments for additional CV-related costs in April. This bonus also goes to people who receive direct payments and their supporting organisations. It is currently a one-off payment, but discussions about this are continuing. There is also a dedicated contact point for care-providers to use for any CV-related matters.

Hospital discharges: the County is working alongside NHS colleagues to help people to leave hospital in a safe and timely manner. Since early March, more than 300 patients have been safely discharged, and OCC is present in the emergency departments at the John Radcliffe and Horton Hospitals to help people who do not require admissions to go home with the necessary support.

CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Primary places: the vast majority (90.6%) of children have been offered their preferred choice of primary school for September 2020, and every family was notified on 16th April.

Appointments: the school buildings programme has been put on hold, but two key appointments have been made — the new Director for Children's Services is Kevin Gordon, and a new Assistant Director for Education is Hayley Good.

Fostering: there is still an urgent need for more foster carers, as progress in expanding this recruitment has dramatically slowed during the CV crisis.

WASTE RECYCLING

Councillors are aware of fly-tipping concerns while OCC and other counties keep the waste recycling centres closed.

The tips were closed to ensure the safety of both the operatives and the public. A trip to the tip was not initially seen as 'essential travel', given the continuing kerbside collections by district councils.

Now, though, widespread reports of fly-tipping mean that the Govt may see it possible to include in 'essential travel'. OCC is therefore reconsidering its own position but is aware that neighbouring counties are firmly against re-opening. A decision will be made on this in May, and meanwhile, the sites have been emptied and deep-cleaned.

TRANSPORT & ROADS

Ox/Cam Arc: work is progressing, but most of the relevant staff have now been moved to focus on transport issues related to CV19. The Arc is demonstrating its importance during the CV19 crisis — from vaccine development at Oxford University, to F1 teams building vital medical equipment.

LTCP5: the first-stage engagement (on 30 topic papers) has been extended to the end of May. The intention is to present the new Transport & Connectivity Strategy to a Council meeting at the end of the year.

Didcot HIF bid: this has been submitted to the Govt and is now out to non-statutory consultation, although there is some concern about the CV19 cancellation of some of the intended 'engagement' sessions.

Congestion: the first stage of the County's congestion management plan revolves around CPZs in the City. Decisions will be made next month on 4 of the 9 zones that are planned for 2020, once OCC's legal officers have agreed a process for community speakers to be involved in the online 'Microsoft Teams' meetings.

These CPZs will begin to deny parking to commuters and are expected to make a big impact on congestion in Oxford. There is funding for 17 more zones in 2021, ahead of implementing other radical traffic restrictions in 2022. The zero-emission zone planned for central Oxford has been postponed to 2021, because engagement with affected businesses is not currently possible.

Highways: as the road network is quiet, the maintenance teams have been working more quickly than usual, fixing potholes and resurfacing roads, and the County's plan remains on track to invest £32 million in improving roads, footpaths and cycleways.

The County's traffic control centre staff are working from home and are able to access Oxfordshire's extensive range of traffic cameras from their homes.

Meanwhile, publicity about social distancing has been placed at public rights of way, following an increase in their use by walkers.

TRADING STANDARDS

This is another example of the County's wide range of responsibilities which have all been examined to decide whether activities should cease, continue on a modified basis or remain as normal.

Business inspections: these have stopped in response to the Food Standards Agency's revised guidance food and feed inspections. TS has also ceased other non-essential visits to businesses such as age-restricted sales test-purchasing. The postponement of the inspection programme will create a backlog, which the FSA will address once the current restrictions are lifted.

Weight restriction enforcement: work continues on serious contraventions, balancing the need to continue protecting Oxfordshire's infrastructure, with the increased pressure on the freight industry and its importance to maintaining the economy. The court system is also restricted.

Doorstep crime: reports have reduced, but scams have increased and work continues to raise public awareness.

Trading restrictions: there has been an increase in requests for advice from the business community, such as adapting to provide home deliveries. TS has also taken on new work, such as enforcing the business closure requirements, and is responding to complaints about trading contrary to the new regulations.

PPE: checks at the ports result in reports being sent to TS so that staff can monitor what sort of PPE is being placed on the market locally. There are concerns at a national level about non-

compliant products arriving in the UK to meet additional demand. TS has a role in ensuring suppliers only sell products that meet safety requirements.

CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE

This service is in its 5th week of working from home, and it is now dealing with inbound calls for newly 'shielded' residents, which can be up to 20% of incoming calls.

In addition, there are more than 20 cohorts of shielded residents (8000+ people) who receive proactive outbound welfare calls. At the end of each shielded call, a code is assigned to describe the current situation of the individual, and it has become necessary to extend those codes with both 'hospitalised' and 'deceased'.

LIBRARIES

All 44 of OCC's libraries remain closed and their staff have moved to other roles, including supporting the Customer Service Centre. The library service reports a dramatic rise in the use of e-books — a 75% increase from 11,700 last April to 20,600 so far this month, along with a 102% increase in e-audio use.

Registrations: these are limited to deaths only, and face-to-face appointments have obviously been suspended while the registrars are working from home. So far, a backlog of 800 births are waiting to be registered, and 275 civil wedding ceremonies have been deferred to next year.

Morgue: a temporary place of rest has been established at Upper Heyford. The County's coroners are undertaking some inquests, in circumstances where the family does not wish to attend.

Music service: online music teaching began in early April, after safeguarding concerns were addressed and staff were trained. Some of the music staff are helping in schools, and the service has applied to the Arts Council for support.

VE Day commemoration: to commemorate the 75th anniversary of 'Victory in Europe' Day (8th-9th May), residents are being asked to submit recent or historical photos relating to Oxfordshire during World War Two. OCC will share these across its social media channels.

For example, these pictures may include wartime parades, vehicles, aircraft, or armed forces in local towns and villages at the time. Significant places such as an airfield or a war memorial may also bring back memories and help to celebrate the brave efforts of local residents at the time.

Participants are urged not to make exceptional journeys to take photos, and only to send images that they own. Images should be in file sizes under 2mb and submitted by 6th May to jonathan.sayers@oxfordshire.gov.uk

MEETINGS

As with all organisations and businesses, the County's meetings are being held, decisions made and policies implemented using all the relevant technology.

OCC has banned the use of the ubiquitous Zoom app on its own IT equipment because of security concerns. Instead, all formal and informal meetings are being conducted on Microsoft Teams.

The next Council meeting is on Mon 4th May, and it will be streamed live for any observers who have nothing better to do. The agenda details are here:

<https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=116&MId=6279&Ver=4>

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