



Committee	FULL COUNCIL
Date	24 FEBRUARY 2021
Title:	LEADER'S UPDATE
Report of	LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

INTRODUCTION

1. In my report today I wish to take the opportunity to inform members of a range of activities which we, as a council, have been leading on within our community, not just in terms of covid-19 but also other important activities and decisions which have enabled normal council business to continue.
2. Once again I must begin by saying thank you and well done to all of the council's staff who continue to go above and beyond expectations to respond to the challenges of covid-19, keep our community safe and deliver the best possible services they can under some of the most exacting circumstances local authorities have faced for many years.
3. The government has now made it clear that local government elections will go ahead on Thursday 6 May, and I can report that a significant amount of work has already been undertaken by the Returning Officer and her team in planning for the safe delivery of the elections. It will take a huge effort from all of our staff and partners to help deliver these elections and some things may run a little differently to our previous experiences. Nevertheless, I would encourage people to closely follow the advice and information circulated in the run up to the election.

ISLAND DEAL

4. I am pleased be able to report to Members that I have now received correspondence from the Minister Luke Hall MP confirming that government has awarded the council £50,000 to review and build the, "evidence case on the relative challenges facing the Isle of Wight due to the island's physical separation from the mainland, with a particular focus on how any structural challenges that may result interface with the Local Government Finance system".
5. I am hugely encouraged by this approach as it signals a clear intention of government to engage with the council and create the evidence base which suits its

systems and process. This will help inform any changes that may be proposed as a result of the review of the funding of local government (the 'fair funding review'). It also recognises we have a unique Island Case – and Government intend to help us present this case

COVID 19

6. It has been very pleasing to see the rates of infection of covid-19 continue to fall across the Isle of Wight over the last month. This is to the credit of our community as they have again worked hard to slow down and break the chains of transmission of the virus. We know that the virus mainly spreads by person to person contact and therefore the more people can avoid contact then the better things will become for us all.
7. The council also secured provisions for a community testing programme which commenced on Monday 15 February and will run for an initial six-week period. The testing is available to all frontline workers, unable to work from home, and is intended to identify all of the people that carry the virus but show none of its symptoms. This is another important way to prevent the spread of the virus, bring it and keep it under control and protect our community.
8. I am very grateful to over 60 council staff that have redeployed to deliver the testing programme and make this important contribution to the Island's fight against the virus. As I write testing centres are available in Newport (County Hall), Ryde (Westridge) and Sandown (The Heights) with the possibility of further centres if necessary.
9. I look forward to hearing the Prime Minister's announcements about how the country will exit from the national lockdown provisions, scheduled for the week commencing Monday 22 February. I am already working with council officers and stakeholder groups to identify what these changes might mean for the council and the Island and what actions the council may need to take in response.
10. I understand that the vaccination programme delivered by the NHS is continuing to progress well on the Island and that there is some optimism it will achieve a target of vaccinating the first nine specified cohorts (over 50's, health and social care staff and the clinically vulnerable) by the target date of April 2021.
11. The council continues to work closely with the police in advising on and securing compliance with covid-19 laws and guidelines, its capacity to do so is strengthened by a very active team of covid-19 support officers. An increasing number of calls are being received reporting breaches of the guidance and from businesses about reopening. Further business webinars are being planned from 24th February to provide advice to different sectors on Covid secure management, self-isolation responsibilities, community testing and relaxation of restrictions (pending announcements by the government).
12. We have once again acted quickly to support Island businesses in accessing the grant funding provided by government to support those forced to close as result of the current national lockdown. The Winter Business Support Grant (WBSG) scheme (closed on 5th February) has paid 566 businesses a total of £2,64m and 6,425

individual grant payments worth £12.8m have been made to businesses under the Local Restrictions Support Grant (LSRG).

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

13. This will be the final meeting of the Full Council before the new combined fire authority for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight begins on 1 April. I would invite all Members to celebrate and thank the Isle of Wight's brave firefighters for everything they do and have done whilst in the employ of this council, and to wish them all the very best as they transfer to the new organisation. I am sure it will bring new opportunities for their progression and development.

HOUSING

14. The Administration is determined to bring homes back into use and stop the scandal of landlords leaving homes empty when so many people on the Island need a place to call home. This determination was underlined by the Cabinet's recent decision to compulsorily purchase a property which has been left empty for over 10 years. The budget proposals to be considered at the meeting today will, if agreed, help make this possible.
15. After our successful lobbying on the Homes England method of funding social housing, projects have changed to include the Island enabling our housing association partners to finance more much needed schemes for housing for social rent. This is a really positive step forward and will help us add to the more than 100 affordable homes we have enabled in the last year. Our budget programme will help support this approach.

WASTE AND ENVIRONMENT

16. The Island's Draft Climate Change and Environment Strategy was endorsed by the Regeneration and Neighbourhoods Policy/Scrutiny committee and will be refined before being taken to Cabinet in early summer for adoption.
17. This sets out our ambitions for the council and the Island to meet net-carbon zero aspirations and actions. Our commitment to a low carbon Island has also seen a successful bid for grant funding of over £2.6m that will replace heating systems throughout the council's buildings with low carbon systems, to be installed this year.
18. Our popular green garden waste subscriptions are now open again for renewal. This amazingly successful service has continued collecting garden waste from its 10,000 subscribers throughout this difficult year and provides a really useful alternative to making regular trips to the Household Waste Recycling Centres at Lynbottom and Afton Marsh.

REGENERATION

19. Plans for the regeneration of Newport Harbour received a major boost this month with the confirmation that an order is to be laid before Parliament to confirm the long-awaited Harbour Revision Order. This will enable the regeneration scheme to proceed with its focus on a mix of job creation and housing projects as well as the

future longevity of existing businesses to be secured through granting longer term lease agreements.

20. I see the government's 'levelling up' fund as a key source of resources to help deliver our regeneration ambitions for the Isle of Wight. Our budget approach will support this approach.
21. A comprehensive bid to the fund is being finalised to support our regeneration programme with funding for underpinning infrastructures which will affect a project's viability. It will be capable of submission as soon as the fund is launched. Enabling the creation of new sustainable jobs and ensuring more provision of affordable housing will continue to be at the centre of our covid-19 recovery and regeneration plans. Seminars such as the highly productive one held in the last month with high street business continue to make an invaluable contribution to the development of our regeneration plans.
22. I have also been pleased to support, on behalf of the council, a freeport bid submitted to government by the Solent Local Enterprise Partnership to government.
23. The bid is in response to a competitive process designed to establish at least ten UK freeports and involves a coalition of businesses, local authorities and other partner organisations. The Isle of Wight would be part of the freeport area and could benefit from tax reliefs, simplified customs procedures and streamlined planning processes to promote regeneration and innovation if the bid is successful. The freeport area will also be able to retain business rate growth to reinvest locally.

PEOPLE

24. As the period of the pandemic continues, our adult and community learning team remain fully engaged in supporting the learning of 76 adults who are working towards their functional skills exams and wherever possible other essential learning programmes including the 28 people who are attending parenting techniques workshops through video conferences.
25. The council's apprenticeship programme continues to go from strength to strength. Not only do we continue to exceed our annual government targets for the number of new starts on apprenticeship programmes, this month we are celebrating the 250th apprenticeship since 2017 when the current scheme was launched.

SCHOOLS

26. During the current lockdown period schools have continued to be open for vulnerable pupils and children of key workers and all of our Island schools have worked hard in this endeavour. Many children have benefited from access to schools whilst all schools have also provided online learning for pupils who have stayed at home. Our children's social care services continue to hold up well and are regularly seeing children in person where necessary to ensure that they are safeguarded.
27. I should like to pay testimony to the wonderful work of everyone involved in looking after the Island's young people during this latest lockdown period. I know that it has

not been easy for any of them, but their work and professionalism is to be admired and applauded. My thoughts are also with all of the parents who have had to juggle their personal and professional lives during these difficult times.

28. Members will be pleased to know that over 4,500 food vouchers have been issued to support vulnerable children during the December and February school holidays under our connect4communities scheme. In addition, 160 care leavers have also been provided financial support through food vouchers.
29. Schools have also been provided with £19,600 to provide additional discretionary financial support to families who are vulnerable, and we are working with schools to ensure they understand how this fund can be used. Over £55,000 has also been issued to community organisations through grants which will provide support to 1,786 households. Our budget approach continues to support this approach.
30. 296 young carers have been provided vouchers through a grant to the YMCA Young Carers Support Service and 114 households have been supported with fuel payments through a grant to Citizens Advice Isle of Wight.

LOOKING AHEAD:

31. This is my final Leader's report to the Council before the May elections.
32. In this report I have again summarised what I hope Council will recognise as the consistent themes of the Conservative Administration. Strong leadership, keeping people safe and reigniting regeneration through our economic recovery.
33. It has had a clear sense of purpose, a vision for the council and a plan for its achievement. It has not been shy of exhibiting strong leadership as required and taking the tough decisions that councils must often make, usually not of their choosing but in respect of the circumstances they face. The covid-19 pandemic is a prime case in point.
34. But let's not also forget our number one objective has been to be a financially sustainable council. We will again achieve this goal if the Council agrees to the proposals made by the Cabinet for a lawful and balanced budget in 2021/22 at the meeting.

COUNCILLOR DAVE STEWART

Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Strategic Partnerships

Contact Point: Councillor Dave Stewart | Leader of the Council
821000 | e-mail david.stewart@iow.gov.uk