Cllr Tony Dale

Report May 2020

Well, I hardly know where to start with this report. So much has changed in our daily lives, locally, nationally and indeed, internationally since we last met. Our entire narrative has changed perspective, with our focus on saving lives and battling Coronavirus as the central theme to our every action and activity.

Across the Publica group of councils 115 officers have been re-deployed to deal with the Covid 19 emergency and in reality, all staff are essentially dealing with life under the threat of Covid outbreaks, and the adjustments that have had to come into place in order to continue to function.

The first priority, and still is, has been to make sure that our residents’ lives are safeguarded. The Communities team immediately shifted focus and within 4 days had made contact with every town and parish council in the district to assess what resources they had and what help they might need. This work has continued with Jacqueline Wright in particular doing an outstanding job of liaising with the Gloucestershire Help Hub, all of our local volunteer groups and charities and ensuring that no-one in need falls through the net.

In order to further support these groups, a decision was made to use the remaining £35,000 from the Communities Activity Fund along with £50,000 of grant from Gloucestershire County Council. So far, Cotswolds Friends have received £10,000, The Churn Project £15,000, Citizens Advice Bureau £6,000 and Gloucestershire Deaf association £1,000. Cllr Jenny Forde and the Communities team are in close contact with these larger volunteer groups across the District to ensure their invaluable work can continue.

The volunteer response across the District has been quite amazing. For every person in need, there are 10 volunteers to provide that help. This is not going to be a sprint, but rather a marathon, so no doubt those volunteers will be required to help get through this long journey.

Protecting those most vulnerable in our communities has been at the forefront of everything we have bene doing in the last couple of months. From helping the shielded community with accessing food and prescriptions, to making sure that isolation doesn’t also mean loneliness, many of you have been helping. Thank you.

We must continue in these efforts, as the crisis takes its toll and it is vitally important that we keep a lookout for those who might fall through the nets. There has been an increase in Domestic Abuse, of mental health issues and families and individuals struggling to cope. If there is anyone you are concerned about in your community, please reach out to them, or contact the Help Hub for advice or to report it. This is a stressful time for many people for many reasons, but help is at hand if required.

Our Community Police Officers, headed by Inspector Simon Ellson have been fantastically supportive during this period. Endeavouring wherever possible to police by consent rather than by enforcement and their care for those they look after is humbling.

The District Council has also had a mammoth task of supporting local businesses who have been affected by the pandemic. At the end of March, the government announced a package of business grants to help small business through this difficult time. Cotswold District Council received £37.5 million of grants which it had to redistribute as quickly as possible. Some of this was easy as we had the details of these businesses on our database, but in some cases it was a matter of making sure the businesses knew about the grants, and then making sure forms were filled in and money sent out. We were hampered at the beginning of the process by a lack of software and the process took longer than anticipated which naturally caused concern amongst business owners. However, I am glad to say that as of last week we had paid 80% of those eligible for grants, some 2312 businesses out of a total of 2909, amounting to a total of £28.7 million.

Further grants announced last week will be distributed to local businesses. These will be more discretionary based, so will probably take slightly longer to process. If you know of anyone who may be eligible for support, please encourage them to get in touch.

The new waste service was launched on the 18th March which really couldn’t have been a worse time to start an entirely new service. With everyone at home in lockdown and 20% of regular staff off sick or self –isolating, temporary crews covering and vast increases of all types of waste, the service has been tested beyond all imaginable limits. It has it its teething problems, with food waste being a particular issue due to the high volumes of waste being presented, and a series of “regular” missed collections most frequently in Doctors Lane and on the Old A40, causing a high volume of calls to customer services. These issues are being worked through, and after a 6 week suspension in order to focus on frontline services, I am pleased to say that the garden waste service will resume this week.

I understand that the waste service has caused issues, and in particular the lack of the garden waste collection has caused great anxiety within the Parish. I would like to thank everyone for their patience during this time, and would be happy to explain in more detail why the service could not be continued over this time.

All public meetings were cancelled as we went into lockdown, but Democratic Services are working hard to get meetings back in the calendar, albeit in virtual format. Planning Committee tests are happening now, with the plan to hold a full Planning Committee meeting in the 2nd week of June. A full Council meeting will be held on the 3rd June at 2pm. As soon as I know more detail on how public participation in these meetings will be dealt with, I will let you know. I believe that at the very least, these meetings will be able to be viewed by the public.

Cllr Joe Harris also fronts a “District Council Live” session every Tuesday afternoon with other council members, community leaders, and some pre-recorded sections as well as a live Q&A. These can be viewed via the Council’s Facebook page or the Barn Theatre’s Youtube channel. All previous sessions are available to view and if you have any questions, you can join in the live session at 3.30pm on Tuesday afternoons.

Every sector of Council activity has been affected by the pandemic, with some areas having to deal exclusively with the issues thrown up by Covid 19, and in others some limited business as usual carrying on after ensuring that the processes and procedures can be carried out safely.

A recovery group has been formed to look at how the District Council moves on from this crisis and details will follow on that in the coming weeks and months, but I think it is fair to say, that in line with the national picture, the financial impact to the council is severe.

The news is not all bleak however!

This is an opportunity for us all to look at what “normal” was and to question it; to understand what worked and what didn’t; to establish a new normal which benefits all and makes the Cotswolds and its wonderful villages and communities an even better place to live, work and visit.

This crisis has shown us what great community spirit exists in the Cotswolds, and where volunteer groups have sprung up, or existing groups have gone beyond what they thought possible, we have seen the rallying of groups and individuals to support those most in need. Community Resilience has become a buzzword, and we have it in spade-fuls in the Cotswolds. We want to make sure that we harness this resource and make the most of it as we move forward.

Many people have had to reconfigure their lives to work from home, and whilst this has no doubt had its stresses, it has meant that our roads are quieter with car journeys down on average between 60-70%, our air has become cleaner and we have seen wildlife thriving in our villages and green spaces. There has been a national and international drive to “reclaim the streets” in our towns and cities, for walking and cycling to be safer and easier, so this is the time to challenge ourselves to really deliver on that vision.

Cotswold District Council has wanted to encourage and promote high value, low carbon jobs and this is the perfect opportunity to really maximise the potential for that. To that end, the recruitment of an officer to oversee this very important area has begun, using money already allocated in the budget.

As we continue to deal with Coronavirus, protecting lives, and as we look to the future, I hope to work closely with you to see that our communities survive, recover and flourish.

Take care and stay safe.

Best wishes,

Tony