

**COUNTY COUNCILLOR REPORT
TO
ALL PARISH COUNCILS
IN PETERSFIELD HANGERS**

1 MAY 2020

1. Coronavirus Updates

HCC has now received two tranches of emergency funding from the Government to cope with the Coronavirus pandemic: £24.3m and £29.6m. This should help to plug the additional funding gap caused by extra care costs and loss of revenue during the lockdown. The total overall impact of the crisis on County finances will be calculated in due course.

So far 6,515 calls have been received at the helpline HantsHelp4Vulnerable (0333 370 4000) with 3,650 calls referred to Local Response Centres. 914,114 items of PPE have been delivered to local partners.

On 28 April the Local Government Secretary asked councils to plan for the organised reopening of their Household Waste and Recycling Centres. It is understood that updated guidance will be published shortly to support local government to open sites safely during the coronavirus pandemic. HCC is working closely with our partner Veolia to introduce social distancing measures and we are targeting the week commencing 11 May for reopening. Visitor access and numbers will be controlled and inevitably this will lead to queues.

Hampshire Highways teams are increasing the amount of routine highway maintenance carried out as the supply-chains reopen at national and local level. Together, with new processes and procedures in place to protect the workforce and residents, the teams will be taking advantage of the quieter roads to carry out more routine maintenance and repairs. During this time, the teams will also be looking at a small number of suitable sites for a temporary reallocation of road space in favour of cyclists and pedestrians on a strictly experimental basis.

Last month, the County Council confirmed its continued support for Hampshire's bus operators during this time by maintaining normal bus subsidy, concessionary fares, and home to school transport payments (where students use bus services)

even where services were operating below normal levels. This approach seeks to offer at least some protection to the income of local bus operators and helps them to continue paying their staff and suppliers with the aim of ensuring that when passengers begin to return, the bus operators are in a strong enough position to provide a good level of service to Hampshire's residents. The Government have also committed funding to the bus sector to compensate for reduced fare income. The County Council also agreed to remove the restriction on older persons bus pass users travelling before 9:30, to support access to priority shopping provision and other journeys. We have also maintained payments to Community Transport Operators with vehicles sometimes now being used to make deliveries or in support of ambulance services for patient transport.

Hampshire Highways have worked overnight to create road lining messages thanking NHS and Care workers on roads outside hospitals and care homes all over Hampshire. Weather permitting, they hope to complete several more ready for the next Clap for Our Carers event.



2. Early cutting of verges

Some Parishes are aware that Hampshire Highways are experimenting this year with an early cut of the verges. This has led to concerns about the loss of bluebells and wild garlic, especially in Hawkley, Froxfield, Colemore and Priors Dean. It remains to be seen whether the early cut will have the desired effect which is to facilitate summer wildflower growth.

I welcome all feedback and I will be passing on feedback as soon as the coronavirus crisis is over. I will also be scrutinising the issue of verge management at the Environment, Transport and Economy Select Committee later in the year.

The Highways Team have shared this response with me, which I hope is helpful in clarifying the thinking behind the early cut:

“Hampshire County Council has a duty of care to ensure that the grass verges adjacent to the road network are cut to maintain visibility and, in many rural locations, to allow pedestrians to step off the road to allow vehicles to pass by safely. With around 5,500 miles of road and 2,000 miles of roadside verges to look after managing the grass cutting for the network to achieve this safety requirement has to be balanced with the desire to promote biodiversity and deliver value for money.

During the course of the last financial year concerns were raised by residents and local groups in Hampshire in light of a growing wave of public interest over the protection of wildflowers and bees. These focussed on the timings of our grass cutting programme and the potential damage being done to roadside flora and fauna. In order to determine how our operations could be changed to better manage this, we liaised with the British conservation charity Plantlife in September last year to discuss their new management guidelines for roadside verges. This has led to a number of changes being made to the timings of the work we carry out. As per Plantlife’s guidance we have adjusted our cutting season this year to keep the main summer months of July and August clear of cutting (except for junctions and bends where forward visibility will continue to be maintained). Undoubtedly not cutting the grass at all would make a valuable saving but aside from the road safety implications of this, Plantlife’s guidance is that no cutting is worse than cutting at the wrong time as this changes the composition of the verges and all the species we wish to protect begin to decline.

Whilst at this time of the year grass in some areas has only minimal growth, in others it is far greater and with the whole of the county to cover in 3 months there will inevitably be some areas that are cut earlier than they ideally need and some that are cut later. However, this early cut is just the first 1 meter adjacent to the carriageway, leaving the remaining areas free from cutting. During the summer months the primary aim switches to cutting for safety purposes only to maintain safety with visibility at junctions and bends. This leaves the wildflowers to be able to thrive and provide food for the pollinators. At the end of the season, from mid-September onwards the primary aim changes again with cutting back the full width of the remaining areas of verge to inhibit the growth of trees, brambles and gorse etc which otherwise can quickly create an overhead canopy stealing light from plants below and reducing biodiversity.

We are still in liaison with Plantlife regarding our current regime and will be reviewing our revised programme with them at the end of the season to see if further adjustment can be made.”

I look forward to discussing this issue with you further and to reporting back on HCC deliberations over the pros and cons of the experimental early verge cut.

3. Launch of New South Downs website and PMP

The new South Downs website has gone live at www.southdowns.gov.uk

The website has been refreshed following extensive user consultation. We found that people wanted two separate things from the site. Some wanted practical and easy-to-find information about our planning service or committee meetings, while others wanted to be inspired and supported to learn about and explore the National Park. When viewing the new-look website, you will notice a number of major changes. These include:

- Drop-down menus – this will allow users to more easily find the information they are looking for by hovering over the menu, without the need to constantly click-through;
- Dual navigation – this helps the website speak to a range of different types of users who are all looking for their own information;
- Tables, forms and site search – all of these have been smartened up to help improve the overall user experience of the website;
- Accordions – several pages make use of the new accordion function. This is especially useful for pages that need to contain quite a lot of information, such as FAQs;
- Discovery Map – we also have a new Discovery Map we will be looking to add and expand in due course with a view of using it to support more of our partners, many of whom face a difficult recovery post-COVID 19

The new 5-year SDNPA Partnership Management Plan has also been published. It has a strong focus on green infrastructure, climate change and nature recovery. A new timely “Health & Wellbeing Outcome” with new priority actions has been created. The plan also has communities running through the heart of it. I invite you to take a look at this link: <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/partnership-management-plan/>

As we (hopefully) approach the end of the lockdown this month, I hope you all stay safe and well and keep your spirits up insofar as possible. And I look forward to seeing you all at your next non-virtual meetings.

RUSSELL OPPENHEIMER
County Councillor for Petersfield Hangers