

Message to my Maldon District and Essex Parish Councils

We find ourselves in the midst of one of the most difficult times this country has witnessed for 100 years, maybe longer. Most of us are confined at home and many of us will have real worries for vulnerable family members and friends. Even a month ago, nobody can have foreseen the situation we find ourselves in today. Even our Prime Minister has contracted this dreadful disease and has been confined to intensive care.

There is a prediction that the Corona Virus will infect many thousands of us in the coming weeks and months. We are seeing infection rates increase dramatically and the death toll growing by the day. There is barely a country on the globe that is not in the grip of the pandemic and at the moment there isn't an end in sight. Until recently the pandemic seemed to be something that was happening to other people, however it has gripped pretty much every community and as the death rate increases, inevitably it comes closer to home. It is with deep regret that one of my councillor colleagues at ECC died last week from Covid 19. Cllr Terry Cutmore represented Rochford and had been leader of Rochford District Council for many years. Terry was a lovely man who was totally dedicated to his public service and he will be greatly missed.

We are being given explicit advice by the government about how we must now live our lives and this is of course changing rapidly based on the most up to date expert medical & scientific advice. Fundamentally we must all be staying at home to reduce the risk of infecting others or being infected ourselves. This is vital for not only the health of ourselves and others, but also to try to reduce strain on the NHS.

At times like this, the great British public rise to the occasion, call it wartime spirit if you will. We are seeing mass volunteering to help those in most need, local businesses turning their hands to home delivery, community shops and other initiatives to benefit residents. These all must be applauded and I would ask you to support these local businesses as they are inevitably taking some risks with their own health to offer their services. Parish Councils are playing a vital role in their communities and I thank each and every one for the excellent efforts you are making to ease the difficulties of residents.

There is of course a great amount of anxiety for many people about their jobs and businesses. I am sure that the government support schemes will have been a relief for many, but I am certain that some people may fall outside of the measures being put in place. I am keeping a very close eye on this situation, but if there are any residents in dire need, please let me know and I will try to help.

In respect of Maldon District Council, this has been a very tough year. Three years ago we had to embark on a major transformation project to both save money and to generate income. The council was facing a deficit of £1.5m per year which was unsustainable. At the time I was Leader of the Council and we commissioned an external consultancy to look at the organisation and develop a totally new way of operating. This involved a ground up review of all services and how they were delivered. Inevitably there were many job cuts and a considerable amount of disruption to the key services. The entire committee structure was changed and all of the staff had to be trained on the new ways of working. These

changes are due to conclude later this year and it looked like to cost reductions were working. However, the council has now effectively closed itself to all business except essential services and no meetings are scheduled for the foreseeable future. Key decisions are being taken by a group including a director and nominated group of members. This can be done under emergency powers provided for in the Covid 19 legislation. Until recently the law did not allow for any local authority, be it parish, district or county council to hold video meetings to make decisions. The Covid Act changed this and video meetings are being gradually rolled out at ECC with virtual meetings commencing this week. Full council takes place on May 17th and this too will be done by video. I believe that this is very important as it restores the democratic process and ensures that all members have the ability to contribute to the work of the council. MDC is currently looking at rolling this out and I urge your parish councils to do the same as soon as possible. ECC uses a Microsoft platform called Teams, but Zoom is also being used for larger meetings. There has been some discussion about security of Zoom, but the legal officers at ECC are happy to use it for meetings that are open to the public.

I am fully aware that during the transformation process at MDC there have been issues that may have impacted on the services to residents. I think that planning will have been one of the biggest frustrations. The planning department also undertook a total reorganisation and unfortunately during this time a large number of the staff decided to leave the authority. I am now assured that staffing levels are now up to where they should be, but with everyone working from home, the difficulties may well continue for some time.

In the absence of formal planning meetings, most decisions are being made by officers under delegated powers, but area committees are likely to be trialled first for video meeting. This again is not ideal, but necessary at this time. Current applicants have been given the choice of delaying determination or electing for a delegated decision, at the moment, most choosing the former.

The Covid 19 pandemic is very likely to place a significant financial burden on all local authorities and this may well bring about the start of a wider reorganisation of local government. Given the vast sums of money being expended by central government, it is certain that the austerity measures we have experienced since 2008 will continue for many more years. I recently took part in a recent video briefing to discuss potential boundary changes across the UK. There is was a plan to reduce the number of MP's from 650 to 600 but this has now been dropped. There will definitely be some changes to constituency boundaries in Essex, but at this stage we have no further details. Given the significant financial impact on local authorities, I think that it is inevitable that this will provide the impetus for wider reorganisation in the lower tiers of government.

Regrettably we have no idea about how long this crisis will continue for, but as at today, it is certain that the initial three week lockdown will be continued, possibly for another three weeks. I suspect that the same will happen again at the end of the month, possibly longer. We are told that it is essential that everyone continues to observe the government advice and if this is done, a lightening of current restrictions will be sooner than later.

In respect of Essex County Council, we are in constant contact with central government and are leading the way with its community initiatives and volunteering schemes. The portfolio

that I am currently deputy for includes the coroner service, libraries, registration service and several other critical services. We are increasing mortuary capacity greatly with mobile units being hired in and located around the county. Although this is a subject that we would rather not think about, it has to be dealt with for obvious reasons.

Essex library online services have been expanded with free access to things like Ancestry, British Library content, online comics for children and several new services. If you are not library members, this can be done online and you will have full access to all content.

For parishes in my ECC Division, I am contacted frequently with requests for information or to report issues. The usual method for me to get these attended to is to use the Members Enquiry Service. Given the reduced capacity at ECC, we have been asked not to submit enquiries for anything other than emergency matters. Therefore, I would be grateful if parish councils could refrain from making requests unless the matter is critical. It is also important that you do not write to officers directly, including highways and the LHP officer. All communication should/must come via myself please. Obviously, the exception for this is making formal applications to the LHP using the correct form. This protocol should also be observed after this emergency period is over.

Some of you may be aware that I broke my leg quite badly in February and was hospitalised for ten days following surgery. I am still sporting my plaster cast and cannot walk terribly well or drive at the moment. It looks like removal of the cast may be delayed and despite asking, the fracture clinic refuses to allow me to cut it off myself!!! I have therefore effectively been isolating for six weeks already!

Please stay safe and well. Follow the advice coming from government at all times. We will get through this and will look back with pride at the collective effort made by the people of this country.

In the meantime, stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives. I am always available to contact by email or telephone if there is anything important you wish to discuss.

Cllr . MFL Durham